



# The Duke's Festive Proposal (Christmas Matches of Worth #5)

**Author:** *Julia Thorne*

**Category:** Historical

**Description:** "I promised myself I would never love again... until she walked into my life."

Callum Stanhope, the reserved and brooding Earl of Glenhaven, has shut his heart away, weighed down by past loss and the demands of his title. Duty defines his every move, leaving little room for the warmth of love or the hope of second chances.

Rosalyn Rothwell, spirited and kind, is no stranger to sacrifice. Determined to forge a new future for her family, she never expected to collide with a man so guarded—or to find herself drawn to the fire hidden beneath his cold demeanor.

As the festive season unfolds, secrets emerge, and walls begin to crumble. But when the shadows of their past threaten to tear them apart, will love prove strong enough to heal their hearts?

\*A Regency Christmas romance novel with dynamic characters, heart-wrenching twists, turns, and lots of romance. This story offers an irresistible escape into the world of the Christmas Regency period.

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“Four weeks before Christmas,” Callum said miserably as he looked out of the window. In his mind, he completed the sentence. Two weeks of travelling, two weeks of Mama’s tiresome house party, and then just another week before my marriage.

The snow falling outside the window caught his grey-eyed gaze and he stared at it, mesmerised by the feathery flakes that fluttered down. Once, he would have been outside, revelling in the beauty of winter. Instead, he sat in his study and tried to create some order before the event of his wedding—an event to which he did not look forward. He had made the choice for reasons of business only. He had never even met Miss Rothwell before.

Her father informed me that she is beautiful and sweet-natured, he thought with a frown. But that does not have to be true. He took a breath, composing himself. Her looks did not matter. Her personality did not matter either. All that mattered was that her family had the country’s most eminent and well-stocked stables. And he needed access to those stables.

Drawing his mind back from that uncomfortable future, he turned to Mr Radwell, his stable master, who sat opposite him at the desk. “When did we own a horse called Stewart?” he asked. The entry in the breeding book for a hunting stallion named Stewart was recent, but Callum did not recall him.

“We did not, Your Grace,” Mr Radwell replied cautiously.

“Beg pardon?” Callum asked, eyes widening.

“We did not. That says “Starburst”. Your father’s handwriting was always a little

crabbed,” the older man added, his brow creasing fastidiously.

Callum clenched his strong, square jaw. He had a naturally reserved, cool disposition and he never normally struggled with his temper, but of late even small things annoyed him. He had five weeks before his life changed unimaginably, and before that, he had his mother’s Christmas party to contend with. He had a great deal on his mind.

“Very well,” he said tightly. “Yes, I recall Starburst. He used to be stabled alongside Hugh.” His mood softened as he thought of the horses at the time that the late duke—his late father—had been in charge of the breeding program.

“Beside Buttercup.”

“Yes.” Callum’s expression lightened. He had been in the stables from as early as he could remember. “Roger,” he said softly, saying the names of the horses in order. “Meadowsweet, Amberleigh, Hugh, Blaze...”

“Starburst, Buttercup, Smoke, Lilac.” The stable master completed the sequence, nodding as if he, too, had fond memories of the times when the former duke had overseen the breeding at Stallenwood Park.

Callum inclined his head. The names had been a litany, a sort of incantation from his childhood. When he had said them, his father had always turned and smiled. Good fellow, his father had always said, praising his small son.

Callum’s heart twisted at the memory. His feelings for his late father had changed from admiration to confusion, to despal and then to sorrow. He had thought his father was the best person in the world—a distant, wise hero who knew everything about horses and about life. When Callum found out, when he was eighteen, that his late father had left the family massively in debt, that he had been unable to stop

gambling and that he had hidden that from everyone, his admiration changed to contempt. He had spent much of the intervening ten years hating his father, working to save the family from ruin. It was only recently that he had allowed himself to miss his father. He might have been complex and confusing, but he had a grin that could light up the darkest night.

“Mayhap you could confirm the information about the latest foals for me?” Callum asked, pointing to the most recent entries. He could not recall what any of them looked like, even though the entries were his own. That fact annoyed him. He was about to join forces with the owners of the finest Arabian bloodline in England, and he should at least know the history of his own stable.

What will the Honourable Miss Rothwell think of me? He thought wryly.

The Honourable Miss Rothwell was the woman whom he was going to marry. Her father, Viscount Cranfield, owned the best Arabian horses in the country. It was for that reason that he had agreed to the match. That reason alone. He needed access to those stables, and Miss Rothwell’s father was only going to grant that access to family.

Callum pushed his chair back and put the book down. As he did, the door opened. He tensed instantly. He had issued strict instructions that he was not to be disturbed.

“Who is...” he barked, but before he could complete the sentence, his mother, the dowager duchess, breezed in.

“It is I, Callum. There is no need to raise your voice,” she said tightly. Her blue eyes fixed him with a hard stare. Her face was a long oval, her mouth set in a grim, firm line. Her white hair was drawn back beneath a tasteful grey silk turban, her dress the same dark grey. Her expression was so determined that Callum almost smiled. She looked exactly like himself in that moment. Besides his stronger jaw, only their eyes

were different—his eyes were grey like his father’s had been, whereas hers were pale blue.

“Mother, may I ask why you are here?” Callum said a little tightly. “I asked not to be disturbed.”

“Radwell, out,” his mother said to the stable master, inclining her head towards the door. Mr Radwell glanced at Callum, but stood and pushed back his chair, going to the door. He went through it silently, swinging it closed behind him.

“Mother?” Callum demanded, his back tense with anger. “Mr Radwell and I have not concluded our business. I required his assistance. And I did very clearly ask not to be disturbed this morning,” he added in a cold tone.

“I am not disturbing,” his mother said lightly. “I am coming in to tell you that luncheon is ready and that I wish to discuss the plans for the house party. Since you are insisting on thwarting my plans, you might as well help me to reconstruct them.” Her voice was tight, her mouth set in a hard line.

“Mother...” Callum protested, the headache he had been ignoring pressing tight into his temples. “I am not thwarting your plans. I am merely expressing my own wishes.”

“Preference! For that nobody of a woman who comes from some unheard-of hole in the countryside! Is that what you call it? I call it a lack of any sort of protocol and decency.”

“Mother.” Callum interrupted, his voice like a whip cracking. “I have told you a hundred times. I am making a sound business choice. The viscount has the best Arabian horses. We have none. Since I cannot travel to Arabia to select some for myself, I am forced to select them from his stable. Which is why I am choosing to unite myself with their family.” He sniffed. That was all that mattered.

“Surely there is some other way to obtain your precious bloodlines! You cannot make that person the duchess. I will not see it happen in my lifetime.”

Callum glared. “This is not a matter about the future duchess, Mother. This is about our stables . The Stanhope bloodlines have always been among the best in England. I wish that to continue. It is the one thing I can maintain from...how things were,” Callum concluded roughly. He had inherited an estate in ruins. He had sold off parts of what he had inherited, including a great deal of property like the London house, in order to repay the debts. The estate he maintained was a third smaller than what he had inherited. The least he could do was to maintain the family status as the best horse-breeders in England.

“What nonsense!” His mother dismissed his words. “It is the future duchess that you have chosen! And you have made a terrible choice. A nobody, from some wretched provincial backwater. When you could have had a celebrated debutante from London’s highest circles! I...”

“Stop. Please ,” Callum shouted. He tensed. He hated raising his voice. His father had raised his voice, sometimes, and Callum had sworn to himself that he would not be that kind of man. He wanted to control himself. But his mother pushed him beyond all reason.

“I will take luncheon, then,” his mother said in a small, tight voice, her blue eyes widening with shock. She looked down at the floor, apparently wounded by his anger. “You seem indisposed to company.” She turned and went through the door.

Callum sat down, exhausted, at his desk. All his energy had drained out of him.

“Heavens help me,” he said silently, a prayer for divine guidance. He had struggled with his beliefs after his father's passing, but if he had ever needed help, it was with his current decisions. He had never once met Miss Rothwell, and he could not care

less what she looked like, what her character was like, or whether her family were acceptable. He had long ago decided that he was never going to trust anyone outside his family with any kind of affection.

“I do not care about anything else. I just need those horses,” he whispered.

He looked up as someone tapped on the door. He drew a breath, about to shout at whoever it was, but someone spoke through the wood.

“Callum? Brother? Are you here?”

“Harriet,” Callum called, going towards the door. “Come in. Do,” he added. Harriet opened the door and slipped in. Her clover-honey hair tumbled around her shoulders; her blue eyes wide. Her face was slim, like his, but she had their mother’s shorter, smaller nose instead of his long, thin one and a neat, pointed chin. She frowned.

“Callum. Are you quite well?” she asked softly.

Callum sighed. “I think you heard that our mother was just in here,” he said carefully. He did not want to lay all his worries on Harriet’s slight shoulders. At twenty, she should be enjoying her life, revelling in being newly out in society. Callum had never had the time to enjoy his youth—at eighteen, he had become the duke, and all the responsibilities of the household had settled on his shoulders.

“Was she terribly horrid?” Harriet asked, her nose wrinkling.

Callum smiled. “You know Mother. A navy captain would have a hard time bossing her about.” He could talk openly with his sister like that, with no fear of any misunderstanding. She loved their mother, as he did; and she understood full well that she could be difficult sometimes.

She nodded. “Even a big navy captain. Like Uncle Gerald.”

Callum chuckled. “Yes. Even he would think twice before making any kind of argument with Mother.” Their uncle was a commodore in the navy, and even he tended to avoid any direct conflict with the formidable Duchess of Stallenwood.

Harriet laughed. She went to the door and Callum thought that perhaps he had avoided laying any worries on her, but at the door, she frowned up at him.

“Are you uneasy about tomorrow?” she asked him.

Callum sighed. “Not particularly, no,” he answered softly. In truth, he was worried, but he was not about to tell his sister that fact. The next day, he was departing on a week-long ride to Sussex, to meet with the viscount, and to make the acquaintance of Miss Rothwell.

“Oh, good,” his sister said with a smile. “I cannot wait to meet her.”

“Mm.” Callum smiled at her, though his thoughts were elsewhere. “That’s good, sister,” he said gently. “Now, if you will excuse me, I need to attend to these wretched books.”

“Of course, brother,” Harriet said with a grin. “But do eat something. It’s cold today.”

Callum smiled fondly at Harriet as she went to the door. “I will,” he promised her. She grinned at him—a breathtaking, dazzling grin—and then went out into the hallway.

Callum sighed and sat down at his desk. His heart was heavy. He was going to make a commitment the next day, and he had still not really obtained his mother’s blessing. She was fighting him, and the last thing he needed was fights.



I wonder what she looks like, he thought idly, recalling Harriet's excitement to see her. He pushed the thought away. It did not matter to him, as he had told his mother. The horses and the future of the Stallenwood stables were all that mattered. He ran his gaze across the line of entries in the breeding book, focusing on the task at hand so that he could be ready to speak to the viscount when he finally met with him at his home after a week of riding.

## Page 2

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“Papa! Look here! This wound healed up so nicely,” Rosalyn said to her father, who was talking to the stable master, Mr Hansley, at the entrance to the stables. The scent of hay and horses was strong in Rosalyn’s nostrils, and she loved it. It was the scent of her childhood, of her happiest memories growing up. She scraped a fall of blonde hair out of one eye and squinted at the scar she could see under the mane of the stallion.

“...and we need to order more bran. What is it, sweetness?” Rosalyn’s father called, turning from where he conferred with the serious-faced Mr Hansley.

Rosalyn turned back to what she was doing, which was combing one of their stallions, Bradford. “The wound on Bradford’s neck,” Rosalyn told her father as he came over to join her. “It has healed up so nicely. It’s just a small scar now.”

Bradford, a part-Arabian thoroughbred, had injured his neck running in the forest—a branch or something else had sliced into his neck as he ran past it. The wound had been cleaned and stitched by the village surgeon, who occasionally visited the Rothwell stable, despite his usual vocation regarding people. It had healed well: Besides a small, hairless line in his russet-red coat, one could see no other indication.

“It looks very good indeed,” Papa replied, smiling. “You’re doing a grand job at grooming him. I have never had the patience that you do. The horses respond well to it.”

“Thank you, Papa,” Rosalyn said with a smile. Her father never gave praise lightly, though he gave it often. She truly had a rapport with the horses, particularly the ones who spooked easily with other people. Their trust in her gave her more than it did to

the horses themselves. She loved their closeness. The stables were her refuge, the one place in the world where she was absolutely herself. Since her mother had passed away five years before, she had spent more and more time there, seeking solace in the love that the beautiful creatures could give.

“Don’t exhaust yourself, dear. It’s a long day today,” Papa reminded her gently.

“I won’t, Papa,” Rosalyn said, biting her lip. She felt nauseous just thinking about it. His Grace, the Duke of Stallenwood, had asked for her hand, and Papa had agreed to it. And the duke was going to arrive that day to call on them.

It still stunned Rosalyn. Her family were barely known in Court circles and had never been part of London’s high society. Their income was modest, their estate holdings not exactly vast. Their horse breeding program was among the very best in England, though, and that was the sole reason, she imagined, for the duke and for her father to agree to the match. She could not imagine any other reason why a duke would involve himself with a relatively obscure and humble family.

I have never even seen him, Rosalyn thought fearfully, her fingers twisting the fabric of her sleeves in an anxious habit. She shut her hazel-brown eyes for a moment, her head hurting. She knew nothing whatsoever about the duke. He could be anything at all—old, young or somewhere in between; ugly, handsome or ordinary-looking. She was frightened of the very idea—frightened and apprehensive. And she was going to meet him in a few hours.

She tidied her thick, pale hair, trying to ignore the knot of worry in her stomach.

“I need to go in, now,” her father added gently. “Do not linger too long. It’s cold.”

“Yes, Papa,” Rosalyn said softly. It was cold, though it had yet to snow. In Sussex, it did not snow heavily—sometimes, not at all. Rosalyn could remember only a handful

of years when it had snowed close to Christmastide. She lifted the brush from where she had left it balanced on the gatepost and continued her work.

“Hush, there,” she said gently to Bradford, the stallion, as she combed his coat. He snorted and stamped, and Rosalyn took a deep breath. Her own anxious mood was communicating itself to him.

“I’ll let you rest now,” she told the horse, stroking his head gently. As she went to the door of the stables, she heard voices. She tensed instantly, peering out. Her father was walking up the gravel drive with a strange man.

Her heart thudded wildly. The man must be the Duke of Stallenwood.

Rosalyn looked down at her gown. She was wearing a threadbare white velvet dress that she hardly ever used and she could only imagine how her hair looked. The duke stood ten paces away. She studied him, heart racing.

The duke was tall; an inch taller than Papa, who was not a short man. He had a slim but athletic build, his tight buckskin riding breeches showing firmly muscled legs and well-formed calves. His face was long and slim, his mouth a grim line. His hair was jet black. He wore knee-length riding boots and something about his stance made her think he rode often; his posture upright, his legs strong. His shirt collar reached up to his ears, white and stiff. His cravat was sparsely tied, as though he could not be bothered to expend energy on frivolity. She could not read the expression on his face—it was what she could only describe as icy.

“His grace the duke wished to view our stables,” Papa greeted her. She gasped, realising he had noticed her presence. The duke was looking at her. Her cheeks burned. “May I have the honour of presenting to you his grace, the Duke of Stallenwood?” Papa added with an awkward grimace.

Rosalyn drew in a breath. The duke was staring at her, but his gaze was far from friendly, and her stomach tightened. His eyes were grey, the exact colour of the leaden sky, and his glance was coldly assessing, as though she was a horse for sale. She reddened, anger mixing with awkwardness.

“Your Grace,” she murmured. She had learned etiquette, and she knew the exact depth of curtsy appropriate to offer a duke. Yet as she did so, her knees were trembling. His expression was so cold, his grey eyes so assessing, that it scared her.

“Your Grace, may I present my daughter, the Honourable Miss Rothwell?” Papa addressed the duke. The duke inclined his head, the barest of nods, and bowed low to Rosalyn. His wintry gaze held hers for a moment as he straightened.

“Good afternoon, Miss Rothwell.”

His voice was neither high nor low, a middle-toned voice that was soft and resonant and which, for some unfathomable reason, tied her stomach in knots.

“Good afternoon,” she managed to say, though her heart was racing, her palms wet with perspiration.

The duke turned to her father. “Shall we go on, my lord?” he asked Papa coolly. “I wish to see your stable.”

How rude! Rosalyn thought angrily. He had not even had the courtesy to take tea with the family and already he was demanding a look at the stables. He had travelled for a week from the Midlands to Sussex, and, still, he could not find the manners to take a cup of tea first. She bristled and glared at him. He caught her stare, and she blushed. His own look was mild, as if her anger did not touch him.

He does not seem to care if we—some small, provincial family—are angry with him,

Rosalyn thought crossly.

“Our stud stallions are on opposite ends of the stable,” her father was explaining as he led the duke into the stables. “At the door we have Wildfire, and Starlight is on the other side.” One of the horses near the door neighed as he saw Papa. It was Chestnut, his hunting stallion. He always greeted Papa like that. Rosalyn followed her father, unsure what else to do.

“Mm. Both are Arabian?” the duke asked mildly.

“They are,” Papa replied.

He seemed to have no idea of courtesy or decency. He had barely even glanced at her. She looked at Papa, willing him to say something. Surely, he should address the rudeness?

“You have your own breeding program with the two and your mares?” the duke asked.

Rosalyn opened her mouth, about to say that they had bred several fine foals already, but Papa spoke first.

“We have,” he replied almost nervously.

“Fine,” the duke said icily.

Chestnut neighed again and Papa went over to stroke him. Rosalyn looked up at the duke uncomfortably. He was standing close to her, and the enormity of the situation hit her like a fist. She did not know him at all. She could not think of a single thing to say to him. But in a few weeks, they would be living at Stallenwood Park together. He was a cold, silent stranger who seemed to be assessing and judging herself and her

family at their small, provincial home.

She looked away, racking her brains to think of what to say.

“He must be two years old?” the duke asked coolly. She jumped. She had not expected him to say anything.

“Two and a half,” Rosalyn replied neutrally. She kept her voice firm, though she was secretly impressed, despite her anger, by his astute observation. It took a knowledgeable breeder to be able to guess a horse’s age, and she could not help but be impressed by that.

“Mm. You have owned him since he was a foal?” His eyes were impossible to read.

“A yearling,” Rosalyn replied. She could not help smiling at the recollection of Chestnut when he arrived. He had been almost full-grown, around the height of her shoulder; all long chestnut legs and swiveling ears and swishing tail.

“He is quite tall,” the duke commented.

“Mm. His sire was very tall. Smoke, his name was. A black thoroughbred.” She recalled the stallion—imposing and cool-tempered, quite different to their loveable chestnut foal.

“Who owned him?” the duke asked.

Rosalyn frowned. That was a secret of their own breeding program, not to be given lightly to a stranger. But then, she thought as a sudden flush crept into her cheeks, he was not a stranger. In a month’s time, he would be her husband.

Her easy rapport with him was instantly replaced with awkwardness. She looked

down at her toes, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. Her cheeks were burning with heat as he looked at her and she realised that he must be thinking the same thing.

“Rosalyn, sweetness?” her father called her, saving her from having to reply. She looked up.

“Yes, Papa?”

“Mayhap you can show his grace your mare? You have done so much of her training yourself that I would hesitate to show her without you.”

“Marmalade?” Rosalyn blinked. Why should the duke see her horse, Marmalade? She was an eight-year-old mare, who Rosalyn had ridden since she was a teenager. She had begun riding her at fifteen, and now, after Rosalyn’s twentieth birthday, they had shared five years together. They were inseparable friends.

“Yes. She is one of our best mares.”

Rosalyn turned to the stall where her horse, Marmalade, stood, whickering a greeting to her over the doorway.

“Easy, lass,” Rosalyn murmured, stroking her nose. Marmalade followed her without the need for a bridle, which was, Rosalyn realised, why her father had asked her to lead the mare out. Marmalade followed her like that, but she would not follow anyone else.

“Fine. Fine,” the duke praised as Marmalade trotted past him. She was a beautiful horse. She was fifteen hands tall—a good height for a thoroughbred mare—and she had a broad, deep chest and strong legs. She carried her head proudly, her thick mane tossing and her white coat glossy in the late-morning light. It was a sunny day, but it was icy cold out in the paddock. Rosalyn’s teeth chattered as she drew her shawl



closer around her shoulders.

“She is eight years old,” Papa was explaining. Rosalyn stopped focusing on them and focused instead on Marmalade. She held up her hand and the horse came to sniff it, tossing her head back in imitation of Rosalyn, who tossed back her own. Rosalyn ached to run because if she did, Marmalade would run with her, showing off her even gait. But the thought of running in front of a stranger made her flush. The duke was so cold and remote that he would almost certainly be shocked by any breach of etiquette.

“Easy, sweetling,” she said to Marmalade, reaching up to stroke her forehead. “Are you going to rear for me?” She lifted her hand, practising a signal that she had taught her horse—or tried to—long ago, when she was fifteen and Marmalade was three. She had exercised for countless hours with the horse, but she had only ever done this particular thing a few times, and Marmalade had only managed to understand her gesture once before. This time, Marmalade reared up on her back feet and then brought her front feet, muscled and heavy, crashing down onto the earth in front of her.

“Whoa! Good girl! Good girl!” Rosalyn praised. A delighted grin spread across her face. The duke slipped from her notice, and she reached up to stroke her horse’s head, hugging her neck in delight and appreciation of the unexpected gesture. Marmalade snorted, snuffing in Rosalyn’s hair. Rosalyn stroked her head again, then glanced across at the duke.

He was staring straight at her.

Rosalyn went cold and looked away hastily, her heart thudding in her chest. Embarrassment and confusion washed through her. His gaze was focused, unreadable.

Why is he staring? she asked herself. She tucked a strand of blonde hair behind one ear, heart thumping hard. Maybe he was staring because she looked untidy. She glanced down at her tatty dress and worn-out boots.

Her father was saying something—she could hear his low voice as he talked, but she could not make out the words. She did not hear the duke reply and she risked a glance at them as she turned to lead Marmalade out. The duke's gaze met hers again. He stared for a second and then looked down, as if he had noticed that she had seen him staring. She was closer when he looked up, and his expression was utterly unreadable. Whatever he was thinking, she simply could not guess.

Those grey eyes are so cold, she thought with a shiver. She risked a glance at him from the stable door, studying his features more closely. His mouth was a thin line, his chin hard. His jet-black hair was cut severely short. His nose was slim and well-formed, and his face was hard, his cheekbones high and very slight wrinkles framing his mouth at the corners. She shivered again and looked away.

“Thank you, sweetness,” her father called to her gently. Rosalyn understood that he wanted her to take her horse back to her stall. She went through the door, fighting not to look back, and stabled Marmalade and then went outside again. Papa was still talking, his posture suggesting that it was a serious matter. Rosalyn's heart thudded hard.

Her father looked up, smiled and waved her closer. She walked over reluctantly, swallowing her fear and tension about being so close to the duke. She avoided his eye, looking instead at her father.

“His grace and I will go to the house to talk,” her father said awkwardly. “If you would prefer to stay at the stable, then you are of course welcome to do so.”

Rosalyn swallowed. “Of course, Papa,” she said swiftly. “I will remain here. Good

day to you both,” she added, though her throat was so tight that she could barely get the words out.

“Good day,” the duke said coldly.

Her father smiled; his brown eyes set in wrinkles that showed whenever he grinned. She knew he was trying to reassure her, his concern evident in his dark eyes. Then he turned and walked with the duke towards the house. Rosalyn stayed where she was for a few minutes, then rushed back into the stables.

“Should I go to take stock of the feed, my lady?” Mr Hensley asked her. Rosalyn jumped. She had thought she was unobserved. She nodded.

“Yes. Please, Mr Hensley. I will complete my grooming of the horses.”

“Very good, my lady.”

Rosalyn remained rooted to the spot, too flustered to move. He is here to finalise the arrangement with Papa , she thought, her stomach churning. It was an arrangement that involved her—no, more than involved her; she was at the very heart of it.

“That man has no decency,” she said softly but angrily. He had come to see the stables, that was all. He had barely spared a glance at her.

Except that he did. He was staring at me for half the time, she reminded herself. She shivered and tucked her hair into its bun. He was probably shocked by my tatty appearance, she thought sadly. His gaze had given nothing away, but she hesitated to call it an admiring stare.

“Well, I don’t want his admiration,” she told her horse firmly. He was horrid, cold and frosty and she did not like him at all. She bit her lip. He was going to be part of

her life soon. An inescapable reality was looming closer every moment.

“Heavens help me,” she whispered, her fingers moving involuntarily to the little pearl cross that she wore around her neck—it had belonged to her mother, and she wore it always, a talisman to keep her safe. Her fingers closed around it where it lay under her dress, over her heart.

“Sister?” a voice called. “Sister? Where are you?”

“Sebastian! I’m here,” Rosalyn called, recognising her brother’s voice. She went towards the door in time to see him striding up the path towards the stable. He was dressed in a black tailcoat, a high-necked white shirt and long dark grey trousers. Of all the family, Sebastian was most often in London, and he dressed accordingly.

He smiled, a grin lighting up his long, thin face. He looked exactly like their father—or, exactly like he must have looked twenty years ago. At twenty-five, Sebastian was the eldest of the siblings and managed the estate alongside Papa, though he took more interest in investing and finance than Papa ever had. He looked into her eyes and a worried expression shadowed his features.

“Are you quite well, sister? You seem troubled.”

“No, I am quite well,” Rosalyn said quickly. As the eldest sister and the one who had managed the household since their mother’s passing, she was accustomed to appearing more cheerful than she felt.

“Come on. Let’s go indoors,” Sebastian said gently.

Rosalyn walked with him out of the stables. She looked up at him, overwhelmed with gratitude for his being there. “I am so glad you’re back from London,” she said softly.

“So am I!” Sebastian grinned. “I feel like when I was at school. Escaping Eton for the Christmas season was one of my favourite parts of the year.”

“Yes! It was grand to have you home for Christmas,” Rosalyn said, sighing too at the memory.

“I am glad you felt that way,” Sebastian said with a chuckle. “I could be a terror when I came back for the holidays.”

“Remember the time you climbed the oak tree and got stuck?” Rosalyn asked.

“I did not get stuck,” Sebastian said, sniffing as if affronted. “I simply rested up there.”

“For an hour?” Rosalyn teased.

They both laughed.

“It was not just me. We were both frightfully naughty when we were children—not just me,” Sebastian commented with a laugh. “Remember when we stole flowers from the garden at the neighbour’s house in London? Or when I stole mince pies from the kitchen?”

“They were so hot,” Rosalyn recalled. “They had just come out of the oven. And we tried to eat them.”

“Yes!” Sebastian was laughing heartily, a big grin lighting his face. “The cook heard us screaming and that rather gave us away.”

Rosalyn laughed aloud, her shoulders shaking with amusement as she remembered. “You screamed so loudly! And then we were both laughing.”

“Indeed,” Sebastian said with a grin. “Those were grand times.”

“Mm.” Rosalyn closed her eyes for a moment, recalling her childhood Christmases. Sometimes there had been snow—usually not more than ankle-deep—but they had sledged and played outside for hours. Inside the hall, greenery and candles adorned the rooms, and the kissing bough—a ball of greenery with red apples suspended in the centre—was hung at the back of the ballroom. Her heart twisted as she recalled how joyous she had been, watching her happy parents laugh and smile at each other.

“You tried so hard to hold us together after...after...” Sebastian coughed. Rosalyn swallowed. She guessed that he had thought of Mama, just as she had. Her heart ached.

“I did. Thank you, Sebastian,” she said, her throat feeling tight. He was one of the only members of the family who acknowledged that—that she had tried so hard to be strong when Mama had passed away, that she had done her best to do what Mama would have wanted and to keep the family as cohesive and strong as it had been when she was alive. As it happened, she did not need to try that hard—apart from Papa withdrawing into silences, which he still occasionally did, they had remained as close as ever. She gazed up at Sebastian, her heart filled with love.

“You are so strong, sister,” Sebastian said gently, his gaze holding hers. “So much stronger than you know. You carried us all for a while. Those are very capable shoulders.” He shoved her playfully on the shoulder, lightening the mood.

Rosalyn smiled up at him, unable to speak for a moment. “Thank you,” she said softly. “Thank you, brother. You have no idea what that means to me.” She had needed to hear those exact words. Perhaps she could do it. At least for the rest of the evening.

Sebastian just smiled. “Now,” he said slowly, “I reckon we ought to go indoors. It’s

chilly out here.”

“Yes,” Rosalyn replied, becoming aware that she was shivering and that it was, in fact, extremely cold. She walked with Sebastian to the door and drew a breath, then stepped into the room. She was strong, and she could face whatever awaited, as long as there were horses and a stable to keep her sane where she was going. Or she would try to face the cold, horrid duke, and forget about him until she had to.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:11 am*

Callum gazed out of the window at the garden below. He had travelled for a week from Sussex to his Midlands home, and during that time the light covering of snow over the landscape had melted. The leafless trees stood along the drive like sentinels and the sky was leaden over the dark landscape. It was barren and dark, like his mood. He tried to forget about the journey he had just made. It was too confusing, calling up questions he would rather not answer.

“Your Grace?” the butler called from the doorway.

“Yes?” Callum asked a little frostily. He did not like to be disturbed.

“Your Grace, your mother was asking for you. Her grace is downstairs in the dining room.”

Callum’s brow creased in a frown. He had avoided discussions with his mother since his return, but he could not avoid her eternally. She was planning for the house party—twenty guests staying for three weeks required rooms to be tidied, menus to be written, the ballroom to be cleaned and a host of other tasks. Mother oversaw all of the preparations, but even with all that work, she would certainly find time to argue with him about his choice of duchess.

“She requested that you await her in the drawing room, Your Grace.”

“I will wait here,” Callum said lightly. He thanked the fellow absently. The butler paused to tidy on the way out. The tray that he lifted from the table caught the firelight, flashing a rich bronzy gold. Callum winced as an image of Miss Rothwell flashed into his mind, conjured by the bronzed tones that matched, exactly, the colour



of her hair.

Stop thinking about her, he told himself firmly. He recalled her tumbledown locks and that bright smile, as bright as sunshine on a frozen landscape. She had been disarming, and easy to talk to. That had been unexpected.

So, I will be able to tolerate her without escaping into the countryside on long rides too often, he told himself angrily. Why does that seem to have captured my thoughts so much?

He turned away, determined to stop wandering in a mire of thoughts of Miss Rothwell. It had been hard enough on the long ride back to focus—alone, his mind wandered to her far more often than he would like. It was uncomfortable and it bothered him.

“Son. There you are!” his mother greeted him as she glided in through the door from the hallway. “I need your opinion on a matter. Should I put Lord Bronham and his wife in the South suite? As an earl, I think the best view ought to go to him.”

“I think you have a far better idea of these matters than I do,” Callum ground out.

“Oh, son! Do pay some interest to this party! It’s Christmas!” His mother said crossly. “I have been working for weeks, and you barely even looked at the menu plans and the guest list. Must I do this all by myself?”

Callum sighed. He could not help feeling a little guilty. What his mother said was true, after all—she had been working hard.

“Mother, you have put a magnificent effort into the house party,” he said slowly. “Truly, you have. But I have other matters weighing on my shoulders. The horses need adequate feed to last the winter, and it is particularly cold. Seeing to their

regular exercise is also difficult,” he explained, hoping that she would not guess he had other matters on his mind as well. Matters like the woman he had met in Sussex and who would be the new duchess in a matter of weeks.

“I did need to ask you something,” his mother began. “I was ordering some greenery to be cut for the house party. To decorate the ballroom and make the kissing boughs and so on. Have you any restrictions on where we can gather the branches in the woods adjoining the park?”

Callum frowned. “Not that I know of,” he replied blankly. The verderers who managed the estate woods had not told him that parts of it needed particular protecting during the winter. “But surely, we will not be hanging the green boughs now?” he asked. “That is for the day before Christmas.” That was a well-established tradition throughout the country. The house would be decorated the day before Christmas, and then the Christmas boughs would remain there until Epiphany the following year.

His mother stared at him. “We will be hanging the boughs in a week’s time,” she answered. “If enough greenery can be located and gathered by then.”

“Mother! Is that not a rather radical notion?” Callum exclaimed. The tradition dictated that the branches be hung the day before. Many people believed that flouting the custom would invite dreadful ill luck.

His mother shrugged. “We have a need for decoration. How is the party supposed to seem even a little bit festive, if we have nothing to show that it is Christmastide?”

Callum sighed. He knew better than to argue with his mother. He shrugged.

“As you wish,” he said, feeling drained. He turned to the butler. “Find whatever greenery you can for Her Grace’s decorations.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” He bowed and withdrew.

Callum looked at his mother tiredly. “When will we commence the ball this evening?” he asked.

“At eight of the clock. We will be hosting an early tea. Some of the guests will be arriving earlier and we will be expected to offer them refreshment.” She raised a brow, as though insisting that he be there on time.

Callum sighed again. “Yes, Mother.”

She was about to reply, when a voice called from the hallway.

“Brother? I needed to ask you something...”

“Harriet!” Callum called with some relief. “I am in the drawing room.”

“Oh, good,” Harriet replied, hurrying in through the door. She turned and looked at their mother and then looked back at Callum. “I can wait for you, if you are occupied...” A thin line appeared on her brow.

“I believe we had discussed all the matters we needed to discuss,” Callum said swiftly. He gazed at their mother. She nodded.

“I think we have discussed all that we needed to,” she said tightly. Her eyes fixed on Callum as if to suggest that their discussion would continue, and would not be limited to decorations and tea-times. She turned and walked out of the room.

Harriet gazed up at Callum. “Brother, is aught the matter?”

“Nothing, sister,” Callum answered tiredly.

“Is Mama angry?” Harriet asked anxiously. “She was shouting. I heard her voice in the hallway.” She was always worried by raised voices and disruption, her gentle nature distressed by any sort of argument.

“It was not anything serious, sister,” Callum said gently. “She and I just have a difference of opinion. A few opinions. Like, whether or not cabbage should be served at Christmas dinner.” He chuckled. He did not like the taste of cabbage—a fact known by everyone in the house—while his mother insisted that it be served as a winter vegetable. Harriet smiled.

“You and your cabbage,” she said with a laugh. She was chuckling, the earlier worries forgotten, and that was all that Callum wanted.

“Have you been out to the stable?” Callum asked Harriet. She was a keen rider, and the horses helped her to ignore the rising tension in the house. She nodded.

“I was out yesterday. I took Buttercup for a ride. It was very cold. I did not want to overexercise her.”

“Quite correct,” Callum nodded, walking out into the hallway. He stopped, remembering something. Mother’s house party would be arriving later on in the day, and he had to plan what he was going to wear to the ball that night. He had not given it a thought.

“Brother? Will all the guests from Sussex also arrive today?” Harriet asked him, her blue eyes wide as she gazed up at him.

“Yes,” Callum replied. “Or, at least I presume so. Mother expects them,” he added, sounding purposely disinterested.

“I look forward to meeting them,” Harriet told him, her smile hesitant and shy as she

gazed up at him.

“You are a dear sister,” Callum said fondly. He had reached his bedroom door, and he turned in the doorway, inclining his head. “I must plan my outfit for tonight before my manservant works himself into a state of frenzy.”

“Brother! The ball is tonight! Have you really no idea yet what you are going to wear to it?”

“None whatsoever,” he assured her. “I can only hope I settle on something that will not also give our mother a fit of apoplexy.”

Harriet giggled. Callum inclined his head in a slight bow and opened his bedroom door. Harriet was still laughing as he retreated inside and shut it behind him.

He stared blankly at his open wardrobe. Rows of neatly starched shirts appeared before his blank gaze, the collars high and the sleeves long. Beside them hung a few tailcoats—thick velvet, appropriate for winter. The colours ranged from sombre grey to deep blue to black. Trousers and knee breeches in similar shades hung beside them.

Callum sighed and reached for a pair of dark knee-breeches, holding them up to assess the colour in the brighter light afforded by the fireplace. It was dark grey.

“Those are sufficient,” Callum murmured to himself and selected a dark blue tailcoat at random, adding a high-necked shirt as he tossed the pile over the chair-back. He gazed at his selection. It was tasteful, restrained and nothing out of the ordinary. That was as he wished it to be. He wondered, briefly, at the door, what Miss Rothwell might think of his outfit. He pushed the thought away. She was hardly there to gawp at what he wore.

He was about to go out when a vivid recollection of Miss Rothwell cannoned into his

mind. He remembered her slender hand reaching up to stroke her horse, the gentle way she spoke to the mare. He had been impressed by her handling of the horses, her easy confidence and unconcealed care. She will love our stable, he thought with a small grin.

“She doesn’t have to,” he told himself aloud. She was just there to bring her family connections and access to the stable.

He sighed. A sudden invasion of chattering, energetic guests was not something he liked. He looked out of the window and tensed, seeing a coach approaching.

His stomach knotted and he wondered briefly who it was. It could be the Rothwell coach. He stiffened, his body tensing in apprehension and some strange feeling he could not name. He turned from the window and went to the door. He had guests to greet.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:11 am*

“...and how delightful it will be to have such varied company! I can hardly wait to dance with so many new people! How truly grand it shall be!” Georgina’s excited voice filled the coach, her tone thrumming with anticipation. Her brown eyes were wide with delight, her red velvet dress warming the spicy chestnut tones of her hair.

“The duke’s house will be very grand, I expect,” Isabel, more practical, interjected. “Will we be suitably dressed, sister?” Her pretty, soft face was pale, her black hair—identical to their father—making it seem paler still. Rosalyn glanced from her sisters towards Sebastian. He chuckled.

“I assure you, dear sister, that your dresses would be suitable for London. And further north, almost certainly.” He grinned, catching Rosalyn’s eye. “They’re more distant from the centre of fashion up here in the Midlands than we are.”

Rosalyn acknowledged his kind words with a smile. He understood, clearly, how nervous she was.

Both of her sisters were simply too excited about the prospect of three weeks at the duke’s country estate. At eighteen, Georgina was full of life and excitement, newly debuted into society. Isabel, two years younger, had debuted the same year since Papa thought it unfair that the two could not enjoy parties together. Rosalyn agreed. Isabel was very quiet and serious, and having her debut with her lively, spirited elder sister would make it more pleasant for her.

“We’re almost there!” Georgina called out. “Look! I think I can see something.” She gestured through the window, pointing at the top of the hill. Sebastian let out a loud exclamation.

“Oh! Look. I think that it is on the hilltop there. There are some turrets to be seen, there, if you look.”

Rosalyn’s stomach was tied in a queasy knot. She looked out of the window and saw turrets there, just visible above the snow-covered trees.

The duke’s home slowly appeared, and her stomach knotted up even more with apprehension. The place was even more grim and imposing than she had imagined. It was three floors high and made of grey stone and had evidently been added to over the centuries; part of it fairly modern, with a facade based on Roman designs. The section behind it was more like a fortress than a manor, though the architecture came from only a hundred years before. It sported several ornamental turrets, built in a time when turrets were revived as a fashionable feature. Trees clustered about the grim, grey building, their bare branches reaching up against the grey sky. The section behind truly was old. It could have been built in the Dark Ages, to judge from its grim appearance. Small windows, barely more than a few inches across, dotted the thick, ancient stone. Rosalyn shivered and drew her pelisse tighter about her.

It looks so foreboding, she thought with a shudder. A grim, dark sort of a place.

Papa alighted first. Rosalyn took their father’s hand, jumping down. Her ankles jarred on the stone of the drive. She winced, feeling the cold even through the soles of her white outdoor boots.

“Looks quite large,” Sebastian commented, his breath a plume of steam in the icy air.

“Mm.” Rosalyn watched her own breath in the cold air, focusing on that for a second before looking up at the imposing, frightening structure, to calm her nerves.

“Ah. That must be his grace,” Sebastian said, the title said with some irony. Rosalyn had to smile. Sebastian had barely exchanged a word with the duke when he visited,



and evidently, he had found him as rude and displeasing as Rosalyn herself had. “And his mother, I suppose,” he added, squinting up at the stairs. “And someone else, too.” His voice softened with those words, and Rosalyn gazed up, studying the three on the steps. Her palms were suddenly wet with nervous perspiration, her heart thudding.

The duke stood there, his tall, imposing form drawing her eye immediately. He was wearing a black tailcoat and a matching top-hat, and she could not see the expression on his face—they were still too far away—but his posture was stiff and unbending, radiating cold displeasure. She shivered.

Beside him stood a woman with elegantly styled white hair partly covered with a grey turban headdress—quite the fashion for older married ladies and widows alike. She wore a dark grey dress and her expression, as Rosalyn walked nearer, seemed even colder than the duke’s. Her steel-blue eyes barely even focused on the group as they approached the foot of the stairs. Sebastian halted where he stood beside Rosalyn and she frowned, then saw that his eyes were focusing on the third person on the steps. She followed his gaze and spotted a slim young woman with the same longer face as the duke’s, her pale blonde hair bright against the dark stone behind. She wore a dark grey pelisse, a white gown just visible below. Her eyes were soft blue, and her expression was shy and hesitant when she studied Sebastian. Rosalyn smiled.

While she had never experienced real attraction before, the spark of something she instantly recognised seemed to pass from Sebastian to the young woman. Her grin widened as their group moved forward, and the young woman instinctively stepped closer to her brother, the duke. She went hesitantly up the stairs with her family to the large terrace. She was glad of Sebastian’s protective presence beside her, shielding her from the dowager duchess’ steely blue gaze.

“Your Grace! Good afternoon,” Papa greeted the duke formally. He bowed. “Good afternoon, Your Grace,” he added, turning to the duchess. “My lady,” he addressed the young woman, bowing to her. “I believe we have not had the honour of an

introduction.”

“Good afternoon, my lord,” the duke greeted Papa. He nodded to Sebastian. “Mr Rothwell, Miss Rothwell.” He acknowledged Rosalyn with a mere tilt of the head. His eyes met hers for a moment and she looked away, her stomach twisting with some emotion she could not place. Her heart was racing.

The duke turned to her father. “I have not had the honour of meeting your other daughters,” he added. “So, I regrettably cannot greet them by name. May I have the honour of introducing you to my mother, the dowager Duchess of Stallenwood, and to my sister, Lady Harriet?” he gestured to the two women beside him. “I suggest we all come in from the cold,” he added, stepping back so that Rosalyn and her family could proceed into the manor.

Rosalyn walked stiffly, conscious of the gaze of the duke and his mother as she passed by them. Their eyes were cold, assessing. Her heart twisted, her stomach tying itself in knots.

“This is pleasant,” Papa commented, either ignoring the frosty unwelcoming gaze of the duke and his mother, or oblivious to it. “Now, I can make the proper introductions. Your Grace, may I have the honour of introducing my younger daughters? This is Miss Georgina Rothwell, my second-eldest daughter, and Miss Isabel Rothwell, my youngest.”

“Good afternoon,” the duke said coldly. His gaze slid past the two sisters and Rosalyn turned to them to apologise for his rudeness, but they were both looking around, barely aware of him, and she had to smile. They had both curtsied politely, but the duke could have been eight feet tall and cast in bronze and they would not even have noticed. His home was clearly much more interesting than he was. Georgina was gazing round-eyed up at the high ceiling, while Isabel was studying the columns by the door in a way that made Rosalyn know she was assessing the age of the place.

“The ball will commence at eight of the clock,” the dowager duchess said, the first time she had spoken since they all arrived. “I presume you would wish to settle into your chambers and perhaps take some tea before readying for the ball?”

Her words sounded polite, but there was a forceful coldness behind them, and the message was clear. Go up to your rooms, she was saying. Our other guests will be arriving, and I am otherwise occupied.

Her gaze met the duchess’ for a second, but the older woman barely acknowledged her; her own gaze sliding away in a way that suggested she had no interest in knowing her.

Rosalyn swallowed hard, the dismissal of that glance burning. She looked over to her father and brother, in dire need of their support. Sebastian caught her gaze and smiled. She drew in a breath, the warmth exactly what she needed. He inclined his head to the stairs, indicating that she should go first. Georgina and Isabel joined her, and they all proceeded up the stairs together.

“How grand,” Georgina whispered as they moved along the hallway. The butler had joined them at the foot of the stairs, and he led them along an upstairs corridor and to the right, their footsteps loud on the stone floor. “I half thought that it would be a fortress inside, but it is rather fine.” Her tone was admiring as her dark eyes moved over the long hallway.

“It is very old,” Isabel pointed out quietly as they moved towards a wooden door. “The columns on the inside of the door could be as old as the fifteenth century.”

“That old?” Rosalyn blinked, her throat tightening with nerves. The duke and dowager duchess were frightening enough without the notion that their family had ruled the area for four hundred years.

“I think so,” Isabel replied and went on to describe what made her decide that the columns were from four hundred years before. Rosalyn would usually have been interested, but she was barely listening, every sense aware of the duke. He was in the hallway—she could hear his voice echoing in the corridor. She strained to hear what he was saying. He was talking to Sebastian.

“...and you and your family will occupy the West Suite. If you would like, we could visit the stables tomorrow. I am currently involved with preparations, and I am certain you would wish to rest awhile.” His voice was cool, detached. It had a middle-range pitch, cold and wintry and more accustomed to giving orders than to dinnertime conversation. Rosalyn shivered. She had never met such a cold, pitiless individual.

“Thank you. I would find that most agreeable.” Sebastian’s answer was tight and clipped. Rosalyn smiled, cheered by the fact that her brother clearly disliked the duke, possibly even more than she did.

“Ah! Daughters. Shall we go in?” Papa walked briskly over to join them. “Georgina and Isabel? I understand that you will be sharing the lilac room next door. Sebastian, Rosalyn and I will be sharing the West Suite. I trust that is agreeable to you?” He smiled a little uncertainly at the two younger women, but Georgina let out a small squeak of delight.

“Yes, Papa! That is perfect. But we shall see you often, will we not, Rosy?” she asked Rosalyn with a frown.

“All the time,” Rosalyn assured them. She felt a little sorrowful—she would have liked to share a room with her sisters, but at the same time, having a bedroom to herself would be welcome. Her mood was so heavy, and it felt good to have a space to allow her sorrow to show. She was doing her best to conceal it from her sisters, so as not to spoil their Christmas.

“Hurray!” Georgina declared loudly. She saw the duke frown and covered her mouth hastily with her hand. “Come on. Let’s go in. Will our luggage be brought up, Papa?” she asked their father. “I need to hang my ballgown up so that it does not crease.”

“I am sure that it will be brought up any moment,” their father assured them. Rosalyn glanced at the duke, who nodded frostily at Papa in reply to his assurance. “Thank you, Your Grace,” Papa added to the duke. “We will go in and make ready to join you for tea.”

Rosalyn could not help but be pleased by the way the duke’s eyes narrowed a little in offence, as though he had not expected to be so politely but obviously dismissed. She was smiling as she went ahead of Sebastian and Papa into the suite.

“Not bad,” Sebastian replied, looking around the space. They were standing in a small parlour, from which exited three doors.

“I will take that room,” Rosalyn suggested, indicating the door on the left. It was closest to her sisters’ room, and was, she guessed, not too warm either, since it appeared to face east. It would receive morning sun, but none in the afternoon. She worried for Papa’s fingers—his joints ached in cold weather, swollen and knotted from years of riding. He would be better suited to a warmer room.

Papa objected, then shrugged, seeing her resolute face.

