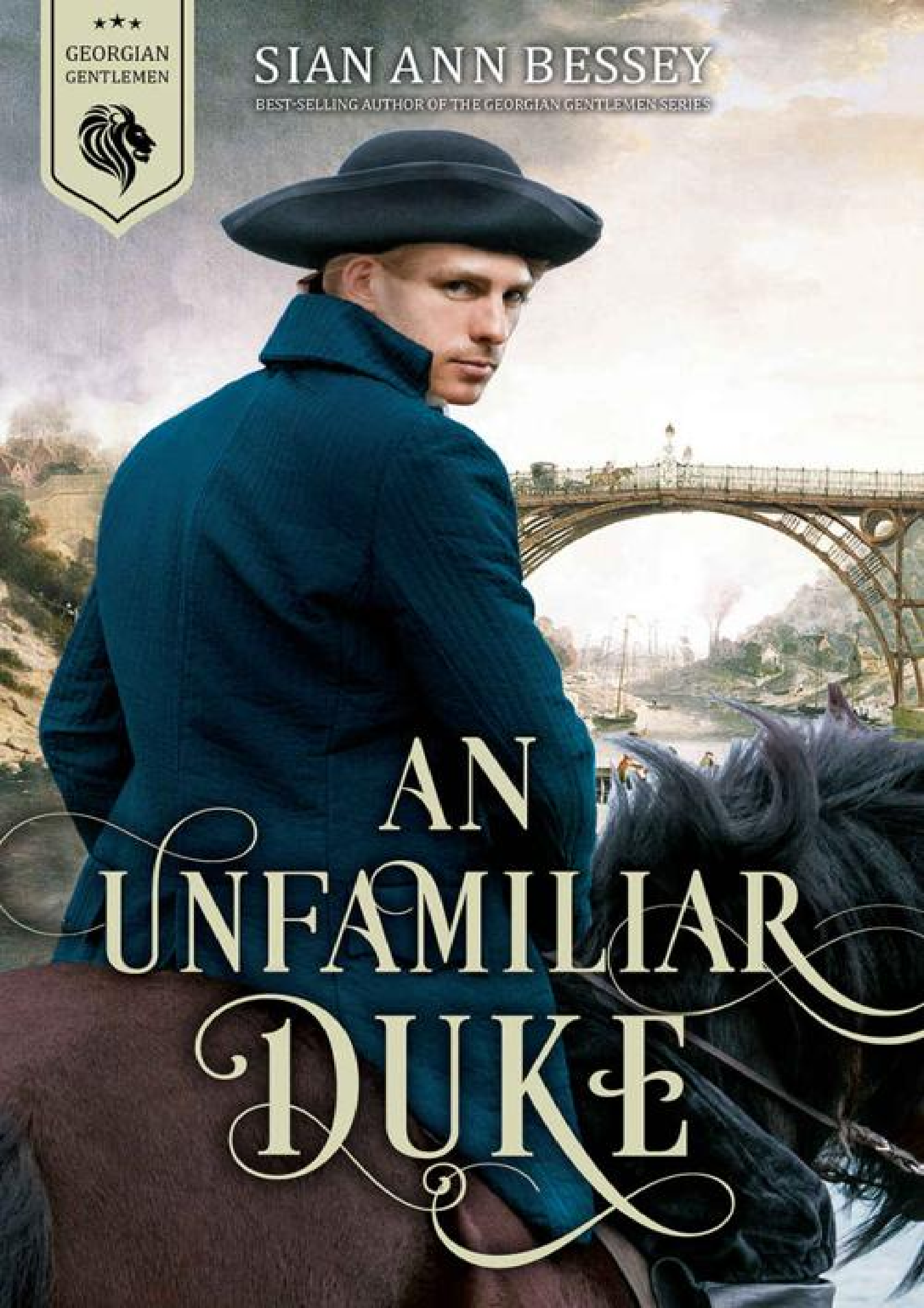


★★★  
GEORGIAN  
GENTLEMEN



SIAN ANN BESSEY

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF THE GEORGIAN GENTLEMEN SERIES

A detailed illustration of a man in a dark blue coat and hat riding a dark horse. He is looking back over his shoulder towards the viewer. In the background, a large stone bridge with a central arch spans a river. Beyond the bridge, a landscape with a factory emitting smoke and a church spire is visible under a cloudy sky.