Rosalyn chuckled, then went into her room and shut the door. She let out a long sigh. The relief of being alone for a moment after a week of almost non-stop coach travel was overwhelming. She sat down on the bed and shut her eyes, head sinking back into the sumptuous pillows. The room was smaller than the one she had at home, but much more richly decorated, the walls covered in flocked-silk wallpaper with a pattern of roses, the bedlinen dark green and satiny. A French window looked out onto the grounds below. She stood and gazed out. The landscape was wintry, the

ground black and bare between the leafless trees. She shivered.

“It is as cold as they are,” she said aloud. The duke and his mother were a frightening prospect—both icy, both seeming unyielding and pitiless.

A knock at the door startled her.

“Sister?” Georgina called; her voice soft because of the thick wood of the door. “It’s us! Can you let us in?” She sounded breathless and excited.

“Of course,” Rosalyn said, feeling her weariness lift a little. She went to the door and her sisters burst in, all giggles and laughter, dispelling the weariness at once.

“You must see our chamber! It’s beautiful! Lilac silk bedclothes and flocked silk wallpaper and a lovely mantelpiece,” Georgina said excitedly.

“You have a lovely chamber, too,” Isabel commented gently. She looked around, her big dark eyes taking it all in.

“The duke! He is...he is handsome, is he not?” Georgina asked shyly.

“He seemed quiet,” Isabel commented.

Rosalyn let out a sigh. Her sisters were evidently as unsure of him as she was, but she was touched by their efforts not to comment anything negative. She paused, not sure how to tell her sisters that she was tired and all she wished was to rest until the ball. She was saved from reply by a knock on the outer door.

“My lady? Your luggage is here,” a woman’s voice called through the wood.

“Please, bring it in,” Rosalyn replied, going to open the door.

“Oh! What if ours comes too?” Georgina declared breathlessly. “We must go to our chamber! I need to hang up my dress so that the creases smooth out.”

“Of course,” Rosalyn said, relieved.

“We will see you later,” Isabel told Rosalyn as they went to the door.

“Yes! We’re going to come to your room to dress!” Georgina called out cheerily. “Just like at home! This is so exciting...”

Rosalyn had to smile as the two younger women hurried out of her room. Once they had gone, the footmen brought in the big box containing her luggage. When they, too, had departed, Rosalyn went to the box and opened it. On the top, packed so that she could access it on the first day of her arrival, was her blue evening gown. She took it out and hung it on the wardrobe door. The velvet skirts had creased slightly, Georgina was right, but in a few hours, she was sure it would be ready. She gazed at it, a slight tremor of apprehension in her stomach.

“I shall think nothing of it,” she told herself calmly. Inside, she was aflutter with a mix of emotions, but she had to tell herself that she was indifferent to it all. She had to be indifferent to the guests, to the duchess and especially the duke. She was not indifferent, not at all—she was angry, offended and aware of him, acutely so. But indifference was the only way she was going to be able to attend the ball and remain sane. So, indifferent she would be. At least for the next few hours.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:11 am*

Callum surveyed the ballroom from where he stood on the steps. The chandeliers were glittering with a hundred candles, the light pouring down on the ballroom. The floor, of pale marble tiles, was polished so that it, too, shone, and the white-painted walls just added to the glowing, bright impression of the space. Trestle tables were set out here and there, laden with delicacies or glasses into which footmen poured wine or cordial. The air smelled of a mix of beeswax polish, perfume and the hot, waxy smell of the candles. Callum breathed in and tried to feel calm. He was distracted, and it annoyed him that it was because of thoughts of Miss Rothwell.

His gaze had been drawn to her immediately as she alighted from the coach. Her bright hair had seemed even more bright in the dark, grey afternoon. She had smiled at her father, and Callum's heart had ached at the dazzling warmth of that smile. For a moment, he had wished that she would give him such a heartfelt greeting. She had gazed at him almost fearfully where he stood on the steps, and that had hurt. He had looked away, unsure what to do or say. He shook his head, trying to stop the thoughts of her that chased themselves around his mind. He kept on wondering what she was going to wear to the ball. He did not want to think like that, to care about that.

"Are you too warm, brother?" Harriet asked from beside him. He stood on the ballroom steps with Mother and Harriet, to greet their guests. "It's dreadfully hot up here."

"I am quite well," Callum replied, touched by his sister's concern. He smiled at her fondly. Her white silk gown of heavy silk complimented her delicate looks, the silver necklace set with bright stones not coming close to outshining her joyful smile.

"Lord Bronham! Lady Bronham! And dear Lady Millicent! How delightful!" Mother



greeted some arriving guests. Callum tensed instantly. Lady Millicent was the woman that his mother insisted he should dance with. Callum wished that he could feel something, some interest, but he did not. He did not feel anything—in that sense—for anybody. He had sworn to himself years ago that he would not. His father had broken his trust, and he was not going to let anyone else get close.

“Good evening, Your Grace,” Lady Bronham—a woman a little younger than his mother, with white, curly hair and a pretty, heart-shaped face—replied, dropping a slight curtsy. “How lovely to be here. I must say, you have outdone yourself, Dottie.” She addressed his mother.

Callum bowed. His gaze moved from Lady Bronham to her daughter, who stood beside her.

“Your Grace,” Lady Millicent murmured, dropping a curtsy fractionally deeper than her mother’s. She was wearing a beautiful gown of deep blue velvet, a slim silver chain at her neck. Her thick black hair was arranged in a chignon, one curl falling to touch her cheek. Her dark eyes caught his captivantly. He swallowed hard. With raven hair, milk-pale skin and those big black eyes, she was a celebrated beauty with whom half of London was in love. He shook his head at himself, unsure why he could feel nothing except for awkwardness in her presence.

“Good evening, Lady Millicent,” he murmured.

His mother glanced at him and he knew that she was expecting him to say something pleasant, but he could not think of anything, and Lady Millicent followed her parents down the steps into the ballroom.

His mother had just enough time to shoot him an annoyed look before turning to the next guests who were coming through the door.

“Lord Rothwell. Good evening,” his mother greeted the viscount, and Callum blinked, his reverie broken as he found himself face-to-face with the Rothwell guests. Lord Rothwell was dressed in a black tailcoat and black trousers, befitting a man who was still in mourning. Beside him stood his daughter and Callum's wife-to-be, Miss Rothwell.

With her golden hair arranged in a chignon, two loose curls escaping in front, and a pale grey-blue velvet gown that fitted her perfectly, she was even more beautiful than he remembered. Her hazel eyes met his and held his gaze and he struggled to look away, lost for a moment in her mesmerising gaze.

“Good evening,” he greeted her, bowing low. She dropped a curtsy, her gaze sliding past his and towards Harriet. He felt a little annoyed.

You could look at me, he wanted to say. You ought to be just a little curious.

He pushed the thought aside. Miss Rothwell was curtseying to Harriet, and her brother's gaze was fixed upon Harriet in a way that made Callum's back stiffen.

“Good evening,” he greeted the young Mr Rothwell coldly, hoping to distract him from gaping at Harriet. Mr Rothwell grinned and bowed low.

“Good evening, Your Grace,” he greeted him smoothly. “Good evening, my lady,” he added, grinning at Harriet in a way that outshone the candles.

Callum dismissed his annoyance and focused on the next guests. The two young Miss Rothwells curtsied; all anxious glances and giggles. He bowed and tried to ignore their awkward chuckles. It made him feel uncomfortable.

“These two entering now are the last of the guests,” his mother whispered to him as an older couple arrived. “Now we can shut the doors and go and enjoy the evening.

Do dance with Millicent?”

“Mother...” Callum shut his eyes. He was obliged to open the ball with Miss Rothwell—she was his betrothed.

His mother had turned away and was gliding down the stairs, the picture of poise and dignity. Callum turned to join her, trying to comport himself as well as she did. One thing he could say for his mother was that she was the epitome of a duchess. Nothing had ever dented her grace and poise, not even the snide comments and cruelty of society following Papa’s deep debts.

He reached the ballroom floor and stepped over to the refreshments table, where guests milled. He accepted a glass from the footman, barely even noticing what was in it as he sipped. He chatted politely and fidgeted with his sleeves and wished that he could escape the oppressive, noisy room. As the musicians tuned up, he glanced across the ballroom—a sea of dark velvets and glittering jewelry—and caught sight of Miss Rothwell again.

She was standing with her two sisters, her head tipped back as she laughed. The golden light shone on her hair, glowing there for a second as she moved. She saw him staring and her happy smile drooped, her manner instantly sobering. She turned away.

She doesn’t even like me, Callum thought, tensing and mustering his cold, harsh defenses. If she did not like him, he was most certainly not going to like her.

“You have to dance the first dance, Callum,” Harriet reminded him, grinning brightly.

“Yes,” Callum replied dully. “I know.” He tried to smile, but the prospect of dancing with Miss Rothwell was uncomfortable. She had no apparent interest in him, and he was determined to fight his growing interest in her. He walked across the ballroom and bowed low.

“Miss Rothwell,” he said carefully. “It is customary for me to request the first waltz with you.”

Miss Rothwell blinked, her gaze cool. Then she curtseyed. “I believe that it is customary for me to accept your offer.”

Callum bristled at the disinterested reply. He inclined his head frostily. “I imagine so,” he said tightly.

She offered her hand, clad in a white silk opera-glove, as was custom. Her gaze was cool and indifferent.

Callum gripped her fingers gently with his own. His heart thudded. He could feel the warmth of her skin through the thin silk. Her touch was so light, so gentle that it set his blood racing. He could smell floral perfume, and he looked away, his heart aching. His response to her surprised him and unsettled him.

They walked wordlessly to the dance floor.

“Excuse me, miss,” he murmured; his cheeks burning as he placed one hand on her back, just over her shoulder blade. His other hand rested in hers. Then he stepped back smoothly as she stepped forward, stepping into the waltz.

They moved seamlessly together around the dance floor. Couples glided past them, and they stepped lightly, twirling around the corner of the ballroom. It felt effortless, as easy as he could imagine. Miss Rothwell was not only a fine dancer, but it was as natural as though they had danced a hundred times together. She moved very formally, both of them reserved and cool. Even so, the dance felt easy, not stiff at all.

Callum could hear someone talking nearby and he glanced over. Harriet was on the dance floor too, and he shot her an angry glance. She was dancing with the viscount’s

son. Mr Rothwell.

The impertinent wretch! Callum thought grimly, shooting a glare at Mr Rothwell. If the impudent fellow saw him, he pretended not to notice, gazing at Harriet instead.

Callum turned back to Miss Rothwell. Her lovely hazel eyes had been fixed on his face, but the moment he looked at her, their glance moved demurely to the floor. It was hard to tell if she was shy or disapproving, and his own cheeks burned with embarrassment.

The music had altered cadence, becoming slower and solemn, and he knew from experience that the waltz would conclude within a few bars. He slowed his pace, keeping in step. The joyous major chords vibrated loudly, filling even the big space of the ballroom with their triumphant, happy sound. Then, abruptly, all the dancers stopped and bowed and curtsied. Callum released Miss Rothwell's hand and bowed low. He had not even noticed that the waltz had concluded, and his cheeks flared even more hotly at the thought that she might have noticed his error.

She straightened up from the curtsy and for a second, her hazel eyes held his. He gazed into them, staring into their golden-coloured depths. Then, shaken, he looked away.

"I must excuse myself," he said, glancing across the ballroom to where his mother stood with some of her friends. "I have a matter I must discuss with my mother."

"Of course," Miss Rothwell said tightly.

Callum inclined his head and walked as speedily as he could across the ballroom. He reached his mother's side just as she turned and spotted him. Her face broke into a big grin.

“Son. There you are! Now that you are here, I recall you wished to ask Millicent something.” She beamed at him, and he cursed inwardly.

“Lady Millicent,” he managed to say, angry with himself for literally walking into his mother’s scheme. “May I have the honour of the next dance?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Lady Millicent murmured. She dropped a demure curtsy. “I would be delighted.”

Callum shot his mother a furious glance, but she was chatting to Lady Bronham, entirely oblivious to—or ignoring—his anger. He looked over at Lady Millicent, who smiled at him.

“A fine evening is it not, Your Grace?” she asked him. Her voice was neither too high nor too low. Her curtsy was poised and graceful. Her choice of conversation was neutral. He could see exactly why everyone in society admired her so much—she was exactly how she ought to be, playing by society’s rules.

“Yes, most fine,” he agreed politely.

“Your mother has done such a fine job. And such a grand idea! A Christmas house party. So festive!”

“Mm. Very festive,” he agreed distantly.

They stepped about the dance floor. The dance was a quadrille, and they partnered with Millicent’s friend—Lady Amelia—and Lady Amelia’s betrothed. They walked lightly, twirling and stepping and touching palms and stepping back into line. The quadrille was a complex dance, and Callum was surprised that he recalled all the steps. He let his mind wander as they danced.

A man with chestnut hair was talking to his mother on the other side of the room and Callum frowned. He recognised the man—the way he stood, the long, slim profile and angular chin. He simply could not recall who it was. His gaze narrowed and he almost missed a step. He stiffened and apologised.

By the end of the dance, after concentrating for so long, he felt exhausted. He bowed low.

“Thank you, Lady Millicent,” he murmured. He thanked their companions and then moved towards the terrace doors. They had been opened briefly, and even though the breeze that blew through them was icy, he felt drawn to them, wanting to step outside for a moment or two.

“Callum! Do come and greet our late-arrived guests!” Mother called, drifting over as he reached the door. Her gaze moved to the chestnut-haired man and a brown-haired woman who stood beside him. Her gaze was inscrutable. She could have been furious at their late arrival, pleased, or entirely indifferent. Her face was always hard to read.

“Good evening,” Callum said to the two people, bowing low. He looked over at his mother in the hope that she would give him an introduction. He was sure he knew them—the woman had a soft oval face and was very pretty, and the man had a long, angular face and watchful dark eyes. He felt certain he had met them both before, too.

“I did wonder when James and Philippa were going to arrive,” Mama said, coming to the rescue with information. Callum sighed in relief. That was who they were, and why they seemed familiar. James was the son of one of his late father’s closest acquaintances, the Earl of Winbrook. James and his father had occasionally been at Stallenwood Park for visits, and Mother had maintained a friendship with Lady Winbrook, James’ mother. Lady Philippa was James’ cousin, a less frequent visitor at Stallenwood.

“We are very grateful to be invited, Your Grace,” James said, addressing Mother. His expression was grave.

“Of course, dear fellow. Of course,” Mother said, her expression sympathetic. After his mother’s own humiliation about their debt, she had felt a certain kinship with Lady Winbrook, who had suffered a similar experience. That was why she had maintained ties with the family.

“It is a magnificent ball, Your Grace,” Lady Philippa said softly. Mother inclined her head.

“Thank you, Lady Philippa,” she said politely.

Callum tried to smile, but he found that he could not muster any real warmth. He had never liked James—as a youth, the fellow had seemed sullen and withdrawn, his eyes darting around the manor nervously, barely speaking a word. Callum would have preferred it if his mother had not invited the two, but then he had not helped her make the guest list, so he could not complain.

He stood with them, racking his brains to think of polite things to say. Part of him wished he was like Millicent. She seemed so capable, gliding through social situations with seamless ease. His gaze moved across the ballroom and stopped, caught on a flash of bright blonde hair with coppery highlights. Miss Rothwell was standing perhaps ten feet away. He looked away, annoyed at himself for becoming distracted.

James and Philippa had noticed his staring, and they followed the line of his gaze. He winced, feeling angry with himself as they glanced at each other. They probably thought he was a fool—a lovesick dolt. He tensed, ashamed of himself.

“Excuse me,” he murmured, deciding he had tortured himself enough. “I am overly



warm. I must take some respite.” He gestured to the doors.

“Of course, old fellow. Of course,” James replied affably. “It is rather warm in here.”

“We will doubtless still be here when you return,” Lady Philippa quipped a little ironically.

Callum bowed to her and then moved hastily towards the doors of the room. He stepped outside and gulped in the fresh, cold air, feeling relieved to be away from the confusion, the press of people and the bewildering mix of emotions that he felt whenever he looked at Miss Rothwell.

He leaned on the balcony and gazed out into the darkened garden; the stone of the railing icy under his arms. Miss Rothwell’s face filled his mind, and he wished that he could think of something to say to her. She seemed so cold, so disinterested and it hurt him, making him feel unworthy. He had never felt quite adequate as the new duke, sure that someone else might have managed the situation better. Her cold indifference made him feel inadequate.

“Don’t be foolish,” he told himself aloud.

All the same, as he stared down at the garden, he could not help musing about Miss Rothwell and feeling sorrowful. He pushed the sorrow down, reaching for irritation—one reliable way to cover up all his emotions—and told himself that he was just annoyed with her for being difficult. That was definitely all it was. It could not possibly be that he felt a growing admiration.

“Certainly not,” he said to the silence. He could not let that happen, after all.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:11 am*

The hallway was overly warm, the press of people tight and uncomfortably close. Rosalyn drew her skirts closer about her, trying to avoid stepping on the gown of the lady standing in front of her. Behind her, the chatter of voices was loud. She looked at the floor, feeling unsteady and dizzy. It was ten o'clock in the evening and the ball guests were attempting to exit the ballroom and cross the hallway to the dining room. This was not simply a matter of walking out of one door and to another but was an elaborate exercise in etiquette. They would need to enter the dining room in a line in order of precedence. The highest-ranking guests would go first.

"I believe Lady Dalforth should go ahead of us," a woman's voice was saying behind her. Rosalyn strained to hear, her heart thudding. Her sisters were perhaps ten paces away, trying to find a place as the guests lined up, and Sebastian was somewhere—she had lost sight of him in the crowd. Papa was ahead. She glanced around, worried that they might have taken the position of someone higher-ranking than they were. To make such a misstep in the intricate world of privilege and station could lead to ridicule or, at the very least, social censure.

Perhaps somebody would advise her, she thought wildly. She scanned the crowded space for anyone who looked a bit friendly.

"Miss Rothwell?" a voice said beside her. Rosalyn whirled around.

"Your Grace?" Surprise made her gaze widen. She lifted her hand to her lips. She had not expected to see him. After the awkward, strained silence during the dance in the ballroom, she had expected him to avoid her.

"I will escort you to dinner, if I may," he said. His voice was cool, his expression

inscrutable. He briefly made eye contact and then looked away.

Rosalyn tensed. It should have felt comfortable to stand with him—after all, she was to wed him in a little more than a month. Instead, it felt wrong—deeply awkward and uncomfortable. He made no effort to engage in conversation, instead staring blankly ahead. It reminded her precisely of his visit to Cranfield Hall, and her initial discomfort gave way to irritation.

How dare he? she thought crossly.

They stood in silence for a full minute. Rosalyn stepped forward, getting out of the way of some guests. The duke stepped with her, both silent all the while.

“Say something,” the duke hissed. “People are staring. They must wonder about us.”

“And so? If they stare?” Rosalyn asked. She tensed, amazed at her own boldness.

His grey eyes flared wide and then narrowed. “It matters. What people think matters. At least pretend to be on good terms.”

“If you were a touch more polite, then perhaps it would not be necessary to pretend.”

The duke stared at her. His gaze widened again, his mouth compressing. Rosalyn stiffened, frightened by his sudden cold temper. Her own boldness frightened her almost as much.

He said nothing. Nor did she. The only sound that she could hear was the wild thudding of her own heart. She stood beside him, focusing intently on Sebastian, whom she spotted a few paces away, chatting with her sisters. She tried to ignore the duke, whose chilly presence was like a statue made from ice. She shivered at his coldness.

He stepped into the line beside her, and she stopped breathing as he took her hand. His fingers were firm around hers in the silk opera gloves she wore; his grip strong. She shivered, his touch racing up her nerves like fire.

As the hosts, he and his mother and sister would enter the room last. People were gazing their way, some nodding in approval, some disapproving, and she focused on the back of the person standing in front of her, cheeks flaming.

“Do you like dinner balls?” the duke asked. Rosalyn squinted up at him in disbelief. He had ignored her almost entirely during his visit to Cranfield—except to inquire about their breeding program—and during the dance he had made no effort whatever to converse. Now, suddenly, he was attempting to talk to her.

“I have little experience of them,” Rosalyn admitted, deciding to be honest.

She glanced sideways up at the duke. His face was expressionless, but a small muscle near his mouth was jumping, almost as though he was trying to suppress amusement. Her heart leapt at the thought that he might smile. But his expression did not change.

“I find them tiresome,” he said.

Rosalyn blinked and tried to think of something to say. “I imagine this one will not be unpleasant,” she said slowly. “After all, it is only friends and acquaintances.” She watched his expression. His mouth compressed again, as though in disagreement.

“Some of them, yes,” he said enigmatically.

Rosalyn was going to inquire about what he meant, but then they were slowly moving in through the big doors to the dining room and she lost her chance to ask him what he meant.

The room was hot. That was the first thing Rosalyn noticed. A fire burned in the grate and the candles were all lit. They made the room almost as bright as daylight. The second thing that she noticed was that everyone else was seated. All the guests—forty pairs of eyes—were focused on her and the duke.

Rosalyn's hands sweated, her feet almost refusing to obey her and follow the duke. Her stomach was a tight knot, and she felt nauseous. Her gaze moved swiftly to the floor again as she followed the duke across the room to the head of the table. There was one seat left—the one on his right. She went and sat in it, cheeks burning with awkwardness.

On her left, the duke was sitting straight, staring down the table towards the butler. He inclined his head to the fellow, who in turn summoned the footmen forward to start serving the meal. Rosalyn gazed down at the plate in front of her and wished that she could blend in with the wallpaper. The dowager duchess sat opposite her—given the peculiar circumstances, where neither Rosalyn nor the dowager could claim the title of duchess in the current household, neither took the seat at the foot of the table opposite the duke. The dowager duchess' gaze on her was icy and assessing.

Rosalyn kept her eyes on her plate, ignoring the scrutiny.

Footmen moved around the room, dishing out the first course, which was soup. Rosalyn nodded her head in gratitude to the footman who filled her dish. They all sat waiting for the entire company to receive their soup before beginning to eat. Rosalyn risked a glance down the table. Papa was sitting a few seats down from the duchess and his eye caught hers. He smiled supportively. Rosalyn smiled shyly back. Beside Papa, Sebastian sat. Rosalyn grinned at him. Lady Harriet, the duke's sister, was sitting beside him.

Sebastian beamed at her, and she fought the urge to laugh. He had no qualms about openly admiring the young woman, and she had to be impressed by that.

“A fine soup,” the duke murmured. Rosalyn glanced sideways, wondering if he had meant that comment to be for her to hear. She inclined her head.

“Yes, it is very fine,” she replied. She looked up to find the duchess staring at her icily and she decided she would not make any further remarks but remain silent.

At least saying nothing might be better than saying the wrong thing, she thought sadly.

She ate her soup, conscious of the duke’s gaze on her. It darted to her now and again, drifting away when she looked up at him. She frowned. She could not understand him at all. He behaved as though she was a nuisance, as though dancing with her or talking to her was a tiresome obligation and yet his eyes wandered to her often during the meal.

The soup was replaced with a fish dish, and then a roast, complete with baked potatoes and glazed vegetables. Rosalyn, who usually ate fairly informally, was starting to feel nauseous. She glanced across the table and froze.

A man was staring at her.

The man had thick chestnut hair and a long, narrow face. He wore a dark blue velvet tailcoat and a simple cravat, and he seemed pleasant enough. He was seated beside a brown-haired lady with a pretty face. He seemed fairly handsome. It was his eyes that troubled her. His gaze on her was not simply inquiring, nor mildly interested. It was a stare so intense and unwavering that she shivered.

“Do you favour trifle?” the duke asked her. Rosalyn blinked as his words jolted her out of her thoughts. It took her a moment to discern what he was asking.

“Um...I like most desserts,” she answered quickly. “But I am afraid I could not eat

another thing.”

The duke did not exactly smile, but his lips tilted at the corners and his eyes seemed less wintry somehow.

“I am likewise sated,” he said, inclining his head. “I will be glad to make my way to the billiards room.”

Rosalyn nodded. After dinner, the men would go up to the billiards room while the women retired to the drawing room for perhaps an hour. She glanced across the table, checking that the man was not still staring, but when she looked again, he was talking to the brown-haired lady. It was a relief.

The dinner progressed, and Rosalyn was relieved when, at last, the footmen came forward to tidy away the dishes. She stood when the duke stood, and they took their place at the back of the long line that would make its way upstairs.

“Rosalyn!” Georgina called as they found her in the entranceway. “How was the dinner?”

“Was the duke tolerable company?” Isabel asked at almost the same time, brow furrowing.

Rosalyn looked away. She was not sure how to answer that question. If they had asked her before the dinner, she would have said he was unpleasant company. But before she could answer them, her mind wandered back to that moment when he had almost smiled. She swallowed.

“It was a pleasant dinner,” she said carefully. “And I think nobody here will be hungry tonight.”

“No! I could not eat another thing!” Georgina agreed. “Though the trifle was delicious.” She smiled shyly.

“It was!” Isabel agreed. “You must have liked it. You like cherries,” she reminded Rosalyn.

Rosalyn just smiled. She had felt too nauseous to eat any of the trifle, cherries or not—not just because of the food, but because of the strange man staring.

“Ladies!” The imperious voice of the duchess interrupted their conversation. “If you will proceed ahead?” she called, her voice firm and impossible to disobey.

Rosalyn glanced at her sisters, who looked equally uncomfortable, but the ladies were all moving towards the stairs, stepping aside for one another in the same order of precedence with which they had entered the dining room. Rosalyn stayed beside her sisters—in the absence of the duke, she was not going to sit far away from them.

“It is such a fine evening,” Georgina gushed as she sank down onto an upholstered chair in the drawing room. “It is a terrific start to Christmas.”

“It is a very fine house party, thus far,” Isabel agreed.

Rosalyn, seated a little set back from them, was not sure what to say. The duchess had her frosty gaze on her, but then the woman’s eyes slid away to focus on a dark-haired young lady who stood beside her. Rosalyn swallowed hard. The young lady seemed so poised and genteel.

I don’t belong here, she thought sadly. All the worries that she felt started to press close. She was a countrified girl from an obscure family. She had never been much in London—just one Season. All the other people there had certainly attended dozens of parties like this one and would know all the rules. They probably spent all the spring



months in London every year and were aware of all the latest fashions.

“May I join you?” A voice asked from nearby. Rosalyn looked up. It was the brown-haired lady, the one who had been seated next to the man across the table. Her eyes widened in surprise.

“Of course,” she answered, feeling bewildered. “I do not believe I have had the pleasure of an introduction?”

“Oh, yes. That is remiss of me,” the brown-haired woman said, a smile brightening her neat, slender features. “I am Philippa, daughter of the Earl of Blakeley.”

“I am pleased to meet you,” Rosalyn replied. She had stood up to make the introductions, and she dropped a curtsey. “I am Miss Rosalyn Rothwell, and I would be honoured to introduce my sisters, Miss Georgina Rothwell and Miss Isabel Rothwell,” she added. Georgina and Isabel stood up, hearing her making the introduction. “Sisters? May I have the honour of introducing you to Lady Philippa?”

Both of her sisters curtsied, and Lady Philippa likewise dropped a low curtsey. She smiled at Rosalyn.

“I am delighted to make your acquaintance,” she said at once.

“Thank you,” Rosalyn replied, smiling at her. She gestured her to a chair beside Isabel. “Please, join us.”

“Thank you,” Lady Philippa replied and sat down. She was facing Rosalyn, and Rosalyn looked down at the table, reaching for the teapot that had been set there. She felt just a little disconcerted. Even though Lady Philippa was smiling at her in a friendly, artless way, there was something hesitant and quiet about her that made it difficult to feel comfortable near her.

“It is a fine evening, is it not?” she asked Lady Philippa, feeling the need to make conversation. Georgina and Isabel were chattering among themselves, and Lady Philippa seemed a little left out.

“Very fine,” Lady Philippa replied. “I was pleased to be invited.”

“The duchess has put a great deal of effort into this party, I think,” Rosalyn said carefully.

“It seems so,” Lady Philippa agreed. “She is fortunate to have an appreciative guest,” she added with a hesitant smile at Rosalyn.

Rosalyn smiled back. “Thank you,” she said.

“It is no less than the truth. It is always pleasant to have one’s efforts appreciated, not so?”

“Mm,” Rosalyn agreed. “Yes, that is so.”

She sat and chatted with Lady Philippa a little longer, discussing the weather, the dinner and the manor in general and how they liked it. Lady Philippa smiled.

“You are very gracious company,” she said warmly. “It has been so pleasant talking to you.”

“Thank you,” Rosalyn said appreciatively. “It has been pleasant speaking to you as well.”

“One does not often find good company at such places,” Lady Philippa replied.

“Mayhap not.”

“Ladies! May I join you?” a voice said from behind where she sat. Rosalyn glanced over and her lips lifted in a grin to see Lady Harriet, the duke’s sister, coming over to join them. She inclined her head, but Georgina and Isabel had already stood up and were greeting her, waving her over to the chair at the head of the table. Rosalyn smiled to herself.

“This is very pleasant,” Lady Harriet said, smiling warmly at Rosalyn and her sisters. Her big smile included Lady Philippa in the group effortlessly. Rosalyn nodded. She could not help liking Lady Harriet, who she guessed to be closer to Georgina’s age than her own.

Her sisters started chatting excitedly with Lady Harriet, who joined in comfortably. Rosalyn glanced sideways at Lady Philippa, wondering whether to continue trying to talk, but Lady Philippa seemed content to listen.

“...and the musicians! They were excellent, were they not?” Isabel asked.

“Mama decided to engage them for this ball. We usually have another group, but I must confess, this one was far superior,” Lady Harriet agreed.

“The quadrille was excellent!” Georgina said excitedly.

Rosalyn listened as her sisters chatted and laughed with the duke’s sister so easily and freely. She could not help smiling to herself. It was a delight to see them so happy, and a joy to feel included in the group.

She glanced over at Lady Philippa. Even she had tried to make Rosalyn feel included, and it turned out that she had included herself in their big, happy group. Rosalyn shifted comfortably in her seat, feeling relaxed for the first time all evening. She had felt so isolated, yet perhaps, in time, she could adapt. Perhaps, with patience, settling into life here would be within her reach.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:11 am*

Callum gazed out over the billiards room.

“If you were a touch more polite, then perhaps it would not be necessary to pretend,” he murmured, recalling her words quietly. They ran through his mind repeatedly. He still did not know whether to laugh or to scowl. She had struck him as spirited when he first met her, but now he could not deny it.

Be careful, his mind warned him. He absolutely did not wish to get close to her, though her hazel eyes drifted through his thoughts, making it impossible to think of anything else.

“Dash it! Are the shares in the rope trade really suffering?” A loud voice beside Callum sounded woeful, distracting him from his musing.

Callum sighed, feeling impatient with the chatter around the low mahogany table. He had never much liked the men’s gatherings in the billiards room—the men drank excessively and tempers sometimes flared; to say nothing of the tendency of the men to bet on the games of billiards. He could not feel comfortable in a room where betting took place.

“Feeling restive, old chap?” A voice near him asked. Callum shrugged.

“It was a large meal,” he replied to Lord Bronham, Lady Millicent’s father. The fellow had at some point joined him at the table. “Just a trifle nauseous,” he added, hurrying to cover whatever discomfort the earl might have noticed.

Lord Bronham—an older man with white hair and a white moustache—laughed. “It

was a fine meal,” he said with a grin. “Capital!”

Callum nodded and murmured something that he hoped conveyed appreciation, then leaned back and went back to brooding.

“May I?” another voice asked. Callum looked up, surprised to see James there. He tried not to scowl. He did not like the fellow, no matter how hard he tried. He did not want the man to join them at the table, but he could think of no reason why he should not. He was saved from reply.

“Capital!” Lord Bronham replied, smiling and waving James to a chair. He smiled at Callum. “Grand to have all of us at one table, eh? Like-minded, we are. Like-minded.”

Callum frowned, but James cleared his throat.

“I was speaking to the earl about the horse races, just a minute ago,” James explained. “I am sure you would be able to help pick a winner, given your knowledge of horse breeding.”

“I do not follow the races,” Callum said tightly. It was the last topic he wished to discuss—though his father had been an avid follower. He pushed back his chair, trying to think of an excuse to escape.

“Just meant to comment on your insight as a breeder,” James demurred, clearly guessing that he had misspoken. That fact annoyed Callum still more.

“Long odds on Rowanwood,” the earl commented, nodding slowly. “Long odds.”

Callum pushed back his chair as James leaned in to confer, discussing the prospects of various horses in the race. Callum was determined to avoid the topic, no matter

what anyone thought.

“Gentlemen?” a voice called at the door. Callum looked up, for once grateful to his mother. She was in the doorway. “If you would like to join in, please proceed to the drawing room for card games.”

The gentlemen turned and pushed back their chairs, standing to follow her.

Relieved, Callum stood, nodded the briefest of acknowledgements to the two gentlemen at the table, and hurried out. He cursed inwardly as he almost bumped into a person in the doorway. He looked up, chagrin intensifying as he noticed it was Mr Rothwell.

“Apologies,” he said stiffly, looking up at Miss Rothwell’s brother. He could not help noticing that the man’s eyes—while almost black—were the same shape as Miss Rothwell’s, and something about the expression on his face was like her also.

“No need to apologise,” Mr Rothwell said lightly, giving a warm smile. Callum clenched his jaw. He could not help but feel irritated by the man, and part of him knew it was because Mr Rothwell’s easy manner and jovial ways were so different from himself. He envied him his ease in society.

Callum nodded his acknowledgement of the reply and was going to wander off, but Mr Rothwell insisted on keeping up the conversation.

“I take it you will play whist with my sister?” Mr Rothwell asked as they walked into the drawing room. Callum blinked. He had not intended to play cards at all, merely to watch, but Mr Rothwell’s suggestion reminded him that it would probably be right to do so.

“Mayhap,” he agreed. Mr Rothwell laughed.

“I wanted to warn you. I taught her to play whist when she was fourteen. I never played against her again.”

Callum lifted one brow, disbelieving. Mr Rothwell chuckled.

“I just had to warn you. Better to play on the same team as her. She’s formidable.”

Callum lifted a shoulder, still not believing the man. “Thank you for the warning,” he said thinly. Mr Rothwell smiled.

“I might indulge in a game of whist myself,” he said enigmatically. Callum was still trying to decide if the fellow was inviting him to join him on a team against Miss Rothwell, when he wandered off.

Dash it, Callum thought crossly. He glanced around the room. The space was packed—several card tables had been set up and the big tea table removed, but every inch of space was occupied, and the room was hot. His gaze roved across the room, seeking out Miss Rothwell.

“Your Grace?”

Callum turned around, annoyed, and his eyes widened as he took in Miss Rothwell, along with Mr Rothwell and his own sister. They were all looking at him expectantly.

“We fancied a game of whist,” Mr Rothwell said.

“Brother, you must partner Miss Rothwell, of course,” Harriet demurred.

Callum stared at her, about to object. Harriet had sat with Mr Rothwell during the dinner, danced with him at least once, and was clearly not often out of his company during the ball. He meant to reprimand her, but as he tried to form words, Mr

Rothwell grinned at Harriet and she smiled back so beautifully, so innocently, that Callum's annoyance dissipated.

We should all feel like that, he thought with a touch of sorrow. His own connection to the Rothwell family was purely business-motivated, but that did not mean that his sister could not have found genuine appeal in Mr Rothwell. Seeing the way the two of them gazed at each other lifted his heart, even though it brought into contrast how cold and businesslike his own connection with Miss Rothwell was.

"Well..." he let out a sigh. "I suppose it is the festive season. If one cannot play a game of cards now, then when?"

"Well said!" Mr Rothwell grinned.

Callum looked at Miss Rothwell. She seemed to be fascinated by the windows opposite, and he wondered if she was trying to avoid him.

"Let us take a seat here," Mr Rothwell declared. He gestured to a card table with a flourish. Callum gritted his teeth, the fellow's affected manner setting him on edge. But he went to sit down. Mr Rothwell lifted the pack of cards.

"I will claim the privileged position," he announced. Nobody moved to argue with him, and so he started to deal out the cards, giving each person thirteen. Callum watched Miss Rothwell as her brother dealt their hands. Her brow was creased, and he wished he could ask her what was on her mind.

"The trump suit is..." Mr Rothwell announced grandly, slowly turning the topmost card that lay beside his place. "Spades."

Callum smiled to himself. He had enough good cards from that suit in his hand to get him out of a tricky situation. He glanced across the table at Miss Rothwell. She had



her head tilted, studying her hand of cards. He drew in a breath. The candlelight played on her honey-pale hair and her soft skin, her lovely neck revealed by the low neckline of her blue gown, and she looked so beautiful in that moment. He looked away, shaken. He looked sideways to find Mr Rothwell looking expectantly at him. He cursed inwardly. It was his turn to play a card.

“The ten of Spades!” Mr Rothwell declared, giving a low whistle. Callum saw Miss Rothwell tense.

Best to start with a strong card, Callum thought. He winced. He hated playing cards. The only reason he consented to play whist at all was his sister. Fortunately, Papa had not lost his money on card games, or Callum would have refused to play it at all.

“My turn,” Harriet, who sat on Callum’s left, said with a chuckle. She put down the four of Spades. Callum tried not to smile at his sister, who had never been particularly lucky in card games.

Miss Rothwell wordlessly produced the two of Spades, and Callum wanted to whistle. She doubtless had strong cards, but she was not playing them because he had played a strong one and so she did not have to. If he won, their partnership won a point regardless.

She clearly does have some talent at this, he thought.

“Dash it all,” Mr Rothwell cursed mildly and threw down the three. They all laughed.

The game continued. Callum put down the four of Diamonds, just because he had it and to see what would happen. Beside him, Harriet threw down the ten of Diamonds, grinning in triumph. Across the table, Miss Rothwell calmly played the King of Diamonds. Mr Rothwell whistled.

“I say!” he said loudly. “You win again,” he added, producing the nine of Diamonds and putting it on the pile.

Callum glanced across at Miss Rothwell. She was looking down at her cards as if she was keeping track of the deck. When she looked up at him, her hazel eyes were bright. His lip lifted in a half-smile. Her gaze darted back to the cards. Warmth spread through him—perhaps she was not quite as indifferent as he thought.

It was his turn again, and he played the ten of Clubs. This time, Harriet produced the King of Clubs, raising a brow at him in a teasing challenge. Miss Rothwell produced a low-ranking card in the same suit, and then Mr Rothwell did so likewise, grinning at Harriet. Harriet’s smile lit the room.

“Our turn to win a point,” Mr Rothwell commented.

Callum said nothing, just looked at his cards to decide what to play next.

Their team won the next two rounds, and then Harriet and Mr Rothwell won two. Callum risked a glance across the table. Miss Rothwell studied her cards, her lip lifted in a half-smile that took his breath away. The light from the nearby candles glowed on her hair, making it the colour of fresh pale honey. He bit his lip, a feeling of intense longing washing through him.

“Your Grace?” Mr Rothwell said from beside him. Callum blinked, then tried not to swear. He had almost forgotten it was his turn.

He chose a card fairly randomly and winced as his sister’s card beat it. He glanced at Miss Rothwell and saw that she was focusing intently. He grinned as she placed a card that beat Harriet’s.

“Dash it!” Mr Rothwell swore and threw down a low card onto the pile.

They all chuckled. Miss Rothwell glanced across the table at Callum and the bright, mischievous twinkle in her eye made him suck in a breath. For the first time, she was looking at him with warmth in her eyes.

Callum beamed. It was only as his grin stretched across his face that he realised what he was doing and hastily his face resumed its reserved look.

“You have five points, and we have three,” Mr Rothwell commented, noting down the scores. “Technically, you have won.”

This time, when Miss Rothwell grinned at him, he could not help grinning back. Her smile was full of joy, and he could not ignore it.

Her gaze held his and he stared back, feeling as though he was being drowned in the tawny depths of her eyes. He gazed into them, and it was only when Mr Rothwell pushed back his chair to stand that he realised the rest of the players were moving. He pushed back his chair hastily, cheeks heating with a blush.

“That was well played,” Mr Rothwell was saying to Harriet, who smiled shyly at him. Callum, seeing the sweet look that passed between them, decided not to reprimand her. Mr Rothwell was not exactly low-ranking—he was the son of a viscount—and besides the fact that the fellow grated on his nerves a little, there was no reason to object.

Miss Rothwell was standing a foot away from him. Her gaze was downcast. He cleared his throat.

“Well done,” he said.

She lifted her eyes to his and he stared into the depths of them. He felt helpless, unable to look away, and strangely, he did not wish to either. He longed to stand with

her, to stare into her eyes, to forget everything else—the room, the guests, the presence of his mother not too far away. Someone coughed in a way that suggested they wanted his attention, and he turned around to find Lord Bronham standing there. He struggled not to glare at the fellow.

“My lord?” he greeted him politely.

“Your mother sent me to ask you a question,” Lord Bronham said lightly. He nodded to Miss Rothwell, but did not do more by way of a greeting. “She wished to ask you if you recalled in what year the estate acquired Newford Acres?”

Callum looked away, feeling annoyed. He knew his mother was trying to distract him, trying to get him to stand with her and the earl. He struggled to recall the time when the small windfall of land, called Newford Acres, had come to them.

“It was three years ago,” he recalled.

He was about to tell Lord Bronham to take the answer back to Mama, but then he spotted his mother drifting over and he tensed, knowing that he could not put it off any longer—she expected him to stand and talk to her, and he could not refuse anymore. He bowed to Miss Rothwell, who was looking around as if she wanted to escape.

“Please excuse me, Miss Rothwell,” he said politely. “My mother wishes to speak to me.”

“Of course,” she said softly.

Callum turned to find his mother before she managed to frighten Miss Rothwell any further.

He glanced back over his shoulder, seeing Miss Rothwell chatting with her brother, her laughter light and her manner easy, and he felt a little envious, a little sad. He could never trust anyone enough to be able to relax that much. He wished that he could give it a try—it would be lovely to see her smile at him again.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:11 am*

The hallway was silent, the pale greyish daylight seeping in through the windows. Callum felt the cold air through his shirtsleeves and wished that he had brought his tailcoat. It was warm in his bedroom, heated by a small fireplace in the corner, but in the corridor it was icy. He walked briskly and quietly past the closed bedroom doors of the guests and towards the breakfast room.

It was eight o'clock in the morning, but the corridor was silent. The guests had obviously been too weary after the ball to venture down to breakfast that early. His head hurt, his eyes dry and scratchy. He had lain awake for hours, thinking about Miss Rothwell. Her spirited words in the entranceway mixed with her softer, warmer discussion at dinner and her excellent performance at whist. She was no shallow society lady, but a complex woman with hidden depths. He could not stop thinking about her.

Callum walked the short distance to the breakfast room and paused in the doorway, then tensed.

The room was empty, except for one person. His mother sat at the table; the morning light soft on her white hair. She was sitting hunched over and she looked weary. Callum's heart filled for a moment with compassion, but he tensed again as she looked up.

"Son! Come in," she said softly, clearly aware, like himself, that the guests were sleeping.

Callum hesitated, unsure of whether he felt comfortable eating alone with his mother, who he expected to be full of criticism about Miss Rothwell, but she seemed affable

enough, so he walked hesitantly in.

“Good morning,” she greeted him affably.

“Good morning, Mother,” he greeted her, inclining his head and then settling in the chair beside her. The breakfast room was more informal than the dining room, with three round tables, capable of seating six guests each, taking up most of the floor space. Callum reached for the porcelain teapot and gestured to his mother’s cup. She inclined her head.

“Thank you, son. I trust you had a good night’s sleep?”

“It was reasonable,” Callum said, not quite truthfully. He had barely slept at all.

“Mm,” his mother murmured. “And yet you woke early, as I did.” She shrugged. “I could not sleep any longer.”

“I, too,” Callum replied. He contemplated a piece of toast, though he felt a little queasy.

“It was pleasant to see James here,” his mother continued, reaching for a slice of toast herself and buttering it.

Callum frowned, not sure what to say. He had never liked the man, though he had never said that to his mother, since she felt sympathy for Lady Winbrook, who was an old friend of hers, and he did not want to raise his mother’s ire by stating that there seemed to be something not quite honest about her son.

“Poor fellow,” Mama sighed. “He was always a good boy. Quiet, reserved. And their estate suffered so.”

“Quite so,” Callum said cautiously. He did not like the fact that his mother felt sorry for James. It made him feel a certain amount of resentment, given that the estate that James had inherited had not been nearly as ruinous as his own. If she had sympathy for James, he thought crossly, she might as well have some for himself too. “Do you think it will snow today?” he added, glancing out of the window. The sky was blanketed with a dense layer of grey cloud, of the sort that brought snow. He sat up straighter. He needed to hurry over breakfast and go down to the stables. Preparations had to be made if heavy snow was likely to fall.

“Mm?” His mother frowned, then glanced at the windows, and nodded. “Mayhap. Lord Bronham said he thought that it would not snow today. His leg hurts terribly before a snowfall, he said. Old injury from the war.”

“Lord Bronham was in Portugal?” Callum asked. The most recent war was the Peninsular War against Napoleon. She shook her head.

“No. He was with Nelson in the navy.”

“Oh.” Callum inclined his head. He had not known that the earl had a naval past.

“Mm. Millicent must have been a small child when he went away to the war,” Mama commented.

“I suppose,” Callum said carefully. He had wanted to avoid the topic of Lady Millicent, but his mother seemed to insist on raising it.

“Now, she is a fine young lady,” his mother said warmly. “Poised and graceful. And so charming! What a fine conversationalist she is.”

“Mm,” Callum said noncommittally. He glanced at the window again. “I need to meet with Mr Randell. Even if it does not snow, I must speak to him about preparations.



The stables need to be made ready for the snowfall.”

“Later, son,” his mother said, flapping a dismissive hand. “You must at least break your fast.” She glanced at the table, where a toast rack and a bread basket stood, the basket filled with pastries. Callum’s stomach twisted queasily. Even if he had an appetite, he felt sick, both because of worry about the horses and because of how confusing the entire situation was. He did not understand his feelings for Miss Rothwell, and he wished his mother would stop trying to convince him to approve of her friend’s daughter. Lady Millicent.

“I am not hungry,” he said quietly.

As he pushed back his chair, his mother shook her head.

“Must the stables always come first? You have guests to meet. I am certain some of them will come to break their fast very soon. You could wait for half an hour, at least!” She sounded strained.

“The horses need to come first,” Callum said tightly. “I have a fine stable. I intend to keep it like that. It is the one thing I can adequately maintain.” He could barely get the words out, so tight were his jaw and his throat.

“You are not a stable master, Callum Alexander Stanhope,” his mother said stiffly.

Callum glared at her, not sure what to retort, anger clouding his mind. As he stood, he heard footsteps and the sound of conversation in the hallway, and he was glad that at least he would not need to have his mother sitting alone in a silent room. He inclined his head politely.

“Good day, Mother,” he managed to say. “I must go down to oversee the stables.”

Callum walked briskly down the stairs, breathing in the cool air of the hallway. It was a relief after feeling stifled at breakfast. He strode to the front door, pausing to put on his greatcoat before stalking out into the freezing cold. He breathed in sharply. The air really was freezing cold outside, and his fingers ached. He put his hands in his pockets and strode to the stables.

“Easy, old fellow,” he murmured to his horse, Firelight, who whickered a greeting as he walked in. The scent of hay and horses surrounded him, and Callum breathed in, enjoying the scent. It reminded him of his childhood. The roan thoroughbred always greeted him, always expecting to go out for a ride if Callum was there. Callum walked over to his stall, glad to note that the air in the stable was at least not freezing. He took his hands out of his pockets and rubbed the horse’s nose. Firelight snorted and stamped. Callum grinned.

“No apples today, old boy,” he said gently, scratching the horse between the ears. “And I don’t know if we will have time for a ride. Perhaps later.” He frowned. Since arriving back from Sussex, he had barely had time to take his horse out for a run. Between thoughts of Miss Rothwell, preparing for winter and his mother’s Christmas party, he seemed not to have a second to himself.

“Dash it. This wretched party,” he swore, but his horse stamped, and Callum winced. “Sorry, old boy.”

His bad mood was going to affect the horses, he knew that. He did not want them to be restless.

“I need to find Mr Randell,” he told the horses. “I’ll be back soon.” He scratched Firelight between the ears, patted Merry, one of the mares, and then walked swiftly out of the stable.

He breathed in, drawing the scent of the fresh, cold air into his lungs. The smell

reminded him of his youth. He had come up to the country estate from Berkshire, where he attended Eton College, every winter for Christmas. Arriving at the estate had always made his stomach knot up with excitement. His Christmastimes were full of snowball fights with neighbouring boys—among them James—eating hot mince pies and sledging down the hill that adjoined the estate. Of course, he had always found time for exercising the horses; a job he took seriously.

Things were so straightforward then, Callum thought sadly. His responsibilities had been easy, his days carefree and his nights full of deep sleep in a silent, snow-blanketed house. His world had become so complex and confusing. He shut his eyes for a moment. Sometimes, he found himself yearning to ride across the fields, to leave it all behind and find some place where the weight of his duties might feel lighter. Perhaps to Ireland, where he had some distant relatives.

He dismissed the thought hastily and opened his eyes again, his heart thudding, body instantly tense, nerves straining as he listened to the noise that he had just detected. Someone was coming around the corner, running swiftly.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:11 am*

“Run! Faster! Faster,” Georgina urged; her voice high-pitched with playful urgency as Rosalyn hurtled around the corner. Her feet were clad in winter boots of white leather, but the path was slippery with frost and ice, and she screamed as her feet lost traction on the glass-smooth surface and she plummeted forward. Isabel yelled and Rosalyn was distantly aware of her two sisters running across the icy lawn, their earlier game of catch forgotten, but then she screamed aloud as someone grabbed her, preventing her from crashing into the pathway knees first.

“What in Perdition’s name?” the duke’s resonant voice demanded furiously. “Miss Rothwell! What were you doing?”

“Your Grace!” Rosalyn exclaimed, horrified. “My apologies!” She straightened up, cheeks flaring. She was leaning against his firm, muscular chest. His one arm was wrapped around her, holding her close. She stepped back, heart racing. She was still held in his firm arms. She looked into his eyes. He stared back.

“You could break something, slipping on this ice,” the duke reprimanded. His grey eyes were huge with shock, his mouth firm.

“Pray accept my apologies,” Rosalyn repeated, her mind entirely blank. One minute, she had been hurtling towards the hard stone pathway, and the next, she was caught in an unyielding embrace. She drew a deep breath.

He stared at her. She stared back. The entire world seemed to move very slowly. The grey depths of his eyes drew her in, wide and compelling. She reached up self-consciously to tuck a strand of her hair behind one ear. She could only imagine what she looked like—the style had come loose, and her hair tumbled around her

shoulders.

The sound of booted feet was loud on the pathway.

“Your Grace! Allow us to apologise,” Georgina said, running up to join them. “It was us. We were playing catch,” she said, gazing imploringly at him.

“We should not have. It was dangerous,” Isabel said sorrowfully.

Rosalyn looked over at her sisters, feeling guilty that they took it upon themselves to apologise for her. She gazed at the duke, willing him not to be unkind.

“It was foolish,” the duke said, his tone soft. “But I understand. You have been travelling for a week. It must be good to stretch your legs.”

“Yes!” Georgina breathed. Her pale cheeks were bright pink. “It feels grand. You have a beautiful garden.”

“The woods connected to the estate seem very large,” Isabel added.

“They are,” the duke said easily. “And that’s quite advantageous for exercising the horses.”

“I imagine,” Rosalyn said quietly. His gaze moved to her. His eyes widened and then narrowed, and Rosalyn’s cheeks flamed as he stared at her. His gaze held hers for an instant, her heart racing, and then he coughed.

“You have seen the stable, of course, Miss Rothwell?” he asked. Rosalyn shook her head. She tucked her hair behind her ear again, feeling terribly self-conscious. His eyes seemed to follow her every move.

“No,” she replied, clearing her throat. It was hard to talk when he stared at her like that. “I have not.”

“You are invited to come and view them now,” the duke said, not quite looking at her.

“Hurrah!” Georgina yelled happily, then glanced at the duke and blushed.

“May we come too?” Isabel queried.

The duke shrugged. “Of course,” he said lightly.

Rosalyn looked at her sisters, who were both looking round-eyed at the duke, and then fell into step with them as they followed the duke down the path where, minutes before, she had nearly injured herself falling.

They walked a short distance down the path, which curved around tall trees, and Rosalyn noticed a long, low stone building with a thatched roof. She gazed at it. It was clearly a stable, but it seemed even larger and more welcoming than their own.

The duke walked in through the front door, and Rosalyn followed him, eyes darting around. The first thing she noticed was that the door lintel was scuffed and worn, then that the boards of the roof were likewise worn, patched here and there with bright, new sections of wood.

Their stable is old, she thought, and grand, but it is in worse repair than ours is. The Stallenwood stables seemed to have been through a time of neglect, the building clearly recently repaired.

“Here he is,” the duke said, his voice loud in the silence. A horse was whickering. “Here is my dear friend, Firelight. He’s the best hunting stallion anyone could want.”

He scratched the horse between the ears and Rosalyn smiled to herself, at ease with the duke's close connection to horses. She went closer.

"He is very beautiful," Rosalyn murmured, watching as the duke stroked the stallion's forehead. He was a roan thoroughbred with a white blaze down his nose. He must, she guessed, stand sixteen hands, perhaps even taller. He was a big horse. His eyes were half closed as he rested his head on the duke, nuzzling against his shoulder.

"He is a grand fellow," the duke said, all of his earlier coldness melting away in the presence of the horse. "A grand old fellow."

"He's very big," Georgina said nervously, making Rosalyn turn around, surprised. She had almost forgotten that she and the duke were not alone in the stable.

"Can I stroke him?" Isabel asked shyly.

"Of course," the duke said, stepping aside so that Georgina and Isabel could approach the horse.

Georgina lifted up a hand, stroking the stallion's muzzle carefully. Isabel waited her turn. Rosalyn stepped back, moving back towards the door so that she did not upset the horse in the stall opposite, who seemed jittery. The duke stood with her. Rosalyn tensed. She could not help but be acutely aware of his presence.

He wore a swathing grey greatcoat of the kind that coach drivers wore, and under it, she could see a few inches of buckskin riding breeches. He wore long riding boots that reached almost to his knees. His tall frame towered over her, and she gazed up into his eyes, feeling unsettled by his closeness.

"You were not hurt, were you?" the duke asked carefully.

“No,” Rosalyn replied softly. “I came very close, though. Thank you.” She could not help smiling.

The duke’s face lit up with a sudden smile. Rosalyn drew a breath. He was so forbidding, so intimidating, but when he smiled, he looked extremely handsome and approachable.

“The paths can be dangerous,” he said gently. “You should not run around out here.”

“I discovered that,” she said with a lilting laugh. “We were in high spirits. The weather is...uplifting here.” She drew in another breath. The cold was invigorating, revitalising in ways that the damp, chilly cold near the coast never was. It had been a pleasant surprise.

He smiled again, this time a grin that made her speechless. He looked stunning when he grinned, his thin, handsome face lighting up from within.

“I imagine so,” he replied. “It is a very wearying, draining cold in Sussex. And it seems you do not often have snow?” he asked.

Rosalyn nodded. “Very rarely,” she agreed.

“That is unfortunate,” the duke said, eyes sparkling warmly. “Snow offers a whole range of pleasant diversions in the winter.”

“I can imagine so,” Rosalyn said, her heart lifting. His smile was warm and friendly, his eyes amused. “Snowball fights, for one.”

“Yes!” The duke laughed. “Indeed. Full-scale snowball warfare, here at Stallenwood Park. There are ten years between myself and Harriet, so for the longest time it was just me and a crowd of boys.” His gaze was soft, nostalgic.



“You must have got up to all sorts of mischief,” Rosalyn said with a grin. She shut her eyes, imagining the duke as a youth. It was hard to imagine, as there seemed so little warmth in him, so little humour. In this single conversation, though, she could glimpse another side.

“We did. We assuredly did. Our snowball fights were second only to sledge races.” He laughed.

“And you warn me to be careful?” Rosalyn teased; one brow raised.

The duke chuckled. “Quite so.”

“Your Grace?” A voice spoke from behind them. The duke turned around and Rosalyn spotted Georgina and Isabel standing close. They gazed hopefully up at the duke. “Um...could we perhaps take the horses out, later?” Georgina asked.

“We have not had a ride in ever so long. And we miss our horses at home,” Isabel added.

Rosalyn looked at the duke. His face was set in a stern expression, and she stiffened, trying to think of some way of easing his temper. But when he spoke, he sounded quite untroubled.

“We will certainly have to exercise them later,” the duke replied gently. “But I do not intend to take them on a ride when it is so cold. If it becomes warmer in the next few days, then I promise you that you may ride with me to exercise them.” He paused. “You are of course included, Miss Rothwell.” His gaze held hers gently.

She coughed. “Thank you,” she said quickly, ignoring her sisters’ confused gazes. “I would like that.”

The duke cleared his throat. "Well, then. Ladies, you ought to get back to the house. It is warm enough in the stables, but it is terribly cold out there. I think we would all do well to proceed inside. I will inform you when the horses need to be exercised," he added to Georgina and Isabel, who both inclined their heads in polite thanks.

"Thank you, Your Grace," Georgina murmured.

"Much obliged, Your Grace," Isabel added.

Rosalyn looked up at the duke. "Thank you," she said softly.

"I did nothing," the duke muttered, looking down. Rosalyn's brow creased. Anyone would think he was shy.

Nonsense, she told herself firmly. He probably feels impatient with our awkward thanks. She followed him out of the stable, cheeks flaring. She had to remind herself that this was a rude, bitter man and she should not lose vigilance.

They walked out of the stable and into the cold. Rosalyn winced. Her fingers ached, the cold sawing through the thin, damp fabric of her gloves. She folded her fingers inwards into the palms of her hands, wincing with the pain.

"Miss?" The duke asked, turning around. Rosalyn flushed. She had not realised she had made an audible sound of pain.

"Yes?" she asked, fighting not to make it obvious how much her fingers were hurting.

"Are you quite well?" the duke asked, his brow furrowing in concern. "You sounded distressed."

"I am quite well," Rosalyn managed to say through clenched teeth, fighting to hold

back another grunt of pain. They were almost at the house. She felt a desperate urgency to run inside to where her hands could get warm again. "It is just...the cold."

"You are not properly dressed," the duke said gravely. "It is cold here in the Midlands, Miss Rothwell. Please, be careful," he added, standing back so that she and her sisters could rush in through the front door.

"I will," Rosalyn managed to say, the pain worsening. She turned, ignoring the duke's concern. Her sisters were hurrying up the stairs, giggling and chatting away among themselves. Released from the duke's stern presence, they were as loud and cheerful as always. She curtseyed to the duke.

"Good day," she managed to say, keeping her voice level despite the pain in her fingers.

"...and I need a new riding gown," Georgina was saying as she went upstairs. "My old one is quite worn out on the...seat," she continued, going bright red. Rosalyn chuckled under her breath and even Isabel laughed.

"Papa will buy new fabric for us," Isabel said softly. "He said we could have two bolts of cloth for Christmas."

"Hurrah! I can't wait."

"I already decided I want a new blue ballgown," Isabel confided. Rosalyn, walking a few paces behind them, smiled at their innocent chatter.

If only I could feel excited about Christmas, she thought sadly. With the looming prospect of her new life at Stallenwood set to start the week after Christmas, she could not find it in her heart to feel real excitement like Georgina and Isabel evidently did.

“He’s so quiet,” Georgina confided as they all piled into Rosalyn’s room, as they did at home, to warm up and chat after the walk.

“He did say we could ride, though,” Isabel commented. “I think he seems rather pleasant. If a little reserved,” she added, glancing at Rosalyn.

“I think that could be so,” Rosalyn said noncommittally.

“What will you wear for the tea tomorrow, Rosalyn?” Isabel asked, changing the subject perceptively.

“I have not really decided. My russet gown, perhaps,” Rosalyn suggested. She had a reddish-brown gown in thick velvet for an occasion less formal than a ball, but more formal than a usual meal. It would suit the special tea that the duchess had planned rather well.

“Oh, yes! That sounds grand. I want to wear my red dress,” Georgina said. “And you, Isabel?”

“The blue, I think,” Isabel commented.

Rosalyn listened somewhat distantly as her sisters chatted about their choice of gowns, focusing on peeling off her wet gloves from her frozen, aching fingers. Her mind strayed back to the duke and how angry he had seemed when she had fallen, and then to the concern and care in his voice. He had gazed at her so strangely, as if he was drinking her in. She blushed, her body heating up, her heart quickening as she recalled that strange, intense stare that he gave her. She had never experienced anything like it.

Perhaps he was looking judgmentally at me because my hairstyle has come undone, she thought, reaching up shyly to touch her damp, cold locks where they rested on her

shoulders. Her fingers throbbed and burned, still recovering from the terrible cold. It had not seemed a censorious look, though. She flushed. It had seemed rather more appreciative.

Nonsense, she told herself stiffly. You are imagining things.

She reached for her gloves and pelisse to hang them by the fire so that they could dry. She had important things to think about. She had no room to focus on the duke and what he thought of her, though she could not help wondering—wondering when she would have the opportunity to speak so closely with him again.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:11 am*

“And pull! And pull! And... Your Grace! Stand back for his grace at once!” The butler’s orders rang out in the downstairs hallway.

Callum, who had been walking to the door to take the air on an unusually sunny morning, stopped and gazed in disbelief.

“What is this?” he demanded loudly. “What is all this doing here?” A bale of green branches, holly boughs, ivy leaves, and Perdition alone knew what else, blocked up half the hallway. He gazed at it, eyes wide. The butler frowned.

“Your lady mother ordered it, Your Grace.” He swallowed and his frown deepened. “We followed her instructions. Were we mistaken, Your Grace?”

Callum ran a weary hand through his hair. A vague memory from before the guests arrived drifted through his head. His mother had asked him if she could cut greenery in the woods, and he had given permission without much thought. He gazed at the vast bale—around the size of the chaise-longue in the drawing room—and sighed. He was not about to reprimand the butler for doing what he had been told to do.

“You did the right thing,” he said to the butler, who slumped in evident relief.

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

“Where are you expected to deliver that?” Callum asked wearily.

“Ballroom, Your Grace. Her grace said we should put it in the centre, near the back.”

Callum inclined his head. “Well, then, that is what you should do,” he said lightly. His frown deepened as he heard footsteps on the stairs. He recognised his mother’s soft, even walk. He turned away from the butler and left his crew of gardeners to haul the massive bundle across the entrance and into the next room.

He went upstairs briskly and found his mother on the first landing. She looked up at him.

“Well? Is that the greenery for decorations?” she demanded crisply.

Callum tilted his head. “Mother...are you certain that we should do this? You really think we should challenge local custom and put it up now?” He still felt unsure about the idea of ignoring the traditions and putting up the decorations straight away.

His mother looked at him. Her blue eyes held his and Callum took in how weary she seemed, with blue-grey prints of exhaustion under her eyes and her brow deeply lined. She was five-and-fifty, but she looked much older in that moment.

“Son, I have a house of twenty guests,” she said, and even her voice grated with tiredness. “They need entertaining. Since I cannot put on a ball every night, we need to do something with them. This will be a diversion for them.”

Callum sighed and nodded his head. “Well, I cannot argue with that. Turn the season on its head if you must.”

His mother’s eye held his, and he was relieved to see her old spirit in her gaze.

“I might have to,” she said. Callum shrugged.

“As you see fit, Mother,” he said wearily.

“I shall bear that in mind,” his mother said. Callum was secretly pleased to hear her old asperity in her voice. However much she grated on him sometimes, she was his mother, a constant in his world, and he would miss her unyielding strength.

“Good day,” he greeted her and hurried off up the stairs. She replied, but Callum was already on the upper floor when he realised what she had said. “Tell Harriet we are going to make the kissing boughs,” he repeated, deciphering his mother’s words. He sighed. He had forgotten that tradition. A ball of woven greenery embellished with apples and—in some, less religious houses, mistletoe—would be hung somewhere in the house. It was considered good luck—indeed, mandatory—to kiss underneath it.

He blushed as a sudden, vivid image rushed into his mind. Miss Rothwell stood underneath the kissing bough, unaware of where she stood. He walked up and wrapped his arms around her, pressing his mouth to her lips. They were, in his imagination, as sweet and soft and fragrant as they looked; flavoured with some sweet dessert she had just eaten, and as soft as satin.

He groaned and pushed the image away. That was the last thing he needed. He was determined to feel only a businesslike respect for Miss Rothwell, and instead, his wretched body was insisting on noticing how lovely she was, how compelling that lively, sweet face and those hazel eyes were.

He tensed as he became abruptly aware that he was not alone in the drawing room. Someone was talking to themselves.

“...and we have the cushions to set out, and...Oh, bother! Where is my music?”

“Harriet?” he called, recognising the voice. He spotted her a second later, in the corner by the pianoforte. Her long pale hair had tumbled loose of its chignon, the white dress she wore bright in the light from the windows. “Sister?”



“Brother!” Harriet turned, startled. “I was just setting the drawing room in order for the tea party. Have you seen my music books?”

Callum looked around and spied some books on the windowsill. “Those ones?” he asked, gesturing.

“Oh! Yes! Thank you, brother,” Harriet said quickly, lifting them up. “Mother will expect me to provide some music, I expect.” She put the books on the music stand.

Callum frowned. Harriet seemed unusually flustered. She was usually high-spirited, and it was not unusual for her to be overwrought, but she seemed scattered and tense in ways that she was not usually.

“Are you quite well, sister?” he asked gently.

“Oh! Yes, brother. I am quite well,” Harriet replied, startled from her reverie. She had a dreamy look in her eyes. Callum recalled Mr Rothwell, and how taken he and his sister seemed with one another, and a wry grin twisted his lip.

“I am sure our guests will be well-pleased with the tea party. All our guests,” he said gently. Harriet frowned.

“I do not follow your meaning.”

Callum grinned. “The Rothwell party seem to have made a considerable impression?” he remarked lightly. Harriet went red. Callum tried to hide the grin that spread across his face.

“Well...Mr Rothwell is...seems pleasant,” she stammered. Callum smiled.

“I am sure that he is a pleasant sort,” Callum answered teasingly.

Harriet beamed at him. “Oh, he is! He is amusing, and affable, and thoughtful...he seems very pleasant,” she concluded, before diving into awkward silence. Her cheeks flushed a deep red.

“Quite an all-round pleasant fellow, then.” Callum grinned at his sister, who looked away.

“I suppose,” she said distractedly. “Of course, he has a pleasant family. Miss Rothwell strikes me as extremely gracious and affable.”

“Mm.” Callum pushed the comment away. His chest glowed with the merest thought of Miss Rothwell, and gracious and affable were the least complimentary things he could think to say. He frowned. The magnitude of his praise was surprising, even to himself.

“Brother?” Harriet asked, interrupting his thoughts.

“Yes?” he asked, frowning.

“Is something the matter? You seem troubled.”

“No,” Callum said quickly, not wishing to tell his sister what was on his mind. “No, sister. I am merely thinking about the tea later.”

“And what you shall wear?” she inquired.

Callum grinned. “Yes. Exactly that.”

“Brother!” Harriet teased him gently. “We are to have tea in but a few hours! You’d best hurry and make a decision.”

Callum laughed. "It matters little what I wear, sweet sister," he said warmly. "I do not think anyone here is going to be making a study of it." In London, during the Season, it would be another matter. What high society members like Beau Brummel wore was literally published in places like the Gazette .

"Even so," his sister said primly. Callum chuckled.

"I will do my best to dress appropriately, sister," he promised.

Harriet grinned. "If you will excuse me, I need to go down to the kitchens. Mother asked me to oversee the delicacies, and they should be bringing them up here already." Harriet hurried to the door. "Good day, brother!"

"Good day," Callum called after her, smiling to himself. When she had hurried off, his brow wrinkled in a frown. Harriet's questions made him think. Was he beginning to feel deeply for Miss Rothwell? He pushed the thought away, feeling uncomfortable.

She is a means to an end. I will not allow myself to become attached, he told himself stiffly. All the same, he could not deny that he felt warm whenever he thought of her.

He gazed out of the window. The grounds were bathed in sunshine, the frost on the lawn rapidly melting except where the shade from the wall touched the grass. He recalled how Miss Rothwell had almost slipped the day before. She had leaned against him for a moment and the scent of her had filled his nostrils, her soft, warm body pressing against his own.

"Lady Harriet? I... Oh!" A voice spoke in the doorway. Callum tensed. He knew that voice. He turned around.

Miss Rothwell was in the doorway. She wore a soft blue day-dress in velvet, her long

hair styled severely in a tight chignon. A white shawl draped her shoulders, and she stood stiffly, her eyes wide, clearly surprised to find him there.

“Good day, Miss Rothwell,” he greeted her, bowing low. As he straightened, he had the pleasure of seeing her gaze widen in surprise.

“Forgive me. I was looking for your sister. I did not expect to find you here, Your Grace,” she said, dropping a low curtsy. Callum inclined his head.

“My sister had to rush off. Can I convey a message to her?” He asked. He did his best to keep his voice level. His heart was racing.

“Um...I wished to thank her for lending me this,” Miss Rothwell said, gesturing to her shawl. “My sisters and I were taking a walk about the grounds, and I had no shawl with me.”

“I shall thank her for you,” Callum said.

“Could you kindly see that it gets back to her?” Miss Rothwell shrugged the silky garment off and handed it to him. Her fingers brushed his as he took it. He groaned inwardly. She was so beautiful, her touch as soft as satin.

“I shall do so,” he said, coughing to clear his throat, which felt tight and tense. “Miss Rothwell?” He asked as she turned in the doorway.

“Yes?” She gazed up at him, her hazel eyes wide and almost apprehensive. He cursed himself inwardly—had he made her afraid of him?

“I would recommend that you take your pelisse whenever you go outdoors. It is very cold here in the Midlands. And you could have caught a fever already after yesterday.”

She nodded. "Yes, Your Grace," she murmured. "Once again, I must beg your pardon for yesterday's happenings," she said unsteadily, her gaze moving to the floor. "I must have startled you."

"Startled me? Not at all," Callum replied hastily. "I was merely concerned. It is much colder here than in your Sussex home."

"Indeed, it is. Thank you, Your Grace." She inclined her head. "I shall take care to remember that."

Callum gazed at her. Her gaze was warm as she looked back at him, and his chest glowed. He had thought she had taken offence, but she appeared rather bemused by his advice. He stared at her, her soft smile and her twinkling eyes holding him captive.

"Good day," he managed to say, and bowed stiffly. When he straightened up, she was already going through the door into the hallway. He gazed down at the shawl that he still held in his hand. It was warm from being wrapped around Miss Rothwell's shoulders.

Callum tensed and marched to his sister's bedchamber to deliver the shawl, trying to ignore the presence of it in his hand and the tide of emotions that filled him when he thought about it draped around her pale shoulders. He tapped on the door of the bedroom and was relieved when it opened.

"Yes? Oh! Your Grace," Miss Emsley, his sister's ladies' maid, greeted him. "I was just tidying. Is there aught the matter?" Her eyes widened and Callum realised he must look angry, his jaw clenched where he fought his own emotions.

"No. I was instructed to return this to my sister. She loaned it to a guest," he explained, keeping his voice light.

“Oh, Your Grace, you are most kind. I am deeply obliged and you needn’t have troubled yourself with such a trivial task. I shall see to it that it is placed properly,” Miss Emsley replied, her dark eyes wide. She took the shawl and folded it with care.

“Thank you,” Callum said politely, his voice even. He turned and hurried down the hallway. He had an outfit to plan, and, as his sister had said, it did matter. Not just because Mother was there, either. He wished to make a good impression on his guests, though there was one in particular who mattered more to him than the rest.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:11 am*

Rosalyn stared out of her bedchamber window. It was three o'clock in the afternoon, and she should have been dressing for the duchess' special afternoon tea party, but she could not focus. Her encounter with the duke, just a few hours before, played through her mind repeatedly. She recalled his gaze on her—so intense, so confusing—the way he talked so hesitantly, as though he was shy. She especially recalled the feeling of his fingers brushing against her own as she passed him the shawl. She could almost feel their brief, soft touch if she shut her eyes. It had been so swift, but it had seared through her nerve endings, making her body tingle.

“What is the matter with me?” she asked aloud. And, she wondered further, what was the matter with the duke? Since their meeting in the dining room at the ball he had been behaving differently. Less cold and silent, more attentive. The strange glances that he cast her way confused her.

She stood up, going to the wardrobe. She had to choose a dress to wear. As she opened it, a knock sounded at the door. She jumped, startled. Her nerves had been tightly strung since the morning.

“Yes?” she called a little shakily.

“Rosalyn! It's me,” Georgina whispered in a particularly loud whisper through the door. “Can we come in?”

“We wanted to ask you about our dresses,” Isabel added, talking in a low voice.

Rosalyn opened the door and let them in. Georgina half-collapsed into the room from where she had been leaning on the wood. She had a mulberry-coloured gown in her

arms. Isabel walked in behind her, carrying a very pale lavender blue gown. She shut the door behind them, and they stood awkwardly by the door, looking at Rosalyn.

“Are we disturbing you?” Isabel asked.

Rosalyn blinked and shook her head. “No. No, dears! Come in. I was just planning my own outfit. Come in!” she gestured them to the padded chair and the stool by the dressing table, the only two places to sit, besides the bed, in the room.

“I thought you mentioned you might wear brown?” Isabel asked attentively. Rosalyn nodded.

“Yes. Yes, I did. Or green?”

“Yes! Your beautiful sage-green day-dress. Do, do please wear it!” Georgina begged her.

Rosalyn went to her wardrobe uncertainly and opened it, taking out the gown. She had been unsure—it became her extremely well, but she had always felt a little self-conscious in it, since when she wore it in London it had drawn some stares. She took out the sage green gown and held it up against herself, studying her reflection in the looking glass opposite.

Her own hazel eyes stared back at her, seeming huge in her slender, pale face. She normally thought of her eyes as pale tawny brown, but when she wore the green dress, green flecks seemed to appear there, making them seem larger and striking.

“Oh, do wear it!” Georgina begged again. “It is such a becoming colour on you.”

“You do look very pretty, Rosalyn,” Isabel told her gently.



Rosalyn swallowed hard. She felt too shy to wear it—the last thing she wanted was to stand out. But if her sisters insisted, she could not refuse. Besides, she thought, her cheeks heating up, mayhap the duke would like it.

“I am going to wear this,” Georgina informed her, holding the dark red velvet dress up against herself. “You don’t think it clashes?” she gestured to her cinnamon curls.

“No. It suits you very well, Georgina,” Rosalyn assured her. Georgina did look very beautiful with her very pale skin and red hair shown up by the dark red gown. Her large caramel-brown eyes also showed up beautifully.

“I wondered about my hair,” Isabel informed Rosalyn as she held up the soft-blue gown. “I thought perhaps something similar to the chignon that you wore the other day? With a silver clasp? But mayhap that would be too formal for an afternoon event.” A frown creased her smooth brow, her slim face showing her worry. Isabel often worried about doing the right thing.

“I think that would be a good level of formality,” Rosalyn assured her sister gently. “You are a young debutante—dressing prettily could hardly be criticised in you.”

“Oh, Rosalyn,” Isabel said warmly. “You always make me feel at ease.”

“As you should,” Rosalyn told her softly. “As you should.”

She stepped behind the screen in the corner of the room to change into the green gown, and then her sisters were racing to take their turn. Time was in limited supply—they were expected to be ready by four o’clock, and they all still needed a ladies’ maid to arrange their hair.

“Now we had best hurry to our chamber,” Georgina said as she stepped out from behind the screen, the dark red dress hugging her curvaceous figure. Isabel was

already dressed, waiting at the door, her black hair falling like water around her shoulders onto the pale lilac gown. Rosalyn's heart twisted as it filled with love for her two younger sisters. They were so beautiful, so innocently full of joy and life. She smiled at them both.

"I shall meet you in the drawing room," she said warmly.

They both hurried out of the door and into their own room, and Rosalyn shut the door behind them, smiling to herself. Let them keep that, she thought, a silent prayer. Please, let them keep their innocence.

She rang the bell to summon her maid to style her hair.

Twenty minutes later, her hair styled in an elegant but simple chignon decorated with a ribbon in a similar green, she walked into the hallway. She went to check if her sisters were in their chamber, but as she lifted her hand to knock, she heard the sound of hurrying feet. She whipped round, as her sisters must be running over to her, but her jaw dropped as she saw that it was not her sisters, but the duke.

He was dressed in a navy-blue tailcoat—so dark that it seemed black—with white shirt and dark brown trousers. His hair was tousled and his eyes round. He saw her and stopped, cheeks reddening.

"Miss Rothwell," he stammered. "I did not know that you were here."

"I was looking for my sisters," Rosalyn said, frowning. "Is something amiss, Your Grace?"

"One of the horses. An older mare. She is sick. I was running to find the butler," he explained. "Someone needs to fetch the apothecary."

“Is she coughing?” Rosalyn asked.

“Yes.” The duke nodded briskly. He had turned towards the stairs. “She was coughing all morning, the stable hand said. Intermittent coughing. She looks weary and frightened. I need to do something to help. She is not strong.”

He was walking down the stairs, Rosalyn keeping pace beside him. They reached the entranceway. The duke gestured to a footman who was hurrying past.

“Stratford? Where is Mr Morton?”

“He is outdoors, Your Grace,” the footman replied respectfully. “A cart of ale came in and he went to direct the unloading.”

“Oh, for...” The duke looked as though he was trying not to swear. He strode towards the door. “I will find him myself. I have to explain to him what to do.” He reached for his greatcoat and shrugged it on, and Rosalyn reached for her pelisse as he opened the door. The cold air cut her like a knife, and she gasped. She tugged on her pelisse, hesitating. She did not have to go outside, but the mare’s plight had awakened her interest and compassion, and she could not simply go to a warm, genteel drawing room and ignore it.

“The stable boy said the warmth improved it,” the duke continued to relate. “I told him to feed her warm mash. The apothecary should see her. He has cures for everything,” he stated, sounding worried. Rosalyn followed him down the steps and into the garden.

“I am sure she can be cured,” Rosalyn said gently. Her gaze held his.

“I hope so,” he said softly. His brow furrowed as he looked down. “She is...special.”

Rosalyn swallowed hard. She knew how he felt. She loved her horse, Marmalade, with every fibre of her. If Marmalade were to be coughing, she would be as worried as he was. All the horses were important to her, but Marmalade and Swallowtail, the old stallion with a white blaze in the shape of a swallowtail across his long, greying nose, were even more special than the rest.

“I am sure she can be cured. Horses can cough for many reasons. As you know,” she demurred. She respected the duke’s knowledge of his horses.

“I hope so,” he repeated. “Mr Morton!” He shouted to the butler, who was instructing a carter unloading a cart full of barrels. The butler came over at once. He bowed to the duke.

“Your Grace. May I assist you?”

“I need someone to fetch the apothecary. At once. Bring him here. Buttercup is ailing and needs some assistance.”

The butler inclined his head. “At once, Your Grace.” He strode off to summon a rider. Rosalyn stood with the duke. It was freezing cold, a chilly breeze tugging at her skirt. She shivered. She had no gloves with her, and she balled her hands into fists, trying to keep her fingers warm.

“You’re shivering,” the duke said softly. He was standing no more than the length of her forearm away. His grey gaze was troubled. He reached for her hand. “Your fingers are cold. Go inside,” he said gently.

Rosalyn stopped breathing as he clasped his fingers delicately around her own. Her heart thudded against her ribcage, and she stared into his eyes. His own grey gaze held hers. Her fingers tingled with his touch.

“Yes, Your Grace,” she said softly.

His gaze lingered a moment and then he turned away.

He let her hand go and she hurried back up the stairs and into the house. The warmth seemed stifling after the intense cold. She shrugged off her pelisse and glanced in a looking glass, checking that her hair was still tidy. She tucked a curl behind one ear and hurried up the steps.

She turned at the sound of footsteps. The duke was hurrying up the stairs after her. The clock struck four as they reached the hallway and they increased their pace, rushing into the drawing room.

“And I...oh!”

The Duchess was standing by the tea table, inviting the guests who had already assembled there to help themselves. She turned and stared as Rosalyn and the duke stumbled in. Her gaze narrowed as she studied Rosalyn.

Rosalyn glanced at the duke. He glanced at her briefly and her heart almost stopped at the look in his eyes. Amused, rueful and tender, it drew her in.

She turned towards the guests, determined to face them all boldly and not to let them intimidate her. The duke walked beside her, and they slipped into the crowd together, determined to enjoy the afternoon.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:11 am*

Callum drew his gaze back, for the fourth time, from where Miss Rothwell sat with her sisters by the window. The sunshine fell through onto her hair, making it glow like burnished brass, and her happy laughter drew his gaze back to her whenever he looked away. A plate of mince pies stood on the tea table, a blue-and-white Meissen ware tea set beside them.

“...thought we’d go for a jaunt. A fine day! Oughtn’t to waste this opportunity, eh?”

Callum blinked, Lord Grassdale’s words just reaching him through the fog of his thoughts. In his mind, he was in the icy cold garden, holding Miss Rothwell’s hand in his own. She gazed up at him, her hazel eyes wide with surprise. Her fingers were icy in his touch, fine and graceful and unexpectedly strong from years of riding.

“...the fellows and me. What do you say, Stallenwood?”

“I beg your pardon?” Callum asked, confused. “Would you mind repeating that?”

“Of course, old chap. I thought that you, myself, Rothwell and Chesterford might take a jaunt. What say you? Not necessarily a festive activity, but a fine one for a day like this.”

“A jaunt? Where?” Callum asked. He looked out of the window. The day was still clear-skied, but the estate was freezing cold, especially in the hollows that were perpetually in the shade.

“Oh, anywhere you care to name. It’s your estate, old fellow. Just a shame to waste the sunlight. What say you?”

“Of course,” Callum replied, distractedly. He was gazing across the drawing-room again, to where Miss Rothwell was seated. Her big smile drew him in. He glanced sideways, aware of his mother’s critical gaze on him. She had been furious when he and Miss Rothwell had drifted in a few minutes late, obviously together and clearly distracted. She had not said anything, but her censorious gaze had followed them through the door and over to the chairs in the corner. He had done his best to ignore it, but he knew that the moment she had time, she would demand to know the cause.

“Capital! Shall we go after tea?” Lord Grassdale asked Callum, bringing him back to the present. A young viscount, Lord Grassdale had a slim, serious face, reddish hair and at that moment, a bright grin. Callum tried to focus.

“Yes. A fine idea. We still have an hour of daylight before sunset,” he added, trying to plan a route. The horses did need exercise, and a ride was a good idea.

“Grand! Your mama shall not mind if we depart a little earlier, I think. The longer we have in daylight, the safer. I’ll go and tell Rothwell, shall I?”

“Who?” Callum blinked. That part had escaped him, but he recalled that the name Rothwell had been mentioned.

“Mr Rothwell. He’s a keen rider. He will want to come out with us for certain. He already expressed admiration for your stable.”

“Oh?” Callum blinked in surprise. He did not recall taking Mr Rothwell around their stable. Harriet. That had to be it. He hid a scowl. When had she sneaked down to the stable with Rothwell? That was his fault. His preoccupation with Miss Rothwell was distracting him from his duties.

“Indeed! Indeed, old chap. Well? Shall I ask him?”

“Yes. Do so,” Callum replied distractedly. He had been glancing over to Miss Rothwell and her sisters, to see if he could locate Mr Rothwell, when his eye fell on someone in particular. James was seated a few paces away, his gaze fixed on Miss Rothwell. He was staring at her. Callum’s blood boiled.

As he watched, James turned to Lady Philippa and whispered something in her ear. Whatever it was, she laughed.

Perdition take you! Callum thought angrily. He glared at them, some of his ire directed at his mother. She had not needed to invite two such unpleasant people to her Christmas party. He watched the two of them, glaring at James as his gaze moved again to Miss Rothwell. His anger dampened swiftly as Lord Grassdale approached, Chesterford—an older baron—and Rothwell in tow. Mr Rothwell’s father, Lord Cranfield, was with them. Callum inclined his head politely to the older man.

“Your Grace,” Lord Cranfield greeted him respectfully. “I believe my son is going for a ride with you? I would like to join him, if I may. I have an interest in seeing your stable.”

“Of course,” Callum said with an easy shrug. In many ways, having more riders was a good thing. They could exercise more horses, and it was always safer to be in a bigger group.

“Grand,” Lord Cranfield said lightly.

“Well, we are all ready, then,” Lord Grassdale said, sounding pleased. “I will just go and explain our departure to the duchess.” He tilted his head in the direction where Mother stood, holding court with Lady Bronham in the corner by the tea table.

Callum nodded and stood with Lord Chesterford, Lord Cranfield and Mr Rothwell. He shuffled awkwardly from foot to foot. He knew none of the men well, and he



disliked Rothwell, while Lord Cranfield he had to admit he found a little intimidating. He was very quiet, very serious: in many ways unlike his son and daughters, who were lively, merry people.

“I say,” Mr Rothwell said, breaking the uncomfortable silence. “I reckon Rosy would like to come with us. Shall I ask her?”

“Rosy?” Callum shrugged and nodded. It was only after Mr Rothwell had disappeared into the drawing room that he realised he meant Miss Rothwell, who was called Rosalyn.

His heart thudded rapidly. He had agreed to the ride thinking that it would be himself and a few other men. He had not planned how he would feel if Miss Rothwell were with them. That was an entirely different matter. He would worry about it getting dark, about the paths being unsafe, about which horse would be safe for her to ride. Mr Rothwell had already reached her, and she was standing up to join them. Her gaze met his, and he blushed.

She came over to join them, and then Lord Grassdale came back to the group.

“Her grace said we were welcome to go,” he told Callum. “Shall we make our way to the stable?”

“Of course,” Callum agreed.

He followed the group downstairs and to the door, walking a pace behind Miss Rothwell, who walked with her father. She moved with a light tread, a curl of hair falling from its style to brush the back of her neck. Her skin shone in the soft daylight that poured into the stairwell. He looked away, frustrated with himself.

James seems to have no qualms about staring, he reminded himself. That still angered

him. He had been surprised by the magnitude of the rage that it raised in him. He had wanted to stride across the room and hit the fellow. He did not understand it.

He was opening the front door when he became aware of footsteps behind them. Two sets of footsteps. Mr Rothwell was hurrying downstairs, Harriet beside him. Her face was flushed, and she smiled at her brother a little shyly.

“Now, Harriet. I do not think...” he began hotly. Grassdale and Chesterford were there, and Grassdale smiled at Harriet.

“Lady Harriet! How pleasant. Do let her come along. It will be good for Miss Rothwell to have another lady with us.” He smiled appealingly.

“You are right,” Callum agreed gruffly. While Miss Rothwell was more than adequately chaperoned by her father and brother, the presence of another lady would soften things and make them more acceptable. He bit back his anger at Mr Rothwell, who was grinning as though he had been granted a thousand pounds, and let Harriet go past them.

The ladies shrugged on their riding cloaks while the gentlemen donned their coats and gloves, and then they all proceeded outside to the stable.

The air was bitterly cold, cutting through Callum’s thick greatcoat, and he gritted his teeth as he glanced over at Miss Rothwell. She wore her velvet gown and a seemingly thick velvet mantel, yet he worried about her in the intense cold. As they walked down the path, they met with the late afternoon sunshine that shone into the stables. That improved matters and Callum relaxed a little.

“Right. My lord?” he addressed Lord Cranfield, Miss Rothwell’s father. “I suggest you take Snowstorm. He is our most spirited stallion. I think you are the most experienced rider here?”

Lord Cranfield shrugged; his thin face relaxed. "I will do as you suggest," he replied politely.

Callum swiftly assigned horses to all the riders, then hurried to call the stable hands to assist with tacking up. While he was sure all of the people present, including the ladies, could tack up their own horses, it would be much faster with help.

He glanced over at Buttercup. He had not assigned her to any rider, though he would have liked her for Miss Rothwell. She was an older horse, calm in temperament and the least likely to spook. She coughed as he approached, but her manner did not seem as strained.

"How is she faring?" Miss Rothwell asked from beside him. Callum jumped.

"She seems better," he said gruffly. "Noah?" he called to a young man, perhaps eighteen, who was hauling a saddle out of the tack room. "What happened? Did the apothecary visit?"

The young man bowed, touching his forehead in a respectful gesture. "Your Grace. The apothecary was here ten minutes ago. He left us a preparation of herbs. We dosed Buttercup with it about five minutes before you arrived. It seems to ease her, Your Grace."

"Good. Good," Callum replied in genuine relief. He gazed over at the horse. She was pale brown, her muzzle white with age. She looked at him and he was relieved to see there was no fear in her gaze.

"Has she always been in this stall?" Miss Rothwell asked Callum.

He frowned, thinking. "No. She was there," he replied, gesturing to the stall at the end of the row, which had a window that looked out onto the kitchen garden. "We

moved her so that she would not catch a draft and get cold.”

“Consider putting her back?” Miss Rothwell suggested. “Mayhap the fresh air did her good. We had a horse with a cough, and when we moved him to another stall, it improved. It might be the dust.” She gestured at the straw on the floor and the sawdust in the aisle between.

“Mm.” Callum nodded, a frown creasing his brow. The more he thought about it, the more it seemed to make sense. He tucked the idea away in the back of his mind to tell Mr Randell when they returned. “Thank you. I will consider it.”

Miss Rothwell just nodded, then turned away, taking the rein of Rainstorm, a dappled thoroughbred whom he had chosen as her mount.

Callum tacked up Firelight, his horse, but his mind was not really in it. He kept on thinking about Miss Rothwell. Her suggestion was good, and he could not help but be impressed. He led his horse out to the mounting block in the stable yard. Miss Rothwell was already seated, waiting at the gate with her father and Lord Chesterford. Mr Rothwell, Harriet and Lord Grassdale were not yet out. Callum swung up into the saddle, still annoyed at Mr Rothwell for inviting his sister and Harriet. While Harriet was a competent horsewoman, she was not accustomed to riding in the cold, or riding on the route he had planned for the afternoon.

He rode Firelight to the edge of the yard, careful to keep him away from Snowstorm, with whom he sometimes fought. He was just getting impatient when Harriet and Mr Rothwell emerged, followed by Lord Grassdale. Harriet and Mr Rothwell were laughing. Callum bit back his annoyance.

I envy them their ease with one another, he thought sadly. They were both open, direct people, and they chatted and laughed without effort.

“I remember almost swallowing the sixpence once,” Mr Rothwell was saying as they rode into the line behind Callum. Harriet guffawed.

“You didn’t! I always wondered if someone had. I always search through my pudding for a sixpence before I take a spoonful of it.”

“Wise, my lady. Most wise.”

Callum smiled to himself. The tradition of hiding a sixpence in the pudding, to bless whoever found it with riches, was a tradition he enjoyed. Their family did not practice it often, since Mother feared that someone would choke on it. But in the years when they had done it, he had himself found the sixpence more than once.

Strange, he mused. He had inherited an estate in ruins, had sold off much of it to repay the debts, and was left as a duke of relatively modest means compared to the wealth of other dukedoms. The silver sixpence did not seem to do its job as promised.

His thoughts drifted back to the moment as they rode out of the gate. He had chosen a route that went up into the parklands that adjoined the manor grounds. Several acres of wood, belonging to the estate, surrounded the manor and were maintained by the verderers to keep them stocked with deer and other hunting quarry. Father had been a keen hunter, but Callum was not fond of the sport. He rode up through the gate, cutting ahead of Lord Cranfield who had been leading the party.

“This way,” he called, gesturing up the steep slope.

His guests fell in behind him, chatting and laughing. The route was narrow but would widen out so that they could ride beside one another later. Callum leaned back, slowing his horse to a walk as they navigated the steep slope.

The feeling of the horse’s relaxed gait soothed Callum and he started to relax. The

woods were warmer atop the steep rise, and the sunshine was pleasant, relaxing him and his horse still further. He could hear the drowsy rise and fall of Lord Cranfield talking to the baron; the low, murmurous conversation pleasant and easy on the ear. Mr Rothwell and Harriet were somewhere near the back—he could hear the occasional laugh and giggle as they chatted brightly. He reached a wider point in the road and stopped, turning in his saddle, to check on his guests.

Miss Rothwell was in the middle of the group. Lord Grassdale rode a little behind her, and Harriet and Mr Rothwell behind him. Callum's gaze focused on Miss Rothwell's soft, pretty face. She looked relaxed, turning to her father to make some comment. Her silky hair glowed in the sunshine and an easy smile brightened her expression. Her brown riding habit made her hair seem brighter. Her gaze caught Callum's, and she held his eye, then blushed, turning away. Callum swallowed hard.

"The road widens here," he informed the guests, his throat tight. "We can safely ride beside one another. It cuts to the left, and then we circle back and cross the pastureland back to the estate."

"Capital!" Lord Chesterford greeted the words warmly.

Callum turned to face the road again, leaning a little forward to guide his horse into a trot. He had ridden since he was four years old, and he barely needed to think about what he did. His mind focused on Miss Rothwell, her undeniable beauty playing through his thoughts. It was not so much her looks—though she was undeniably lovely—but rather her vitality, her sweetness. The warmth in her smile.

Help me, he thought wordlessly, sending up a silent prayer for aid. He did not know how to escape the growing closeness he felt, the irresistible draw toward her that was beginning to drive him mad. It would be one thing if she seemed to return his feelings, but instead, she seemed politely indifferent. He could not forget her scathing words at the dinner party. It seemed cruel that he should feel so drawn to someone

who seemed unable to return anything but chilly good manners.

“May I join you?” a voice said beside him.

Callum turned around, blinking in astonishment, to see Miss Rothwell and Harriet beside him on the path. Mr Rothwell was a little behind. At the point where the road widened, they must have seized the chance to overtake the two older men and Lord Grassdale. He stared at them, not sure what to say, then nodded.

“Of course,” he said, struggling to maintain a cool, neutral tone. Miss Rothwell was looking at him with an inquiring gaze. He turned away, feeling embarrassed. He could not fathom what she might be thinking about him.

She rode alongside him. He rode wordlessly, searching his mind for something to say. His thoughts were blank, filled only with his awareness of her. She sat upright, her posture as easy and relaxed as his own. She held the reins lightly. She used a side-saddle, one of Harriet’s old ones, her long legs twisted gracefully around the pommel, demurely covered with her brown velvet mantel. His cheeks flushed red.

“Do you often ride here?” she asked him. He blinked in surprise, not expecting her to say anything.

“No. I mean, yes. In winter. It is a good place to exercise the horses,” he explained. He blushed, aware of how odd he must sound.