AN  
UNFAMILIAR  
DUKE

# AN UNFAMILIAR DUKE

A HISTORICAL ROMANCE

FROM THE BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF THE GEORGIAN GENTLEMEN SERIES

SIAN ANN BESSEY



Covenant Communications, Inc.

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# PRAISE FOR SIAN ANN BESSEY

“With a slow-paced and character-driven story, Sian Ann Bessey intriguingly whisked me into her world of creativity. She uses short and twisted sentences, accompanied by vocabulary that highlights the setting of eighteenth-century Britain. She beautifully accentuates the culture and lifestyles of London and its neighbors, the luxuries the different social classes enjoyed at that time, their unique taste in architecture, and more. I loved it. The gradual development of the plot and Bessey’s subtle way of conveying her ideas give *An Unfamiliar Duke* a general tone of suspense and adventure. The author wonderfully incorporates various themes into her work. They included family, technology, marriage, religion, social classes, and more. The characters were amazing and wonderfully developed. I loved how the author uses introspection to reveal the traits of her characters. This gave me a deeper understanding of Sebastian’s and Rosalind’s actions, choices, and ideas. I loved how she narrated the pair’s feelings. Lovers of romance stories will find this a great read. This is the fourth installment of the Georgian Gentleman series, but *An Unfamiliar Duke* is a stand-alone book. It is a great piece of work.”

—Readers’ Favorite five-star review

“Bessey has quickly become one of my favorite authors for historical fiction. She is a master at meshing actual historical details with a fictional story.”

—Inkwell Inspirations

“Sian Ann Bessey has that magical ability to transport you into the pages of a book, where you can’t help but live and love alongside the characters who are as real as you and me.”

—Traci Hunter Abramson, best-selling, multi-award-winning author of the Dream’s Edge series

“Historical fiction at its finest!”

—Esther Hatch, author of *A Proper Scoundrel*

“Bessey easily endears her readers to her protagonists, and her wry sense of humor is delightful.”

—Historical Novel Society

### Praise for *An Alleged Rogue*

“The story is plotted well, with some areas foreseeable and some coming as complete surprises. The ending is dramatic and satisfying.”

—*Meridian Magazine*

“Any book by Sian Bessey demands my attention, and *An Alleged Rogue* is no different. Ms. Bessey’s stories often provide obscure and fascinating details about history or, in this case, the cider-making process during the Georgian Era. This story truly is a coming of age for Phoebe Hadford, a fashionable young lady with a kind heart and a man, Adam Norton, Lord Dunsbourne, desperate to rebuild his family fortunes after his father was swindled out of theirs. Lies, tattered reputations, and a diabolical forger all run the gamut in this satisfying tale. *An Alleged Rogue* is sure to please a wide readership.”

—Paige Edwards, 2021 Readers’ Favorite Book Award  
finalist for

*Danger on the Loch*

“I have really enjoyed reading the Georgian Gentlemen series.”

—Timeless Novels

“The author beautifully plots the novel and injects the new characters timely, which makes it the most entertaining read.”

—All Novel World

“This book has a great plot. I loved the dangerous element; it kept me enthralled. And the ending was amazing!”

—My Book a Day

*For my sister Sarah*

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

AT THE COMPLETION OF EVERY book, I find myself in awe of the miracle of the process and am mindful that I could not have done it alone.

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# CHAPTER 1

*Finley Park, Surrey 1772*

“NO GIRLS MAY ENTER MY tree house.”

Rosalind Ainsworth placed her hands on her hips and glared at the foliage above her head. “I am not a girl; I am a young lady.”

Lord Hartford’s face appeared through the greenery. “You are a girl.” Sebastian Lumley, the future Duke of Kelbrook, was nothing if not dogmatic. “But even if you were a young lady, it would not matter. This is *my* fortress, and until we are married and I am obligated to admit you, you may not come up.”

At eleven years of age, Rosalind had given marriage little more than a fleeting thought. But this much she knew: she would never marry the ill-mannered fourteen-year-old currently shouting at her from the midst of the large oak tree on the grounds of Finley Park. “If marriage to you is my requirement for entry, I shall never set foot in it.”