“It is warmer here than elsewhere on the estate. Or, it seems to be,” Miss Rothwell said after a moment.

“Mm.” Callum nodded. “It is.” He gazed around, wishing he could think of something intelligent to say.

They were riding downhill, moving towards the pastureland. He leaned back, slowing his horse to a walk. Miss Rothwell was slightly ahead of him and, as the path narrowed, he stopped briefly, allowing her to slip in ahead. Lord Chesterford caught up with them and then Callum rode on, keeping a little behind Miss Rothwell.

They rode past a thicket, and Callum gasped as something—a bird, he thought, he could not see what—suddenly burst out of the bushes. In the same moment, Miss Rothwell, who was riding ahead, took off. He let out a yell. Rainstorm, her horse, was a stable, wonderful mare, except in the presence of anything that moved swiftly. She had a bad experience on a hunt when a gun went off too close to her, and ever since then she had associated fast movements with danger.

“What was I thinking?” Callum swore at himself. Miss Rothwell was clinging on, doing her best to remain mounted, but Rainstorm had bolted, and they were galloping out onto the pastureland. There were fences there, and Rainstorm would not think twice about jumping if she was spooked. Two of the most dangerous things were if horses vaulted fences or reared unexpectedly.

He leaned forward, urging his horse into a gallop.



*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:11 am*

Rosalyn clung to the reins. She leaned back, doing her best to stay on, as her mare, Rainstorm, bolted at a gallop across the field.

“Easy, girl,” Rosalyn tried to say, loosening her grip on the reins as much as she dared. Her legs were gripping the high pommel of the side-saddle, and she leaned as far back as possible, both to slow the horse and because the horse might rear or vault. A rider lying across the horse’s neck was vulnerable to having their own neck snapped by a sudden rear.

God, help me, she thought silently as the horse continued to gallop. Trees and bushes flashed past, shadows barring them as they raced past fences. The horse had left the road and was careening down a path. If it was her mare, she would have relaxed as much as possible, trying not to send any mixed signals that would frighten her mount still further. But this was an utterly unknown mare, one whose behaviour she could only guess at.

They were approaching a corner and Rosalyn screamed, then a wild plan to slow the horse occurred to her. She grabbed the reins and pulled as harshly as she dared, jerking the horse’s head sideways. As she had hoped, the horse veered sharply into the corner, the movement naturally slowing her down.

Rosalyn eased her grip on the reins, the horse slowing slightly. She tried straightening up, relief weakening her as the horse slowed to a canter.

As her horse slowed still further, she had time to look around. Her relief gave way to a sense of shock again as she realised that she had no idea where she was. It was twilight, the shadows lengthening and the path under her feet barely visible. She

could see woodland up ahead and somewhere far away burned distant lights; perhaps a farmhouse. Her heart thudded in her chest.

She had no notion of how to get back to the manor.

“Sebastian?” she called. “Papa?”

The horse heard her and swivelled her ears, pawing the dirt and snorting. Rosalyn patted her neck, aware that her own shaky, fearful voice was frightening to the confused, exhausted creature. She shivered, drawing her mantel tight around her. The horse had stopped, and she could lift her hands from the reins. She looked around. It was getting dark fast and if she did not find the way back soon, she would be lost all night.

What about wolves? And the cold? She asked herself, a frisson of fear running down her spine. It had been warm while the sun was out, but as night fell, the cold gnawed at her even through her thick cloak. She and her horse could both freeze to death on the field. To say nothing about the possibility of predators. Wolves were rare but far from unheard of, especially in thick woodland. And even in the countryside, the chances of running into a dangerous human on the road were greater than she would like. She looked around, fear gripping her.

“Easy, girl,” she told the horse, patting the creature’s neck. Her horse was pawing the ground again and she did not want to risk her bolting a second time.

The farmhouse was not impossibly far away, but it was almost utterly dark and there was no way to know if a road or track led there. She lifted the reins. The only wise option seemed to be to retrace their steps, but since they had not followed any particular path, that was also difficult.

“Easy, girl,” Rosalyn said gently, as she pulled on the reins as gently as she could,

trying to guide her horse to turn around.

Her horse turned, and they started to go back. There was the faintest evidence of a path; a brighter greyish ribbon of bare earth in the sea of black that was the nighttime grassland. Rosalyn swallowed hard, her fingers icy and her stomach queasy with fear.

She shut her eyes for a moment, trying to calm down. Her horse was exhausted, and so was she. Neither of them seemed to have any notion of where they were. She drew in a breath and listened to her own exhalation and the calm, steady breath of her horse. The soft clop of hoofs on the ground reassured her. She opened her eyes.

And frowned.

The sound of the horse's hooves seemed off, disjointed. It took her a moment to realise why; the noise was coming not just from beneath her, but also from up ahead.

"Sebastian?" she called, her heart lifting with joy. "Papa?" Someone had ridden after her! Her spirits soared and she leaned forward, signaling her horse to move faster.

"Miss Rothwell?" a voice called out. Rosalyn shivered.

"Your Grace?" It was the Duke of Stallenwood. He had ridden after her. She breathed deeply, trying to still her heartbeat. If she showed any sign of agitation, the horse might become frightened again and bolt. Her heart thumped against her ribs. She tried to call out, clearing her throat, which was suddenly tight with a mix of emotions.

He must think I am a fool. Mayhap he was worried that I injured his horse. He couldn't be worried for me, could he? The thoughts chased themselves around her mind. He was so hard to read. One moment, he was indifferent to the point of rudeness and the next, tender and considerate in a way that stole her breath.

“Miss Rothwell?” his voice called out. He was not too far—she could hear the distinct sound of a horse trotting along a dirt path. Her horse whickered a greeting, stepping forward of her own accord.

She must recognise the other horse, Rosalyn thought, patting her mare’s neck.

“Easy, girl,” she said gently. “We’ll be there soon.”

They rode forward and, before long, the sound of hoofs was almost before them. It was completely dark, and she widened her eyes, trying to see ahead. The flash of white of a high shirt collar came into focus, and then the white blaze on the nose of the duke’s thoroughbred. As she watched, he reined in, bringing his horse to a walk. The stallion walked alongside Rainstorm, who whickered again and stamped, giving him a greeting. Rosalyn swallowed, tension tightening her throat.

“Your Grace. I...” she began, trying to apologise for what had happened. His horse could easily have broken a leg the way she bolted. If he was angry, she could not really blame him. She braced herself for his ire, but before she could say anything further, he dismounted and ran to her. He reached up, lifting her out of the saddle.

“Miss Rothwell! Are you quite well? Did you fall? Are you harmed?” His voice was urgent.

He set her on her feet on the ground before him, his hands—which had been around her waist—resting on her shoulders. His eyes stared into her own. It was almost too dark to see him, but when he stood close, she could see his face in inky grey and black shadow.

“I am quite well,” she managed to reply. With his hands on her shoulders, and his presence so close to her, she was shaking, but not entirely with cold. She did not understand the wash of feelings that rushed through her, too intense and strange to

fathom.

“You are sure you are not hurt?” The duke demanded. His grip on her shoulders tightened. She nodded.

The duke slumped visibly, the dark shadow of his presence becoming less upright. He let out a sigh.

“I thought you had been thrown. I thought you were badly wounded.”

“No, I am quite safe,” Rosalyn replied softly. “A little shocked and unsteady,” she added, giggling shakily.

“Of course. Of course.”

He stared into her eyes. She stopped giggling and looked into his gaze. She could see him a little better, the light of the first stars and the moon illuminating him well. His eyes were wide and round, his thin-lipped mouth set in a firm line. His hands were still on her shoulders. Wordlessly, he reached up and, with a tenderness that made her breath stop, he tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

She gazed at him. He was so close, and in the darkness, it felt as though they were utterly alone, the only people for hundreds of miles. He stared into her eyes and leaned a little forward. She held her breath. For a moment, it seemed as if he might kiss her. The thought stirred a longing within her, unfamiliar and powerful. She wanted him to lean closer, to press his lips gently to hers. She longed for it, more deeply than she had ever known.

“Daughter? Daughter? Stallenwood! Are you there?”

Rosalyn let out her breath sharply. It was her father. He was galloping along the

road—she could hear the horse’s hoof-beats, though they were still fairly far away. His shout was full of concern, and she flushed, feeling suddenly embarrassed.

The duke straightened up, making a small sound like a cough in his throat.

“You must be cold. Do you need assistance? There is a fence here that you can use to step up into the stirrup.”

His voice was businesslike, his manner brisk. Rosalyn swallowed. She tried to snap back into their usual, practical manner, but it felt wrong. She shook her head.

“No, thank you. I can manage quite well.” Her voice was a little colder than she intended it, spurred by her hurt.

“Fine,” the duke said briskly. She heard his boots crunch on the path and then the sound of him turning his horse and mounting the saddle. She went to her own horse, stroking her neck reassuringly.

“Easy, there.” She soothed the horse, stepping up lightly. She gripped the reins, wincing at the pain in her fingers. She was wearing riding gloves, but the thin leather did very little to warm her hands. She turned at the sound of a noise.

“Daughter? Oh! God be praised!”

It was her father. She heard the horse’s hoofs stirring up the gravel as he drew to a swift halt and then he was leaping from the saddle and running to her horse. Rosalyn reached down as he reached up to embrace her. Her horse, thankfully, was not spooked by his sudden motion and stood still, allowing him to embrace Rosalyn.

“I thought you were dead. I thought you were dead,” her father repeated. He was almost crying. She could hear it in his voice. She let him lift her down from the

saddle and hugged him tightly, as much for him to feel assured as for herself. She breathed in the familiar scent of his greatcoat—sawdust and horses. She allowed the reassuring smell to soothe her heart.

“I am not dead, Papa,” she said gently. “I am sorry I scared you so.”

“Don’t be. I am just so grateful you are alive. My sweet daughter.” He hugged her a moment longer. “You must be freezing. Can you still ride?”

“I can,” Rosalyn assured him, mounting up onto her horse again. She looked around for the duke. He had ridden forward a few paces—she could see his dark outline against the velvet blue of the night sky. Her heart ached. She loved her father for riding so recklessly to find her, but part of her longed to be alone with the duke. She turned her horse and rode up beside him.

“We need to get you home,” the duke said shortly. Rosalyn bridled at his tight, formal tone.

Rosalyn heard her father turn his horse on the path and the duke rode up to lead the way. She rode up behind him and her father fell into step behind her. The duke, it seemed, could follow a stony path in pitch darkness where none of the rest of them could.

They rode in silence. Rosalyn was aware of the duke as he rode up ahead, his silhouette sometimes visible as they rode out from under the trees. She could not help but be sad that he had turned away so swiftly, returning without warning to the former coldness they had shared. They rode without speaking back to the gate that led to the manor.

“The duke bade the others return to the manor,” her father explained from behind her. “Lady Harriet led them. She knows the way.”

Rosalyn let out a relieved sigh. At least Sebastian and the others were safe. The duke dismounted and opened the gate, and she kept Rainstorm halted until they were ready to move again.

The lights of the manor shone out over the garden, seeming impossibly bright and warm after the moonlit, starlit dark. Rosalyn swallowed hard. She dismounted at the stable, allowing one of the stable hands to lead her horse into the stall. She gave the animal an appreciative pat on the brow.

Afterwards, she walked out and found the duke there, instructing the stable hands to rub down the horses and feed them bran mash. He saw her, and for a moment, his gaze held hers before sliding away. “And give them plenty of fresh water. Warm it slightly, if possible,” the duke was instructing.

“Yes, Your Grace.”

Rosalyn swallowed hard and looked away.

“Come,” the duke said as she and her father approached him. “We must return to the manor. You must be cold,” he said levelly. He turned away, leading the way down the path. Rosalyn said nothing. She could not think of anything to say. She was cold—that was certainly true. Now that she was dismounted and standing still, the cold seemed to overwhelm her. She drew in a breath, every part of her aching.

“Come, daughter,” her father said gently. “You have to get inside. You’re barely dressed.”

“I have...have a cloak...” Rosalyn stammered. She felt an overwhelming weariness, the effort of walking up to the house almost more than she could bear. She tried to walk, but she was shaking.



“Come, daughter,” her father repeated softly. “You need to get inside. You have to get warm.”

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders as he would have when she was a small child, weary after a long ride, and they walked slowly, her weight supported against him, into the manor.

“Ask Mr Morton for whatever you need,” the duke said to her and Papa in the entranceway, and then he was walking briskly up the stairs.

“You need a hot bath,” Papa said, and when the butler approached, he gave him orders for a bath to be drawn. Rosalyn leaned against the wall. Her heart was sore from the duke’s sudden indifference, but she was freezing cold, barely able to stand, she was shaking so hard. Her hands and fingers ached, and she tried not to cry out from the pain. She was impossibly tired all of a sudden, her head throbbing.

“Easy, there,” her father said gently, as though she was a flighty horse. He wrapped his arm around her again and helped her slowly up the stairs.

“Sister? Sister!” Sebastian was on the stairs, running down towards them. His eyes were wide and round, his hair wild. “Papa! Sister! There you are. Heaven be thanked.”

Sebastian wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. Rosalyn leaned against him, utterly exhausted. She shut her eyes, unable to move a step further. Papa took her one arm and Sebastian took the other and they half-carried her into the hallway. The next thing she knew, she was in her bedroom.

“Rosalyn! Rosalyn!”

Her sisters were there at the door—she could hear their concerned voices. Papa was

also there, and she heard him explaining in a quiet voice that they should not disturb.

Rosalyn lay down on her bed and shut her eyes. She drifted, half-awake, and the last thing she thought of before her maidservant came in with the wooden bathtub was the duke's face, hovering before hers, his eyes wide with care as he gazed at her.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:11 am*

Callum gazed out through the window in the corner of the drawing room. It was almost impossible to stand still, he felt so restless and impatient. Despite it being evening, a full day after the ride in the woods, his mood had yet to settle. Miss Rothwell filled his thoughts.

That moment, alone with her in the starlight, he had almost kissed her. He had wanted to. He had fought so hard not to press his lips to her own, not to draw her into his arms and hold her close. He did not want to frighten her—she seemed so diffident and formal with him, and he did not want to impose on her.

She had kept to her chamber the entire day. Callum had sought out her brother and father, inquiring as to her wellbeing, but they informed him only that she was too tired to get out of bed and that they feared she had a fever.

“Son? Could you come here a moment?”

Callum jumped as his mother asked him a question. He had been looking out of the window, gazing at the darkening garden and ignoring the guests that milled around, waiting to go down to dinner.

“Yes, Mother?” Callum asked. “May I assist you?”

“Yes. Might you fetch me that book there?” she pointed to a book on a shelf just above his head. His mother’s voice was stiff. She hated having to ask for any kind of help.

“Of course, Mother,” Callum said, more gently, and reached up to get the book she

had indicated.

“Thank you,” his mother said with a touch of asperity. “And might I ask you to come and talk with Lady Bronham and Lady Millicent? You have been very chilly with them, and it is most unfair. She is a dear friend of mine.”

“Mother...” Callum began to argue, then sighed and followed her across the room.

“Gertrude? My son fetched the book for me. Here it is,” Mama was addressing Lady Bronham. She passed the book to Lady Bronham and gestured to Callum. “He is fortuitously tall enough to reach the books I cannot.”

“You are very tall,” Lady Bronham commented to Callum. He blushed, feeling desperately awkward. He was tall, and he had never felt embarrassed about that fact, but in that moment he did. Opposite him, Lady Millicent gazed up at him.

“Tallness is a virtue in men, it seems. Less so in women.” She smiled self-deprecatingly. She was a tall woman, her figure willowy and well-suited to the wispy, fashionable muslin dresses. Mama made a small, disapproving noise.

“Why, Lady Millicent! Tallness in a woman is very elegant. Certainly, it must be called a virtue also,” the duchess remarked.

“Thank you, Dottie. Do tell her,” Lady Bronham insisted, smiling at Mother.

Callum glanced around, feeling terribly out of place. Mr Rothwell was nearby and, as he turned and gazed towards the door, Callum followed his line of sight. His heart soared in his chest. Miss Rothwell was in the doorway.

She was very pale, and she wore a pale blue velvet gown. Her hair was arranged in a tight chignon. She glanced warily at him for a second, her glance sliding to the floor.

Callum winced. He felt responsible for how ill she seemed, and he wished that he could think of something to say or do that would help.

“...And I thought that we would decorate the hall tomorrow,” Mama was saying as his mind returned to the present.

“Oh?” Callum frowned. He had assumed that the servants would do that.

“Yes! It will be most festive. The staff will put up most of it, of course,” his mother demurred quickly. “But we can add ribbons and holly and such things. Not so? It will bring a seasonal touch to our gathering.” She smiled.

“It will be most diverting,” Lady Millicent said lightly.

“Yes! And mayhap you could sing, Millicent,” Lady Millicent’s mother suggested. “Millicent has a beautiful voice,” she added, looking at Callum.

“Mama...” Lady Millicent protested, her cheeks flushing with genuine embarrassment. Callum bowed low.

“I am certain she has,” he said politely. “Now, if I may, I would offer to fetch you ladies some refreshment?” He gestured to the tea table, which, as usual, held tea, cordial and a few light pastries, even before dinner.

“Oh, that is kind!” Lady Bronham replied. “I would be delighted to have a glass of redcurrant cordial.”

“I will fetch it directly.”

He crossed the room, passing near Miss Rothwell. He was considering at least asking her if she felt well, when his gaze slid a little leftward, and he tensed. James was

staring at Miss Rothwell again. Callum bridled. He glared at James, but the fellow must have seen him looking and he had already looked away. As Callum watched, James sat down beside Philippa, seeming to ignore the Rothwell family.

He took the cordial across the room to Lady Bronham, giving James another hard look as he walked past.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” His mother announced. Her crisp, icy voice made the guests fall abruptly silent. “We will proceed to dinner, but before we do, I would like to invite you all to join us in the drawing room for a game of acting charades after the meal.”

Callum shot his mother an annoyed look. He had always hated acting charades. The game involved breaking up a word into syllables and then acting out each syllable. The best ones were witty and confusing. He found it a little silly, if he was honest.

“Come, Callum!” his mother said brightly. “Let us proceed to the dining room. And perhaps you might escort us all downstairs?” She raised a brow, making a gesture including Lady Millicent. Callum scowled. Miss Rothwell and her sisters were already leaving the room.

“I must query after the health of Miss Rothwell first,” he said carefully. His mother glared at him, but she could not very well argue with that—it was the most basic of polite gestures.

He went swiftly across the room and bowed low to Miss Rothwell and her two sisters.

“Miss Rothwell,” he addressed the eldest Miss Rothwell directly. “Might I inquire as to your health?”

“I feel indisposed, Your Grace,” she said softly. She looked away shyly and he

frowned. His cheeks flushed with embarrassment. Perhaps my strange behaviour in the field when she was freezing cold had offended her, he thought. His intention to kiss her might have been altogether too obvious.

“That is disheartening news,” he said carefully.

“We are going to take Rosalyn back to her chamber,” Miss Georgina informed him briskly. “She is tired.”

“I regret that I will not attend dinner tonight,” Miss Rothwell said quietly.

“But you will all attend the charades?” he asked swiftly.

“We will!” Georgina spoke up excitedly.

“Will you?” The younger sister asked, turning to Miss Rothwell.

“I will try,” Miss Rothwell promised.

The delight on the faces of the two younger sisters echoed in Callum’s heart. He grinned at her and saw a confused expression cross her face.

“Only if you feel well, of course, Miss Rothwell,” he demurred quickly.

“Yes, Your Grace,” she said softly.

Callum bowed low and stood back for the ladies to go out into the hallway. Then he returned to his mother and Lord and Lady Bronham, who were waiting expectantly with Lady Millicent.

“Allow me to escort you to dinner,” he said, bowing in a way that included all of

them.

“How gallant,” Lady Bronham said, sounding very pleased.

Callum tried to smile and stood back to let the ladies proceed into the hallway ahead of him.

Dinner felt as though it took an age, each course seeming to stretch for hours. The dessert arrived—a delicious syllabub—and then cheese and biscuits and fruit. Callum felt restless with impatience. He went upstairs as fast as he could to the drawing room.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” his mother began. “I invite you to form groups. We will work in partners to form our charades. Paper and pencils are to be found there, should anyone have a need of them.” She gestured to the big table in the corner.

Callum barely listened. His gaze moved over the excited party guests, scanning the group for Miss Rothwell. He spotted bright hair and a blue dress over in the corner near the window. His heart leapt. She saw him and held his gaze. He smiled shyly. He thought for a heart-stopping second that she was going to ignore him, but then, as he approached her, she curtsied. He bowed as low as he would at court.

“Miss Rothwell,” he said softly. “If I may, would you do me the honour of assisting me in this evening’s endeavour?”

She inclined her head. “I would be most pleased to assist you, Your Grace. We shall make a fine team.”

“Good,” he said brightly.

They stood and looked at one another. Callum stepped awkwardly from foot to foot.



He could think of nothing to say. His mind was utterly blank, filled only with how delighted he was to see her. He had missed her, though she had only been absent from the festivities for a day. Nothing else entered his mind and he coughed and looked down shyly.

“One of us ought to fetch pencils and paper,” Miss Rothwell suggested. Her voice broke the awkward silence.

“I shall,” Callum said, bowing low. As he swiftly crossed the room, he spotted James and Philippa standing by the fire. James gave him a hard look. Callum glared back, no longer caring about whether he was rude or not.

Callum retrieved a pencil and paper and hurried back to the window. Miss Rothwell was still there.

“Miss Rothwell,” he said, clearing his throat. As he spoke, she began.

“I have an...”

He grinned and she blushed, looking down.

“What did you mean to say?” he asked quickly, his heart thudding.

“I have an idea,” she said swiftly. “How about “festivities?” As a word to act out, I mean.”

Callum frowned. “Is that not quite difficult?” he asked. “I mean, fes-ti-vi-ties.” He broke up the word into syllables. “None of the syllables have a meaning on their own.”

Miss Rothwell inclined her head. “True.” she paused. “But what if we use French

meanings? If we divide the syllables differently, we have words with meanings in French.”

“French?” Callum blinked at her.

“Not because of any partiality to Napoleon,” Miss Rothwell demurred.

Callum grinned. “I think Lord Bronham, for one, would be a bit cross.”

“I imagine that many here might be,” Miss Rothwell replied, looking around the room. There were two men wearing military uniforms among the guests.

“Mm. So, maybe not French, then,” Callum said quickly. Given the recent Peninsular War against Napoleonic France, he was sure that would raise some ire among the guests, particularly any of them who had fought against Napoleon’s forces there or elsewhere.

“But it would work so well,” Miss Rothwell pleaded. “Festive- vite .”

Callum raised a brow, then grinned. “Yes! We could act out the fact that the second word has a meaning in French, too. Otherwise, it shan’t work.”

“Yes! I have a good idea!” Miss Rothwell said with evident enthusiasm.

Callum had never seen her so excited before. She glowed. They went over to the corner to whisper their ideas to one another.

Callum flushed, seeing eyes turning their way. There is no reason why I should not whisper into the ear of a woman with whom I will soon wed, he reminded himself.

His heart raced. The thought was staggering. He had made the arrangement without

knowing a thing about her, and yet he had been blessed to discover a beautiful, witty woman with whom he could share many interests. The thought gave him a bold idea. His cheeks burned as he leaned in to whisper it to her.

“What?” Miss Rothwell gaped at him.

“Only if you would not be offended,” Callum said quickly, his entire body heating with a blush.

“Um...well, no,” she said, and her cheeks flushed pink in a way that made him smile as his heart pounded. “We have it!” Miss Rothwell declared after a moment or two.

“I think we have,” Callum agreed.

They went to sit down, and soon the rest of the guests were with them, waiting for someone to start off the evening performance. The two younger Rothwell sisters boldly volunteered to go first.

The two young ladies went to the front of the room and promptly burst out laughing as they started to enact a scene together. Even Callum could not help but be amused; mainly because they were both laughing so hard at their own antics that it was impossible to be serious.

“We give up!” Lord Grassdale protested after several minutes of hilarity. “Tell us!”

“Shall we tell him?” the older sister—Georgina—demanded.

“No!” Mr Rothwell yelled playfully, making them all laugh.

“It was, or rather, it was meant to be the word ‘generosity’,” the younger sister informed them with a shy smile.

The crowd applauded them.

Lady Millicent and a female friend went next, and their performance was quite skilful. Callum thought that he had guessed the word—entertainment—and he turned out to be right. The performance was greeted by enthusiastic applause.

“Shall we go?” Callum asked Miss Rothwell. Partly he wanted to conclude their performance because James and Philippa were staring at them again. The sooner he could get out of the drawing room and onto the balcony with Miss Rothwell, the better he would feel.

“Now?” she whispered. She was leaning close to him and her hair—the stray curl that had fallen from her chignon—brushed his cheek. Gooseflesh raced down his spine.

“Yes,” he replied as evenly as he could.

He went up to the front and held up his finger, indicating the first syllable. The feeling of so many people staring at him made his cheeks burn. They began acting.

They needed to try and convey the meaning of a festive celebration. Miss Rothwell lifted a wineglass and clinked it to the wineglass that he held. Then they mimed singing. The next part—the part that made Callum’s face burn with a flush—had been his idea. They pretended to kiss under the kissing bough.

They did not actually touch their lips to one another’s, but they stood facing one another, their hands on each other’s shoulders. He leaned forward, his heart racing. She leaned forward, tilting her head back, and he kissed the air close to her cheek.

Someone—he thought it was Mr Rothwell, but he could not be sure—whistled loudly at them, drawing amused giggles. Nobody was shocked—such liberties were allowed in a game of charades, which was one of the reasons why people enjoyed it. It was an

opportunity to behave in ways that would not usually be entirely proper, and to explore bold, new ways of being. His entire body heated up with awkwardness.

“Kissing!” Lord Chesterford yelled.

“That is not a syllable,” Mother objected stiffly. Everyone laughed.

“You were celebrating Christmas!” a woman whose name he did not recall suggested.

“But how is that a syllable?”

Callum held up his hand, trying to indicate that they would act out the second syllable.

Miss Rothwell began. She mimed a bicorne hat on her head, holding up her hands to indicate the two corners. Then she gestured in a roughly easterly direction, trying to indicate France, or French. The bicorne hat was well-associated with Napoleon, and Callum had hesitated to include that part, but they could think of nothing else to indicate France.

“Bonaparte is not a syllable!” someone objected loudly.

“Do not say that name in here!” someone else shouted hotly. It was one of the military men.

Callum held up his hands, trying to avoid an argument. He shook his head violently, gesturing east. He was starting to worry, but someone shouted out, loudly and fortuitously quickly: “France! He means France.”

“French?” someone else suggested. Callum nodded, relieved.

“The next syllable is in French?” Someone asked. Callum nodded again, vigorously,

grateful that they had managed that part without a fight erupting. Their audience relaxed.

The next part was amusing. Miss Rothwell held out her finger dramatically and Callum mimed running. Then he acted out trying to do a task very fast, with Miss Rothwell miming that she was trying to hurry him up. Several of the audience started to laugh.

“ Vite !” someone shouted the word, which meant “quickly” in French. Callum applauded, relieved that someone had guessed that part.

Miss Rothwell grinned at him, clearly delighted. His heart stopped. When she smiled, the lamplight bright on her hair, her pale skin flushed, she was breathtakingly lovely.

“Christmas- vite ,” Mother said with a sniff. “That is not a word.”

Callum shook his head, holding up his index finger to indicate that they would mime the first part of the word again. Feeling inspired, he grabbed Miss Rothwell’s hand, and they mimed waltzing around the room. She beamed up at him and for a moment, he forgot that they were in the drawing room and that a dozen people were staring at them. They could have been alone, dancing together in some secluded corner.

Someone coughed, rudely snapping him back to the moment.

“Dance- vite . That makes no sense either,” someone protested.

Callum looked at Miss Rothwell, desperate for her to do something. She mimed singing again and then eating. Callum mimed drinking and eating.

“Celebrating?” someone guessed. Callum nodded wildly.

“Festive? Festivities!” someone shouted out.

Callum beamed, relief washing through him. He had surprised himself by enjoying the acting, but he was starting to become restless, and he had wanted someone to guess. He glanced at Miss Rothwell. She smiled at him, a dazzling smile that stole his breath.

They went to sit down with the audience.

Another group went up to perform. Callum barely watched, his head still spinning after Miss Rothwell’s stunning smile. He glanced sideways to where she sat on an upholstered chair next to him. He had perched on the piano stool, the only available seating left. She smiled at him shyly. He smiled back.

He joined in the applause, and then stiffened as James and Philippa went up. They mimed shaking hands and exchanging gifts and then walking arm-in-arm together. Callum frowned.

“Friends?” someone shouted after several other guesses. Philippa nodded, smiling brightly.

James held up his finger to indicate the second syllable. He pretended to look through a telescope, striding about an imaginary deck.

“Captain is not a syllable,” Lord Bronham objected. Everyone laughed.

“Sail?” someone else suggested.

“Sail? Ship? Friendship!” someone yelled. Philippa beamed.

The audience applauded them. James bowed, looking straight at Miss Rothwell and

smiling shyly. Callum tensed, his spine prickling with anger. Was James trying to suggest that he wanted to be friends with Miss Rothwell? He dismissed the thought instantly.

Stop having such wild flights of fancy, he told himself with some annoyance. It is a game of charades, not some sort of secret code-message.

He put all thoughts aside as Miss Rothwell turned to him. Her smile was warm and lovely, and his heart melted. He beamed back.

When everyone had performed and the entire room was applauding one another, Callum stood up and bowed low.

“Might I fetch you some refreshment?” he asked her.

“That would be most kind,” she replied.

He went off to the refreshments table to fetch her a glass of cordial, his soul soaring. It had been a beautiful experience, working with her on their charade. He hated the game, but with her, it had been immensely enjoyable. He walked back across the room and presented the glass to her, bowing low.

“You are a fine actor, Miss Rothwell,” he complimented her.

“As are you, Your Grace.”

“I can’t be sure of that. I was dying of fright up there. Especially when the arguing started.”

“You did extremely well, Your Grace,” Miss Rothwell said gently.



“As did you,” he assured her.

“Thank you,” she replied, a teasing smile on her lips.

His heart soared. She was standing, talking to him, her fear apparently forgotten, and he was having the best time he could remember having. He glanced warmly around the room, grateful even to his mother for suggesting the idea. His cheeks reddened at the memory of miming the kissing under the bough, and he recalled his mother’s idea of decorating the hall the next day. He could not wait to see what would happen.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:11 am*

Rosalyn paused in the hallway. She had risen early, at least an hour before the guests usually gathered to break their fast, but she had taken time deciding what to wear and how to style her hair, and as she walked down the hallway, she realised that the breakfast room was already almost full. She paused in the corridor, her heart thudding as she heard the loud, strident noise of chatting and laughter. Crowded rooms always made her feel a little uncomfortable.

Her hands smoothed her skirt of heavy silk in pale yellow. She had taken almost an hour to decide on an outfit that she felt was right, and even as she stood there, she wondered if she had chosen correctly.

Stop it, she told herself, feeling a mix of annoyance and amusement. She knew that it was because of the duke that she had taken so long to get ready.

Her stomach twisted as she recalled the previous evening. She remembered staring into the duke's eyes as they mimed the kiss. It had seemed as though time stood still, as though only he and she existed in the room; in the world. All that she had thought of was his eyes and his closeness. She was drawn into them, drowning in them.

What is the matter with me? she asked herself as she walked into the breakfast room.

The guests fell quiet. Her cheeks burned. Luckily, nobody had received the French words badly, and many of the guests had congratulated them afterwards on their daring performance. It would have been hard to enter the crowded room had it not been received so well.

Her gaze moved to the duke. He was staring straight at her. Without moving his gaze,

he stood up, politely acknowledging her as she entered. Her stomach tied itself in knots, her cheeks flaming hotly as the other men at the table, too, stood.

“Good morning,” she managed to say, moving to a chair beside Sebastian, which was fortunately unoccupied. The reason for this was that Lady Harriet was seated on his other side. Rosalyn smiled at her as she sat down. Lady Harriet beamed.

“Good morning,” the duke said politely. His voice was resonant, and her throat tightened with emotion. It felt as though it were just the two of them in the room. The tenderness in his voice made her heart twist. His eyes were focused on her and he poured tea for her.

“Thank you,” she managed to say.

“I trust you slept well?” he asked her. His expression seemed as though he really cared about the answer.

“Mm. And yourself?” she asked. She had lain awake for an hour, the memories of the charades game playing around her mind. She had feared she might lie awake all night with the same lovely memories dancing through her thoughts, but she had fallen abruptly asleep.

“I slept well, thank you,” the duke replied, his voice sounding as though his throat, too, was tense with emotion.

Rosalyn smiled. “Good,” she managed to say, shyness making her cheeks flare red. She reached for a pastry from the basket, not paying much attention to what she took. She was too busy focusing on the duke. “How does your horse fare?” she added, remembering the coughing horse.

“Buttercup? She is much better. The draft of herbs that the apothecary gave her seems

to have helped a great deal. Thank you,” the duke replied. He smiled warmly at her.

“Have you...” she began, wanting to ask if he thought snow was likely—thick, heavy clouds hung over the hillside—but before she could finish, his mother clinked her spoon on her teacup, clearing her throat to make an announcement.

“Ladies and gentlemen! After breakfast, you are invited to the ballroom, where we will assist in decorating the room with Christmas boughs. Then we will retire to the drawing room for early tea.”

“Oh!” someone exclaimed, a woman’s voice. “Oh, how grand!”

“What a splendid idea,” Lady Bronham commented.

The room was instantly loud with excited chatter as people discussed the idea. With only a week before Christmas Day, the excitement was growing considerably. Rosalyn leaned back, smiling to herself. Christmas had always been one of her favourite celebrations.

“You seem to be thinking of something happy,” the duke commented. Rosalyn jumped.

“Yes. I was. I was recalling Christmas in my childhood home,” she said with a smile. “I recall opening my Christmas gift in the drawing room. My sisters would be shrieking with joy, and Sebastian would usually already have opened his gift. Mama and Papa would be eating breakfast while they watched us. We were all so happy.” She sniffed, trying not to cry.

“That is a beautiful memory,” the duke said softly.

Rosalyn swallowed hard. She had not expected her sorrow for her mother to surface

just then. It was the prospect of decorating the hall that reminded her. The kissing bough had been something that all the children had helped to make, decorating it with ribbons and apples. Once it was completed, Papa would hang it up, always making a little charade of placing it where it might catch Mama unawares. Of course, she had always known where it was, her surprise just a sweet act that Papa, laughing, would dismiss, and they would share a tender kiss.

Rosalyn blinked back tears at the memory and focused on her pastry, feeling a little shy. It was a fond and intimate memory of her family, and she was not sure how he would take it. She gazed at him, sneaking glances as they ate. He caught her eye on him and smiled. Rosalyn blushed.

As the rest of the guests stood, she and the duke followed them downstairs to the ballroom.

Excited exclamations filled the room as the guests entered. Rosalyn craned her neck to see what was causing the agitation, and she, too, let out a sigh as she saw the vast bundles of greenery set out for them to work with. There was ribbon in red and white, and piles of holly, ivy, fir branches and other evergreens.

“Rosalyn! Look! Oh, isn’t this so diverting?” Georgina asked, pressing close as they stepped into the ballroom.

“I hope we can make a kissing bough! We must ask her grace who is to make it!” Isabel said excitedly.

Rosalyn nodded, swallowing hard. “Yes,” she replied.

The duke smiled at her. His grey eyes sparkled. “This will be quite a task,” he said with a grin. “And I am afraid that I will require your assistance. I have no notion of how one proceeds with decorating a hall.”

Rosalyn giggled. He sounded so serious. She looked around the room.

“I think the staff have given us some ideas,” she replied, looking over to where hooks had already been set out at regular intervals around the walls, some of them already supporting boughs or bunches of greenery.

“Quite so,” the duke replied. “Ought we to make bunches, do you think?”

Rosalyn shrugged. “That is a good way to begin. And be certain to put enough holly and ivy in each one.”

The duke frowned, looking puzzled. “Why is that, pray, Miss Rothwell?”

She chuckled. She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and began her explanation. “The holly represents Christ, and the ivy His mother, the Holy Virgin. We should try to put equal amounts of both into every bunch. That will ensure a harmonious festive season.”

“Mm.” The duke inclined his head. “Whatever you say, Miss Rothwell. Well, then. May I choose whatever ribbon I like, or is there a tradition regarding those as well?” He went to the trestle table, where ribbon, wire and other things had been set out to assist them in the making of bunches. His lips tugged upwards at the corners a little, showing he was teasing. Rosalyn followed him.

She giggled. “I shall let you choose whatever ribbon you like. Though I shall tie mine with both red and white ribbon.”

“Does that ensure a harmonious season?” he asked.

“Well, the symbolism is a little different,” she began. He started to laugh. “What?” she demanded a little crossly, going to choose some holly from a big pile on the floor.

“You are a mine of information,” the duke said, smiling at her with real warmth. “But pray, enlighten me. What are the red and white ribbons for?” He leaned back against the wall as if waiting for her to answer him.

“Well,” Rosalyn continued, choosing a red ribbon and a white ribbon from the table. “The red are, of course, representing the blood of Christ. His suffering on the cross.” She wound the red ribbon around the bundle. “And the white is purity and innocence.” She wrapped the white ribbon and tied it in a bow.

“That is beautiful,” the duke murmured. He coughed, seeming genuinely affected by her words. She frowned. She wondered what he was remembering. After a moment, he cleared his throat.

“I remember our father taking us to the chapel on Christmas morning to celebrate mass. We used to be so excited. We would bundle up in our coats and cloaks and walk to the chapel with him. It is here in the grounds,” he added, gesturing out of the window. “Harriet was just one or two years old, toddling along through the snow. Papa would lift her onto his shoulder.” The duke sniffed. “Mama walked behind us, with a lady’s maid carrying our muffs and scarves and other things.” He chuckled. “The chapel was lit with candles, and I remember sitting listening to the priest’s words, and then we would sing. I would often be dreaming about pudding and Christmas gifts,” he added with a guilty smile.

Rosalyn laughed. “You were a little child. Of course, you were excited.”

“Excited does not do it justice,” the duke said with a chuckle. “I was ecstatic. I could barely believe that Christmas had come and that we would have a whole day of celebration and diversion ahead of us. When the service was concluded, we would walk back to the manor and our gifts would be waiting in the drawing-room. I will never forget the year that Father gave me my first horse. I did not understand why there was no gift for me upstairs.” He laughed, and Rosalyn swallowed, her own

heart aching as a tear ran down his face.

“He must have been so happy to see how excited you were.”

“I think my scream of joy must have deafened him,” the duke said with a chuckle. “Poor man.”

Rosalyn shook her head. “He must have loved to see your happiness,” she replied. She had made one bundle of holly and ivy, and reached for some fir branches to make another, different, bunch.

The duke sniffed. “I never considered it much,” he said softly. “I suppose he must have.”

Rosalyn smiled gently at him. “Of course, he did.”

The duke said nothing, and Rosalyn focused on her bunch of fir leaves. She watched as the duke made a tolerably good bunch of holly and ivy and stared after him as he went to hang it on the wall at the back of the hall. The images from his stories played through her mind. She imagined a dark-haired young boy with grey eyes and a solemn face. She completed her fir bundle, wove ribbons through it swiftly, and went to join him. He turned to face her.

“I have not thought about those things for a long time,” he said quietly. “I had forgotten them.” he paused. “I mean I had forgotten so many memories of Father.”

Rosalyn nodded. “I understand. I often think of Mama, but these happy memories are ones that I try not to think about too hard. Or I will miss her too much.” She sniffed, looking at the soaringly high ceiling as tears threatened to fall. “I cannot help thinking of her at Christmas.”



When she looked back into the room, the duke was smiling. “It does me good to remember,” he said softly. “It is good to remember the happy times.”

“Mm.” Rosalyn nodded. “It is good.”

They looked at each other without speaking. Rosalyn sniffed. The duke lifted his hand and, very gently, pressed his thumb against a tear that was running down her cheek. Rosalyn stiffened. Her heart was beating loudly in her chest, her entire body rigid with the sudden, beautiful sensation of his touch on her cheek. He gazed into her eyes, and she gazed back, her awareness filled with him, with his closeness. She could think of nothing else.

A loud whoop startled her, and her head whipped around to see her two sisters, running over with a sphere made out of wire. The sphere was a little uneven in shape, but Isabel was trying to repair it, while Georgina gestured excitedly to it and then to Rosalyn.

“Look! Look, sister! Her grace said yes.”

“We are making the kissing bough for the ballroom!” Isabel said happily.

“I am sure it will be beautiful,” Rosalyn assured them, her heart filled with warmth. They were flushed and smiling, real joy making their eyes sparkle with brightness.

“Oh, you must help us!” Georgina pleaded. “You used to do such grand ribbons for the kissing boughs in our house when Papa and Mama...” she trailed off, looking down uncomfortably.

“When Papa and Mama used to kiss under them,” Rosalyn replied, completing the sentence. Georgina and Isabel were always hesitant to mention their mother, not wanting to upset Rosalyn or each other. Lately, though, Rosalyn had found herself

wanting to talk about Mama. She wanted to recall all the happy memories, to talk endlessly about her. Perhaps it was because it was Christmas, or perhaps it was because her life was changing so fast and she missed her guiding presence, but she felt a need to speak and remember.

“Yes,” Isabel replied, her eyes shining. “We used to decorate them with red apples. And red and white ribbons,” she continued.

“I wanted to put rock candy on too,” Georgina said with a giggle. “It looks so pretty! But Mama said no.”

Rosalyn laughed aloud. She recalled that year very well. Georgina had been eight, she ten. The considerable quantity of rock candy had been a gift from Uncle Jack who had returned from a tour abroad.

“I think that my mother will likewise say no, sadly,” the duke quipped. They all laughed.

“We need some holly,” Georgina said, gesturing to the pile beside them, where there were only two branches left. “There is some over there.”

“We will come and ask you to tie the ribbons,” Isabel told Rosalyn. Then she hurried off after her sister.

Rosalyn and the duke shared a smile. She swallowed hard. Her heart ached with the happy memories, her mind wandering in the past. She gazed into his eyes, and she could see that he, too, was lost in thought. He saw her staring and he smiled.

Rosalyn smiled back and, without thinking, she stepped forward towards him. He took her hand, folding his own around it. She stopped breathing for a moment. The gesture was so tender that she could barely think.

“Shall we go and assist Sebastian and Harriet? I think they are having some difficulty reaching the hooks,” the duke said with a laugh.

Rosalyn looked over to where Sebastian and Harriet were attempting to hang a bunch of fir boughs, tied with red ribbon, from a hook at least eight feet up on the wall. He was standing on a chair, but even then, he was having a hard time reaching it. As they watched, Sebastian wobbled on the chair and Harriet shrieked and then giggled.

“There is a ladder in the corner,” the duke said with a grin as they reached the pair. “You know, the one that the staff use if they have to pull the curtains,” he added to his sister Harriet, gesturing to the high curtains over the small windows.

“Oh! Yes! I know where it is. Come on!” Harriet gestured excitedly to Sebastian. He climbed down from his stool and grinned at Rosalyn.

“I am not sorry to be relieved of chair duty,” he said with a rueful grin. “I feared for my neck.”

They were all laughing as they followed Harriet to the corner to retrieve the ladder.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:11 am*

Callum gazed out of the window. It was afternoon, the sky leaden grey over the garden. He was in the drawing room, trying to read a book and relax while most of the guests took a turn about the garden, but he was too restless for reading. His mind went back to the events of the morning repeatedly, thoughts of decorating the ballroom with Miss Rothwell lingering in his mind.

“Your Grace?” the butler’s voice in the doorway made Callum jump. He sat up straight, closing the book on his lap with some annoyance.

“Yes?” he asked briskly.

“Your Grace? What are your instructions should it snow? Mr Randell has asked for your direction.”

“Ah, you mean about the stables?” Callum got to his feet. “I shall attend to it directly,” he added, his heart thudding. It was dark outside and as he looked through the window, the first flakes floated down.

He hurried downstairs just as the guests who had been on an afternoon jaunt about the grounds, crowded into the entranceway.

“Oh! So enchanting!” Lady Bronham was saying loudly to Mother as they walked in.

“It is truly Christmastide now,” Lady Millicent said excitedly.

“I believe we should take a coach ride!” Mother declared, glancing at Callum as he hurried to the entrance to the staff corridor. “To view the estate beneath the snow. It

is quite charming.”

“Oh! Oh, yes, Your Grace!” Lady Millicent exclaimed, sounding delighted. “Oh, do let us. What a delightful notion.”

Callum winced and shot an annoyed look at his mother, but the other guests—including Mr Rothwell and his father—were all chattering about it excitedly and Callum sighed. He would have to indulge his mother just this once. Besides, he thought, his heart thudding swiftly in his chest, he did own a barouche. Once the estate had started to show signs of prosperity, he had indulged his whims and purchased one for sightseeing jaunts. It would be the perfect coach for himself and Miss Rothwell to enjoy the wintry scenes together.

He hurried to the kitchen to meet with Mr Randell.

“Have the walls gone over carefully, and any chink where the air gets in filled up,” he instructed his stable master briskly. “If the snow is blowing in, have the windows shut, especially on Buttercup’s stall. If the snow falls straight down, leave them open for an hour so that the fresh air can circulate.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Mr Randell bowed low.

Callum thanked him and hurried upstairs. In the entranceway, he found a milling group of twelve or so guests, all donning pelisses or greatcoats and chatting in lively, happy voices. The sight of the snow had clearly lifted everyone’s spirits.

His gaze scanned the space, seeking Miss Rothwell. He heard happy laughter, and he spotted Miss Rothwell and her two sisters in the corner, hurriedly tugging on bonnets and pelisses. Harriet was with them. He crossed the room and bowed low.

“Miss Rothwell,” he addressed her politely. “If I may, I invite you to join me in the

estate barouche.” His heart raced; hands damp with nerves.

Miss Rothwell stared at him, her cheeks going red. She looked away shyly, then her gaze met his once more. He could see delight in her expression and his heart soared. “I had thought that we would go in the family coach, but, well, I...” she stammered.

“Go with the duke,” Mr Rothwell said quickly. “Georgie and Isabel and I shall think of something.” He grinned. The duke looked at him frowningly, but he could not help but be grateful to him for persuading Miss Rothwell to say yes.

“Yes. I would be pleased to accept, Your Grace,” Miss Rothwell said seriously.

“Grand,” Callum said swiftly. He reached up to fetch his greatcoat from the hat stand and shrugged it on. Then he donned his charcoal brocade top-hat and hurried down to the kitchen to find the coachman.

Miss Rothwell was ready, her brown pelisse matched with a bonnet with brown ribbons. Callum’s heart soared. Her cheeks were flushed with the cold where she waited on the step, her eyes dancing with excitement.

The other guests were waiting as their own equipages were harnessed up. The big Landau was ready, and he watched as Mother clambered in, casting him a frosty glance. Next were Lord and Lady Bronham, followed by Lady Millicent and a young lord whose name escaped him, though he was the brother of Millicent’s friend, Lady Amelia. Both of them clambered in as well.

The barouche rolled out next, led by his favourite team, two pure black coach-horses. The hood was down, which was what he had requested. He helped Miss Rothwell up, then took the reins and set off at a slow walk down the drive.

The snow was falling fast, the grass already covered with a thin layer of white. The

air smelled crisp and cool, and the snow fluttered down like feathers as they rode.

They moved through the front gate and then on down the road. He guided the horses left to where the road led through the estate parkland. Snow dusted the bushes and trees, flurrying down onto them. He turned to glance at Miss Rothwell. She was gazing, wide-eyed, at the woodlands, her cheeks pink and her eyes bright with wonder. Snow fluttered down onto her bonnet, and a light dusting of it settled on her pelisse. She looked so beautiful.

He was not sure where the Landau was—it had probably followed the other road that curved to the right. They were alone in a wondrous white landscape. The only sound was the shush-shush of the coach wheels on the snowy surface and the muffled tread of the horses. The world was a silent winter land, full of magic and silvery snow.

“It’s quite something,” he murmured as he slowed the horses to a walk. He gazed out over the landscape.

“It’s so beautiful,” Miss Rothwell whispered. “So, so beautiful.”

She was sitting close to him, her shoulder pressing against his. The coach jolted, making her slide closer to him. He stopped breathing for a moment.

He altered his grip on the reins, slowing the horses to a walk. They passed by a snow-covered field, the expanse pure, unmarked white. Miss Rothwell gasped and pointed.

“Look! A hare!”

Callum smiled as he spotted the furry creature darting across the white expanse, leaving a trail of delicate footprints behind it. He glanced at Miss Rothwell, her radiant smile lighting up his soul.

The coach continued down the road, moving through the forest.

They reached a crossroad, and Callum swore under his breath as another vehicle passed them. The coach was also a two-seater, but a smaller, lighter one than their barouche, and his eyes widened as he recognised it. It belonged to his sister. Mr Rothwell was holding the driving reins. Callum saw Mr Rothwell's eyes widen in alarm as he spotted their coach and who was driving it.

"Perdition take him," Callum said softly, not sure whether to be impressed by the fellow's audacity or annoyed. Mr Rothwell was risking Harriet by riding in the light coach that could turn easily on a slippery path, but then, he had to agree that he was driving at little more than a walk, and doing well with the pair of coach-horses. He knew how to drive a coach, that much was clear.

"Sebastian has always been a little, um..." Miss Rothwell said with a small smile.

"Cheeky?" Callum asked.

Miss Rothwell laughed. "A good word," she replied. "And a fairly accurate description."

They both laughed. The small two-seater coach was ahead of them on the road, and Callum kept a good thirty feet or so behind, both to maintain the sense of being alone on the road and to avoid Mr Rothwell being tempted to go faster.

They rounded a corner, moving past a stand of fir trees, all covered in wintry white. The other coach was out of sight, and they were alone in the wintry landscape.

"So beautiful," Miss Rothwell murmured.

"Mm." Callum stared around. The coach had slowed to a walk, and they moved



slowly, each new vista unfolding at a gentle pace before them. The snow was falling more slowly, the flakes drifting down silently past their wide-eyed gazes to dust the trees and bushes like powder.

They rolled past an inn, the windows spilling bright golden light onto the snow, then crossed a bridge and moved down a hill, moving back towards the easterly boundary of the estate. The road moved under dense trees and Callum let the horses have their head for a moment, the ground beneath them snowless and firm footing.

“Oh!” Miss Rothwell gasped, the fast pace tugging at her bonnet and causing it to fall backwards to rest on her shoulders. She giggled, her thick hair tugging partly loose from the confining bun. Callum slowed the horses and then turned to her.

He stopped breathing for a moment. Her lovely hair was tumbled around her face, her cheeks flushed, breathless from the excitement and intense cold.

“Are you quite well?” he asked softly, unable to look away. Her hazel eyes locked with his and he gazed into their depths. She was indescribably lovely, and so close that he could so easily have put his arms around her shoulders and drawn her into a kiss.

“I am quite well,” she said in a soft tone.

“Are you sure?” he asked gently. His hand moved off the reins—the horses were walking, and he could guide the coach one-handed—and wrapped his fingers around hers. She wore gloves, but despite the thin leather, her fingers were freezing cold. “You’re cold.”

“It’s so lovely out here,” Miss Rothwell protested softly, her eyes holding his. “We do not need to go back yet.”

“We should head indoors,” he said in a quiet tone. “It is truly bitter out here.” He shivered, the cold seeping into him. Snow had built up on the collar of his greatcoat and even through the high collar of his shirt, he could feel the cold dampness. He lifted the reins, urging the horses into a trot.

The horses, it seemed, were also pleased with the idea of returning and as they neared the estate, he let them trot back down the road and up the drive. He gazed up at the manor as they neared it. Light blazed from the windows, pouring out onto the snow-laden garden. He could not recall when it had seemed to welcome him as it did. He jumped down, reaching up to help Miss Rothwell down.

“Thank you,” she murmured softly as his fingers closed around hers.

“My pleasure,” he whispered.

Miss Rothwell gazed into his eyes and for a moment he forgot all about where they were. The coachman had come out to lead the horses into the stable, and he could hear a distant coach approaching, but all he could think of was her closeness, her flushed cheeks and those bright eyes, full of wonder and excitement.

He rested his hands on her shoulders, holding her gaze. Snowflakes fluttered down to settle in her hair. She smiled at him, and in that instant, Callum lost his breath, his heart swelling with joy and longing as he looked into her eyes.

Miss Rothwell glanced towards the door, and Callum, reluctant to break the moment, reached out to take her hand. His mother and her coach party were already there, divesting themselves of soaking wet coats and bonnets, stamping snow off their boots.

“We will retire to the drawing-room,” she announced as they entered the space, though whether she was speaking to Callum or to her other guests, he was unsure.

She was ignoring him, untying her bonnet to pass to the butler. “I shall order chocolate to be served.”

Callum smiled. Chocolate—with its rich warmth and velvety texture—would be most welcome after the cold snowy trip.

The other guests chattered excitedly about the prospect and the sights they had just seen. Callum gazed at Miss Rothwell as she undid her bonnet, shaking out her damp hair. It had come loose, and he drew in a breath, staring at the beauty of her. She saw him looking and looked away, shyly. He hastily transferred his gaze to the wall opposite, to save her embarrassment.

When he looked round at the others, he went suddenly cold. James was staring at him.

Callum frowned. He had caught James looking—many times—at Miss Rothwell. Never before had he intercepted the fellow studying him, though. The look he levelled at Callum was one of such hatred that Callum shivered. He looked away and, when he looked back, James had turned to Philippa and was whispering something. Philippa smiled.

What in Perdition are those two gossiping about? Callum asked himself. He shivered again, thinking of the undiluted hate in James’ stare. He had never seen such a look before.

Miss Rothwell stepped into his line of sight. His heart tightened with an emotion he had never felt before. His eyes widened as she saw him and smiled. He watched her drift up the stairs towards the drawing room. His gaze did not leave her until she was out of sight, and he blinked, shaking himself.

Am I in love? Is this what this strange, wondrous feeling is? He asked himself.

Mr Rothwell barged into the entrance, greeting the other guests loudly and distracting Callum. Harriet was with him, her eyes bright, her cheeks flushed as she was laughing.

Callum drifted towards the stairs. When he saw Mr Rothwell and Harriet together, he could see what he and Miss Rothwell must look like. It was obvious to him that the two of them felt more than fondness for one another. His heart skipped, shock mingling with joy as he realised that what he was beginning to feel was love. He was falling in love with Miss Rothwell.

He walked up towards the drawing room, his head spinning in confusion and wonderment. He had never imagined he would fall in love. He had thought he never would. It was a wondrous, terrifying prospect, a million times more frightening than the first time he had ridden at a gallop. Like galloping, it felt uncontrolled, wild, terrifying. But galloping also felt incredibly freeing and magical.

I need to speak to someone, he thought distantly. He needed good counsel, and soon.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:11 am*

Rosalyn blinked, opening her eyes in the dimly lit room. She had slept deeply, utterly fatigued from the cold, the long coach ride, and the conflicting yet exquisite emotions that stirred within her. She sat up, looking around.

There was a soft glow in the grate where the fire had burned low, and a slight gap in the curtains showed pale dawn light. She slipped out of bed and reached for her nightgown, shivering in the cold bedroom. Her maid had hung a dark brown velvet dress on the wardrobe for her, and Rosalyn tugged it on, reaching behind herself to fasten the buttons. Then she thrust her feet into her outdoor boots, which had been drying all night by the hearth. She felt restless and she wished to go outdoors.

“Good morning,” a male voice greeted her as she hurried down towards the entranceway. She stiffened, body tensing. It was not the duke. She did not recognise the voice and so she said nothing until she reached the foot of the stairs. Then she stopped and blinked in surprise.

“Lord Winbrook,” she greeted, addressing the man with red-brown hair, whom she had caught staring at her on more than one occasion. He seemed to be some sort of acquaintance or relative of the Duke of Stallenwood. She had never exchanged more than two words with him, yet he often glanced her way, and he smiled at her after he had performed his charade. His gaze on her was intense and he bowed low.

“Good morning, Miss Rothwell,” he greeted her again. “I see you also found it difficult to find rest last night.”

“Mm,” Rosalyn said, making as noncommittal a reply as she could think of. “I woke early.”

“As did I,” Lord Winbrook replied. “I took a stroll about the grounds. It is extremely cold out there,” he cautioned as she lifted her pelisse from its peg. A member of the household staff must have hung it before the fire to dry because it was crisply warm when she shrugged it on.

“I imagine so,” Rosalyn said a little briskly. She did not like the way he stared at her or attempted to make conversation despite her evident lack of interest.

“I would recommend that you remain indoors, miss,” he said with a worried frown.

Rosalyn lifted a shoulder. “I shall not be long,” she said as lightly as she could, opening the front door as she spoke. She stepped out into the snow.

“You might catch a fever,” Lord Winbrook said as she turned to shut the door. She raised one brow, trying to be calm, though her heart was thudding in her chest, and she ached to run off.

“I suppose I might. You also might have,” she reminded him. He grinned.

“Well said, miss. Well said.”

“Good day,” Rosalyn said, a little more firmly than she usually would, and shut the door. She hurried out into the snow. She shivered, though not only from the cold. The man’s behaviour was most unsettling.

She walked across the path. It was freezing cold. She shivered again and tucked her hands into the sleeves of her pelisse. She had forgotten her gloves. A light dusting of snow covered the path, and she stepped into it, her footsteps crunching as she hurried past the lawn towards the hedge-lined path.

Lord Winbrook had disturbed her and, while she would usually have taken a brisk

walk around the lawn and gone in—perhaps staying for a moment or two to admire the snow-dusted foliage and the icicles on the tree—she walked towards the stable.

Just a moment with the horses, she promised herself. That is all I need.

Horses had always been her first source of comfort. Whenever she was sad or disturbed, she went to find them. She stepped into the stable and breathed in, smelling the rich, dusty hay and the pleasant, warm smell of living creatures drowsing in the stable's warmth. A horse whickered, and Rosalyn walked instinctively towards the stall.

“...and you're much better now. Much better,” a male voice murmured.

Rosalyn moved back, pressing herself against the wall. It was a refined voice, rich and resonant and clearly mature. It might be the stable master, she reminded herself. She stood where she was and listened.

“You're a good girl. Such a good girl.”

She drew in a breath. It was the duke's voice. He was in the stall at the end. She guessed he was talking to Buttercup, the mare who had been sick earlier in the week. She stepped out of hiding, turning in the aisle to go out again. She did not want to disturb the duke. She froze as he called out to her.

“Miss Rothwell? Is that you?”

“Um...yes, Your Grace,” she murmured, turning to face him. She reached up to tuck a curl behind her ear. She had not yet taken the time to arrange her hair, planning to go back to her room and style it before going down to breakfast. It was tied back in a ribbon, that was all.

“Come and see Buttercup. She has made such progress. The medicine must be quite effective.”

“I would not wish to intrude,” Rosalyn demurred, reluctant to disturb the duke on his morning rounds in the stable. Perhaps, like for herself, this place was his refuge.

“Come,” he said gently, gesturing to the stall. “You are not intruding. I have invited you to step inside.”

She grinned, a wry smile. “Indeed, Your Grace, that is so.”

“Quite so.”

His smile was wry, and his one eyebrow lifted in amusement as he looked at her. His long, thin face was still, his gaze intense.

Rosalyn’s heart thudded in her chest. It was there, the look that had so confounded her the day before. It was admiration. She could not deny it to herself any longer. She gazed up at him, losing herself in the grey depths of his eyes.

One of the horses neighed, making him look away, startled.

“Oh. Firelight? Is that you?” the duke chuckled. “Whatever is the matter now?”

Rosalyn laughed. He sounded just a little impatient, though the love he felt for the horse was evident. It was just like her voice must sound when she talked to her own mare, Marmalade. At the thought of Marmalade, her heart twisted. She had no doubt that she was being well cared for at home, but she missed her sorely.

“I should take them out for exercise today,” the duke confided as she came to join him next to Buttercup’s stall. “At least, my horse needs it.” He chuckled, gazing over



at the stall. “That big fellow is used to being out and about. He hates being shut away in a stable for long.”

“He looks like an intelligent creature,” Rosalyn commented, looking over at the horse. “I imagine he finds it very tiresome in here.”

“Quite so,” the duke replied. “Intelligent, brave and as stubborn as a mule. Not so, eh, old chap...?” He turned to his horse.

The horse neighed and stamped, and it seemed as though he had understood the duke’s minor insult. Rosalyn chuckled.

“He is a sweet fellow.”

“Mm.” The duke stepped back to rub the stallion’s nose, then came back to where the mare, Buttercup, had stuck her head over the gate of her stall and was swishing her tail, waiting impatiently. He smiled and rubbed her nose, then tickled her behind the ear. “There you are. You are such a dear, dear creature.”

The horse snorted and shut her eyes. Rosalyn’s heart twisted. She was quite old, her reddish fur showing white at her muzzle. Her coat was not particularly shiny. Her eyes were big and limpid and full of wisdom and patience. Rosalyn stroked her head, feeling drawn to the wise old dame of horses.

“She’s beautiful,” she said softly.

The duke smiled. “She is one of the only horses who has been here since my father’s time.” He swallowed. “I remember her from when I was a boy.”

“How old is she?”

The duke shrugged. "She must be more than ten—fifteen, perhaps?" he frowned. Rosalyn felt her eyes widen.

"That's a considerable age for a horse."

"It is," the duke replied. "She's an old dear." He rubbed the horse's nose again. "I am so glad she is better."

Rosalyn smiled. "So am I."

The duke walked down the aisle to the feed room and put his hand into a bag, then drew it out filled with rolled oats. Rosalyn watched as he fed half the handful to Buttercup and then went to Firelight's stall and fed him. The big, red-coated horse gobbled the oats, lipping the duke's fingers as he ate. Then he stamped, as if to ask why he was not getting more.

"Greedy thing," the duke teased him. Firelight snorted.

Rosalyn's heart twisted as she chuckled with mirth and pleasure. Seeing the two of them interacting was something special. The duke was vulnerable with his horses in ways she had never seen him be with people. He showed them a side that she had never seen before. He seemed to trust them more than he trusted others.

And yet he has shown care to me, she thought, drawing in a breath. When her horse had bolted, or even when she had been cold outside, he had shown a caring, gentle side.

"I shall need to come back here at a later hour," the duke said, gesturing to the tack room. "Firelight needs a proper brushing. It is one thing for the stable hands to attend to him, but when I do it, it is different. We both need it. That connection."

“I understand you completely,” Rosalyn said, nodding. “I groom Marmalade too.”

“It is not just about cleaning them and caring for them. It is a way of speaking to them,” the duke explained.

“Yes. I tell Marmalade I love her, but grooming is a way of showing it.”

The duke nodded. “Quite so.”

He held her gaze. Rosalyn stared up into his grey eyes. They were mesmerising, the colour like the snow-clouds that blanketed the sky. His skin was pale in the light from a lamp on the wall.

“Few people understand so well what I mean when I talk of my love of the horses,” the duke said softly. His gaze was soft, his expression serious.

“Few people understand how deep and meaningful the bond can be. Marmalade is like no other—she listens, and she does not judge.” Her eyes dampened as she thought about her beautiful horse, so many miles away in the south.

The duke nodded. “Quite so. Firelight knows so much about me.”

“I used to tell Marmalade all my secrets when I was a girl,” Rosalyn nodded. “She has been with me since I was sixteen.” She smiled, her eyes damp.

“That is a very special thing,” the duke said softly. His gaze held hers and Rosalyn smiled. His expression was intense but tender, and it made her flush with warmth. They had stepped back from Firelight’s stall towards the door, and she shivered. The draft that blew in from the snow outside was icy. The duke frowned.

“You’re cold,” he said softly. “You have no gloves! Miss Rothwell...you’ll give

yourself a fever like that.” His tone reprimanded her gently.

Rosalyn smiled a little teasingly. “You, too, are bare-handed.”

He raised a brow. “I am not,” he said, and patted his pocket, where she could see the ends of leather gloves just under the flap. He grinned smugly.

Rosalyn laughed. “I see that I am wrong.”

“Quite so. Now, I am going to escort you to the house. I regret that I must stop at the kitchen...I must give some instructions to our stable master,” he explained. He gestured to the door that led out into the snow, and she stepped out, curling her hands into the sleeves of her coat.

The duke followed her. They walked down the pathway, their steps crunching on the snow. He reached the steps and bowed. “I shall see you upstairs in a few minutes,” he said gallantly.

She smiled and dropped a brief curtsy. She would have given a formal curtsy just days ago, but now—especially after their heartfelt talk about horses—it felt wrong somehow.

“I shall see you upstairs in a moment. I promise to leave some pastries and tea for you.”

“Just a little,” the duke teased.

“A pastry. Or two. At the most,” she called teasingly. He laughed and she frowned in amazement at herself. Only a few days ago, she had been positively wary of the man. Now, she teased and joked as she did with nobody else.

What in Perdition's name has possessed me? she asked herself, giggling as she walked into the hallway and up the stairs. If it was madness, it was of the most delightful sort.

She stepped into the breakfast room and stopped. Lord Winbrook was there and he stood up, bowing to her. His dark eyes held her own as he straightened from the bow.

"Good morning, Miss Rothwell," he greeted her.

"Um...I...I need my shawl," she stammered. She had not taken the time to rearrange her curls, forgetting all about her dishevelled appearance. She gazed down, relieved that her dress had not become wet around the hem when she walked through the snow outdoors.

"Of course, you must fetch it, then," he demurred. Rosalyn turned in the doorway and fled to her room.

"Whatever is the matter? Why does he unsettle me so?" she asked herself. She hastily arranged her hair, tucking it up into a simple bun and tying it with a dark-coloured ribbon. Then she donned her shawl and hurried to the breakfast room.

Lord Winbrook was still there, but—she was pleased to see—so was the duchess, and two other guests, an elderly couple who nodded and smiled at her in a friendly way.

"Tea, Miss Rothwell?" Lord Winbrook asked. He reached for the teapot and poured some for her. Rosalyn flushed with embarrassment.

"Thank you," she managed to say.

"A pleasure, Miss Rothwell."

Rosalyn looked away. She could not think of something to say, desperate to escape from the table where Mr Winbrook sat watching her with an attentive look. As she cleared her throat, about to excuse herself on grounds of feeling off-colour, her father walked in.

“Sweet Rosalyn! Good morning,” he greeted her with a fond smile and came and sat down at the table beside her.

“Good morning, Papa,” she said quietly. “Did you have a pleasant rest?”

“I slept so deeply I was surprised to wake as early as I did,” her father said with a smile. “Yourself?”

“I slept well enough,” she replied quietly. When she glanced across the table, Lord Winbrook was talking to the elderly man and ignoring her. She leaned back, her posture relaxing with her relief.

She and her father chatted about the snow and the ride in the coach—Father had not gone, but had walked around the garden and he had heard all about it from Georgina and Isabel. She was laughing happily as she heard someone walk in and saw the duke come over to the last unoccupied seat at the table.

He inclined his head in a slight bow when he looked at her and she smiled. She tensed as the duke’s gaze moved coldly to Lord Winbrook, who sat opposite. Lord Winbrook gazed at the duke and she shivered at the look in his eyes. It was hateful. She looked away, feeling shocked.

Whatever is the matter with them? she asked herself.

It made little sense, yet she knew she disliked the young viscount, and she fervently hoped to avoid his attempts at conversation. He unsettled her, though she could not

say why, but if she could manage to steer clear of him for the remainder of the festivities—whatever the duchess had planned—she would be most content.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:11 am*

The scent of snow icy and pure was in the air as Callum stepped down into the garden. It had snowed all night and all day, and the lawn was buried in three or four inches of snow. He gazed up at the sky, where a flurry of flakes was still falling. The snow was starting to fall heavily and he shivered, drawing his coat tight about him.

“The horses,” he murmured under his breath.

He had checked on them before breakfast, but almost ten hours had passed since then. He had promised to take Firelight out on a ride, and he had got as far as riding him up the path when the snow started to fall so thickly that he had deemed any outriding as dangerous. He could barely see, and his horse was skittish, snorting at the flurry that fell on him and the heavy, dull thump when snow slid off a tree branch near them. He had turned and ridden him back and ordered the grooms to rub him down.

“Make sure he stays warm. Keep his stall window shuttered until he is completely dried off,” he had said.

“Yes, Your Grace,” the stable-hand had replied.

That was six hours ago.

Callum battled through the thick snow, hurrying towards the stable. He had brought a lantern with him, the darkness long fallen. He kept careful eyes on the path, not wanting to slip.

He reached the stable, and there he stopped, blinking in confusion. Usually, there would be a lamp or two burning while the stable-hands mucked out the stalls on their



evening round. Instead, the stable was entirely dark, no light showing under the door, and he frowned. It was understandable if the stable-hands had done the task earlier, hurrying indoors to where it was warm and dry, but something felt wrong and he stepped up to the door, pushing it open.

The stable smelled damp, and Callum lifted his lantern. A horse neighed. It was Firelight, he guessed. He stepped into the aisle, scraping the snow off his boots as he did so.

“Easy, boy,” he called out to Firelight indulgently as the horse snorted again. Firelight was always talkative, especially when he heard Callum. He walked on down the aisle and frowned as his foot splashed into water. The circle of light from his lantern showed a puddle on the floor, water flowing from the corner. Firelight neighed more urgently. Callum swore under his breath, marching down the aisle and pausing in the doorway. The oil lamp hung on the wall there and he lit it, then gazed around in the brighter light.

He could see nothing untoward. The light fell on a clean-swept aisle. The stable-hands had mucked out, laying fresh straw. The only odd thing he saw was a puddle of water. A big one.

Firelight neighed again, and then Snowstorm and Rainstorm together whickered and stamped. The two stallions—Firelight and Snowstorm—sometimes neighed at one another, but that Rainstorm joined in was odd. Callum walked down the aisle and gasped aloud.

“What in Perdition?” he swore.

Part of the roof had collapsed.

A great, gaping hole stretched above him, perhaps a yard across and two yards long.

Through it, he could see the night sky, snow clinging to the edges. A rotten board swung freely, and another one sagged, two or three bending inwards where the supporting beam broke. By such improbable luck that he could only deem it a miracle, the roof that had collapsed was at the very end of the aisle, where the feed-room joined the stable proper. Snow drifted in and melted in the warmer environs, making a big puddle that stretched more or less the length of the aisle. Callum swore again.

“I knew that would happen!” he said aloud. He gazed up at the roof, the weight of what he was seeing slowly filtering through his mind.

The stable was cold. Snow was drifting in and, while the body heat of the horses was enough to make the area closer to the floor warm enough to melt the snow, if a wind came up during the night, the horses would freeze in their stalls.

It was the thing he had feared more than anything. He had always feared that he would fail with the horses. The stable was the one thing he had inherited from his father that he had succeeded in developing.

“Please, help me,” he whispered. He looked around. There were twenty horses—his usual fifteen, and five belonging to guests. The horses for the guests’ coaches were stabled at the coach-house, along with his three teams of coach-horses. He could move some of the horses to the coach-house stalls—but they were also in scant supply, since the guests’ coach horses used up the spare stalls.

Callum went to Firelight’s stall. His horse neighed, rolling his eyes, and then came forward to lip at Callum’s hand. All the horses were agitated, and no wonder, Callum thought angrily. They must have been confused, cold and afraid for hours. Heaven only knew when the roof beams had broken under the snow. Since the stable-hands had not mentioned the fact, it must have been after their rounds were made.

“Easy, boy,” Callum said distantly, stroking his horse’s nose. His mind raced. He needed to get the horses to safety—that was his first priority. But he had no idea how—he was by himself, and did not want to spare a moment in case more of the rotten roof beams collapsed under the heavy snow.

He breathed in deeply, marching to the tack room. What he needed to do first was to get the horses out, starting with Buttercup—who was most at risk if the stable was becoming too cold—and Firelight. To do that, he needed to put bridles on them.

Should I fetch someone? He asked himself. The village carpenter needs to be fetched straight away. And what about the weight of the snow? Someone should go up there and brush the roof. But what if the boards are so rotten that their weight causes damage to the roof?

His mind was in turmoil. He walked into the tack room and grabbed the bridles of Firelight and Buttercup from the wall by the door, then marched out. As he walked into the main stable, someone spoke.

“Your Grace? Are you there?”

“By Perdition!” Callum swore, jumping with fright. Then he turned to the door. Miss Rothwell stood in the half-open gap. Her hair was uncovered, her bonnet hanging down her back. She wore a brown pelisse. Her eyes were huge and confused. She gazed at him with worry.

“Your Grace. I beg your pardon. I saw a light in the garden and I followed it. I was out walking before dinner. I did not intend to intrude.”

“No! No, you are most welcome,” Callum said quickly. “I was merely...” he paused. He hesitated to share his troubles, but he was in desperate need of assistance. He was but one man and he had no idea where to begin in moving the horses to safety. “I

noticed a problem with the roof—the back section. It has collapsed,” he explained, gesturing toward it. Speaking of it seemed to steady his nerves, and he drew a deep breath. She gazed down the aisle, her eyes widening as she took in the damage, before turning back to him.

“The horses. We need to get them out,” she said at once.

Callum nodded grimly. “But where?” he asked her, already beginning to bridle Firelight. His horse stepped back, ears flat, whinnying as if Callum was a threat. Callum sighed. His own fear was communicating itself to the horses. He took a moment to gather his thoughts. “I have no other stalls. The coach-house stalls are full.” He gazed at her, wishing she could think of something.

“The coach house stalls are full,” she repeated, then frowned. “But the coach house itself is not. We can put them in there!” Her eyes brightened, a big smile blooming on her face. “Come on! We must get them there at once, before the roof suffers any further damage.”

“Sorry?” Callum blinked, struggling to keep up with her rapid speech. He gazed at her, and soon her words began to make sense. “You mean...in the coach house? The coach house proper?”

“Yes!” Miss Rothwell’s eyes danced with excitement. “We should take the carriages out. They can remain outside for the night—on the lawn, in the pathway... it matters not where. We can clear the space and prepare it for the horses.” She was already making her way toward the door.

“But...” Callum frowned. “But they will all be next to each other,” he protested. “They may fight.”

“How many do you have that fight?” Miss Rothwell demanded. “We can place the

troublesome ones in the stalls that are available in the coach house, or we may fashion temporary fencing to divide the space. It will only be for the night until the carpenter can be summoned. It is the only space we have.”

Callum nodded. His heart soared, a surge of joy flooding him. “It could work!” he exclaimed. “Yes. I will bridle the horses,” he began, managing to buckle the bridle he had put over his hunting-horse's nose. “If you could, please go to the kitchens? Tell Mr Morton that we need the coach-house to be cleared. And send for the stable-hands. And inform them that a carpenter needs to be summoned from the village. After his working hours or no. Get him here—the cost is no matter,” Callum insisted.

“Yes, Your Grace,” Miss Rothwell said, pausing at the door. “Anything else?”

“No,” Callum said swiftly, the realisation sinking in that they were working seamlessly together, that he had sent her off to the kitchen as though it was Harriet or Mr Randell that he talked to—people with whom he had the rapport of a lifetime's knowing. “Thank you.”

Miss Rothwell disappeared into the snow.

Callum bridled Buttercup, then walked to the tack room to fetch more bridles. He needed to ready all twenty of the horses to be moved. In the group of horses who lived on the estate, only two could not be put in the same paddock, and that was the two stallions. All the rest had an easy rapport with one another and could be housed in the same space for a night together.

“You can have your own stalls,” he told Firelight as he passed on his way to put a bridle on Snowstorm. He glanced at the guests' horses. He had no idea which of them would tolerate the others, but the stable-hands must have some sense of that by now. He slipped the bridle onto Snowstorm, noticing that the stallion stood without complaint and let him do it. His own mood must have settled a great deal if the horses

were no longer feeling afraid.

He was putting a bridle on one of the guest's horses when a voice hailed him from the door.

"Your Grace?" It was Alan, one of the stable-hands.

"Alan! Grand!" Callum beamed at the sound. "Come in! You, too," he added, summoning the other stable-hand, Noah, who waited at the door. "We need to move the horses. If you two will bridle them with me so we can lead one pair at a time to the coach-house?"

"Yes, Your Grace," Alan replied, frowning.

"The coach house is almost full. Begging your pardon, Your Grace," Noah said, looking down as if afraid to contradict an order from a duke.

"Yes. It is. Quite right. Which is why we are going to stable them in the main part where the coaches go. If you could tell me which of the guest's horses may safely be stabled with my herd? I would appreciate it," he added honestly. He slipped a bridle onto Rainstorm and stroked her muzzle, calming her.

"The coach house? Cor!" Alan exclaimed, eyes round.

"Good idea," Noah complimented warmly.

Callum just smiled. He was too busy to thank them, and besides, he was not sure how to respond, and so he continued with his task, going back to the tack-room to fetch more bridles.

They fell into an easy rhythm. Callum worked with the horses belonging to their

estate, while the two stable-hands bridled the guests' horses swiftly. A knock at the door made them all turn around. Miss Rothwell was there. She caught his eye and smiled.

"The coach house is empty, Your Grace. The coaches are parked on the lawn. They are quite a sight there."

Callum grinned. She was smiling, her energy infectious. It seemed to crackle in the air around her. He looked at the stable-hands. At that moment, if she had told them to throw themselves into the brook, they would have done it. They hung on each word she said.

"We can begin leading the horses in, two at a time," Callum announced, his heart soaring. He beamed at Miss Rothwell. "Thank you," he murmured quietly.

She smiled back and he smiled to himself. He would have done anything she asked in that moment, even if it meant leaping into the brook himself.

"Come on," he called to the stable hands, summoning them to the door. "Let's get the horses out. I shall take Firelight and Buttercup."

"I'll take Rainstorm and Snowstorm," Alan said swiftly.

"I'll do the two guest-horses who make a fine team together," Noah offered.

They began leading the horses out.

Miss Rothwell stood silent in the doorway where the aisle widened and met the tack room. The horses walked calmly past her. Callum led them into the coach house without complaint. Firelight went into his own stall on one end of the row of stalls where the coach-horses slept.

They worked for an hour. Callum leaned on the door, sweating despite the trips into the cold, as the last pair of horses were led into the coach house. The vast space was spread with straw on the floor, and one of the gardeners had helped to move the feeding mangers from the stable into the space and filled them with hay and oats. Eighteen horses milled about in the space, feeding or resting calmly. Firelight and Snowstorm were in stalls on opposite sides of the space, able to see the rest of the horses, but not able to see or reach each other.

“All is settled now, Your Grace,” Alan said, collecting a bridle from where he had hung it on a post. All of the horses were standing comfortably, their bridles removed. With so many of them in the space, it was warm, and, more importantly, it would remain so because it was dry and sheltered from the elements. Callum shut his eyes, relief making him feel suddenly weakened.

“Go to the kitchen,” he told the two stable-hands tiredly. “Tell the cook to prepare a fine meal for you—whatever is being served to the guests, you are to have your share. As much as you desire.”

“Cor!” Alan exclaimed; eyes wide.

“As much as we like? Blimey, Your Grace! Thank you!” Noah effused.

Callum nodded wearily. “You need it. And a rest. Thank you for your assistance.”

“Thank you, Your Grace!” Alan called as the two youths hurried to the door.

Callum sighed, leaning back against the wall.

“They did a grand job today,” he remarked after a moment, as Miss Rothwell entered the space. She had worked alongside them all, supervising the proceedings and relaying messages, where necessary, between the duke, the stable-hands and the team



who were already working to restore the stable roof. He stared at her. She stood in her brown pelisse, slightly open at the neck to show a pale gown below. Her hair had escaped its style and curls hung around her face. Her cheeks were flushed, but otherwise, she was calm, her eyes bright and glowing in the lamplight. He sucked in a breath. She looked so beautiful. He cleared his throat. Words would not come. He felt too shy.

“Those young fellows were pleased with your offer,” she said softly. “I have never seen two young men run to the kitchen so fast.”

Callum grinned. “They needed it. They did a great job.” He paused. “As did you.” He shook his head. “None of this would have been possible without you. It was your idea.” He gazed around the space. Twenty horses grazed in peace, where, so easily, all twenty could have been shivering in their stalls, catching pneumonia—or worse, succumbing to the cold.

She gazed into his eyes and smiled, shyly, then looked away. “I am simply so grateful that the plan succeeded,” she said softly. “And that I could be of help. The horses are happy here.” She looked up, staring at the small, calm herd of horses.

“They are. I am so glad. And so grateful,” Callum said gently. “Without you, I had no idea. I do not know what I would have done.” He swallowed hard.

Miss Rothwell blushed. “I am glad I could help,” she repeated softly.

He stared into her eyes. She was so close, just a few steps away, and he stepped forward, and slowly took her hand in his. Her palms were warm, the tips of her fingers cold. She gazed into his eyes. Slowly, deliberately, he folded her fingers into his grip. His eyes held hers, her skin soft against his fingertips.

“Thank you,” he said, his voice rough with emotion. “I owe you so much; at the very

least, a heartfelt thank you.” His lips lifted at the corners in a smile.

She gazed into his eyes. “You are in no way indebted to me, Your Grace. I am glad I could assist.”

His heart ached. He stared into her eyes. The skin of her cheeks was petal-soft in the lamplight, her gaze gentle. He longed to press his lips to her own. He moved fractionally forward, then stopped.

“You must be tired,” he murmured. “We should go in. They will fare well without us, I think. They have all they need. We can go inside.”

“Yes,” Miss Rothwell murmured.

Callum loosened his grip on her fingers, heart aching as she drew them away. She looked towards the door.

“We should take ourselves inside,” she said softly. “It is quite cold outside.”

“It is,” Callum agreed and stepped out into the cold. He had taken off his greatcoat during the work and it hung by the door at the front of the coach-house. He lifted it down and shrugged it on. They stepped out into the garden.

The garden was cold. It had stopped snowing, the breeze ruffling the snow on the bushes and blowing soft, powdery drifts of it across the ground. Everything was covered in a thick blanket of white. The path beneath their feet was trampled by dozens of footprints, both of humans and horses. It was slippery, the compacted snow already freezing in the icy cold. Callum reached for Miss Rothwell’s hand.

“It’s slippery. You might fall,” he murmured.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

Her fingers were warm in his own. They walked down the path silently. They reached the front terrace. The steps led up to it, bathed in light from the long windows of the house. Callum gazed at her.

“Thank you,” he said again. “We are probably late for supper.” He chuckled.

“We need to put on some other clothes,” she answered. “We are both soaked through.”

“Go in. It’s cold,” he insisted.

“Yes.”

He paused where he was on the step, letting her go ahead of him. She walked to the door and opened it. He stood where he was, reluctant to move. The space of the garden, and of the stable, was magical—there, connection was possible that was not possible in the crowded, public space of the manor. There, it was possible for him to be himself, and for her to be herself. He swallowed hard.

“Good evening,” he murmured as she went inside. “Until dinnertime.”

She laughed. “Until dinnertime, Your Grace,” she replied. She turned in the doorway, dazzling him with a grin.

He stood on the step, unable to move for a second or two. Then he walked up the stairs. His legs ached, his feet seeming heavy as balls of lead. He marched wearily into the entranceway and leaned against the wall, breathing hard. The horses were safe, the roof was being fixed. And he had just spent the afternoon with the most beautiful woman he could imagine.

He was smiling as he walked up the stairs to his room to dress for dinner.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:11 am*

By the fire in the breakfast room, it was cosy and quiet. Callum listened to the companionable rustle and crackle of the flames in the grate and gazed out of the window at the grey sky. Though the sun had risen already, nobody else had yet come to have breakfast, and Callum enjoyed the peaceful calm of the space. As he poured himself another cup of tea, his thoughts strayed to the moment in the snow when he had gazed into Miss Rothwell's eyes and held her hand.

"So beautiful," he murmured to the empty space. She seemed not only astonishingly lovely in appearance, but her character, too, seemed more and more appealing. Her bright idea had saved his horses, and that mattered more to him than he could express.

"Callum? There you are," Mother called him, just as she was walking into the breakfast room as briskly as he had ever seen her move in his life. Her white hair was carefully styled but some of it had come loose from its elaborate chignon and fluffed around her face. Her severe grey-blue velvet dress was ruffled in a way that suggested she had walked swiftly all the way to the room. Callum got to his feet, heart thudding. "I was looking everywhere for you."

"I am here, as you see," Callum began. "What is it, mother?" he asked swiftly. For her, moving quickly was a level of agitation she bestowed on nothing.

"Recall that I said that we would hand out the gift-boxes to the craftsmen and villagers today, not the traditional St. Stephen's Day?" she asked.

"No," Callum said truthfully, but held his peace when she shot him a hard glance.

“Well, I did. How are we to involve our guests when half of them will travel back home again on St. Stephen’s Day?” she demanded. Callum inclined his head.

“True.”

“Quite so,” his mother said firmly. “And now the guests will be down any moment and all the hampers are not packed yet and there’s no way of readying the coaches because they’re all over the place!” She gestured to the door.

“It will be well,” Callum began soothingly, though his mother glared at him.

“I would appreciate it if you could go down and tell the coachman to find some way of harnessing half a dozen coaches that are halted all over the lawn. Then I shall be satisfied.”

He stood. “Yes, Mother,” he answered swiftly and hurried downstairs.

In the entranceway, he was met with a chaotic scene. Half a dozen baskets filled with food lay strewn around the floor, while boxes that contained blankets and bolts of fabric were lined up somewhat casually against one wall. Three footmen were working there—one completing the baskets with oranges and other things from the kitchens, and another two beginning to carry them outside.

“Your Grace!” The butler spotted him and sounded relieved.

“The coachman will begin harnessing the coaches,” Callum assured him swiftly. “In the meanwhile, direct the men to arrange the goods on the terrace beneath the overhanging roof.”

The butler bowed. “Yes, Your Grace.”

Callum instructed the man, then hurried back up the servants' corridor. As he reached the stairs, he tensed. He could hear James talking.

"...and it will likely snow more heavily this evening."

"Perhaps it will," Miss Rothwell's voice replied.

Callum bridled at the thought of her talking to James. He had seen the fellow stare after her with what he could only name hunger in his gaze. His cheeks flushed with anger and he stalked up the stairs after them.

He slowed down behind them. Miss Rothwell wore a blue gown, her hair styled with a blue ribbon into a simple bun. James walked attentively beside her, his dark trousers and brown jacket sombre in the darkened space of the stairwell.

"It would be grand for sledging. Though I reckon we are all too old for that. A fast sledge might already give me an apoplexy." James continued calmly.

Miss Rothwell laughed. Callum's jaw stiffened. He marched up to them as they reached the second floor.

James smiled smugly. Callum glared at him.

"I trust you slept well," Callum greeted Miss Rothwell abruptly. He heard the abruptness of his own voice and winced.

"Yes. I did," she stammered, sounding confused and upset. Callum groaned inwardly. After all her help and kindness, and the connection they had shared, such a rough, rude greeting was much less than she might have expected.

"Thank you. As did I," he managed to say. Dash it, he thought wildly. I must sound

quite the fool! James was staring at him, amusement playing at the corners of his mouth, brown eyes gazing sardonically at him.

“Have you visited the horses?” Miss Rothwell asked conversationally, walking beside him up the hallway.

“No. I was helping my mother. She is organising the hampers for St. Stephen’s Day. Yes, I know.” He made a wry face, seeing her gaze widen in surprise. “It is a little unconventional to give out the charity hampers a few days before Christmas, but Mother wished to do it before the guests return home, and so it must be so.”

Miss Rothwell smiled. “It will be a most pleasant morning,” she said. Callum raised a brow, but her smile was genuine.

“I am glad you will find it so,” he replied.

They had reached the breakfast room, and Callum stood back for Miss Rothwell to enter, aware of James trailing behind them. He did not turn around to see whether the fellow was watching and listening.

Several guests had arrived since his brief exit, and Mother sat at a table with Lord and Lady Bronham, Lord Chesterford and Lady Millicent. His mother caught his eye and Callum knew that she was about to wave him over to take the empty seat at their table, but he evaded her and swiftly gestured Miss Rothwell to a seat at the table in front of them.

“Miss Rothwell?”

“Thank you,” she replied, sitting in the chair he indicated. Callum sat opposite her and let out a relieved breath as James took a seat at the other table. He poured tea for Miss Rothwell, then for himself. She seemed quiet and he was content simply to gaze



at her. Her lovely soft hair glowed in the light from the fire and she gazed out of the window, her hazel eyes slightly unfocused. She looked relaxed but lost in thought—an expression that became her well.

“Did you see the coaches? I do wonder what we shall do today!” Miss Georgina Rothwell commented brightly. She and her sister, along with Harriet, appeared at their table and sat down hurriedly.

“A coach ride, I expect,” Isabel said seriously. Callum chuckled.

“Well said,” he replied.

“It’s the St. Stephen’s Day hampers,” Harriet related excitedly. “We’re going to go and give them out, are we not, brother?”

“Yes. We shall,” he assured them.

A few minutes later, Mother stood and made the announcement to the guests. The news brought a hush of focus to the diners, who seemed in a hurry to eat so that they could go outside and take part in the new activity.

When the guests began to drift from the room, heading downstairs, Callum stood and walked with Miss Rothwell. He glanced over his shoulder, glaring hard at James, but he was laughing with his cousin, an affable smile on his face, and did not seem to be staring after them.

“How will we take so many people—along with all the hampers—to the village?” Miss Rothwell asked Callum as he shrugged on his greatcoat. He smiled.

“Mr Morton shall follow behind us with a cart. Most of the gifts will be in that.”

Miss Rothwell looked pleased. “Your family is most generous at Christmas,” she remarked as they walked down the front steps. The remaining boxes were being loaded up into the cart as they passed by. Callum smiled.

“Thank you,” he said softly. He hesitated to tell her that there had been years when they had been so poor, due to repaying the debts, that they had been unable to dispense charity. He suspected that was the reason why his family outdid themselves with the St. Stephen’s Day hampers—it was, in part, a celebration for them of their restored wealth. They were sufficiently wealthy to be able to give gifts again.

“Can you see my sisters?” she asked him, gazing over the milling guests. Callum spotted them patting the coach-horses harnessed to the big Landau, and he grinned, inclining his head to indicate where they were.

Miss Rothwell wandered over to the coach. Callum followed at a deliberate pace, unwilling to let her out of his sight. He was resolved to be in the same coach as she. James and Phillipa were about to alight into a coach and he looked away, bowing to Miss Rothwell.

“Might I help you in?” he asked.

“Oh! Yes. Please,” she said, holding out her gloved hand. Her sisters shrieked in delight.

“Are we to go in this one?” Georgina asked him excitedly.

“Oh! How grand!” Isabel exclaimed, her usually quiet mood lightened by the apparently exciting prospect.

Callum inclined his head. “As you wish,” he said smoothly.

The cover had been removed from the Landau, and it afforded unparalleled views of the snowy landscape.

He helped them up, then swung up behind them. He was not surprised to see Mr Rothwell and Harriet rushing to join them. Mr Rothwell helped Harriet into the coach. Laughing, she budged onto the seat beside Callum, pushing him against Miss Rothwell, who sat beside him.

“How diverting!” she said, a big grin on her face. Callum laughed.

“My legs might disagree with you,” he told her with a grimace. “You leave them no room.”

Opposite them in the coach, the two younger Miss Rothwells chuckled. The carriage was unusually cramped, with barely enough space for six passengers and the driver, adding a touch of levity to the situation.

“Well, then,” Mr Rothwell declared, clambering up into the groom’s seat at the back of the coach. “We can set off!”

Callum turned to squint up at him with some annoyance. Guests would not usually sit on the rear seat, which was uncomfortable and little better than balancing on the running-board of a normal coach. Mr Rothwell was grinning serenely and Callum wanted to laugh when he guessed that it was because he wanted to be close to Harriet.

The driver climbed up onto his seat and they set off.

They rolled out of the gate and the coach headed downwards, following the road that curved up towards Stallenwood Village.

They arrived after half an hour, the rest of the guests drawing up in their own coaches

on the village green. Callum jumped down, his legs tingling and his feet jarring on the hard, snow-covered ground. He reached up to assist Miss Rothwell down. Her eyes were sparkling.

“When shall we begin?” she asked him as he helped her sisters and Harriet out.

“As soon as the hampers arrive. Mother has no doubt informed the villagers of our unconventional arrival.” Dozens of people dressed in their finery poured out of the expensive carriages. The village craftsmen and poor would have a big surprise. That was the tradition on St. Stephen’s Day. The artisans who had worked for the family—that was, the carters, builders, farriers, painters and others—would be gifted with a hamper to thank them for their services. The household staff would likewise receive hampers to take back to their families. Those, though, Mother had decided to give out on the right day, so that the staff could take them home on their day off. Any remaining hampers would be graciously distributed to those in need.

Miss Rothwell was grinning with delight, and he followed her gaze to see four or five children gazing over at them, round-eyed. The children were tattily dressed, their faces pinched with hunger and one of them—a boy of around fourteen—was dirt-speckled in a way that suggested that he worked as a sweep. Callum’s heart twisted uncomfortably. The difficulties faced by many in his duchy were never far from his mind, but he found it hard to face them directly; it would unsettle him deeply.

“Look! Let’s begin with them. Have we any oranges?” Miss Rothwell asked him briskly.

Callum frowned. “We ought to take the hampers to the craftsmen’s homes first,” he reminded her gently. She shook her head.

“Look at them. They look so excited. Please, let’s! I would love to give them a surprise. And is that not what Christmas is about?”

Callum sighed. "I will ask Mr Morton if he has any oranges," he told her, stalking across the gap to where the cart had just arrived.

"Oranges?" Mr Morton looked shocked. "They are all in the hampers, Your Grace."

"I know," Callum said with a weary exhalation. "But, indulge me. Have you really no extra oranges to speak of?"

"Well..." Mr Morton shrugged. "There is a bag. But those are for the staff, and..."

"Give me six of them," Callum asked. "And the staff who do not receive oranges will be compensated with money."

"Um...yes. Yes, Your Grace," Mr Morton said swiftly. He opened a cloth sack and passed down six oranges. Callum looked around, then took off his top-hat and put them inside as Miss Rothwell came to join him.

"Hurrah!" she exclaimed, taking the hat from him. "Thank you! Oh, thank you."

"My pleasure," Callum said quietly, watching her as she rushed off across the snow. He had thought she was going to join her brother and sisters, but instead, she took off towards the six children. Callum tensed. Images of them rushing her, trying to steal her jewels, filled him with fear and he ran after her. He stopped three paces away.

"My lady! Cor! Blimey," the boy was saying, eyes round as she handed him the orange. He looked at it fearfully, as though he had never seen one before. "Is that for me?"

"Yes. Merry Christmas!" Miss Rothwell said brightly.