“Yes, you will.” His scowl matched her own. “When you are one-and-twenty. My father told me so.”

Rosalind barely caught her vehement denial before it burst forth. Although some might consider her still a girl, she had sufficient training to know that one never contradicted a duke, even when what he purportedly said was ludicrous. She clenched her fists. “Jonas, I am returning to the house,” she called.

“Very well.” Her younger brother’s voice floated down to her. By virtue of his gender, he was already encamped in Lord Hartford’s lofty fort, and although she recognized the hint of regret in his words, she knew he would not sacrifice his opportunity to play in the tree house to keep her company.

Turning her back on the oak tree and its male occupants, she

marched away with her head held high. The unfairness of the situation stung, but at least she could have the satisfaction of proving Lord Hartford wrong. Her father may be merely a viscount, but his word was as good as the duke's. He would tell her exactly how she could refute the infuriating young nobleman's claim that she would one day be his wife. And tomorrow, after she had put Lord Hartford right, her family would leave Finley Park and she need never speak to the irritant again.

The sound of voices penetrated Rosalind's stormy thoughts, and she turned to see her mother and the duchess walking together through the rose garden on the other side of the expansive lawn. The flowers were in bloom, and Rosalind knew full well that her mother would linger there as long as possible. Rose gardens were one of Lady Langton's favorite places.

Not wishing to settle for doing something so demure when she could have been climbing a rope ladder into a tree, Rosalind veered away from the ladies and toward the house's large stone terrace. Raising her skirts, she hurried up the eleven stairs—she knew there were eleven because she had counted them on her way down—and ran across the smooth flagstones to the french doors leading to the library. At the threshold, she paused a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dimmer light.

“Well, good afternoon, young lady. Have you been enjoying the Finley Park grounds?”

Her father, Lord Langton, sat in a capacious leather armchair beside the fireplace, a thick book on his knee.

“Not really,” she said, her shoulders drooping. Now that she was indoors and away from Lord Hartford's eyes, there was no need to keep up the appearance of indifference.

“Dear me. That is not the response I expected from someone who has been given the freedom to explore the grounds of one of the finest houses in England.”

“Not complete freedom,” Rosalind said. “I was not allowed into Lord Hartford's tree house.”

Her father set his book on the corner table beside his chair. “And why is that, child?”

“Because I am a girl.” Hot tears pricked her eyes, but whether they were caused by frustration or disappointment, she could not tell.

“Ah, I see.” Her father patted the spot beside him on the chair. She crossed the room quickly and squeezed into the small space. Her father put his arm around her shoulders and drew her close. “Am I to assume that your brother is currently in said tree house?”

“Yes. Jonas is two years younger than me, but he was allowed in simply because he’s a boy.”

“Perhaps Lord Hartford wished to spare you the difficulty of climbing up the ladder in a gown.”

“He cannot possibly care about that. My gowns will surely be bigger and wider when I am one-and-twenty.”

Her father frowned. “What does being one-and-twenty have to do with climbing the ladder?”

“Lord Hartford said I cannot enter the tree house until we are married and that the duke told him the wedding would occur when I turn one-and-twenty.” Rosalind stiffened. “But he is wrong. I will never marry someone so odious as Lord Hartford.”

Her father remained uncharacteristically silent.

She stole a glance at him. At the sight of the troubled lines creasing his brow, the first whisper of unease entered her heart. “Father?”

“Lord Hartford is correct, Rosalind. The marriage agreement between the two of you was written when you were an infant. It states that you are to be wed when you reach your twenty-first birthday.”

If Rosalind could have leaped from the chair, she would have. As it was, her father’s arm held her in place even as his devastating words sank into her heart. “You cannot mean that. I would rather never marry at all than marry Lord Hartford.”

Her father shook his head. “I do not think you will feel the same when you are older.”

“Yes, I will.” She was as adamant as she was horrified. “I cannot think of one thing that Lord Hartford has to recommend him.”

“Not one?”

Rosalind clasped her hands together in a vain attempt to control their trembling. “No. Not a single one.”

“He is to be the Duke of Kelbrook. Does that mean nothing to you?”