Callum watched as the boy tucked the orange into his pocket, looking around as

though he feared that someone would take it from him.

“Merry Christmas, dear,” Miss Rothwell murmured to a little girl, dark-haired and bundled in a worsted shawl, as she passed her another orange. The little girl’s dark eyes widened.

“For me?” she whispered.

“Yes. Of course, it is for you. Merry Christmas,” Miss Rothwell said, bending down to realign the little girl’s shawl that was slipping down her shoulders.

Callum let out a sigh. The children surrounded her in a half-circle, gazing up at her. They were half-afraid, half mesmerised, and he stood where he was, reluctant to disturb. Miss Rothwell handed out her oranges. Her face fell as another two children arrived.

“I have nothing,” she began, voice aching. The little girl gazed longingly at the oranges and Callum tensed, considering running back to see if he could filch some from the butler’s cart. As he watched, Miss Rothwell dug in her reticule and took out two coins. “Here.”

Callum’s heart twisted as the little girls both stared at her in amazement.

“Cor!” One lisped. “Pastries! We can buy pastries.”

Callum’s soul lifted. He had a purse with coins in it under the seat in the coach—he always kept it there lest unforeseen expenses arise on the road. He ran to the coach to fetch it.

“Here,” he said, pressing it into her hand as he hurried back across the snow. “Give these to as many children as you can find.”

“Your Grace?” Miss Rothwell blinked. Then she beamed at him as she understood.  
“Thank you.”

Callum looked away. Her joy in giving affected him greatly. He had always enjoyed giving, but it was something that he had crushed in himself. The years of having to mind every cent because of the debts had forced that joy out of him, making him think of charity as a wasteful indulgence. Now, however, a spark of joy kindled in his heart once more, and he moved toward the cart.

“Blankets,” he said to the butler, who was passing hampers to the guests to take to the craftsmen’s families. “We should distribute them to the poor and those in need.”

“Your Grace? The blankets are gifts for the tradespeople of the village,” the butler demurred.

“We pay the tradespeople for their goods,” Callum argued. “They will be compensated. But please, do this. It is Christmas. We cannot let good people freeze in their homes.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” the butler said, sounding sceptical. His face was stiff with disapproval as he passed a bundle of blankets down to Callum. He looked around, unsure what to do, but Harriet ran over.

“Blankets! Brother! What a grand idea.”

Callum beamed, straightening up gratefully as she took the load of blankets. The butler wordlessly passed him another.

“Thank you, sister. If you and Miss Rothwell can distribute these?”

“Yes! Yes, let’s. Join us, brother!” she called as she walked briskly off to join Miss

Rothwell. Word must have spread, because there were more children clustered around her, and two beggars, dressed in patched, old clothing, shivering in the cold.

Callum watched as Harriet, grinning warmly, passed one of the beggars a blanket. The man's eyes widened and he gazed at it in disbelief.

"For me?" he asked. He had several missing teeth, Callum noticed, his skin raw and rough from days outdoors and his fingers gnarled and blue-white with cold.

"Yes! Merry Christmas," Harriet said with a grin.

The look in the man's eyes twisted Callum's heart. He was almost mistrustful, almost sceptical. Callum rushed up to join them, overcoming the last of his inhibitions.

"Here," he said, thrusting one of his blankets towards the woman in a tatty, thin shawl. Her eyes widened.

"No, good master," she said, sounding shocked. "You cannot give me that. It's...it's fine wool."

"It is yours," Callum said firmly. His throat was tight, his eyes damp. "Take it, and I wish you a merry Christmas."

"No, good master," she stammered again. She took the blanket, though, and Callum watched as she smoothed her hand over the wool.

Miss Rothwell was surrounded by children. He gazed over at her, feeling concerned, but she beamed at him, eyes shining.

He went to fetch more blankets, dazed by her dazzling grin. The blankets seemed heavy, and more and more poor people seemed to be drifting onto the village green.



The other guests had largely disappeared, dispensing the hampers to the craftsmen or milling about the cart, waiting for more goods to be passed out for them to give away.

He carried the blankets towards where Miss Rothwell stood with five villagers. Harriet and Mr Rothwell were handing out more blankets, this time to a thin-faced young woman with a baby in her arms.

“Merry Christmas,” Miss Rothwell was murmuring as she handed out coins, blankets and whatever else she had. “Merry Christmas!”

Callum came over to join her. “Merry Christmas!” he said with a smile, handing a blanket to a poorly dressed man who gazed at it with the same wary eyes he had seen so often.

The village was not very big, and, as such, its population of poor people was also not extremely large. The group thinned and soon Callum and Miss Rothwell stood by themselves.

“This is a wonderful day,” Miss Rothwell said, her grin huge as she turned to him.

Callum swallowed hard. “Yes,” he said softly. “Yes, it is. A wonderful day.”

He took her hand and they stood silently as Miss Rothwell’s sisters, Harriet and Mr Rothwell came to join them. His heart was full, too many emotions flitting through him to express. Joy was there, and appreciation, and contentment. He gazed at Miss Rothwell.

She has given me so much, he thought wordlessly. More than all the blankets, coins and oranges in the world. She had returned his joy of giving, his joy of doing as he felt was right in his own heart. He beamed at her. She smiled back.

It was a wonderful day, he thought silently. And a wonderful lesson. And, he thought with a wry smile, they would soon be home.

He could not wait to enjoy the warmth of a cup of chocolate and a conversation with her. It would be a real pleasure.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:11 am*

“And I thought a ribbon would be decoration enough? What think you, Rosalyn?” Georgina asked, her voice soft in the quiet of the room.

“I think you are right,” Rosalyn replied, a little distractedly. She glanced at her own reflection in the looking-glass opposite. She had chosen to wear a pale blue heavy silk gown to the soiree that the duchess had organised for the evening. She was tired after the morning’s activities in the village, and her mind kept on drifting to the duke.

He had been so helpful, so thoughtful, she acknowledged smilingly. And sometimes, his gaze on her had seemed more than supportive or friendly. Her cheeks glowed. She could not deny that she felt something, and that he did, too.

“I thought I would wear my lavender gown again? It is my favourite,” Isabel commented. Rosalyn inclined her head.

“And so, you should,” she replied. “If you do something a little different with your hair, it will look entirely different, too.”

“I thought perhaps I would try leaving the front loose in ringlets?” Isabel suggested.

“I think that would be grand,” Rosalyn replied. She glanced at her own reflection again, considering the gown and her choice of hairstyle. She had taken her hair back in a bun tied with green ribbon, some loose locks left in the front to curl in around her face. The sage green gown brought out the colour of her eyes. To her own surprise, she looked fresh and well-rested, not tired at all.

“I will fetch my red ribbon,” Georgina announced. “It is so red, that I think it might

not match!” She giggled as she ran to her chamber to fetch it.

Rosalyn smiled to herself. She wished she did not feel so tired. Usually, she would have been amused by her sisters’ lively interchange, but she felt drained and a little confused after the morning in the village.

I wish I understood the duke, she thought distractedly. He gazed at her sometimes in a way that set her heart aflame, and yet sometimes he was distant and businesslike. It makes no sense.

“Hurrah!” Georgina announced, disrupting her musings. “Here it is! And it matches so well, I could have bought it for the purpose.” She had wrapped a thick crimson ribbon around her hair, tucked in under the bun at the base and encircling her hair midway between her brow and the bun. It looked beautiful, especially with the red gown that Georgina had chosen.

“It looks very well,” Rosalyn told her firmly.

“Thank you,” Georgina said shyly. Rosalyn smiled to herself. Lately, she had noticed that uncertain expression on Georgina’s face more often, as though she was distracted, thinking of someone. She tucked the thought away, intending to inquire, subtly, if there was a man who held her fancy.

I suppose I understand that feeling now, Rosalyn thought, cheeks flaming. She was grinning to herself as she went to fetch her shawl from the wardrobe. Isabel was styling her hair at the looking glass while Georgina chatted about the music and the dances.

When they were all ready, they went out into the hallway together. Papa and Sebastian were waiting, and Rosalyn’s heart thumped with excitement as they joined them and walked down the stairs. Sebastian looked particularly grand in a black

tailcoat and she smiled. He most certainly had a reason to look his best. The duke's sister and he never hid how they felt about each other.

"Well, this is pleasant," Papa said warmly as they reached the ballroom.

"Yes, it is," Rosalyn murmured quietly. Her stomach was knotting with anticipation, her heart thudding. Part of her wondered what had possessed her. She never normally felt that way about balls—a little apprehension and excitement, yes, but nothing like she felt in that moment.

She was still musing as they walked in and the duke, his mother and his sister waited at the top of the stairs to welcome them. She dropped a low curtsy, cheeks flaming as she lifted her eyes to the duke's. He wore a blue velvet tailcoat and pale grey breeches and his cloud-grey eyes seemed even more intense than usual. She stood straight, lifting her gaze to his face.

"Miss Rothwell," he greeted her, his voice resonant and rich.

Rosalyn looked away, the tone sending shivers through her. Her sisters greeted their hosts, seeming oblivious to the tension between herself and the duke as they walked towards the stairs. Rosalyn was a little ahead of them and arrived first in the ballroom.

"Ah! Miss Rothwell!" Lord Winbrook drifted over to her almost at once. "May I say how ravishing you look?"

"Um..." Rosalyn blushed, but from discomfort, not from pleasure. "Thank you, my lord," she managed to say. She glanced around, but her sisters were engaged in conversation with Lady Amelia and Lord Grassdale, and they could not see her. Sebastian lingered on the stairs to talk to Lady Harriet, and Papa chatted to the duchess. There was nobody to help her.

“Might I say also that nothing would give me greater joy than to have your hand for the first waltz?”

“My lord,” Rosalyn said carefully. While there was no reason for her not to dance with him—even though she was betrothed to the duke, a friendly dance with someone else would not be frowned on—she did not wish to. He unsettled her greatly.

“Ah! Miss Rothwell! You look lovely,” Lady Philippa murmured, gliding across to join them. “I was so touched to see your act of charity for those young children today.”

“Thank you,” Rosalyn managed to say. She had not thought of it as an act of charity—she had seen the children and she had longed to give them a Christmas gift. She knew that her action had not been well-received—the duchess, for one, had shot her a furious glance, doubtless annoyed that the oranges that were intended for the staff—as the duke informed her—had found a place with the village’s poor children.

“You set a fine example,” Lady Philippa continued. “So many of the guests witnessed it.”

“Thank you,” Rosalyn repeated, shrinking inside. Though she was certain that Lady Philippa meant to compliment her, the words made her feel acutely aware of the duchess’ disapproval, and the disapproval of many of the guests. They reminded her how much she stood out.

“You are certain you will not waltz with me?” Lord Winbrook asked her again.

“Um...well...there is no custom that would gainsay it,” Rosalyn stammered.

“Thank you, Miss Rothwell. You do me a great honour,” he said, smiling warmly at her. Though everything about his expression seemed affable and friendly, Rosalyn

felt uncomfortable.

I did not say yes, she reminded herself as he came to stand beside her. Even so, the viscount had acted as though she had approved of his invitation.

She looked around the hall, planning to escape onto the terrace. Perhaps if she hid sufficiently well, the first dance would go by and he would simply have to wait for her to appear.

She curtseyed, about to excuse herself from his company, but before she could say anything further, the music started. Rosalyn bit her lip as he reached for her hand. His touch through the thin silk of her opera glove felt cold and repellent.

The music rose and fell in cadence as they stepped out onto the dance floor. It was a somber waltz and Rosalyn swallowed hard. She did not want to look directly at Lord Winbrook—it felt terribly wrong. But she also could not very well spend the entire dance looking away. It simply was not possible, since occasionally she had to check what was ahead of her.

“It is an enchanting piece of music, is it not?” Lord Winbrook asked her as they stepped neatly around a corner. His hand on her shoulder-blade made her feel nauseous.

“Yes,” she managed to say. She gazed out over the ballroom. The duke must be somewhere. She wished he would come and rescue her.

“I enjoy the waltz. It is my favourite of the dances.”

“Mm,” Rosalyn said, as non-committal a response as she could make it. The waltz was quite controversial, given that in turns, the two partners touched quite closely. She tensed as they turned. She gazed over Lord Winbrook’s shoulder, searching

across the dance floor.

The duke was there. He was standing one row back from the dance floor. She spotted him gazing at her and her heart soared. He had noticed! She tried to convey her distress to him, gazing into his eyes, but two dancers moved past them and when they had passed, she could not see the duke because she and Lord Winbrook were elsewhere in the ballroom.

“Your sisters seem to be enjoying the evening,” he commented.

“I am sure they are.”

“You do not seem to like to talk during a dance. We shall remain silent, then,” he said lightly.

“As you wish,” Rosalyn replied. Relief washed through her. She was glad not to have to try and talk to him.

They danced around the ballroom once more, and then the cadence changed, the steps slowing, and Rosalyn felt relief flood through her as she let go of his hands and he bowed. She dropped a curtsy and straightened up, hastily thinking of an excuse to escape the ball.

“I feel a little indisposed. I will retire a moment to the drawing room,” she said swiftly.

“May I fetch you some refreshment?” Lord Winbrook asked. He looked a little puzzled.

“No, thank you,” Rosalyn said firmly. “I just need a moment to gather myself. I feel dizzy.”



“Of course, Miss Rothwell. Thank you for a lovely dance.”

“Thank you,” she managed to say, then turned and walked as swiftly as she could through the ballroom and out of a side door. She stood in the corridor, shutting her eyes for a moment with relief. The tension of waltzing with the viscount had been awful. She really did feel sick.

Footsteps hurrying closer made her open her eyes, startled. She looked up to see a footman hurrying towards the ballroom. His eyes widened in surprise to see a guest in the hallway, then he bowed respectfully. Rosalyn inclined her head in acknowledgement and hurried up the stairs. The drawing room was empty, the fire burning in the grate. Refreshments had been set out for later, when the guests would retire to play card games or make music. One window was still uncovered by a curtain, the night sky black and mysterious and enchanting. Rosalyn went to the window and leaned on the sill. She gazed out at the stars that sparkled there. Down below, the garden was white, the snow glistening in the light from the windows.

Rosalyn stared out, feeling calmer. The beautiful sight helped to settle her nerves. She leaned forward, resting her weight on her elbows. The duke flitted across her thoughts and she frowned, wishing that she could have understood that cryptic gaze. He had looked concerned, as if he had guessed at her distress.

She looked out at the stars and wished she could run out into the garden, escaping the stifling house party and guests and enjoy the blissful quiet. The silent gardens seemed to beckon and she half-turned. A shadow at the door had distracted her attention.

A man stood there in the doorway—the duke. She recognised him instantly. She straightened up, feeling flustered.

“I beg your pardon,” he said softly. “I did not mean to disturb you. Are you feeling well?” His voice was low and resonant, concern clear in every word and in the

expression on his face. He frowned, his thin mouth a firm line. He gazed at her uncertainly.

“I feel quite well,” she said. It was not an untruth—since being in the tranquil silence of the room for a few minutes, she already felt a little better. Seeing him also helped to lift her spirits.

“Forgive me,” the duke said softly. “I saw you exit the ballroom. I wished to check if you were feeling well.”

“Thank you,” Rosalyn murmured. His voice sounded so concerned, the expression in his eyes worried.

He moved over to stand next to her by the window. Her heart thudded loudly and she tensed, acutely conscious of his arm resting on the sill just a few inches from her own.

“A beautiful night,” he murmured softly.

“Mm.” Rosalyn cleared her throat. Her heart was racing wildly and she could barely think. “It is.”

“A winter night is always something beautiful, I think,” he murmured. He turned to face her, his eyes locking with hers—intense, as though boring into her, lit with a light she had never seen before.”

Rosalyn’s heart thudded, loud and slow. She gazed into his grey eyes. He seemed to be speaking of the night, yet his words were meant for her, she felt that deep in her soul.

“Forgive me,” the duke murmured. “I was overcome. Your beauty strikes me that

way sometimes.”

“I...” Rosalyn stammered. She had no idea what to say. The notion that anyone would find her beautiful was new enough. The notion that he—the man she had come to admire and long for—found her beautiful was enough to amaze her.

“I find it very hard not to do what we are compelled to do,” he said softly. Rosalyn frowned, but he was gazing upwards and her eyes moved to where he was looking. Above them, green, red and white, hung the kissing bough. Her cheeks flared. Her heart stopped. She looked into his eyes.

Gently, so slowly, with impossible tenderness, his lips pressed against her own. She shut her eyes. His mouth was warm, his lips smooth and firm where they met her own. His arms enfolded her and she leaned against him, losing herself in the sensation of his lips against hers. His chest, muscled and firm, pressed against hers, his arms tightening around her protectively, possessively.

Rosalyn leaned against him, forgetting how to breathe. All she knew was the sensation of his closeness and his warmth, and a longing such as she had never felt before to hold him and be held, to be closer and closer. He held her tight, his lips resting against hers tenderly. She wrapped her arms shyly around him, holding him to her chest.

The duke gasped. His eyes opened and he gazed into her own. He stepped back a little, but he did not release her from his embrace. He stared into her eyes and she stared back. Her heart thudded slowly, her breath slowly returning. She could see surprise in his eyes, and wonder.

She felt exactly the same.

“Your Grace, I...” she murmured.

“Callum,” he said firmly. “Pray, call me by my name. My Christian name.”

“Callum,” Rosalyn whispered. It was a pleasant name, unusual and musical. It suited him. Her heart raced, chills racing through her body as she said the word and his eyes widened to hear her use his name for the first time.

He said nothing, just gazed at her. Rosalyn cleared her throat shyly.

“Please call me Rosalyn,” she said softly. Her cheeks burned. She looked up into his eyes.

“I shall. Rosalyn,” he murmured. His voice was low and resonant and chills erupted through her body at the sound of her name on his lips.

He had stepped back, so that his hands rested on her shoulders and her hands were on his back, her arms loosely holding him.

She gazed into his eyes. It felt strange, exciting; almost dangerous. They had crossed an invisible barrier. The distant formality between them had dissolved gradually over the past weeks, but now it was irrevocably replaced with something else. A new, untravelled, uncharted landscape through which they forged their own way. Her heart leapt, her breath catching in her throat.

“We ought to return to the ballroom,” he murmured distantly as footsteps drew closer. Blushing, Rosalyn stepped hastily back. “The staff will be making ready for the after-dinner tea and card games.”

“Yes. I suppose so,” Rosalyn said quietly.

He held her gaze. She stared back levelly.

“We ought to go,” he said again.

She did not say anything, and he did not speak or move, but stood staring at her, his eyes kindling with the same longing that she felt racing through her body like fire. She ached to feel his lips on hers again. They stood like that, neither moving nor speaking, but with a wealth of words in their eyes. A sound startled Rosalyn, and she turned. The butler had come in, pushing a trolley laden with crockery that clinked softly as he moved.

“Come, Rosalyn,” the duke said softly. “Let us return to the ball.”

Rosalyn smiled as the wonder of her name on his lips raced through her. They returned to the ballroom.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:11 am*

Sunlight slanted into the library. Rosalyn stepped in silently, narrowing her gaze as she passed through a ray of sunshine that spilled onto the floor. She searched the darker space beyond, looking for her brother.

“Sebastian?” she called.

He was standing by a shelf in the corner, his back to the door, a small booklet in his hands. He turned around and his gaze widened as he saw Rosalyn there.

“Sister! Were you looking for me?” he asked. His dark eyes were concerned as he scanned her face.

“Isabel and Georgina said you were here,” Rosalyn said simply. She stared up at his thin, handsome face. It was late morning, around tea-time, and Rosalyn had hoped to find Sebastian. She had barely slept, images of the ball, of the duke and of the kiss returning to waken her and twist her heart with a mix of confusion and wonder. She could not understand her own feelings, or what any of it meant. Sebastian was the one person she felt she could turn to for honest advice.

“I thought I would explore the duke’s collection.” Sebastian smiled. “It seems not to be lacking.” His eyes teased. “I am surprised it is so well-stocked, even with the latest books.”

Rosalyn laughed. “Is it all to your satisfaction?” she asked, her own voice teasing.

“Satisfactory indeed.”

They both laughed. Rosalyn drew a breath, not certain about how to ask.

“You are feeling better this morning, sister?” Sebastian asked before she could begin.

“I heard that you were feeling indisposed at the ball yesterday.”

“I felt a little queasy, yes,” Rosalyn began uncertainly. “I needed a moment to calm my mind.”

“Mm.” Sebastian nodded, frowning. “Are you certain that you are well, sister? You did exert yourself in the village yesterday, and it was very cold.”

“I am quite well,” Rosalyn assured him.

“Harriet was delighted! She enjoyed handing out the gifts to the poor. She said that it brought her such joy and that she wants to do it every year, now.” He laughed.

“She seems a very pleasant young woman,” Rosalyn said warmly.

“She is. From a pleasant family, I think,” Sebastian said slowly.

“The duke is a fine man,” Rosalyn said, blurting it out before she lost her opportunity and her nerve.

“I am certain he is,” Sebastian said unsurely.

“He is a good man. He can be difficult to get to know—reserved, cold—but when one knows him, he is entirely different,” Rosalyn breathed.

“I am sure that is so,” Sebastian said, still sounding a little unsure.

“I feel...oh! I do not know how to explain it.” Rosalyn gazed up at Sebastian. “I wish

I did. It is so strange. One moment, I feel full of admiration and affection, and the next moment, I am in turmoil in my thoughts, confused and uncertain. What is happening to me?" she demanded.

Sebastian raised a brow. "Love is strange. Like water. It leaks slowly into our hearts, and, where we have built dams against it, it pushes at our resistance." He paused. "That is where we feel the discomfort, the fear. Where love challenges our confused, conflicted beliefs."

"Love?" Rosalyn gaped at him.

Sebastian smiled. "I believe that is what is happening to you, as you say."

"You think so?" she asked, a smile spreading across her lips. It made sense that the wondrous feeling that consumed her, that set her thinking of the duke and smiling for no reason, that made her heart warm when she saw him, longing just to be near him, was love.

"Assuredly," Sebastian said with a grin. "I recognise it."

Rosalyn chuckled, her eyes widening in understanding. "Harriet! You and Lady Harriet?" Joy made her voice rise as she spoke.

"I believe that I have gazed at her with the same soft eyes with which you sometimes can be seen staring at the duke."

Rosalyn went red. "Is it that apparent?"

"It is to me," Sebastian said gently. "But I suspect that it is because I find myself in like position."



Rosalyn giggled. As delightful as the feeling in her heart—and the knowledge that it was, indeed, what she thought it was—was the fact that Sebastian could share it.

“I think I realised what I felt for her when she fell in the snow.”

“She fell in the snow?” Rosalyn gaped at him. She did not recall the incident.

“Yes. On the day when we went out on a coach ride. I believe you were in the barouche with the duke?”

“Yes!” Rosalyn lifted her hand to her lips, recalling the day. “How did that all unfold” she asked.

Sebastian blushed. “It was my fault, I suppose. I lifted her down out of the coach. I was showing off,” he added with a shy grin. “She was a little unsteady on her feet when I set her down, and she fell into the snow. I was so worried,” he confessed, eyes wide. “Her pelisse was soaking wet and I thought that she might die of the cold.”

Rosalyn smiled, seeing the concern in her brother’s eyes, and she took his hand in reassurance. “But she did not. She is alive and well.”

“Alive, certainly. She had a cough for a day or so afterwards, but she is well again.”

“Good,” Rosalyn said softly.

“I hope that she will consent to ride with me in a coach again,” Sebastian said wryly. “It was grand to share the ride with her in the little coach.”

“I imagine so,” Rosalyn agreed. The coach ride with the duke had been magical. She could not think of a time, like Sebastian had just described, when she became aware of her love for Callum. It had crept into her awareness slowly, growing like a seed

from the moment that she first saw him, each incident and each new awareness making her love fuller and broader until even she could no longer fail to notice its presence. She beamed, joy filling her heart.

“What a pair we are,” Sebastian said with a laugh. Rosalyn smiled.

“It is a wondrous feeling.”

“It is,” Sebastian agreed. He gazed out of the window onto the snow. Footsteps patterned it, and off to the side was a mass of horse-prints from where she and Callum had led the horses to the coach-house. She frowned, wondering if the roof had been repaired.

“Have you taken a turn about the grounds?” she asked Sebastian conversationally as he slid the book back into the shelf where he had found it. The sun shone down on the snow and it seemed too beautiful a day not to take advantage of it. Besides, she wished to see how the horses were faring.

“I have not,” Sebastian said with a smile. “I had thought to take some tea first. I feel the need for something to eat.”

“We just broke our fast two hours ago!” Rosalyn protested with a grin.

“I see no reason why that precludes a slice of raisin loaf at tea,” Sebastian said primly.

They were both laughing as they stepped out into the hallway. Rosalyn’s laughter faltered as two people walked past on their way to the front door. Lord Winbrook was one of them. He saw her and smiled. He bowed low.

“Miss Rothwell! How delightful to see you.” His dark eyes held her gaze. Rosalyn

curtseyed, looking hastily at the tiled floor of the entranceway.

“Lord Winbrook,” she greeted him blandly. “Lady Philippa.”

“Have you been outside?” Lady Philippa asked Rosalyn warmly. “It is a beautiful day.”

“I had...” Rosalyn began awkwardly, thinking of an excuse. She did not want to mention that she had thought to go outside, since Lady Philippa was wearing a pelisse and they might go with them. She did not wish to go with Lord Winbrook.

“We were just planning to take a brisk walk about the garden,” Sebastian interrupted with a smile. Rosalyn winced and gazed up at him, but instantly Lord Winbrook was replying.

“I would suggest that you join us, then,” he said, his gaze holding Rosalyn’s own. She looked away.

“Well, nothing better than company, eh?” Sebastian said brightly. Rosalyn swallowed hard. Sebastian was a bright, sociable sort and he was clearly also unaware of the tension between herself and Lord Winbrook.

“Capital,” Lady Philippa said warmly.

Rosalyn went to the hat stand and retrieved her brown pelisse, shrugging it on in a desultory way. Sebastian shook out a charcoal-coloured greatcoat, wrapped it around his shoulders, and then opened the front door.

“Let us proceed!” he said, grinning.

Rosalyn went outside and waited for Sebastian to step out with her, ignoring Lord

Winbrook, who hovered at her elbow as though he expected her to walk with him.

“Is this not fine?” Sebastian asked brightly as they wandered out into the snow. “A fine day.”

“It is rather cold,” Lord Winbrook pointed out tightly.

“It is December,” Sebastian pointed out.

“Quite so,” Lord Winbrook said disapprovingly. He was walking beside Rosalyn, who walked as close to Sebastian as she could. She was determined not to let him distract her or override her will as he had the previous night at the ball. He sounded put out, as though he had expected her to be pleased to see him.

“Is it not beautiful?” Lady Philippa asked Rosalyn, gesturing to the snow-covered landscape around them. The sunshine sparkled on the ice that clung to the hedges and trees, making long, lacy patterns that shimmered in the daylight. The air was crisp and cool, the snow glittering in the bright sunshine.

“It is very beautiful,” Rosalyn agreed. She focused on the landscape, ignoring the sullen Lord Winbrook who walked beside her.

“The coaches are safely housed in the coach-house again,” Sebastian pointed out as they crossed the lawn. Rosalyn nodded, noting that the horses must all be well-settled in the stable once again.

“A foolish risk, to put the coaches all out in the snow to rust and moulder,” Lord Winbrook said tightly. “I cannot imagine what was in the duke’s mind.”

“It was a wise decision,” Rosalyn snapped, her patience wearing thin. “Between risking the coaches and saving the horses, there is no choice at all. Mechanical

objects can be replaced. Living beings cannot.”

Lord Winbrook’s eyes widened and she felt a moment’s fear at the rage on his face. Then abruptly, he calmed. A fatuous smile appeared on his face.

“Quite so. Well said.”

Rosalyn looked away. She had little enough liking for the fellow as it was, but to hear him criticise a wise decision and then to act as though he agreed with her, was too much. It showed her that her assumptions about the man were not wrong. He was unpleasant and untrustworthy.

“Have you called at the stable lately?” Sebastian asked Rosalyn, sensing her discomfort.

“I have not,” Rosalyn replied quickly.

“Shall we go there?” Sebastian suggested, gesturing in a way that included Lord Winbrook and Lady Philippa. “It might be interesting to see the repairs on the roof.”

“I have seen roofs before. It cannot be so different,” Lord Winbrook muttered, but he fell in with them as they turned to take the path left.

Rosalyn walked ahead, doing her best to ignore the two who walked behind her. Sebastian was at the back of the group, loudly pointing out the frozen water of the pond and the icicles that clung to the trees in the water garden.

The stable door was open, the scent of hay and horses strong in the cold. Rosalyn walked in swiftly, sighing with relief. Lord Winbrook and Lady Philippa remained outside, while Sebastian, who seemed to have become suddenly aware of her discomfort, distracted them with comments about the history of water gardens.

“Rosalyn?” a voice called from in the stable. She turned and saw Callum there, standing by Buttercup’s stall. Her heart soared in relief and she went to stand next to him.

“Callum,” she said shyly. Her cheeks grew hot with shyness. She gazed up at him. He gazed back. “How does she fare?” she asked.

“Well,” he replied warmly, turning to Buttercup. “Her cough came back after the stay in the coach-house, but it has entirely gone now. I think perhaps it is the dust from the straw, as you suggested.” His gaze was admiring.

“I am glad that I could help.”

“You are a great help,” he said softly. His eyes held hers and Rosalyn’s heart began to beat loudly as he rested his hand on her shoulder, looking into her eyes. His stare was so full of feeling, so tender, that she forgot how to breathe.

“I say!” Sebastian’s voice rang out, and Rosalyn spun around to see him, along with Lord Winbrook and Lady Philippa, in the doorway. She glanced up at Callum, whose gaze narrowed as he stared hard at the viscount, who gazed back with equal dislike. “It would seem the roof is mended,” Sebastian said. “Grand. Grand,” he repeated, seeming to sense both Callum’s and Rosalyn’s discomfort.

“It is indeed well mended,” Callum said thinly. His gaze held Lord Winbrook’s, distaste in every line.

“Well, then! We ought to let you have some peace. One’s tasks with the horses should not be disrupted, eh?”

“Quite so,” Callum said crisply.

Rosalyn gazed up at him, but he was not looking at her. Instead, his eyes were fixed on Lord Winbrook, a hard, cold stare in place. Lord Winbrook moved toward the door, briefly returning the challenging gaze before turning away. Rosalyn shivered. She could not understand what had possessed the two men, and it unsettled her.

She looked up at Callum as Lady Philippa and Sebastian went out of the door. He gazed back at her. His eyes were full of tenderness, her heart twisting with warmth and love as she gazed up at him.

“Thank you for coming to see the horses,” Callum said softly. Rosalyn swallowed, his smile making chills run through her body.

“A pleasure,” she said softly.

He smiled and she turned to walk out of the stable, feeling as though she was floating as she walked onto the path beyond. She walked silently, Lord Winbrook walking sullenly behind Sebastian up the path, drifting in thoughts of Callum and his smile.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:11 am*

Callum wandered down the hallway. His fingers were numb after his visit to the stable and his walk in the icy garden, but it was not that which made him feel so restless. He needed good counsel.

“Harriet?” he called, as he walked up towards the drawing room. Some guests had gathered there for morning tea, but a brief glance showed him that Harriet was not among them. He frowned, then drifted down the stairs, thinking that perhaps she had retired to the library to read. As he walked past the entrance to the dining room, he paused. The door that led through into the conservatory was open.

He walked lightly through the dining room, nodding to the housekeeper, who was supervising the setting of the table for luncheon. The conservatory—part of the terrace that wrapped round the house from the ballroom—was long and narrow, the glass walls and roof letting in sunlight and keeping out the cold.

“Harriet,” he called. She was bent over one of the tables that ran around the room, gently repotting an orchid. She turned when she heard him and her face lit with a smile.

“Brother, look! This little plant has grown so well.”

“It has, indeed,” Callum commented, pausing to admire the small plant, which had, indeed, burgeoned over the summer. She carefully set it into its new pot filled with tree bark, then placed the pot caringly back where it had stood. She paused to wipe her fingers on a rag, then turned to him.

“Is aught amiss?” she asked, a delicate brow lowering in a frown.



Callum shook his head, smiling at her. “No, dear sister! All is well,” he assured her. “Most well.” The memory of Rosalyn’s smile made his own lips tug upwards at the corners with a grin.

“Good, brother,” Harriet said gently. “Were you looking for me for something?” she asked, lifting a metal watering can and pouring water into some plant pots.

“I wanted to ask you something,” Callum replied, deciding to throw aside caution. “Do you think that it is possible to fall in love in a month?”

Harriet blinked at him. “These things cannot be measured by time, brother,” she said with a gentle smile. “Just like a plant does not grow in a day, or a minute, or a year. It does so continuously. Sometimes slowly, sometimes fast.”

Callum grinned. “That is well said,” he replied, his heart soaring.

“Have you fallen in love, brother?” she asked him, her blue gaze level where it held his own.

Callum nodded. “I believe so, sister,” he told her, warmth glowing in his voice. “I believe I have.”

“Miss Rothwell?” she asked, her own eyes lighting with joy.

“Yes. Yes!” Callum nodded, joy filling him as he expressed his love. Keeping the truth to himself had been hard. Being able to share it, to enjoy it, to speak of it, felt wonderful. “She is...like no other I have ever met.” His throat tightened with feeling.

Harriet smiled. “She seems like a good person,” she replied gently.

“She is. A good person. Bright, clever, and good-hearted.” He grinned, aware of how

obvious it must be to anyone listening that he had fallen for her.

“I am so happy for you, brother,” Harriet said warmly. “Truly, I am.”

Callum grinned. “I think that you have a great deal of experience with falling in love,” he replied, eyes widening as he thought of her wise words on the topic. He had never realised how many hidden depths his sister possessed.

“Mayhap,” she said with a smile, turning to hide her blush. Her eyes sparkled.

“Mr Rothwell?” he guessed.

“It could be,” his sister replied, and the bright grin that blossomed on her face made it clear to him that he had guessed rightly.

“They are a remarkable family,” he teased. The sound of Harriet’s giggle kindled his heart.

Before she could reply anything, footsteps at the doorway made Callum turn. He tensed instantly as he spotted his mother standing there.

“Son! Harriet. Grand. I am pleased to see you both here. I have to speak to you, Callum.” She gazed firmly at him.

“Mother, if it is anything of an uncomfortable nature, might we not do it somewhere else?” he looked at Harriet. Loud voices and distressing topics upset her.

“I see no reason why, son,” his mother said firmly. “Should Harriet wish to exit, there is nobody saying that she has to stay and listen.”

“No,” Callum agreed, trying to be reasonable. “But...”

“Allow me to say first of all,” she began, interrupting him without embarrassment. “I have always been appalled by your choice of the next duchess. That woman has no social graces and no idea of what is appropriate. One only had to see her on our outing to the village to know that she acts without discernment or consideration.”

“Mother!” Callum exploded. His face heated with anger. “How can you say that? She acted with the utmost sensitivity and consideration. How else could you explain her actions?” He glared at her.

“She showed no decorum. It is not for her to decide which gifts are given to whom,” she said thinly.

“Oh! So, it is because she flouted your decisions. Not, I presume, because giving charity to destitute children is a crime now?” He made a wry face.

“She handed out our oranges to a flock of grubby ruffians,” his mother said tightly. “That is not how a guest should act.”

“She is not a guest,” Callum hissed. “She is the future lady of the manor. I think we can allow that she has more right here than a mere acquaintance.” He winced as he glanced sideways at Harriet, hearing the venom in his own voice and knowing it would distress her.

Harriet was standing with her back against the wall of the conservatory, watching them with round, scared eyes. Her hands hung at her sides, her posture tense.

“That is what I am talking about!” his mother shouted.

“Please, Mother. At least we should have the decency to shut the door,” Callum interrupted, striding toward it.

“Do not change the subject. I shall not stand for this. You must reconsider. You are a fool if you do this to the manor. You will be bankrupt before long. No one shall want investments from a man who has the dull-wittedness to choose someone with no sense of social standing or proper etiquette.”

Callum looked at his mother in disbelief. His throat tightened and he fought the urge to shout at her. After a moment, he managed to speak. “What, exactly, are you requiring me to do?”

“I am requiring you to become betrothed to someone else instead.”

Callum gaped at her, unable to comprehend her words. She could not be serious.

He repeated the words slowly.

“Become betrothed to someone else?”

He could not find words to explain to her how he felt. After a long, long pause of staring at each other, he cleared his throat.

“Are you out of your wits?” he demanded softly. “Do you truly believe I could turn my back on that woman, and walk towards a socialite who, although undeniably pretty, has the shallowest of characters and no apparent values?”

“Lady Millicent is the sort of stuff that duchesses are made of!” his mother said angrily.

“I do not want a duchess like her,” Callum said roughly, and as he spoke, he found words coming to his mind that he knew were absolutely true. “I want a duchess who is compassionate, caring, one who understands my vision for the manor and has aspirations of her own. A woman who is gentle, loving, and who loves me in return,

as I love her. I know who I want. I have chosen her already. I love her with all my heart. And I will not change my mind, no matter what threats you concoct. I love her.”

His mother looked at him. Her eyes widened and her jaw dropped and for a long moment, she said nothing. Then she shrugged.

“Well, what can I do?” she asked, and her voice was tight and small, a mix of hurt and disbelief in her words. “If you have made your decision, then you have made it. But do not expect me to celebrate with you.” She turned around and went out through the door.

Callum leaned back and shut his eyes. He felt impossibly weary, drained of all his strength. He heard someone drop something onto the table and he opened his eyes again.

“Harriet?” he asked with concern. “Are you quite well?”

“Brother,” Harriet said quietly. She was crying, tears running down her cheeks. He went to her, wrapping his arms around her and holding her tight. She sobbed silently, then leaned back and looked up at him.

“Shh,” Callum said gently, as he had when she was a little child, and she was crying in distress. He stroked her hair back from her brow. “It is all well. It will be well.”

“You won’t let Mama chase the Rothwell family away?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Callum shook his head. “No, my dear. I will not. Your heart, and mine, matter. She will come round to the idea.”

“She will?” Harriet sounded unsure as she gazed up at him.

“Mm.” Callum nodded. “You know her. She may not like it now, but she shall come around. Remember how she was when I bought the barouche?” he teased.

“She was silent for a whole day,” Harriet remembered.

“She was. But eventually, she looked at it and said that if I wanted that lump of metal and wood, I was welcome to it.” He chuckled at the recollection.

“You are right,” she said softly. “Mayhap she will come to accept our choices soon.”

“She will,” Callum assured her softly. “It will all be well, Harriet.”

“Good,” Harriet said in a small voice.

Callum squeezed her fingers reassuringly. “Thank you, sister, for talking to me,” he said sincerely when she was a little calmer. “I value it a great deal.”

“Thank you for talking to me, brother,” she said with a grin. Callum smiled to see her happiness returning. He was angry with his mother for making Harriet witness their argument. She knew how distressing Harriet found such things.

“I am certain that she shall be talking again by dinnertime,” Callum said with a grin.

Harriet giggled. “Mayhap she shall,” she agreed.

“Now, I need to go and choose a tailcoat. I have not yet decided what to wear.”

Harriet laughed. Callum’s heart lifted to hear her happy giggle, and he exited the room, hurrying upstairs to go and find something to wear to dinner that evening. He

wanted to look his best, and he also did not want to offend their mother—he had offended her enough as it was, and he hoped that she would forgive him soon. He hoped that he was right in what he had said and that she would accept him and his decision.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:11 am*

Rosalyn sat on the end of her bed. Her stomach hurt, and her head ached. She was dressed in her red gown, prepared to attend the duchess' planned music evening, but the thought of attending made her feel sick and Philippa's insinuation that all the guests were watching her had not helped. She had always disliked having to perform in public—playing an instrument was not something she enjoyed, and she did not like to sing in front of people. While there was no pressure placed on any of the guests to perform, the young ladies would almost certainly be expected to, and it was one area in which she felt lacking. She did not want to perform in front of the judgmental, critical duchess.

She frowned as someone knocked at the door.

“Betty?” she called, thinking it was her maid. Instead, Georgina and Isabel answered her through the door.

“Sister? Sister! May we come in?”

“Of course,” Rosalyn said. She stood and opened the door.

“Sister!” Isabel called out. Rosalyn frowned. While her sisters usually came into her chamber to complete their outfits—seeking advice about their hairstyles or borrowing fans or shawls—they were always high-spirited. This time, though, their eyes were wide, faces pale and tense.

“Isabel? Georgina? Whatever is the matter?” Rosalyn's heart thudded. Was one of them also feeling sick? Had something happened? Was their father unwell? A hundred thoughts raced through her mind.



Isabel looked at Georgina.

“Shall we...?”

“I don’t know...” Georgina said unsteadily in answer.

Rosalyn stared at them. “Sisters?” she asked, heart racing. “Please. Whatever it is, tell me. I want to know. I must.” Their father was ill, she knew it. Sebastian. Something had happened to Sebastian. Her hands clenched into fists, fear stiffening her entire body.

“We were walking in the hallway,” Isabel began. “And we heard...”

“He said it. He said he was going to marry someone else.” Georgina concluded in a rush.

“Who?” Rosalyn said carefully. “Who said what?” Her head pounded, the headache pressing in on her forehead like an iron fist.

“The duke,” Georgina blurted. “I am so sorry.” She was crying.

“We didn’t believe it,” Isabel said. “But his mother was there. It was her!” Isabel said angrily. “It is all her fault. She’s rude. She hates us. All of us.”

“I know,” Rosalyn said. Her voice was a whisper. None of it made sense. She could not believe it. She swayed, losing her balance. Georgina rushed forward, grabbing her, hauling her upright.

“Rosalyn! Don’t fall. Forget about him,” she said angrily, her voice rising. “He’s just horrible. And what sort of man listens to his mother when he’s...he’s...old,” she completed her sentence.

“He’s not that old,” Isabel protested.

Rosalyn shook her head. Part of her wanted to find their comments amusing and part of her even did. Yet the overwhelming majority of her felt as if she were trapped in a snowstorm of confusion and shock. What could have happened? Surely, her sisters were mistaken?

She hates us, Rosalyn thought, her heart twisting.

That was undeniable. The duchess had been rude and hurtful from the first moment that her family had met her. She had not once attempted to be friendly or caring—even being welcoming had seemed too much for her. She had accommodated them and made sure that they were taken care of, but she had never even spoken to Rosalyn, and she had made it clear that she found the company of other people more appealing than she did that of Rosalyn and her family.

“I want to tell him how horrible he is,” Georgina said angrily. “I think we should go and find him.”

“We cannot do that,” Isabel said quickly. “We are in his house.”

“Sisters...” Rosalyn said quietly. She was struggling to think, and their heated argument about whether or not to tell the duke was not making it easier. “Please. We shall do nothing,” she said quickly.

“But Rosalyn!” Georgina protested. “He cannot do that. It’s wicked! It’s wrong!”

“It is not his fault,” Isabel said. “It’s her. She’s wicked! The duchess, I mean.”

Rosalyn drew a breath. “We shall do nothing for the moment,” she said quickly. Her heart raced. “All we shall do is attend the musicale.”

She had not wished to go—she had felt too sick. But now, something drove her to do it. Even if she did have to perform and her performance was appalling, she did not care. The duchess already hated her. She had already decided that Rosalyn and her family were beneath her, and were worthless. It did not matter how bad Rosalyn was at playing the pianoforte and singing. It would make no difference to anything.

“You want to go?” Her sister demanded. “We should avoid everything that horrid woman plans!”

“It is for Rosalyn to decide,” Isabel said carefully. She looked at Rosalyn. “Sister?”

Rosalyn took a breath. “I wish to go,” she said, her heart filled with cold bitterness. There was nothing the duchess could do to hurt her. Nothing that would hurt her more than what she had done. There was no point in feeling shy or avoiding her.

Georgina gaped at her. Isabel lifted a hand, quelling whatever Georgina was about to say.

“If Rosalyn wishes to,” Isabel said carefully.

Georgina shrugged. “Very well,” she agreed. “But myself, I think we should tell the duchess that her silly musical evenings are not welcome. Nothing of hers is.”

Rosalyn smiled. Her heart was in more pain than she could imagine, her mind in such turmoil that she could not yet think to fathom what they had said. But they cared, and that touched her. She took a deep breath. Lifting her reticule, she went to the door, her sisters following her.

“Daughters!” Papa greeted them in the hallway. Rosalyn blinked. She looked away, trying not to cry, her father’s friendly manner touching her more than she could say. “Come! Let us go down. My, how beautiful you are!”

Georgina looked as though she might say something, but Isabel lifted a finger to hush her, and they all walked down the stairs together. Rosalyn walked beside Sebastian. She kept her back straight, her face stiff. She wanted to cry, to run away. But she could not. She was the Honourable Miss Rothwell. And she would not let the duchess heap more shame on her.

“Capital,” Sebastian murmured as they reached the entranceway. It was crowded with guests and Rosalyn glanced up, knowing that her brother did not mean it as a compliment. They stood on the edge of the group while the duchess greeted her guests and invited them into the ballroom.

The ballroom was filled with chairs, and the pianoforte had—somehow—been moved from the drawing-room into the space. Trestles with refreshments had been set out further down the room, and there the guests stood and sampled the delicacies while exchanging polite conversation.

Rosalyn found a space at the far end of the room. Her mind felt empty as if frozen. She could not feel a thing—just a cold, blank void. She gazed out of the window at the evening snow, the hum of conversation and the laughter of the guests drifting past her, distant and muffled.

She spotted the duke staring at her across the room. She stiffened and looked the other way, turning her back on him to stare out of the window. She could not bear it. She could not look into those grey eyes and think of what he had said. He had not even had the decency to tell her himself. Her gaze fixed on the falling snow, and she tried to focus on the delicate flakes. If she could just trace their patterns, perhaps she could lose herself in them and forget everything else.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” the duchess called. “Our musical evening will begin! If everyone could make their way to the chairs? I invite one of you to come forward to begin the entertainment for the evening.”

Rosalyn turned around and gazed straight at the woman. To her surprise, the duchess looked straight back. Her cold blue eyes held Rosalyn's and Rosalyn was surprised to see their gaze widen, almost as if the other woman was afraid. Then the duchess turned away.

"Please, find a seat," she called to the guests.

Rosalyn blinked and looked away.

"Come, sister," Georgina said, appearing on her left.

"We will find a place to sit," Isabel told her, gesturing towards the chairs.

Rosalyn allowed her two sisters to lead her to a chair. She was grateful for their presence—being in the room was only possible because of it.

"Ah! Lady Amelia! Will you go first? That is most kind," the duchess was saying as Rosalyn looked away from studying the front of the room. There was a window there, and if she focused on it, she could watch the snow and forget where she was.

Everyone greeted the performer with polite applause. Rosalyn clapped, barely aware of what she was doing. Every part of her that was able to think was focused on the snow, while the rest of her was a whirling blank.

Someone was playing the pianoforte. If she listened to it, she recognised strains of the tune. Her mind refused to focus on it. It kept on repeating the words she had heard, while the rest of her tried to ignore it.

The crowd applauded and another young lady went up to play. Rosalyn wondered distantly if one of her sisters would play, but they sat resolutely still as one young lady after another went up to perform. Rosalyn watched them, seeing debutantes and

ladies going up to perform. Her heart twisted. It felt as though they were part of a parade, each performance a reminder of her own weaknesses, her own inadequacies. You are not one of us , it seemed to scream. You are not one of us .