“Only that he will be even more pompous when he’s older than he is now.” A vision of gangly Lord Hartford wearing a white wig and ordering her to do his bidding filled her mind. She shuddered and reached out to clutch her father’s sleeve. “Please, Father. You must do something. Tell the duke it was all a big mistake.”

“I cannot do that, Rosalind.” His eyes were serious now. “The contract was signed in good faith. The duke and I have been close friends for decades, but he has done us a great courtesy to agree to this match.”

“But *I* never agreed to it.” Desperation clawed at her throat, leaving her voice raspy.

“You are eleven years of age. You do not have a say in the matter.”

Rosalind had rarely heard her father speak so sternly. She swallowed hard and removed her hand from his arm. No say? But it was her life. Her future.

“I signed the document,” he continued. “I am honor bound to uphold it. As my daughter, you are similarly obligated.”

Rosalind scrambled to her feet. This time, he did not stop her. She wanted to scream, to cry, and to beg him once more to reconsider. But she knew it was useless. He was resolute. Forcing her leaden feet forward, she moved toward the door.

“It is for the best, Rosalind. I truly believe that.”

She kept her face averted as her tears began to fall. It mattered little that her father believed it. She did not.

## CHAPTER 2

*Scotland, 1782*

SEBASTIAN LUMLEY, THE DUKE OF Kelbrook, leaned over the large oak desk, studying the diagram lying on its surface with a critical eye. Where was the flaw? Andrew Meikle was so close to perfecting his automated threshing machine that Sebastian could almost see the completed contrivance standing in a field of wheat. His gaze moved to the large drum Meikle had constructed in the corner of his workshop in East Lothian, Scotland. The engineer's goal was to have the paddles he had affixed to the cylinder beat rather than rub the grain to remove the chaff. But something was preventing the grain from circulating the drum correctly, and they had yet to determine what it was.

"I dinna think ya'd still be here, Yer Grace. Were ya not intending to be on yer way to London by this time?" Meikle paused at the entrance of the small room to consult his pocket watch.

Offering the Scotsman a rueful look, Sebastian stepped away from the desk. "You are making it most difficult to leave, Meikle. The new adjustments you suggested for the main crank have changed everything."

Meikle chuckled. "Don't you be usin' my invention as an excuse to put off marrying yer young lady, Yer Grace. I've been happy to have ya here. Yer eye for detail has saved me hours of work on this fool invention, but I won't be keeping ya when you've other more important things to be done."

Sebastian grimaced. Working alongside Meikle for weeks in the privacy of the Scotsman's workshop had caused Sebastian to let down his guard, and he had probably shared more than he should have with the mechanical engineer—particularly with regard to his pending nuptials. With both Sebastian's parents and Lord Langton deceased, Miss Ainsworth, Lady

Langton, and their respective solicitors were the only ones who knew of his arranged marriage contract. He had wanted it that way. And given the fact that, to the best of his knowledge, no rumors regarding their situation had circulated the *ton*, it would appear that Miss Ainsworth was of a similar mindset.

“You are correct, Meikle. I should be on my way.”

The engineer may have guessed at Sebastian’s reluctance to go through with a wedding to an essentially unknown bride, but it would not do to have him realize the extent of his dismay over being saddled with Miss Rosalind Ainsworth for the rest of his life.

He’d had no interaction with the young lady since she had stayed at Finley Park with her family when he’d been about fourteen. The memory of how he’d finally retreated to his tree house simply to escape her constant chatter haunted him. However would he manage a wife who was as vivacious as he was reserved? She would surely fill Finley Park with a constant stream of houseguests and demand that he attend every social function imaginable. Sebastian shuddered. He could think of little that he would enjoy less.

By virtue of his title, he received invitations to more events than he could possibly attend. He occasionally made an appearance at small dinner parties, but he rarely set foot inside a ballroom. He did not see the point. Why put himself through the torture of being assessed by every female in the room when his bride was already determined, especially when he would much rather spend the time in his workroom at Finley Park. Indeed, the freedom to temporarily ignore Society’s expectations for an eligible nobleman was the only silver lining to his otherwise untenable marriage contract.

“I’ll be glad to have ya return any time you’re able, Yer Grace. It’s been an honor to have ya here; yer help has been invaluable.”