“Thank you for being so attentive, ladies and gentlemen!” the duchess announced, making Rosalyn blink. “I invite you all to join us for a brief interval. Please feel welcome to partake of refreshments.” She gestured to the tables on the other side of the room.

The murmur of conversation began, growing louder as people stood up, pushed back their chairs and moved towards the refreshments table. Rosalyn blinked. The room was whirling, and she felt sick and dizzy. She tried to stand up and stumbled backwards.

“Rosalyn!” Georgina cried out.

“Are you quite well, sister?” Isabel demanded, sounding concerned.

“I am well,” Rosalyn managed to say. She was about to cry. She could feel it and she did not want anyone to see. Not the duchess, not the ladies who had performed, and not her sisters—although for a different reason. “I just need some air.” She looked away, trying to hide her expression.

“We shall come with you,” Georgina said at once.

“I think Rosalyn might wish to go by herself?” Isabel asked, looking at Rosalyn. Rosalyn nodded.

“Thank you, sisters,” she said softly. “I would like to go alone. I am just feeling a little unwell. I shall only be a moment—just a moment,” she reassured them.

She walked as briskly as she could through the milling guests, heading to the terrace. A footman opened the doors, and she strode out, fleeing to the railing. She leaned against it, her shoulders shaking. Tears ran down her face, soaking it. She could not stop crying. It was cruel pain, as cruel as a knife, as the winter cold.

She sobbed again, unable to hold it back a second longer. She had tried so hard to contain herself. The pain had solidified, the confusion lifting and the impact of it hitting her full in the stomach. She sobbed and sobbed and gasped and sobbed again.

“Miss Rothwell?” A voice spoke behind her. It was quiet, middle-register, one she recognised, and it was not the duke. She spun round.

“Lord Winbrook?” she said, disbelief making her voice shrill. She hastily lifted a hand, batting away her tears. The last person she wished to see at that moment was someone who already made her feel weak and afraid.

“Miss Rothwell,” he said softly. “Why! My dear lady! Whatever is the matter?”

“I am quite well,” Rosalyn replied, hastily pulling a handkerchief from her purse and wiping her face. “Just feeling indisposed. That is all.”

“Oh, my poor dear lady,” Lord Winbrook said softly. He stepped close and, to her horror, his arms wrapped around her, drawing her close. “Allow me to offer you comfort.”

She went stiff. Horror rooted her to the spot. His closeness was so unwanted, so nauseating, so unexpected, that it froze her to the spot. She could not move or breathe or think, shock robbing her of words or action.

“I would like to help,” he breathed.

Rosalyn drew in a breath, trying to find words, desperate to think of a way of pushing him away. She did not know what to say, but as she tried to find the words, the door to the ballroom burst open.

“Oh! Your Grace!” Lady Philippa’s voice cried out in alarm.

Rosalyn whipped around in horror to see Callum and Lady Philippa staring at her.



*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:11 am*

Callum stopped breathing. His eyes were riveted on the scene before him. Rosalyn was enveloped in James's arms, her body pressed to his. She saw Callum and her eyes widened, staring into his.

"No," Callum whispered. He felt as though he had run into a wall, the breath knocked from him. He had thought that Rosalyn cherished him, that she cared for him. But here, right under his nose, a different truth was revealed. And, much as he disliked her, Philippa had been the one to guess. Philippa had come to find him, wringing her hands. She had told him she was worried, that James and Rosalyn had disappeared onto the terrace together for quite some time. And this was clearly why.

"I have been a fool," Callum said bitterly. Rosalyn's eyes widened, and she pushed James away, though he had already stepped aside.

Callum rounded on him, and his anger must have shown in his eyes because James said nothing. Philippa stood where she was in the doorway, gaping at them.

"Callum?" Rosalyn whispered.

"I have been a fool," Callum repeated, gazing bitterly at her. "I have trusted you, when I should have known that nothing so good could be true. I should have seen it. All the while. You and him. He was staring at you, walking with you, talking to you. I was a fool! I ignored it. I should not have. Now, what can I do? I cannot trust you." He was close to tears and he stopped, looking away. The last thing he wanted was for her to see his tears. She had clearly thought him a halfwit for months. He had thought she cared for him.

“Callum, it is not...” Rosalyn began.

“Enough,” Callum interrupted. “I can see with my own eyes. I should have seen it weeks ago. I have been stupid. My mother said that I should never have invited you into my circle. Do you have to make it clear that she was right? That I cannot make good decisions?” His throat ached. “There is nothing left for me to do, then. I should have done as she wished all along.”

“Callum! But...” Rosalyn tried to speak. He shook his head.

“No.” He had to harden his heart. He could not allow her to persuade him that he was wrong, that he had been seeing things for the past few weeks. James’ interest in her had been clear since shortly after he arrived. It should have been plain to see that she returned his affection. “I have been a fool. All I can do, now, is free you from what must be an odious bondage. I shall do as my mother wishes. I shall choose another.”

“Callum! But...but...” Rosalyn was blinking at him, horror on her face. He turned away. He could not look at her. If he looked at her, then he would listen to her. If he listened, then he would be fooled. He did not want to be fooled. He walked to the door.

“Do not approach me,” he said, making his voice harsh though everything in him longed to take her in his arms, to believe her flattery. “I do not believe a word you say. I let myself believe you all too readily.”

“Callum!” she called after him. He pushed open the door. Philippa was standing beside it. Callum glared at her.

“You have done me a favour, but I cannot thank you,” he said tightly.

“As you wish, Your Grace,” she said, dropping a low curtsy.

Callum stood back for her to go into the ballroom. He pushed ahead of James, who was trying to speak to him.

“Your Grace! I...” The fellow’s eyes were bright with triumph, though his face was calm. Callum glared at him.

“You are fortunate I do not throw you out of here,” he hissed. “Get out! I should hurl you into the snow. You come into my own house and betray me? How dare you.”

“Your Grace. I did nothing,” James said mildly. “I broke no agreement with you. I merely pursued a beautiful woman.”

Callum gritted his teeth. The words were horribly true. James had broken no vows. The only person who had betrayed Callum was the only person he would have trusted, without question.

He turned away and stalked through the ballroom.

“I shall retire upstairs,” he told the footman at the door, who stood back for him and let him through. Callum stalked through the entranceway and out toward the stairs, not once looking back. He could not bear to return to the party. He had no doubt that many of the guests had overheard the exchange—the windows had been open, and he had made no attempt to speak quietly. And, he thought with resignation, if they had not heard, they would soon learn of it from those who had—perhaps from Philippa. Or James.

He marched to the drawing room and shut the door behind him. The place was set out for the guests to relax after the musical evening—low tables were set with tea and refreshments, a few extra tables had been brought in and the fire and lamps were lit. Callum marched to the window and looked out. The snow was falling, flakes drifting down towards the garden, where white snow showed in the light that fell from the

well-lit room.

“What can I do?” he whispered to himself. His heart was recovering from the shock, and pain washed through him. He could not really make sense of what he had seen, even though he knew that it must be true—James had been pursuing Miss Rothwell for weeks, and he had made it perfectly obvious to everyone. The only fool was himself.

“Callum? Callum!”

The sound of his mother’s voice at the door made Callum spin around, anger mixing with hurt and the need for her not to vaunt herself for how right she had been.

“Mother. If I am in the way here, I will go elsewhere. I will retire to my chamber,” he said swiftly. He marched to the door. He should have gone there already. Of course, his mother would find him in the drawing room—but then, she would have no qualms about finding him in his chambers either.

“You are not in the way,” his mother said softly. “Harriet told me you were shouting outside. Whatever is the matter?” she asked. Her voice, to his surprise, was not harsh.

“Mother, I...” Callum blinked, tears suddenly flowing. “Mother. I was wrong. I was a fool.”

“Hush, Callum,” his mother said softly. “We can all be fools.”

Callum sniffed. Oddly, that was the kindest thing his mother had ever said to him. He coughed. “You were right. Mayhap everything I believe is wrong.” His throat was raw. He and Harriet had always laughed at the elaborate customs of society, at their empty politeness, at the notion that things like etiquette mattered.

“Mayhap,” his mother said with a sniff. “You know, part of me wanted to be wrong. Part of me wanted to think that mayhap these things, like breeding, do not matter. But sadly, I was right. That family is all a pack of worthless scoundrels.” She sniffed again.

“They are not worthless,” Callum said hotly. He recalled Miss Rothwell laughing as she handed out the oranges to the children. Her tender care for Buttercup. She was not worthless. She was a good person. That was why the betrayal cut so deeply. It was unbearable.

“You cannot argue that now,” his mother said tightly. “That woman has shown no decorum from the beginning.”

“You can hardly compare the improper depth of curtsy to...to this,” Callum protested.

“They are all wastrels and fools. I shall tell them to depart at once.”

“No. Not all of them,” Callum said quickly. “Mr Rothwell...Harriet...” Harriet would never forgive him. He could not let his mother hound them all out of Stallenwood Park.

“Do not change your mind, son,” his mother said firmly. “They are all scoundrels. Mr Rothwell took liberties that he should not have, inviting your sister alone in the coach. That was a dangerous risk to her reputation. I cannot approve of him.”

“It isn’t as though nobody could keep an eye on them. I saw them,” Callum said quickly, springing to Harriet’s defence. His mother made a disapproving moue.

“That is hardly decorous. Anyone could have seen them and noticed how improperly they behaved,” she added. “No, I have entertained that horde of provincial nobodies

for long enough. I shall require that they leave immediately.”

“It’s cold,” Callum said tightly. “You cannot make them leave in this cold.” It was a winter’s night. Miss Rothwell would suffer on the coach ride, and what if there were no inn for them to stay at? He recalled how she had suffered in the cold, how she had shivered that day when she fell in the snow, falling into his arms.

“It will be just as cold tomorrow,” his mother began, but she saw Callum’s expression and her posture softened. “I shall require that they depart the manor before breakfast in the morning.”

Callum turned away. “As you see fit, Mother,” he said tightly. “I have been wrong in every respect—I begin to wonder if I know anything at all.”

Callum kept looking at the fireplace. He heard the door open and he heard feet in the hallway and he did not turn around. Whatever his mother did, he would simply allow her to do it. He did not trust himself anymore. He had made one choice without any contribution from anyone, and it had proved to be pure foolishness.

He could not believe it. He could not believe that her sweet smile, her care, her gentleness—that it had all been a ruse, a game. He could not allow the weight of that betrayal.

He stood up and went to the door. It would only be an hour before the guests flooded in to relax after the performances. He absolutely did not want to be there. He could not bear the house party, the playful afternoon games, the festivities. He stalked to his bedchamber and shut the door. It was darker in there, the lamp burning low, the fire red embers in the grate. He leaned back and shut his eyes.

Wild plans raced through his mind. He would run away and bestow the manor on his uncle. There was a relative in Ireland—his mother’s uncle. Perhaps he could escape

the dukedom, the responsibilities, and the pain that weighed on him.

“Don’t be a fool,” he told himself harshly as he stood up to unfasten his cravat. He opened his wardrobe, took out a thick greatcoat and tugged it on. The horses could do with a visit, and that was the one place where he could find solace and be able to think clearly. As he walked down the stairs, thoughts of Miss Rothwell cannoned into him and he pushed them away with a groan. He could not let himself think of that. Not anymore. He had to think ahead and decide whether to remain the duke and follow his mother’s orders or run away and seek his fortune somewhere abroad. He could not stay and hope that he had, again, been mistaken. However much he might wish to. He had to do something befitting a duke. It seemed he had done so little of that.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:11 am*

“Papa,” Rosalyn whispered, her hands tight where they gripped together, fingers threaded stiffly through each other, “I do not know what to do.”

“Sweetling, it doesn’t matter,” her father said gently. “Whatever he might think, the duke needed us, but we do not need him.” He reached a soothing hand out.

“But, Papa, it is not about the horses,” Rosalyn whispered. Tears ran down her cheeks. She barely understood it herself. A few weeks before, she would have been relieved if the duke had decided as he had. Standing in an anteroom with Papa, the fire low in the grate, she could not find words. “It is not just about the horses.”

“I know.” Her father breathed out. “Sweetling, I understand. You like the fellow. More than like him, I know. I know how it feels.” He reached for her hand again, and when she placed her palm against his, he drew her into an embrace. He smelled of dust, with a faint undertone of leather, and she wrapped her arms around him.

“It’s just...I do not understand. My sisters overhead him say something, and then it seems as though he never said it at all. And now, because of that foul man and his unwanted embrace, now...”

“I know, sweetling.” Her father let out a sigh. He gazed into her eyes. “But you are still so inexperienced. There are countless opportunities ahead of you. You need not cry.”

Rosalyn shook her head, biting her lip. She understood what her father could see of the situation—that she was young, and her heart would soon mend. But it was not that simple. Even though she had never really met any other men, she knew that the



duke was different, that he mattered to her, that he connected with her in ways that nobody else ever had before. She trusted him.

A knock on the door made her jump. Her father tensed, then relaxed.

“Who is it?” he called.

“It’s me,” Sebastian’s voice called through the wood. “May I come in?”

Her father looked at her, and Rosalyn nodded. He cleared his throat.

“Yes, you may come inside.”

Sebastian’s head peered round the half-open door, another man standing beside him. Rosalyn tensed. It was Lord Winbrook. She turned away, her heart thudding. She did not wish to see his face. The memory of his embrace still nauseated her. She heard her father take a deep breath.

“Lord Winbrook. What do you mean by coming here?” His voice was cold as the snow.

“My lord,” Lord Winbrook said politely. “I came to apologise. I did not intend to compromise your daughter’s reputation. I also wish to offer amends, if I may?”

“I do not know that I can accept an apology from you.” Papa’s voice remained cold. “What amends do you propose to make?”

Lord Winbrook’s voice was grave as he replied. “Since I have tarnished your fair daughter’s reputation so, I can think of only one solution. I ought to give myself to her in marriage.”

Rosalyn's jaw dropped. She turned to her father, terror making it impossible to speak. He could not do it. He must not. Marriage to that man would be repellant. Unbearable.

"Papa..." she whispered urgently. But her father was already replying.

"I suggest, sirrah, that you leave this chamber. And do it quickly. You have tried my patience enough. I am not known for my temper, but I am an expert marksman and I am not averse to duelling if I need to defend a lady's honour. Get yourself from my sight."

"My lord viscount! I..." Lord Winbrook began.

"Out!" Papa shouted. Rosalyn gaped. She had never heard her father shout before. His voice was like a whip, like the shot of a gun.

Lord Winbrook fled.

Sebastian was still standing in the doorway. Rosalyn gazed at him, hurt that he had brought the fellow into the room. He opened his arms.

"Sister. I wanted to choke the life out of that loathsome fellow myself, but I thought Papa would do a finer job. I beg your forgiveness. I did not know what he would say."

Rosalyn went to him wordlessly, wrapping her arms around him. She had been succeeding in holding back her tears, but Sebastian was someone with whom she had always cried if she needed to. She leaned against his chest and sobbed and sobbed.

"You know, I never liked that fellow," Sebastian said quietly. "He has no taste in cravats. And I cannot speak well of a man who ties them so poorly."

Rosalyn giggled. In spite of the pain and the horror, it was still possible to find Sebastian amusing. She hugged him close.

“Let us go back to the suite,” Sebastian suggested softly. “It’s late at night. We do not need to sleep,” he said to Rosalyn gently. “We can sit in the parlour and play cards. I do not need to sleep.” He grinned.

Rosalyn gazed at him with affection. He understood better than anyone, better even than Papa did. She let him lead her to the door. They walked out and up the stairs and if anyone was there to stare and whisper, she hugged Sebastian firmly and paid them no mind. Together, they made their way to the suite.

“I shall rest,” Papa said as they entered the parlour area that formed the centre of their three chambers. He was grey with weariness, Rosalyn noticed, and her heart twisted. It was already one o’clock.

“Come, sister,” Sebastian said gently. “We can sit here. It will be like when we tried to stay awake when we were little.”

Rosalyn chuckled. Memories of their childhood were sure to make her laugh, no matter how much her heart was aching. She let Sebastian guide her to the table and settled in a low chair. She had brought a shawl, and she wrapped it tightly around her shoulders. There was a fire, but she felt icy cold. She shivered.

“Now,” Sebastian said, reaching for a pack of cards. “I think you might do me the grace of showing me how it is that you always manage to win at cribbage. It has bothered me since you were eight.”

Rosalyn smiled at him. She knew that he was trying to make her laugh, and she wanted to let him; wanted him to coax her out of the sadness that had settled like winter on her soul. She just could not quite ignore the pain that she was in.

She took the cards, and they started to play. It was impossible to focus, and so she set the cards aside and they began to talk instead.

“Remember when we tried to get into the kitchen through the window?” Sebastian said.

“I did not try,” Rosalyn reminded him with a smile.

“No. True. You did not. I did, though. Cook almost hit me with a spoon. She thought I was a proper bandit.”

Rosalyn smiled. She was feeling tired. Cold and tired. She blinked, trying to stay awake. Sebastian’s voice continued, talking about how the cook had shouted at him for trying to enter the kitchen by force. Her eyelids drooped and her thoughts wandered, and she drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, she woke to the sound of voices. Papa was in the parlour, and Sebastian was with him. They were talking in hushed voices.

“...we should go back.”

“We could go to London!” Sebastian argued. “So many diversions. It would be best.”

“Your sister should avoid London. People talk. We need to go to Cranfield Hall.”

Rosalyn’s heart ached. Her father was correct. Lord Winbrook had damaged her reputation and, though she was grateful to her father for taking her views on things, in many ways it would have been safer for her to do as he had suggested.

“Papa...it should not matter,” Sebastian began, but Rosalyn could hear he agreed. She stretched, and the two instantly fell silent.

“Sister,” Sebastian said gently. “Would you care for some breakfast? I am starving.”

Rosalyn blinked. She was stiff and cold. She smiled at Sebastian, doing her best to look as well as she could. She was grateful to him for his kindness. “I do not really feel much like eating,” she tried to explain.

“I’m going to send for some tea and things anyway,” Sebastian said firmly. “And then you can decide what you would like, eh? I cannot eat it all by myself, you know.” He strode over to ring the bell. He was wearing fresh trousers and a white shirt and Rosalyn shivered. She had slept in the chair without a change of clothes.

“I would like to dress,” she said softly, standing and going to the door of her chamber.

“Of course, sister,” Sebastian said gently. “I shall not touch the pastries.”

Rosalyn smiled. He was trying so hard to make her laugh, and she wished more than anything that she could. She shut the door behind her and went to the wardrobe, selecting a brown dress at random. She dressed herself hastily, drawing her hair back into a bun.

When she returned to the parlour, her sisters were there. They were dressed and they looked worried. They embraced her.

“Rosalyn! We were so worried.”

“Rosalyn, dear! Let us go home to Cranfield Hall.”

Rosalyn sat silently. It made sense to do so. She reached for the food and drink that Sebastian had ordered brought to the room. It gave her something to do while she thought. “We should go to the Hall,” she agreed.

“I shall inform the duchess,” Papa said after they had eaten. Rosalyn’s stomach twisted. She did not want to think about that woman. She did not want to see any of them. She wanted to run back to the Hall and try to ride Marmalade and forget everything that had happened.

They waited for Papa and then all of them went down to the coach. Rosalyn glanced at Sebastian. It was unfair, she realised suddenly. He had no need to depart from the manor. He could stay. She turned to him, about to say so, but he turned back to her.

“Papa said mayhap we could make a trip to Brighton,” he said lightly. “In the springtime, of course. You won’t catch anyone bathing in the wintertime; no one in their right mind, at least.” He chuckled.

“Sebastian. You...” Rosalyn began.

“I am doing what I think is right,” Sebastian said firmly. “Now, let me help you in. It’s snowing and my toes hurt.”

Rosalyn gazed up at him, horror and sorrow aching in her heart. They were both suffering. And her sisters, too, looked sad and subdued. She shut her eyes.

Papa clambered up into the coach, and then he shut the door, and they were heading off. Rosalyn gazed through the window. Sebastian was right. It was snowing. It was thick, heavy snow and she frowned. They should not travel in such conditions. Not only for the horses, but because the coach could easily become stuck.

“Papa. Should we not...” she began.

“I wish to be away from that place,” her father said tightly. “It offends me.”

Rosalyn breathed out. She had not expected his absolute, unwavering upholding of

her. Somehow, she had expected societal matters to carry more weight with him than she did. But she was absolutely and entirely wrong. He supported her utterly. She blinked, touched beyond words.

“It shall be warmer in the southern parts,” her sister said firmly.

“And we can see the horses,” Isabel reminded her.

“Yes,” Rosalyn whispered. She gazed at her sisters and at her father and brother. Her heart ached. She was more hurt and frightened than she had ever been, and yet one thing—one wonderful thing—was that she did know just how much she was loved.

The coach rolled on. Rosalyn watched the snow fall, her heart aching, and the only thing greater than her sorrow was the constant, gnawing fear that they might become stuck in the snow.

She closed her eyes, listening to the soft chatter around her, and silently prayed for their safety—for their well-being both on the journey and beyond.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:11 am*

Callum sat in the drawing room. The snow fell in a flurry down onto the garden. It was the day before Christmas and the house was silent. The guests were still all at the manor, but Mother had the decency to take them on an outing to the lake, which had frozen, so that those who wished might go ice-skating. Callum watched the snow. When he stared at it, he did not have to think. The world became small and silent, and it blotted out his thoughts.

“Brother?”

Callum blinked. He thought he heard a voice, but he must have imagined it. Harriet had gone with Mother to the lake to ice-skate, so it could not be her. He kept on looking out over the snow.

The sound of the butler pushing the tea trolley—rattling, clanking—broke his concentration. He cursed softly as memories of Miss Rothwell surged unbidden into his mind. He recalled her laughing in the snow with her sisters, her cheeks flushing as she sat in the coach beside him. He remembered her tenderness on the night when he had needed her help. He swore under his breath.

“Brother! I had to talk to you!” Harriet’s voice was loud. Callum spun around. His eyes widened.

“Harriet! I thought you were ice-skating?” he asked swiftly.

“I was,” Harriet replied. “I chose to come back earlier. But Mama and the others are on their way. I have to tell you something. Please, listen!”



Callum frowned. He had been shutting himself away in his study for the entire day and night since the Rothwell family departed. He knew that he had been unfair to Harriet, who must be as upset and confused as he was himself. But he could not bring himself to talk to anyone. It was all he could do to keep his own thoughts locked up, unable to hurt him.

“What is it?” he asked gently. He gestured to the chair opposite. There was a teapot and some cups there. Perhaps she needed him to comfort her. He hoped he could find words.

“Callum, I need to tell you something,” Harriet said firmly.

“What is it?” Callum asked.

“I overheard something. It is something you have to know. James. Philippa. They planned this. It was all their idea. They did it on purpose. I don’t know why, but they did. You have to talk to them!”

Callum held up his hand. His head had been pounding all morning, and his sister’s words were confusing him and worsening his headache. “Wait, sister. What was their idea? What was their plan? What did you hear them saying?”

Harriet drew a breath. “Sorry. I just had to tell you. James and Philippa. They planned that you would see Miss Rothwell and James like you saw them. They planned that. They wanted you to think that James and she were...were in love,” she said uncomfortably.

“They planned it?” Callum’s heart soared. He clenched his fingers into fists, fighting against the fragile glimmer of hope. What if it was a lie? He couldn’t allow himself to believe something so wonderful, and yet so improbable, all at once.

“James and Philippa staged the embrace. They wanted you to believe that Miss Rothwell was in love with James. That was why Philippa knew to come and call you! Because they had planned it all along,” Harriet said urgently.

“Please calm yourself, sister,” he said gently. “Why would they do that? James was clearly interested in Miss Rothwell; I saw that from the day that he arrived. But what would it benefit them to stage something like that? No, I believe that he is in love with her and that she returns his affections.”

It was painful; it was horrible. But at least, if that was true, then he could feel noble by allowing her to have what she truly wanted. It was the last way he could think of saving himself from the pain.

“Wait! Listen,” Harriet said urgently, but there were footsteps in the hallway and their mother strode in.

“Callum! There you are,” his mother said briskly. “I was looking for you. Millicent was asking to speak with you, and I cannot deny her any longer. You have been moping around miserably for far too long now. Come and join the party. It’s the night before Christmas!” She gestured to the hallway.

Callum swallowed hard. “Mother,” he said carefully. “I am in no mood for company and I would make a terrible one myself, especially on a festive occasion. Please, let me remain here as I wish.” He gritted his teeth. He wanted to shout at her to leave him alone.

“Millicent is here, and I demand you speak to her,” his mother insisted. “You are doing yourself no favours by skulking away. And you have duties to do. This manor needs a duchess. And you have spent enough time ignoring the ideal person for the job.”

Callum drew a breath. He pushed back his chair and rose from it. His mother tensed. He cleared his throat.

“Mother,” he said in a tight, clipped tone. “I am miserable, as you yourself have pointed out. I am sunk into despair. My heart has been betrayed by someone who, treacherous and cruel though she may be, is also the woman I love. I cannot simply turn from that and develop affections for another to whom I feel indifferent.”

“Indifferent! To a young lady who is beautiful and accomplished, as well as your social equal?” his mother demanded. “It is not possible.”

Callum drew a breath, rage dispelling his pain. “Love does not work like that, Mother, and I believe you know that. Love cannot be called forth by social status, or wealth, or manners. It cannot be won by pretty conversation or fine looks. Love is something that grows between two people, a sharing of souls. It is not a reward; it is a gift. And it cannot be earned. It must be received.”

His mother gaped at him. She stared, eyes wide, as though he was speaking a foreign tongue, as though he expressed ideas that she could not understand. He continued.

“I love Miss Rothwell. I always shall. She might be treacherous, and deceitful, and Heaven knows what else. She is also kind, and loving, and gentle. She is amusing and witty and diverting. And she is herself. I can love no other as I love her. I shall love her all my life.” He turned away. “She rode away from this manor and took my heart with her, and I cannot give to another what I no longer have.”

There was no sound in the drawing room when he turned to face his mother and Harriet. They both stood silent. Harriet was gazing at him, eyes shining. His mother was looking at him with a shocked, hurt look.

“Son...you...” she began. Harriet interrupted.

“Callum! You have to listen to me! I heard them. Please. If you mean what you say, do something.”

Callum took a deep breath. He turned to Harriet, his heart aching. “What, Harriet?” he said caringly. “What must I do?”

“Confront James.” Harriet gestured to the hallway. “He was saying it when I walked past. At the lake. He was talking to Philippa at the lake’s edge. I was behind some trees. I had hurt my foot while skating, and I wanted some peace and quiet. I heard them. He said it all. He said how he had staged the embrace to make you think that Miss Rothwell was in love with him. They wanted you to think that, to hurt you.”

Callum gaped at her. “You truly heard that?” he demanded.

“I swear,” Harriet said firmly.

“Harriet, what are you saying?” their mother demanded. “You must be mistaken, or imagining things. You have not been well since they left. Mayhap the afternoon exertion was too much for you.”

“I did not imagine it!” Harriet protested. “I heard it. I swear I did. If you do not believe me, then confront him yourself. He said it. He really did.”

“James is a good man,” Mother began firmly. Callum interrupted.

“It was certainly noble of him to seduce my betrothed right in front of me. That is certainly the action of a morally superior person.”

His mother blinked. That, at least, seemed to make her see sense for a moment. Callum inclined his head. Though he had said the words simply to contradict his mother, they were accurate.

“You know,” he said, turning to Harriet. “I think I might go and talk to James. I think he might have something to tell me.”

As he strode down the hallway, Harriet beside him, their mother’s dire warnings about not making a scene still ringing in their ears, Callum tensed. James was coming up the hallway towards them. Philippa was with him.

They were chatting together, clearly in good spirits, and when they saw Callum and Harriet, they fell quiet. James bowed low.

“Lady Harriet! Callum, old chap. I did want to apologise, but...”

“I would not wish you to apologise,” Callum said carefully. “For then you might have to tell me what, exactly, you are apologising for.”

James frowned. “But, Callum, surely that is obvious?” he asked in a soft tone. “I am apologising for the pain that I have caused.”

“Why, pray, when that was precisely your intent?” Callum asked.

“I say!” James began, his face flushing. Philippa held up a slim hand.

“I would like to know what you mean,” she said in a thin, even tone to Callum. Callum shrugged.

“I believe you already know. However, should you wish to explain, I invite you both to the Green Room to do so.” The Green room was something akin to a parlour downstairs, so called because of the green curtains. It was the one room in the house where nobody was likely to overhear what they said.

“This is preposterous,” James blustered. Philippa, though, seemed calm. She walked

ahead, leading the way down the stairs.

Callum walked with Harriet, a little behind James, who, though he seemed reluctant to go, nonetheless walked down the stairs with Philippa to the entranceway. They turned left at the library, entering the small, warm room that their parents had sometimes used for informal gatherings. Callum shut the door.

“What exactly do you think you are doing?” James demanded as Callum stood in front of them, arms folded.

“I think you are aware that you have something to tell me?” Callum inquired.

“You’re being ridiculous,” James blustered, but Harriet interrupted.

“I heard you. You said that you were glad that you had made a fool of my brother, made him suffer like you wanted to. I heard you!” she said firmly.

James’ eyes widened. His cheeks turned an ugly shade of red and he rounded on Harriet. Callum stepped in front of him. His hand made a fist. He took a deep breath, trying to resist the temptation to hit the man. James paled.

“I suggest that you do not turn your ire on my sister. Do not dare.”

James went quiet. Philippa spoke up.

“I think perhaps Harriet has misunderstood. Yes, my cousin was pleased to have hurt your feelings, but that stems from childish jealousy,” she said smoothly. James whipped around, a surprised expression on his face as he stared at her, but she shrugged and looked at Callum appealingly.

Callum winced. That was altogether too possible. James probably had been

jealous—though that was the first time he had heard about it—and the words Harriet heard could easily be interpreted that way. He turned away. He had longed for Harriet’s story to be true. But he was left to believe the evidence of his own eyes, and that was that she was mistaken. Philippa must be right about what she had heard.

“There is nothing to say,” he began, but Harriet interrupted them, voice high-pitched.

“Wait! Wait! You said that James was pleased because he was jealous. But that isn’t what he said. He didn’t say that. He said he was pleased because the plan worked as he intended. That the plan to humiliate and hurt my brother had worked. That means it wasn’t an accident. It was intended to hurt him all along.”

Callum caught his breath. James gasped. Philippa turned on Harriet, gaze icy.

“She is lying,” Philippa began, looking at Callum, but he shook his head. He had been prepared to forgive them, to believe Philippa’s words about James having been jealous of him. But her response changed that.

“My sister,” he said thinly, “does not lie. I think you are the one with little regard for the truth. And I want to hear what really happened.” He rounded on James.

“You saw what you saw,” James said stubbornly. Philippa was silent.

“I think I saw what I think I saw,” Callum countered. “I thought that I saw you and Miss Rothwell embracing. But now, I am not so certain. Was she willingly embracing you? Or were you forcing yourself on her?” He shut his eyes. It had happened so fast that he, himself, could not have said which version of the story was true. He had not even thought to look more closely.

“She embraced me,” James said firmly. “She was crying, and I went to comfort her, and she clung to me.”

Callum drew a breath. That, too, could have been true. Miss Rothwell had certainly been crying—her face had been streaked with tears. But why had she been crying? Another thought struck him, hitting him as though a cannonball had been fired at him.

“She was not embracing you.” He gaped, his jaw dropping in shock at the realisation. “Her arms were at her sides. She was not clinging to you. You are lying.”

James looked up at him. Callum saw fear in his eyes. Fear and anger. Joy surged forth in Callum. They had staged it! His sister had not been misunderstanding their words. They truly had planned to hurt and humiliate him. It truly was a plan.

“You did stage this,” Callum said when James did not speak. “You intended to hurt me. All those glances, all the moments I caught you together with her. Those were deliberate.” His heart raced as he realised the depth of how they had fooled him.

James did not look at him. After a long moment, he raised his eyes to Callum’s. The expression in them was so angered and so bitter that Callum blinked in surprise.

“What if I did?” he asked with a small shrug. “You have so much. Why should I not take from you the one thing that you would care about losing? You have everything, but it doesn’t seem to mean a lot to you.”

Callum’s frown deepened. He felt utterly baffled. “What do you mean?” he asked after a long moment.

“Hah! You see?” James demanded. “You see? You have everything. But you don’t even know it. A house. Land. Titles. Wealth. A family. You have a purpose in those wretched horses. You have respect. And then, on top of it all, you have someone you love? I wanted to take at least some of it from you. What I could take. The one thing you seemed aware of.”



Callum swallowed. "I don't have everything, James. Like you, I nearly lost it all." His throat tightened as the memory of that fear resurfaced—the looming threat of losing everything. He and Mother had been cast out of society, working tirelessly to restore the manor despite the scandal that had barred them from entering society without shame. There had been years of hardship, as he fought to repay the debts and rebuild their family's standing in the world.

"Ha! As if your situation and mine were anything alike. Your father was the one who ruined my father! It was his fault ! If he had not led my father down a bad path, my father would never have ruined us. And you got it all back! I lost half my estate. We were rejected from society and we remained rejected thereafter. Can you imagine the humiliation? Having to depend on charity from my uncle and from your mother? It was shameful!" He spat.

Philippa blinked and cleared her throat. She had remained entirely silent throughout the time. Callum had forgotten she was there. "That is not fair, James," she said quietly. "My family was happy to support you."

"They should not have had to!" James yelled. "Can you imagine how terrible it was for me? Needing charity? I am a viscount!" He drew himself up. "I should have to depend on nobody! And your family reduced me to begging from my relations like a pauper." The last sentence was directed at Callum, the words roared angrily at him.

"What happened between your father and mine," Callum said softly, "was between your father and mine. It should remain there. I cannot pretend to speak for either of them. But I do know that it was not my fault. Or yours," he added gently. While he was shocked, and hurt, by what James and Philippa had done to him, he could not help but feel sorry for the man. Besides, while part of him tried to understand how someone could have come to hate him, another part of him could not stop thinking about the fact that it was not true. Rosalyn had not run into the open arms of James. He could not contain his delight.

James blinked, and Callum watched closely as his words took effect. The stunned look in James' eyes suggested that, for some unfathomable reason, he had sought revenge because he believed—wrongly—that he was responsible for what had happened. He had blamed himself for the ruin of the estate, and again when he had failed to repair it.

“Maybe that’s true,” James blustered. “But I still wished to hurt you. And I am not sorry that I did it.”

Callum sighed. “You did hurt me,” he said honestly. “And if my sister Harriet had not overheard you, you could have done a lot worse than that. You could have changed the course of my life. But that was not meant to happen,” he added wonderingly. For the first time since his father’s death, faith was stirring within him. Someone—some higher power—had decreed that Harriet would overhear that snatch of conversation. And the same Someone had brought James and Philippa to this place and made them confess their wrongs.

“What will you do?” Philippa asked. She was gazing at him fearfully and Callum frowned, then understood that she meant to ask if he was going to punish them. He sighed.

“You were both foolish. And I hope that you never come to experience firsthand the depth of hurt you caused or the horror that you could have wrought on me. I would not wish that upon anyone. But it did not happen. And you told the truth—eventually, at any rate.” He sighed. “Now, leave the manor. I forgive you, but do not seek me out or call on me again.”

“You forgive us?” Philippa gaped.

James just stared at him. Callum could not guess what the man was thinking.

“I do,” Callum said wearily. “Be gone. I wish you well, and I forgive you. But I pray our paths never cross again.”

The two of them gaped at him and then, slowly, they went to the door. Callum stood and watched as they walked out into the hallway. Then, when their footsteps had gone, he went and shut the door. He leaned back against a wall, breathing heavily. He was exhausted.

“Brother? Brother?” Harriet asked gently. “You forgave them. It was the right thing to do.” Her blue-eyed gaze was solemn.

“It’s Christmas,” Callum said wearily.

“Yes,” Harriet agreed. “It’s Christmas.”

Callum sighed. “It’s Christmas, and I have much to do.”

Harriet frowned. “Where are you going, brother?” she asked as he walked towards the door.

“I am going to ready the coach. Sussex is five days’ journey from here and they cannot have got far.” He opened the door. Harriet ran after him as he went briskly down the hallway.

“You’re going to Sussex?” she demanded.

Callum nodded tiredly. “I am.” He had never been more convinced about anything in his life. He had to find her. He had to tell her that he knew the truth.

Harriet walked with him, and they went upstairs to prepare for the journey.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:11 am*

Rosalyn looked out of the coach. The snow was falling heavily. It had fallen heavily all day and through the night. They had stayed at a wayside inn, and she had advised her father that they should not continue on their journey, but he had insisted. The snow had not abated all morning, and, by afternoon, it was falling too thickly to see.

“Papa,” Rosalyn said tightly, as the coach slowed to a walk. “We need to stop.”

Her father blinked and nodded. “You are right, daughter,” he said softly. He sounded tired. He banged on the roof of the coach with a walking cane. The driver stopped and Papa opened the window, letting in a flurry of cold snow. Georgina and Isabel, who were sitting closest to the window, screamed as the snow fell in on their uncovered faces. Rosalyn gazed out at the whirling flakes.

“Mr Simmons? Please stop at the first inn that you see.”

“Very good, my lord!” The coachman called back. He sounded pleased.

Rosalyn leaned back, shutting her eyes. The coach trip had been exhausting. Sebastian and her sisters were the only reason that she was still sane—the former for his cheerful support, and the latter for their irrepressible spirit. Without them, she was sure that she would be stark mad. She could not understand how Sebastian found the strength that he did to comfort her—he himself was suffering as much as she was. But she was grateful, and she did not question it.

The coach rolled on.

“Papa?” Rosalyn whispered as they slowed again. “Will we manage to reach the

closest inn?”

That was the thought that terrified her. If they were forced to stop, the horses might die of cold—to say nothing of Mr Simmons, on the roof, and themselves in the cold interior. The padded coach walls did something to keep out the cold—and it was dry inside—but it was still almost as freezing inside as it was without, her breath visible vapour if she exhaled hard.

Her father gazed at her. “We will have to be brave, daughter, and pray,” he said tightly.

Rosalyn swallowed hard. He was as worried as she was. Her fingers laced through each other. Her heart skipped with elation as Mr Simmons got the coach going again. Every yard ahead was a yard closer to an inn and safety.

They rolled on.

As it was starting to become dark, her prayers were answered. The coach turned and rolled slowly into an inn yard. Her sisters let out a cry of joy.

“Papa! Look!” Georgina yelled. “It’s an inn! A real inn!”

“The horses can dry off. And we can get warm!” Isabel announced with delight.

“You’d think we were traversing the frozen North,” Sebastian joked though the relief was evident on his face as well. Rosalyn squeezed his hand, and he smiled back at her.

The coach came to a halt.

“Here we are,” Papa murmured, helping Rosalyn down, and then her two sisters, who

shrieked as the thick snow fell on them. They ran under the shelter of the overhanging roof. Rosalyn walked up the steps to join them. Her gaze followed her father as he directed the coachman to the yard, handing him coins to pay for the horses' lodging and his own.

They bundled into the inn hallway.

"Two bedchambers, please," Papa requested of the innkeeper. "One for my daughters, and one for myself and my son."

"Very good, my lord."

"And we would like to take a hot meal in the parlour," Papa added. Georgina nodded vigorously. She had been terribly hungry during the coach-trip, since they were entirely unprepared and had not brought any food with them.

"Well, look at that," Sebastian murmured as they bundled into the inn parlour—an upstairs room overlooking a small garden, with wood panelling to keep it warm and a small fireplace. It was a room set aside for the gentry to dine in, while the local folks would use the taproom downstairs. "It's snowing and it's Christmas Eve."

"Mm." Rosalyn's heart ached. She did not want to remember. At the very least, she wished it to be an ordinary day. It was worse than an ordinary day.

"We've nothing prepared, my lord," the innkeeper's wife told Papa as she came into the inn parlour, wringing her apron in her hands. "It's too early for supper and too late for dinner. What may we prepare to feed you?"

Rosalyn took a breath. She had no appetite. She would have been perfectly happy to retire to bed without eating anything. Georgina looked hopefully at Papa and Isabel did likewise. Papa frowned.

“Whatever you have that is warm and filling, good lady. Please prepare that,” he said politely.

“Well! My lord! We’ve nothing but dumplings and stew. I can hardly serve such humble fare to persons of your station...” she stammered, looking away.

“Please, prepare that,” Papa repeated gently. “We would be most pleased with a hot meal.”

“Of course, my lord. Of course.”

Rosalyn leaned back and tried to focus on the snow. It was falling heavily outside the window, big, heavy flakes fluttering down. She listened to the conversation around the table sporadically. Sebastian was trying to keep up cheerful banter with Georgina, who was becoming positively poetic about the stew and dumplings. If guilt about Georgina’s hunger had not been one more weight of pain on Rosalyn’s shoulders, she would have laughed.

She watched the snow and tried to ignore everything else around her.

“Rosalyn? Rosalyn?” Isabel nudged her gently on the shoulder.

“Mm?” Rosalyn asked softly.

“Papa says that we shall have to stop here the night and depart tomorrow—mayhap only by the afternoon. He says that he will not attempt to go forward while it still snows so heavily.”

“Mm. Good,” Rosalyn replied distantly. Nothing seemed to make sense. Nothing touched her. Besides the fear that they would all freeze in the snow, no emotion seemed to get close to her, as if she was surrounded by an invisible wall that turned

away joy and anger alike.

“Look, Georgie!” Papa declared as the food arrived. “Now, isn’t that fine?”

Georgina nodded, and even through the strange, cold wall around her, Rosalyn couldn’t help but smile at the joy on her sister’s face as a steaming plate of dumplings and meat stew was placed before her. The innkeeper’s wife blushed.

“Bless my stars! To think that fine gentlefolk like yourselves would be eating the humble fare I prepare.” She grinned.

“You have done a good thing this night,” Papa said warmly. “We all thank you.”

“I thought I would starve!” Georgina said dramatically. Even the innkeeper’s wife laughed.

Rosalyn focused on her food and tried not to think about anything.

As she retired to bed in the big room that she shared with her sisters, Rosalyn tried to forget that it was Christmas Eve. Her sisters chatted to one another and Rosalyn tried to shut out their banter.

“...and we should do something special for tomorrow!” Georgina said with a smile.

“I cannot help but wish we were spending Christmas Day at home,” Isabel said softly, her voice tinged with longing.

“Let’s make it special anyway!” Georgina said playfully, her good humour restored with the warm food.

Rosalyn looked away as her sisters continued to talk about the holiday plans. The



reminder of home was too painful, and the pathos of the conversation deepened her grief. She rolled over in bed and tried to sleep.

The next morning, Rosalyn awoke to sounds of arguing coming from the inn yard. She blinked, opening her eyes. It was daylight. She had slept much longer than usual. Church bells were ringing loudly. Her sisters shot upright at the sound of the bells and the raised voices.

“What is...” Georgina began.

“Who are...” Isabel asked.

Rosalyn held up a hand and they fell silent. They all listened to the words that drifted up from the yard. They were loud enough to hear in the crisp, clear air now that the bells had stopped ringing.

“...and the cheek!” The innkeeper’s wife was saying.

“It’s all well, Judy. Don’t go fretting about it. It’s Christmas.” That was a male voice and Rosalyn guessed it must belong to the innkeeper.

“I’m not fretting, Albert. I just cannot abide rudeness,” she said, sounding put out.

“It’s not rude to stable your horse, dear,” the innkeeper said gently.

“I know, Albert. But it was still rudely done. When there’s barely enough room, too! And them upstairs are such fine gentlefolk. Not a rude bone in their bodies, that lot.”

Rosalyn smiled to herself, the compliment to her family bringing a vestige of warmth to her heart.

“I wonder what happened?” Georgina was saying as she tugged on her white velvet dress. “She sounds so angry. And it’s Christmas Day.”

“Some customer was rude, I suppose,” Isabel said quietly, donning a green velvet gown. “I suppose it must happen all the time.”

Rosalyn tugged on her dark red gown. As she tied her hair back in a ribbon, an urgent knocking on the door made her frown.

“Daughter? Daughter! Are you awake?”

It was Papa.

Rosalyn’s frown deepened as she hurried to the door. She opened it a crack. Georgina, who was still arranging her hair, shrieked. Rosalyn stuck her head around the door.

“Papa? What is the matter?”

“You’re awake. Good. There is...um...there is a visitor downstairs.” Papa’s expression was pained, his brow lined with worry.

“Whatever is the matter?” Rosalyn’s heart thudded. “Whoever is it?” A horrible thought occurred to her. It was Lord Winbrook. It must be. Only that could make Papa look so worried. Or mayhap an emissary from the duchess herself, come to stir up trouble.

Her father wet his lips. “Best if you come down, my dear,” he said carefully.

“Tell her to stay put,” Sebastian yelled from the stairwell. “I’ll break this scoundrel’s head if he tries to...”

“Rosalyn!” A voice shouted. It was a voice that made Rosalyn’s heart stop. Middle-register, soft and melting. She would have known it anywhere. Her soul soared; her throat tight with sudden emotion. “Rosalyn! Wait! Let me speak.” Callum shouted.

“I’ll tell this dastardly fool to return to the hole he crawled from,” Sebastian said from the hallway. His face appeared in the gap as he marched up the stairs, two spots of anger flushing his pale cheeks. His dark eyes blazed with fury. “Just let me handle him, sister.”

“No.” Rosalyn shook her head. “No. I shall go down.”

“Rosalyn...” Sebastian gaped at her. “Why would you?”

Rosalyn shook her head, reaching for her coat, which was hanging on the back of the door to dry.

“I shall only be a moment,” she assured her sisters and hurried downstairs. They rushed after her, then she heard the sound of their feet stop on the stairs.

Rosalyn carried on, running to the bottom of the stairs. Hope flared in her heart. Her soul was soaring above her. She ran to the door and cried out as the duke, Callum, grabbed her. He lifted her up, crushing her against his chest in an embrace so strong, so urgent, that it knocked the breath from her.

“Rosalyn!” he cried. His voice was rough with emotion. “Rosalyn.”

“Callum,” she croaked. “Callum. You’re here.”

“I travelled all day. And all of the next day. I had to find you. I had to. You’re here. Oh, God be praised!”

He set her down gently on her feet and his arms tightened around her, drawing her close. Rosalyn leaned against him, her heart melting as he held her in his tight embrace. He stroked her hair and she leaned against him. She held him close, the scent of him warm in her nostrils, his closeness a balm that dissolved the walls of pain around her. She hugged him tightly.

“How did you come to be here? Why did you follow us?” she asked, leaning back and looking up at him.

“I had to,” Callum said softly. “I am blessed with a sister who overhears things,” he added with a faint smile. At that moment, the front door creaked open, and a woman’s face appeared, her hair hidden beneath a white fur-lined hood.

“Callum? Brother? Oh! Miss Rothwell! You’re here!” Lady Harriet’s pale face flushed delicately pink. “I am so grateful you’re here!”

Callum gazed at Rosalyn. She gazed back. His grey eyes were wide and unclouded, their depths honest and true.

“Rosalyn,” he said softly. “I was a fool. I have been such a fool. Can you forgive me?” He took her hand. His gaze moved to her fingers. He lifted them, kissing the knuckles. She closed her eyes. His kiss seemed to spiral down her nerves, lighting them with incandescent warmth. She gazed at him, heart thudding.

“I can forgive you,” she said, just a little playfully. “But you have to tell me what happened. How did you come to be here? How did you find us?” Her eyes widened with surprise.

“That was easy enough,” Callum said gently. “Though I was sick with worry. You should not have travelled so far. I never expected you to venture so far on the road, especially in this weather. I cannot quite forgive my mother. She should never have

let you go in these conditions.” His face darkened with a mix of anger and concern, but then his expression softened. “As to the former, I came here because Harriet told me the truth. I cannot believe I ever thought otherwise. I was a fool. I should never have believed him. I truly hope you can forgive me.”

Rosalyn looked into his eyes. Her heart was melting, the pain and sorrow and disbelief melting like the snow under the bright sunshine. Joy flared up inside her, pure, wonderful joy like the cry of an eagle who soars for the sheer pleasure of it. She gazed up at him and for a moment, their gazes held. Then she looked away, swallowing hard.

“Of course, I can forgive you,” she said softly. “I, too, believed the worst of you. I thought...” She laughed, almost in disbelief, at her own thoughts. “I believed that you had decided to wed someone else instead of me.”

“What?” Callum stared at her, his eyes wide and his face a picture of disbelief. “How in Perdicion’s name did you come to such a notion?” he demanded. “I must know! If my mother was behind this, I swear that I shall not forgive her.”

“It was not your mother,” Rosalyn interrupted gently. “I think perhaps it was a misunderstanding. Did you ever say that you intended to wed another? You were in the conservatory. With your mother,” she added, hoping that he might remember and contradict it.

Callum gazed at her in disbelief. “No! No! I said the exact opposite. I said that I wished to marry you. Beyond all others. That I would never choose another. I never would.” His tone was intense.

“No?” Rosalyn gaped at him. Though they had been betrothed for a month and a half, he had never said that. He had never actually told her, without withholding, that he would have chosen her for herself. Not for status, or horses, but for herself and her

alone.

“No!” He shook his head. Rosalyn stared as she saw tears form in his eyes. “I love you, Rosalyn. I love you like no other. I admire you, I respect you, and I would choose you blindfolded. I would choose you for your spirit, for your compassion, for your wit. I would choose you for your kindness and your caring. I would choose you over anyone. I love you, Rosalyn. I love you with all my heart.”

Rosalyn’s eyes widened. She cleared her throat, trying to speak, but tears ran down her cheeks. She smiled at him, laughing at his bewildered expression as he saw her happy response.

“Callum. Your words move me deeply. They stir my heart in ways I cannot fully express. I love you. I think I fell in love with you that day in the snow, when you caught me. You were so cross!” she chuckled at the memory. “Or mayhap it was even before. I do not know. One cannot put a time on these things. All I know is that I love you like no other, and that I will love you always. I love you, Callum.”

She gazed up into his eyes and he looked back at her. Slowly, tenderly, he reached for her hands and held them in his. She stared into his eyes, his lips lifted at the corners in a half-smile. He gazed back at her. He leaned forward so gently, so carefully. Just as his lips were about to touch hers, two sets of feet sounded on the stairs.

“Gracious! Look at that!” Georgina’s voice said loudly.

“It’s Christmas!” Isabel yelled.

Rosalyn laughed wildly as Callum lifted her off her feet, spinning her around and setting her gently in the entranceway of the inn. She frowned, bewildered, but as her gaze moved upward, she realised why. A kissing bough hung above the entrance at the bottom of the stairs.

Callum's face moved toward hers, and with a tender smile, he pressed a soft, heartfelt kiss to her cheek. Rosalyn shut her eyes, her heart swelling with warmth as his affection flooded her. It was a kiss that spoke of everything they had shared and everything yet to come, a promise of love and devotion.

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Later, they sat at the table in the inn parlour. Harriet was there, sitting next to Sebastian, and Papa and Georgina and Isabel. The inn parlour seemed crowded, and when the innkeeper's wife appeared, carrying a tray laden with pie and potatoes and buttery carrots, they all cheered aloud.

"What wholesome fare," Callum said appreciatively as Papa carved up the enormous meat pie. Steam and savoury smells filled the space. Rosalyn's mouth watered.

"It's Christmas!" Georgina reminded them all, making everyone laugh.

"This is the best meal I have ever eaten," Callum said with a sincere look in his eyes. Rosalyn smiled back.

It was true, she thought as she sampled the delicious pie and trimmings. The meal was humble but delicious. And the warm, cosy space of the inn parlour was simple and undecorated, but it was a veritable palace because love filled the space between its walls.

"It is a grand meal," she murmured, staring at him.

"If we had a pudding, I wonder who would find the sixpence?" Callum mused.

"You, brother," Harriet teased. "You always find it."

“I do,” Callum said with a smile. “I am rich. I truly am. More than I ever thought possible.” He gazed at Rosalyn, his eyes gentle as he looked at her.

Rosalyn swallowed hard, her throat tight with emotion, her heart warm with love.

“And so, do you see?” Georgina declared as they settled down to their meal. “Despite all the hardships and amidst the sorrow, we have been blessed, after all. We have received more than we could have ever imagined—Callum, Harriet, and the rest of us”

Everyone laughed. Rosalyn smiled; her heart so full of happiness that she could barely speak.

“I think there is truth in that,” Isabel said quietly. “Christmas, after all, is not about any single figure or tradition, but about the spirit that fills our hearts when we are surrounded by those we hold most dear. It is in the joy of giving, yes, but also in the quiet grace of receiving with an open heart.”

Rosalyn nodded, her heart swelling with a quiet, peaceful certainty. “That feels right,” she whispered. “It is the spirit of being together, of love shared, that truly makes Christmas.”

“Love is not a reward; it is a gift. It cannot be earned, it can only be received,” Harriet said, nodding at Callum.

Callum inclined his head. Rosalyn frowned. She did not know the significance of the interchange, but she felt the truth of the words deep in her heart. She took Callum’s hand and smiled.

He smiled back, and Rosalyn shut her eyes for a moment, the warmth and joy of the moment settling on her soul. She was surrounded by love and she opened her heart to



it, receiving all the joy that drifted in to settle there. When she opened her eyes again, she glanced sideways and noticed Sebastian and Harriet sitting close together, their hands resting gently near each other, slightly touching, exchanging soft smiles. Georgina and Isabel were laughing with Papa, and even the innkeeper's wife who dropped in with some fresh-baked bread for the gravy looked happy. The room was full of love and joy.

Callum leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers and they kissed.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:11 am*

“Rosalyn! Here it is!” Georgina’s voice called through the bedroom door.

“We made a special trip through the garden just for you,” Isabel added brightly.

Rosalyn turned away from the looking-glass where Betty arranged her hair. Her heart thundering with excitement, she half-stood, going to the door. She had no idea what her sisters meant, but their voices were welcome, adding to her joy. Betty stepped back from where she was arranging a few pearl-ended pins in Rosalyn’s pale hair to open the door.

Rosalyn stood up slowly, trying not to disturb the elaborate hairstyle. As she did, she turned to the door, where shrieks of delight erupted from her sisters’ throats.

“Rosalyn! You look beautiful,” Georgina exclaimed.

“How lovely you look,” Isabel murmured.

Rosalyn’s throat tightened. Her sisters looked beautiful. They were dressed in winter finery—Georgina in a dark red gown, Isabel in sapphire. Georgina’s lovely chestnut hair was fluffed around her face in a cloud of curls, and Isabel’s long, sleek black hair hung in ringlets beside her slim face. They both gaped at Rosalyn in her long white gown.

Rosalyn frowned as she saw what they were holding. Then her eyes widened, filling with tears as she recognised what it was. A bouquet of winter greenery and a small wreath.

“We went picking leaves for you, since there are no flowers,” Georgina said with a grin.

“This is for your hair,” Isabel explained.

“Sisters...it’s beautiful.” Rosalyn swallowed hard, unable to find words. “It’s just beautiful.”

“We’re so glad you like it!” Georgina said with a big grin. “I shall put it here. Be careful...it’s got some little prickles.” She put the bunch of trailing ivy, conifer and holly sprigs on the table. It was tied with red and white ribbons.

“Will this do, for the veil?” Isabel asked carefully, holding the wreath. Rosalyn nodded, swallowing hard.

“It’s beautiful,” she said softly. “It’s so beautiful. Betty will arrange the veil with it.” She turned to smile at Betty, who nodded.

“I shall take care of it, miss. It shall be a challenge.” She grinned and giggled.

Rosalyn smiled as she watched Betty carefully lift the delicate gauzy white veil. With meticulous hands, Betty took the simple silk loop meant to secure it and tied it into the elaborate wreath of greenery her sisters had lovingly crafted for her. All the grateful, happy emotions in her throat made it impossible to speak as Betty lowered the wreath onto her hair and she carefully picked up the bouquet. She smiled down at it. Since it was the middle of winter, she had not thought that she would have a bouquet or a wreath. But her sisters had somehow contrived both—and they were just right. They reminded her of so many beautiful moments.

“Oh! Sister! Look at you. You look lovely,” Georgina breathed.

“Yes. Come and see in the looking glass,” Isabel insisted.

Rosalyn went over to have a look at her reflection. She drew a deep breath, touched and amazed and excited all at once.

The gown that she wore was of a simple style, made of thick white silk. The long skirt fell from a high waist that was decorated with a thick white ribbon. The sleeves were long, extending down to her hands, the upper section of the sleeves full and slightly puffed. The dress swept to the floor in front, with a train trailing perhaps half a yard behind her. The delicate, gauzy veil cascaded down her back, merging with the train that followed in its wake. Rosalyn gazed at her reflection. Her hazel eyes seemed enormous, framed by soft, pale curls that framed her slender face. The back of her hair was arranged in a neat chignon, hidden beneath an inch-thick wreath of ivy and holly that encircled her head. The fine veil draped over it, falling gently to frame her face.

Her throat tightened with excitement and wonder and she gazed down at her hands, which clasped the pretty bouquet. The arrangement exactly matched the wreath in her hair. She gazed at her sisters, her eyes filled with love. They beamed back.

“Are you ready?” Georgina asked solemnly.

“We’ll go out first. You should descend the stairs alone as is proper.” Isabel inclined her head, adding emphasis to her words.

Rosalyn swallowed hard. Her eyes filled with tears, joy mingling with the knowledge that she would be going away from her home. She thought of Callum, his strong face filling her mind, her heart overflowing with the love that she felt for him. And besides , she thought with a wry smile , it will not be long before I see Georgina again, at least —if things unfold as I imagine.

“I am ready,” she said softly.

Georgina and Isabel looked at one another and then solemnly walked forward. They wrapped their arms around Rosalyn, holding her tight. She struggled to hold back her tears. She wrapped her arms tight around them and hugged them with all the force of her care.

“That bouquet is prickly,” Georgina objected. Rosalyn laughed and released her hold on Georgina, the bouquet still firmly clutched in her hand.

“Thank you, sisters,” she said softly. “I love you both so much.”

“We love you too,” Georgina echoed. Her big dark eyes were full of tears.

“We’ll see you often,” Isabel promised, her voice firm though tears collected in her lovely black eyes as well.

“I will see you, too,” Rosalyn assured them. She waited until they had gone out of the room and then she embraced Betty and walked silently to the door. Her silk slippers were soundless on the wooden floor, and then she was walking down the stairs and towards the front door, ready to begin her new life.

Papa and Sebastian were at the foot of the steps. Rosalyn took her father’s arm, her heart thudding in her chest. The household staff were gathered at the foot of the steps, watching her proceed towards the front door. The housekeeper and the cook were crying. Rosalyn squeezed their hands, her heart filled with love and thanks.

“Bless you, Miss Rosalyn,” the housekeeper stammered.

“We will all miss you so much,” the cook said softly.

Rosalyn thanked them, her heart full. Then she was walking with Papa down the path towards the chapel in the grounds.

Despite the original plan to have the wedding at the duke's home in the Midlands, they had decided instead to travel to her family estate in Sussex for the wedding. Rosalyn's heart lifted as they walked slowly towards the chapel where her family had taken mass all her life. Isabel, Georgina and Sebastian went in ahead of them, and she and Papa walked slowly down the empty path together.

At the door, she gazed into her father's eyes. He blinked, his own tears threatening to fall.

"Bless you, my daughter," he said softly. "I love you."

"I love you, Papa," Rosalyn whispered. She squeezed his hand. She knew that she would see him often, but not every day—the Midlands were too far for that. She swallowed hard and focused on the door. She had a new life ahead. A wonderful, exciting life with Callum.

Papa helped her to cover her face with the veil. Then he opened the door and they walked into the chapel.

It was dark at first, and Rosalyn struggled to see. The light from the snow outside had been much brighter than the interior, especially through the veil, and it was difficult to orient herself at first. They walked slowly down the aisle. A tall, dark-clad figure stood at the altar. It was Callum. He was standing slightly turned away, his pale face in profile, his thick black hair blending with the shadow, along with his dark grey velvet jacket. He turned and her heart soared.

Two steady, unwavering grey eyes held her own and she could look nowhere else.

She smiled through the veil, smiling so wide that her cheeks hurt. Her heart was soaring, her soul rejoicing with love. Callum must have seen her smile despite the gauzy lace because he grinned back and his smile seemed to light the chapel. She could look nowhere else.

The vicar stood beside the altar, and he, too, smiled when he saw them approach. He cleared his throat and began the ceremony. Rosalyn gazed at Callum. He gazed back.

The words of the ceremony rose and fell in a steady chant, and though Rosalyn tried to focus, the thudding of her own heart drowned out much of it. Her mind and heart were consumed with thoughts of Callum, and the overwhelming joy that surged through her, leaving little room for anything else.

“...and do you, Rosalyn Grace Rothwell take thee Callum Alexander Stanhope to be your lawful wedded husband?” the priest asked. Rosalyn swallowed hard.

“I do,” she said, softly but firmly. She had never meant anything more sincerely in her life.

The vicar turned to Callum. “And do you, Callum Alexander Stanhope, take thee Rosalyn Grace Rothwell to be your lawful wedded wife?”

“I do.” Callum’s voice, firm and deep, rocked through her soul.

The ceremony continued and Rosalyn’s heart thudded as they reached the concluding words. She gazed up at Callum as he turned to face her. Very slowly, very tenderly, he drew back the veil that covered her face. He smiled as he smoothed it carefully over her hair. Rosalyn’s heart raced as he leaned toward her and, so slowly, so gently, pressed his warm, firm lips to her own. She shut her eyes, joy flooding her heart as, so sweetly, so tenderly, they kissed, their lips meeting in a union that made her soul soar.

He straightened up and, slowly and shyly, they turned to face the congregation. Rosalyn blinked, tears filling her eyes as she gazed at all the joyful faces.

They walked down the aisle. As they reached the door, the small crowd in the church erupted in cheers.

“Congratulations!” Georgina yelled, her high, clear voice carrying above all the others. Rosalyn’s heart filled with love.

“Blessings on you both,” Isabel called, more softly.

“Congratulations,” Sebastian said loudly. Beside him, Harriet beamed, calling out her own congratulations to them both.

Rosalyn’s ears were filled with the sound of so many murmurous voices, shouting congratulations and well-wishes as they walked out into the daylight. Her heart was filled with love and thankfulness. Callum grinned at her, taking her arm.

“You are not cold, are you, dear?” he asked softly as they walked across the lawn. They would sit down for luncheon with her family and then proceed to the coach for the first part of their journey northwards to his home. She smiled and shook her head.

“Not too cold,” she said, though her teeth were chattering in the dress, her feet in their silk slippers icy on the cold stones of the path.

“I would offer to carry you,” Callum said with a grin as they walked briskly towards the house, where the staff waited to offer them congratulations. “But I think your dignity would not allow it.”

Rosalyn tilted her head, grinning at him. “Perhaps one day I might let you,” she teased.



“Mayhap,” Callum said, laughing, and he took her hand and they half-ran up the path, laughing in delight, to reach the warmth and shelter of the house.

In the doorway, the kissing bough still hung. It was a week before Epiphany, and nobody would touch the Christmas decorations before then. Rosalyn gazed up, seeing it as Callum did. Without warning, Callum wrapped his arms around Rosalyn, making her gasp as he lifted her off her feet. Then he pressed his lips to hers and held her close in a big, firm, lovely kiss.

Rosalyn kissed him back, then let out a delighted laugh as he twirled her around and set her on her feet again. He took her hand and they walked into the hallway, ready to start their new lives together, full of love and joy.

The End

Thank You for Reading “ The Duke’s Festive Proposal” !

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:11 am*

Hugh, Seventeen Years Ago

Thunder crashed outside Westendale Manor, sparks of lighting flashing through the sky through the window. Hugh startled awake to one of those flashes, gasping, through another fitful waking moment. Had he even properly fallen asleep yet?

His wide eyes glanced towards the window as another roll of thunder rumbled through the countryside. His small body quivered beneath the bed covers as he tried to burrow down and forget about the storm.

Just sleep , he willed himself. Mama will come to comfort you soon.

He whimpered, closing his eyes.

Once again, he drifted off fitfully, unsure of how much time passed before he was awoken again.

It was not by thunder this time. Hugh sat bolt upright in his bed, blinking in panic. The air was heavy and thick with smoke. He followed the trail to beneath his bedroom door, and beyond, flickering lights flashed.

“Has the storm come into our house?” he thought, his sleepy thoughts muddling what was happening. But before he could do anything or cry out for his mama, his bedroom door burst open. A wave of heat rushed into his face.

It is not the storm , he thought, panicked. It is a fire!

Behind the figure in the doorway, fire blazed through the hallway.

“Master Winterbourne.” The figure grew closer, but Hugh was paralyzed. “Master Winterbourne, forgive me, but we must get you to safety.” The butler coughed into his sleeve. Before Hugh had a chance to say anything, he was pulled up. And then he was taken—out of his bed, towards where those flames licked up the walls, destroying everything in its wake.

He watched in terror as the butler ran with him, right through the bedroom door.

“Mama!” Hugh yelled. “Papa!” But the fire tore his cries from his mouth and devoured them too.

“Please hold your breath as best as you can, Master Winterbourne!” the butler shouted, as he raced Hugh through the halls of the east wing. Hugh couldn’t help looking around in fright as he clung onto the butler’s jacket, eyes wanting to snag on something that would help him know where his mama or papa were. But the butler kept running, kept him close, and kept telling him to keep his mouth closed.

Debris fell, crackling resounding through the rooms and hallways. He could hear the harsh pants of the butler as he struggled to hoist Hugh for so long and run. What is happening ? Hugh wanted to ask, as terror tightened his chest. Smoke concealed his home, and paintings were falling victim to the flames as they dashed through to the staircase.

Heat pressed at Hugh’s back, through his thin pajama shirt, and he cried out as the butler ducked from more debris.

“I will get you outside, Master Winterbourne, please just hold on.”

The instruction came with as much tight panic as Hugh felt. Still, he could only cling

on and watch as ruins fell around him. The butler raced them down the stairs of the east wing but as they reached the first landing, a deep crack sounded from above. The butler halted in fright, and Hugh looked up in time to see a flaming beam as it plummeted from the rafters above.

“Master!” The butler shouted and threw Hugh forward, but it wasn’t enough. As his shoulder hit the stairs, and he cried out, the beam came right for him. He tried to roll out of the way but even though he rolled fast, still that flaming, wooden pillar came hurtling for him.

“Help!” he cried helplessly but then all he knew was heat. Pain burst across his face as the beam soared past him, embers and flames jumping. A scream tore from Hugh’s throat, and he was aware of another crackling sound.

His breaths came in panicked bursts because that wasn’t just the halls and the paintings crackling—it was his skin.

He screamed and screamed, sobbing in pain and distress, hands twitching to grasp his face. The smell of burnt flesh hit his nose nauseatingly. Hugh’s vision went dark, or perhaps it was the smoke, but he felt utterly too light as arms wrapped around him. He moved, each jostle sending more stabs of pain through his face, and suddenly the cool embrace of the night air was a brief reprieve until the heat settled back in a moment later.

“He needs medical attention!” A voice yelled but Hugh’s vision was still going spotty with darkness.

“Where’s Mama?” he thought he asked, or maybe he didn’t, because nobody answered him. It was wet—tears, or rain. Both. As tears slid down his cheeks, and rain pelted his face, as if the sky wanted to cool down his skin and save him from the fiery grips of whatever had happened, Hugh lay there, immobile.

Crackles and the snapping of wooden beams falling, and the roll of thunder, and voices. It all reached him in a storm of noise that he wished he did not have to hear. Footsteps walked past him and every time their flurry of steps went past, the shift in air caused more agony to ripple through his face. Buckets of water were carried past. Some splashed over him.

Voices snapped to be careful but Hugh peeled his eyes open again.

Mama? Papa?

His head felt weak but he still lifted it, trying to find his parents in the chaos. Servants regarded him with expressions of alarm and trepidation. A wave of dread engulfed him as he perceived their horrified gazes upon him. What had transpired? Yet, where were his parents? He strained to seek their familiar visages. His mother's dark tresses, elegantly coifed into a refined bun, came to mind, and his father's deep, warm brown eyes, frequently alight with mirth, haunted his thoughts.

Where are they ? He thought desperately, a sob escaping him.

Time passed, and Hugh screamed at anyone who came near him. He kicked and thrashed, ignoring their pleas. All he did was beg and cry for his parents, telling anyone who would listen that he did not understand why they weren't there. He didn't know how much time did pass but soon, the sky above began to lighten, and the buckets got less and less, and servants retreated from him and towards the manor.

As dawn broke over Westendale Manor, Hugh met the eyes of his butler.

"Master Winterbourne," the butler said, his voice hoarse. "I am here to support you." There was a graveness about his face that Hugh didn't like. The pain in his face was no longer sharp and searing, but now a dull, aching heat. He accepted the butler's outstretched hand, wincing as he moved, for any motion seemed to aggravate the

affliction that awaited him.

He heard whispers, glances at him as he was helped up.

Only ten years old, the poor thing , one whisper came from a maid.

He shall remain looked after , another said. We should not speak of his business, only await our new employer.

Hugh barely registered the words. He was dizzy and a nausea had settled within him.

The butler's hands were on his shoulders as he was steered around. I am going home now , Hugh thought. He is taking me back inside where Mama and Papa are.

His thoughts broke off as soon as he saw the wreckage and devastation before him. The entire east wing was in charred ruins, blackened beyond recognition. Smoke still poured from the house as the orange flames no longer raged through anything in their path.

Windows were smashed through, and the roof had caved in. Walls crumbled, and a charred shell of the east wing stood in its tragedy against the breaking dawn.

“Master Winterbourne,” the butler said, his voice soft. “I am sorry to inform you that the Duke and Duchess of Westendale did not make it out of the manor. Your parents did not survive the night.”

Before Hugh could process the horrifying news, he heard hurried footsteps approaching, a physician rushed by his side, his expression grave yet determined. He had been summoned for the boy, the butler had said, with the weight of loss heavy in the air.

Hugh fell to his knees, tears falling down his face, and suddenly, he raced for the smouldering manor, screaming for his parents because that could surely not be true !

“No,” he moaned, in pain, in tragedy, in grief. “No, no, no. Mama—Papa!”

Hands caught him and stopped him from getting any closer.

“Please, Master,” the butler said, his voice thick. “I am so sorry.”

Hugh’s wails should have buried the sun beyond the horizon so the day did not have to begin, for he did not want any day to begin without his parents there. His screams tore the deathly silent morning apart, and he did not care that his skin cracked and crackled with each wail.

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Hugh moved automatically in the days following. He was taken from his bed, the very bed he now hated, for his parents had last been alive when he had been in his bed, and he should have stayed there .

Questions rolled through his young mind. Why had the butler saved me? Why did my parents not leave? Why did I have to be the one who got rescued ? I wished I had gone with them.

He stared blankly as food was placed before him once he was dressed and seated in the dining room. He ate alone, and wept silently, as constables combed his father’s study in the east wing.

“The Duke had a candle burning,” he overheard several days after the fire. “It was among many papers and ledgers, and His Grace must have forgotten about it and retired for the night.” They looked at Hugh, who kept his head down. He now saw

how people looked at his face: in utter horror.

“This has been a tragic accident, Master Winterbourne,” one of the constables said. “Pray, accept my heartfelt sympathies during this sorrowful time.”

Their words meant nothing to him. He stayed silent, built up his walls, and retreated into the heaviness of his mind. His face ached with the burns he now knew had seared right down his face but that was nothing to the grief burning through his heart. He moved from room to room only when instructed. Otherwise he remained still, a statue, a lost boy with no parents in a house that had taken them from him but should have taken him, as well..

In the days that followed, Hugh found a cane by the door, one of his father’s promenading canes, and he forced his legs to move. Each room he came by had a reflective surface of some sort. One by one, Hugh smashed every mirror, and when the butler tried to stop him, Hugh only screamed at him. He was a beast now, he knew that, and he used it to keep the butler away.

“Leave me be!” he cried out, wielding the cane. “Do not stop me.”

He could not bear to see the scar, to see the permanent damage of the fire—to not only feel it through grief but be the starkest reminder of what had happened. Hugh collapsed into angry, devastated tears, surrounded by the destruction of his own bedchamber, which he had ruined, lest no reminders linger of the beast that he had become.

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Years passed, and Hugh grew older, and as he did, the shunning of himself grew deeper. His grandfather took over Westendale Manor. He was a cruel man who forced Hugh to dine with him, to show his face, but Hugh resisted and argued. Every



argument pushed him further back into his reclusive state. He often hid away in his father's study, hiding his face, his scar, his grief.

And Hugh did not speak a word to anyone in the years following his parents' death.

News of the night of the Westendale Manor fire spread through London, and Hugh never once let the memories fade. They haunted him until he had built up walls so high he could not even peer over them. But he did not wish to. More time passed, and Hugh's grandfather passed away, leaving the dukedom to him. He despised every moment of it, hired a steward, and proceeded to lock himself away in his study.

He was a beast, and he was afraid of seeing it reflected in the eyes of others.

To be alone was to remain safe and unjudged.

Hugh let more time pass isolating himself with such determination that he could hardly entertain the notion of any alternative. Westendale Manor was now his sanctuary and his prison, where the world did not have to see his scars—the ones on his face, or his heart.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:11 am*

Hugh, Present Day

The countryside air was refreshing as Hugh stepped out of his hothouse, looking at the expansive, rolling countryside beyond the grounds of Westendale Manor. Nearby, a host of birds tweeted their early afternoon song, and he turned to find their flutter of wings in the trees as he closed the door to the hothouse and strode away.

Each step took him further away from his sanctuary and towards Westendale Manor, and his mood grew fouler at the thought, as it always did, of being trapped within those oppressive walls. His gaze flicked over the east wing. It had long since been repaired but he still felt a roll of nausea whenever he looked at it for too long.

His ever-present scowl twisted as he strolled across the manicured lawn. Springtime bloomed around him but he ignored it all, wishing he was back in his hothouse already.

There is solace to be found among the plants , he thought to himself. At least they do not look at me in horror .

The sunlight made him squint further, and the sun's heat prickled the back of his neck, but he paid it no mind. He cared only for the sun and what it would do for the orchid he'd begun nurturing in the late winter, into early spring, ready for the sun to help it bloom to life. Each petal he had caressed was velvety, and it was the only time he did not have to worry about being watched. When he was in his hothouse, it was simply him and the petals and the scent of mint, herbs, and ferns, rising up. The flowers spoke in a language of color and beauty. He did not need words, and that was why he had begun to covet his hothouse so thoroughly years ago. No servants were

required in there, for he enjoyed doing everything himself. His grandfather had rarely ventured out to the gardens, and Hugh was left to his solace and his rare plants.

As soon as he passed the entrance of the manor, where the glass walls did little to shield him from the sun but still offered a semblance of cool air, he felt the tightness in his chest return. But as soon as he adjusted to the absence of his peace, he was stopped by a woman—one of the very few who still met his gaze – his housekeeper. He did not speak to her, the words thickly clogged in his throat. He nodded at her instead.

“Your Grace.” She inclined her head respectfully. “Lady Eleanor awaits you in the drawing room. She is expecting your cooperation to have tea with her.”

He gave her another curt nod and went to stride past her but she murmured, “Oh, Your Grace? You might wish to change your gloves.”

Hugh glanced down at the gardening gloves he had been wearing, as if he truly was very reluctant to let his time in the hothouse be over. Slipping them off, he put them in her outstretched hand.

“I shall see that they will be there for your next use,” she assured him.

He walked on past her, through the hallway, ignoring the paintings surrounding him. Disapproval somehow had been painted in the eyes of the former Dukes—all passing down the Westendale title. They bore into him as he passed by each one.

I know I disappoint you , he thought sourly. But what choice did I have ?

The door to the drawing room was quickly opened by a footman who nodded at him, and he walked in, immediately spying Lady Eleanor, his aunt.

“Your Grace!” she greeted, rising as he entered. “I woke up this morning thinking that it has been a while since we last had tea together. I wished to steal you away from those plants you love so much. Would you humour an old lady?”

She sat primly on the edge of her chair as did he, and she smiled brightly at him. You are not old, he thought.

“The housekeeper informed me that I would find it quite difficult to persuade you to leave that hothouse, but I did instruct her to make the attempt,” Lady Eleanor said as she picked up the teapot to pour them both a cup of tea. He eyed the sandwiches and delicate dessert treats that had been set out. “But it appears you were already done for the day, were you not? It is a beautiful day. As much as I love your passion for botany that I believe I myself ignited in you, it is good to get some sun on your face.”

Hugh gave a grunt of response and picked up his cup, swallowing the scalding liquid in one mouthful. He did not wince as it went down his throat. Eleanor, as well as Mrs. Simmons, was one of two ladies who looked at him properly. Who actually saw him beyond a burned, scarred face, and she did not falter in her regards of him today.

“Do tell me of your latest botanical experiments, dearest nephew.” She settled back in her chair, smiling cheerfully. The duke eyed his aunt silently. She knew full well that he did not speak, and even if he did, it would certainly not be to the extent of explaining his experiments. She kept chattering, filling in the blanks of his silence. Hugh’s mind strayed on the peculiar plant he was currently nurturing. It had a strange lilac look to it at the very center of the veins on the leaf.

He was proud of its cultivation but he did not feel the need to express that to his aunt.

He poured another cup of tea, sipping this one. Lady Eleanor brushed back an errant curl. She shared her dark hair with her sister, Hugh’s late mother, and it almost hurt to look at the similar mannerisms. The years he’d been alive without his parents had

surpassed the years he'd had them, so time had dampened many of his memories, but he always remembered how she brushed stray hairs back into her bun with a warm smile, elegant and graceful, always.

His heart lurched, and he looked away.

"I must admit I did not only ask you to tea to talk about botany," Lady Eleanor confessed moments later. He paid her no mind, still sipping his tea. He loved his aunt dearly, as much as his reclusive heart allowed, but he truly wished for solitude. "We have received an invitation from our neighbours, Lord and Lady Hartley."

Hugh's head snapped up, his gaze alighting on his aunt. They narrowed as he corrected her, finding his voice. She always did manage to get him to break his silence.

"You have received an invitation," he amended. "As you well know, I have no interests in social events."

His voice came out harsh, a sharp slice of a rejection, and his aunt's smile faltered.

"Come now, nephew," she said softly. "Surely you understand that, as a Duke, you have duties. I know you did not ask for it, nor even particularly like it, but it is important to maintain your social connections. Not just with the Ton but with the people in your dukedom. They should see you, Your Grace. They should know you do not wish to live your life reclusively in this manor."

He shook his head, his temper flaring. He never quite could keep it down—especially since his grandfather had shown him that being angry was acceptable, for he had acted that way himself very often. Their only difference was that Hugh's was internal, whereas his grandfather's had spiraled outwards.

He glanced at his aunt. Did she really expect him to attend such an event?

Setting his teacup down, it slammed down against the saucer, and the delicate china quivered. He heard his aunt's sharp inhale as silence descended over both of them. The tea was the color of bark, and he stared into it to avoid the hurt in his aunt's gaze. But he could not—he outright refused—to attend any societal event. He despised the expectations put upon him in his role. But one look at the way Lady Eleanor drew herself smaller at his frustrated silence had guilt spiraling through him. She is simply another person I disappoint. Except she can voice herself, and I have to hear that as well as see it in her face.

Beneath that, though, there was fear. Genuine fear of what would happen if he gave into her request.

He stood to his feet, pacing the length of the drawing room by the window, shaking his head. He could not face the outside world, he simply couldn't. He hid himself away for a reason. For he had tried, endlessly, but the people of the Ton were ruthless and cruel, and he was fearful and monstrous.

His aunt's eyes tracked him. He was a caged animal to be watched, and he hated it. All they ever do is watch. Eyes on me everywhere.

But despite her worry over his anger, he looked back at her and saw determination. She would do everything in her power to have him attend, and he could not allow it.

“Hugh,” she said, her voice a firm but quiet tone. “Perhaps it shall be good for you to attend. It shall be a small step to you rejoining society. I am saddened to watch you spend your years behind these walls.”

A growl built in his throat. I do that for a perfectly good reason. Clenching his jaw, Hugh's step was faltered as he caught his vague reflection in the window. The

tightened muscles in his face made his scar starkly stand out. Red edges of faded, folded scars, from where he had been stitched and healed. He closed his eyes, and a spearing, phantom flame cut across his face.

The clock chimed in the drawing room, and he startled, opening his eyes but not before he turned away from the window.

“I have... I have been away from my work for too long,” he told his aunt. “Please excuse me.”

He stalked to the door and left her behind, ignoring her look of disappointment. Yet it was not a surprise, he supposed. And she would not be surprised at his behavior, for she expected this of him, and somehow that made him feel more wretched.

He retreated down the hallway, up the stairs, and into his study, where he slammed the door shut and exhaled deeply. Hugh buried his face in his hands, yet upon encountering the disfigured flesh, he recoiled in horror and withdrew

How could he ever leave his manor?

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Standing in her bedchamber, Henrietta turned her gaze from the busy London street beyond the window to her lady's maid, Lucy Dutton. The young girl was folding a beautiful pale blue dress into the trunk, along with her other belongings for the journey to the countryside.

"I am quite looking forward to this ball," she said to Lucy. "It has been quite some time since I saw my sister, but from her letters, I know she is making an excellent viscountess. This house gathering will be a grand way to spend time with her."

"Indeed, milady," Lucy answered, smiling over her shoulder at her. "You shall have a most wonderful time in the countryside. The viscount's home there is very beautiful."

Henrietta had visited her sister in the countryside since her marriage to Lord Hartley, a wealthy viscount.

"Their love match is very admirable." Henrietta sighed, sinking onto her bed. "But I do not care much for that sort of thing. You know me, Lucy. I wish for... broader horizons." She gave her lady's maid a secret smile. She glanced at her bedroom door, listening for a brief moment for any sign of footsteps on the stairs or down the hallway. When she heard none, she hurried over to her writing desk.

In there was a secret compartment within the top drawers. With a key that hung on a chain around her neck, she unlocked it and reached in to close her fingers around a leather-bound journal. She brushed her fingers over the pink string that tied the front and back cover together, enclosing her deepest secret.

"Tuck it between my gowns," Henrietta whispered, handing the book to Lucy, who



did as instructed. “That way, even if anybody thinks to check my trunk, it shall not be seen. Perhaps between the second and third gown at the bottom.”

“Of course, Henrietta,” Lucy whispered, giggling. When they found themselves in private, Lucy addressed her by her given name as the two of them had become close friends, perhaps unconventionally so. But Lucy enjoyed talking, and Henrietta had always wished for a close friend to confide in who did not only talk of suitors and balls. Ever since Caroline had left to marry Lord Hartley, Henrietta and Lucy had grown closer, their loneliness blossoming into a friendship.

“Have you written anything new of late?” Lucy asked.

“Since you asked me yesterday?” Henrietta teased. “No, I do not believe I have.”

Her journal was filled with her deepest secret: her love of botany. It detailed every plant she loved, every herbal remedy she had recreated and concocted herself, and every note on plant growth, herb tending, and optimal flowering seasons. It was her pride and joy, and her most coveted passion.

It served as the link to her great aunt Ruby Wentworth, and the summers she had spent at her great aunt’s manor.

She was ever so kind to me , Henrietta thought. Her great-aunt had lived out in the countryside, in a sprawling manor that was covered in wisteria. Every day had been spent in the sun, beneath her parasol, wandering the gardens, exploring the different paths, crouching down in her fine gowns to take notes on the flowers that bloomed along the pathways and fountains. It had been extensive, endless, and Henrietta had delighted in the luxury of it all.

Aunt Ruby’s manor had allowed her to take specimens of plants from around the world, herbs and plants she could not find in London, or even in the surrounding towns. The manor had been filled with sunshine and warmth, not only from the

season but her aunt's manner. She had been loving, kind, attentive, and cultivated Henrietta's love of botany.

In contrast, the coldness of Turner House, the townhouse where she lived in London with her parents, was unsettling and upsetting.

"I was thinking about—"

"Henrietta!" Her mother's shrill voice came from downstairs. It was an alarm—a bell to answer, always a demand and never a request. It made Henrietta shudder. "You must make haste in your preparations! I shall not endure the embarrassment of telling the viscount that his sister-in-law is the reason we are late."

"We are not even departing tonight," Henrietta muttered to herself. Then, to Lucy, she resumed, in a whisper, "I was thinking about finding a plant of some sort that might aid migraines. I understand peppermint and ginger root do but... I wish to find something that can be ingested without a lot of preparation. Something to chew on, perhaps. I think I can concoct—"

"Henrietta! I shall not ask you again."

Her mother's sharp voice rang through the house, and Henrietta stood up straight, as if the countess was in the room directly. Lucy met Henrietta's gaze knowingly, sighing. It was not just Henrietta who suffered the burden of her mother's icy impatience and rigid ways, but Lucy, too. As her maid, Lucy went everywhere with Henrietta. She knew exactly how the countess would behave, especially at a ball that her own daughter held as a viscountess.

"She shall be insufferable in the countryside," Henrietta whispered, trying not to show her distress. But Lucy reached out and squeezed her hand encouragingly.

"And as always, I shall help you through it," she promised. "Now, let us not forget

why Lady Goodheart is frustrated in the first place. We must finish your packing and have your trunk ready to depart with everybody else's."

"Quite," Henrietta muttered. "Heaven forbid I make everybody late. Not to mention that there could be delays on the road itself. I should be honoured my mother thinks so highly of me that me delaying packing shall delay the whole ball!"

Lucy sniggered but they hushed themselves.

"Do not be late for dinner," came Lady Goodheart's voice once again. "We are going for several days, Henrietta, you do not need your whole wardrobe."

Henrietta rolled her eyes. It was not a whole wardrobe she took the time to pack but her belongings that meant a lot to her, that she felt empty without if she were to leave them in Turner House. Her journal, of course; a locket from her aunt Ruby, even if she did not wear it; her favorite charm that she held for good luck; and a seeing glass, a small, flat spherical piece that helped her to better see the plants she examined. Her mother thought of Henrietta as a blushing, dolled-up lady of the Ton, and Henrietta played the part well but it was the botanist in her that packed the trunk, not a lady needing many gowns to only last a several days' worth of a journey.

"Of course, Mama," Henrietta answered dutifully. "I shall take care to do as you suggest."

The footsteps echoed down the hall, retreating. Henrietta rolled her eyes and turned back to watch Lucy fasten her trunk closed.

"I have rather good feelings about your trip to the countryside," Lucy whispered. "I believe you shall find this plant you are looking for among your sister's estate."

"It shall be a new turn in my research if I do," Henrietta decided, nodding. "Now, I shall attend to the preparation of dinner before my mother faints from her incessant

exclamations.

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There was the silence of a spring day, with only the breeze to weave through the grasses, sending them billowing—a tranquil solitude that Henrietta craved.

And then there was the silence of the dining hall that evening.

The stark contrast nestled within her heart until Henrietta could no longer bear it. She was not often one to reduce silences but today she simply could not stand the heavy silence, broken only by the clinking of cutlery.

“I think Caroline will be glad to see us, do you not think, Mama?”

Her mother spared her a brief, withering glance as she pieced asparagus into her mouth. Pointedly, her mother paused. “Henrietta, if you take your mind off your sister for a moment you might begin to focus on your true task for visiting the countryside.”

“Indeed.” Lord Goodheart, her father, interjected. “Henrietta, you must focus. The ball will be ample chance for you to begin meeting suitors. Only today, at the gentleman’s club, some other lords were discussing their sons who shall be in attendance.” He gave her a meaningful look. “That includes Lord Philip Barnsdale.”

“You shall be on your best behaviour,” her mother interjected.

Henrietta stared back and forth between them, realizing she had made a mistake in breaking the silence.

“Yes, Mama. Yes, Papa.”

“That means no soil beneath your fingernails,” her mother chided. “And Heavens forbid your lady’s maid do her job in presenting you properly. I shall never live down the embarrassment of when you greeted Lady Barnsdale at the end of Season ball last year with a mint leaf in your hair!”

“It was a fern,” Henrietta mumbled.

“None of this mumbling, Henrietta,” her father scolded. “You shall speak with confidence and grace, as your governess instructed you.”

“I have not needed a governess in some years, Papa.”

“Then why is it you are not married, hm?” Her mother questioned. Between the two of them, Henrietta’s mood dropped and dropped, until she miserably pushed around her vegetables.

“Of course, in attendance, there shall be the viscount’s brothers,” Lord Goodheart said. “Lord Hartley has proven an excellent match for Caroline. He has a brother not two years younger than him.”

Henrietta fought the wrinkle of her nose. “Papa, I only wish to spend some time with my sister.”

“And you shall seek out suitors while you do that. You are twenty years old now, Henrietta, you cannot expect Caroline to cater to your side at every social gathering.”

“I do not,” she argued lightly.

“There will be none of that at the ball,” Lady Goodheart snapped. “Pray, do refrain from any impertinent retorts, Henrietta. It is expected that you maintain a demeanour most polite and express a sense of gratitude. You must embody the image of a most proper young lady, as we have endeavoured to cultivate. However, for the love of

Heaven, do ensure that Lucy attends to the brushing of your hair with greater diligence next time. Goodness, there are quite a few tangles near your visage. Such a state is simply unacceptable.”

“Do not blame Lucy,” Henrietta spoke up, frowning. “She was packing my things and I told her my hair looked perfectly fine.”

Her mother gave a scoff. “It is perfectly not fine. We shall have none of this unkempt appearance when you enter Lord Hartley’s estate.”

Their voices continued, and Henrietta lapsed into silence.

“Your posture is awful, Henrietta. Did you not listen to your governess when she taught you the proper way to hold oneself? And your face! We must do something about the uneven blush. We cannot have you looking as though you are coming down with something in front of Lord Philip Barnsdale.”

“Indeed, no.”

“And remember not to eat too much cake, Henrietta. You do not want to fill out all your dresses after we have spent a lot of money at the modiste for the Season.”

Henrietta craved that silence of a spring day. She craved the whisper of the wind through the grasses, and the peace of her aunt Ruby’s gardens. So very expansive and tended to by Henrietta herself. In Ruby’s house she had shed the propriety of a lady, donned some gloves, and gardened right along with the staff.

She could almost feel the velvety petals beneath her fingertips, and the coarseness of some plants she grew. The way the blades of grass would irritate her soft skin but she never once minded.

“Above all, Henrietta, you must make a good impression. Your sister did, so I do not

understand why you make it such a difficult task.” Her mother shook her head as her father listed off other suitors in attendance at the gathering.

Their names left her mind as soon as he said them, scattered like dandelion seeds on the wind.

Her mother poked at her fingernails, her hair, her dress, the downturn of her mouth as she sullenly ate.

“And do not forget to ask polite questions about your suitors. I am sure your father can tell you about each one so you have some background knowledge and questions to think of,” Lady Goodheart continued. “You have a duty, as did Caroline, to marry well, Henrietta. You cannot burden us forever with your life in this house. You must marry and do well for yourself. Heavens, after two failed Seasons you have caused us to be the topic of enough gossip. Do you not think of us at all, Henrietta?”

She swallowed, shrinking into herself.

“See? This is the sort of silence that shall have men like Lord Ashley Darby walking away!” her father complained. “He is young, wealthy, a very eligible man. I hear he and his cousin, Lord Patrick Tenson will be there as long as we shall be. These are the men you should speak with, Henrietta.”

“You must marry,” her mother continued. “You must secure a match and see your family looked after in society. You have a duty to us.”

Henrietta nodded, vacantly forking more vegetables into her mouth so she did not have to talk. But her mind was drifting far from the table, as the weight bore down upon her. The societal pressure was never something she endured well at all, and she felt that pressure close up her throat. She swallowed, wincing, wishing they would stop just for a moment.

I shall not pursue botany when all I am good for is societal duties , she thought miserably.

Her mother's voice rang in her ear. Henrietta nodded at the right moments, long accustomed to her accusation and criticism. They were ashamed of her, and soon, they would throw her not at young lords but older men who were desperate for a wife.

And they would give her to them, knowing her chances dwindled with each failed season and each smear against their name.

Her shoulders were rigid with the worry of that being her future.

But she did not want to do what society expected of her. She wished to stay in the field of flowers in Aunt Ruby's house, and bury herself in the grasses and herbs and the earthly smell of soil and not have to worry about balls or marriage.

It had brought her the utmost freedom, those summers spent at her great aunt's estate.

"Henrietta."

The snap of her mother's voice brought her back. She startled, blinking.

"Yes, Mama?"

"Have you finished eating?"

Henrietta looked down at her half-eaten dinner. "Yes, Mama. I—I am too excited for the ball and having another chance to meet suitors to fully finish my plate."

Her father looked pleasantly surprised at the confession. Henrietta could play the part for now. "May I retire for the night? I wish to sleep well before we travel."



“Of course,” her father said gruffly. “Good night, Henrietta.”

When she made it back up to her room, she closed the door and unpinned her hair, letting it fall about her shoulders in her long curls. Lucy was there, knocking on the door, prepared to ready Henrietta for bed.

She combed her hair out—including the tangles—and unlaced her dress before helping Henrietta into her nightgown. Together, the two sat on the edge of Henrietta’s bed, their voices pitched low.

“I know I must feel excited about the gathering and the suitors I shall meet but all I can feel is the utmost dread, Lucy,” she confessed. “My mother and father need me to meet a suitor and be courted into a marriage, like Caroline, but I simply cannot promise my life away in such ways!”

“I understand, Henrietta,” Lucy murmured sadly, clasping her hands. “And as much as I wish to encourage you to pursue only what you wish to I know it is not so simple so I shall hope for this. That whomever your suitor is, I hope he has the most vast garden so you may lose yourself among the brambles and the plants.”

Henrietta let out a weak laugh. Perhaps Lucy was right. Whether it was one young lord or another, there was hope that he would have beautiful gardens to rival even Aunt Ruby’s.

“The weight of society is too heavy,” she lamented. “Some days I cannot bear to shoulder it.”

“But you do not have to do so alone,” Lucy reminded her.

“No,” she agreed. “I shall not. For you will be with me the whole time, and I will weep and wail with you if ever I am forced into such a terrible arrangement.” She mustered a smile but her mind was on the countryside.

Perhaps Lucy was right. Her future husband might have a beautiful garden, and if he was old, then perhaps he would not notice if she snuck out to enjoy her botanical love. If he was cooperative, he might even let her build her own hothouse.

Maybe she could find one thing positive out of all of this.

My sister's gardens are bound to yield something. I shall sneak out at some point to explore .

If only she could escape the watchful eyes of her parents. But she would find a way. She had to.

For among the flowers she might find, Henrietta was sure she would feel close to her Aunt Ruby once again.