Meikle’s voice brought Sebastian back to the present. “If I can be of further assistance, do not hesitate to send your calculations or drawings to me at Finley Park.”

The Scotsman eyed the large roll of paper on the desk with

a frown. “Ya know as well as I do that taking those papers out of this locked room is a risky move, Yer Grace. But I may take ya up on the offer yet. Especially if I canna get the paddles turning as they should.”

Sebastian nodded. The battle to be the first to develop an instrument that would mechanize harvesting grain was as competitive as a horse race at Epsom Downs. And promised an equally lucrative prize. “It will come, Meikle.”

“I sincerely hope so, Yer Grace. After so many disappointments in the past, it wouldna do for us both to have spent this many weeks making changes only to have it come to naught.”

“This time will be different, you mark my words.”

Donning his hat and gloves, Sebastian offered his friend a farewell nod, then he turned his back on the sketches and exited the workshop.

It was raining, a steady drizzle that deepened the greens of the trees and darkened the grays of the buildings lining the road leading out of the Scottish coastal town. Sebastian’s coach stood waiting a few yards away. A quick glance assured him that his trunks had already been transferred from the rooms he’d rented for the last few weeks to the rear of the conveyance.

“Are we ready, Perkins?”

His driver was standing under the eaves of the nearest house, making the most of the limited shelter until he was forced to face the inclement weather from his bench atop the carriage. At the sound of Sebastian’s voice, he stepped forward to open the vehicle’s door. “Yes, Your Grace.”

“Very well.” Sebastian climbed inside. “We have a long drive ahead. Rain notwithstanding, I should like to make it as far as Newcastle before sunset.”

Perkins grinned. This late summer rain was nothing to the frigid downpours and snowy blizzards he navigated in winter. “Very good, Your Grace.”

\* \* \*



Numbers had always fascinated Rosalind Ainsworth. She loved counting steps in dances and stitches on her tapestries, estimating the number of people attending events and the percentage of ladies wearing the same-colored gown. She maintained her own financial ledgers to keep track of her pin money and marked off weeks on the calendar with the precision of a governess with an abacus. It was no wonder, therefore, that at any given time, she knew exactly how many days there were until her twenty-first birthday. Today that essential number was thirteen.

Thirteen more mornings before her life was no longer her own. Her stomach churned, and she set down her piece of toast, watching as their butler, Rutherford, crossed the dining room with the silver salver containing this morning's post. She met her mother's eyes. For the last month, her mother had been anticipating a wedding—had commissioned a special gown to be made for Rosalind, even—but at present, neither of them had heard from the prospective groom. Rosalind still clung to the hope that somehow the duke, with the help of his solicitors, had found a loophole in the marriage contract their respective fathers had drawn up, but there had been no word on that either.

Were Rutherford's footsteps even more slow and deliberate than usual? Rosalind smoothed her hands over her pale-blue skirts and took a deep breath. Many more mornings like this and she would be undone. As much as she dreaded hearing that her wedding was to proceed as it had been planned twenty years ago, she would be relieved to have the agony of not knowing behind her. She could barely remember what it was to look forward to the arrival of the post.

"Thank you, Rutherford," her mother said as the butler placed the salver on the table beside her breakfast plate.

"My lady." He bowed politely before exiting the room as quietly as he had entered.

Rosalind picked up her piece of toast and took a bite. No matter that she'd put extra marmalade on the bread, it was tasteless. Forcing herself to chew and swallow, she watched as her mother sifted through the envelopes. It appeared that even

though the London Season had officially wound to a close, most of their friends had not yet returned to their country homes. They were still sending out invitations.

“The Marlboroughs are holding a ball on Saturday,” her mother said, setting aside a cream-colored card. “I daresay it will be the last one this year.”

Rosalind managed a faint smile. “I believe you said that about the Osbournes’ ball two weeks ago.”

“I did, didn’t I?” Her mother laughed softly. “The weather this past fortnight has been unseasonably pleasant. Perhaps that is why so many people have stayed in Town.”

Rosalind nodded. She wished the same could be said for them. Oh that she could spend the next three weeks without a care in the world, going for rides in Hyde Park or taking tea with Elinor Spencer and Margaret Fotheringham. As it was, she and her mother remained in London for one reason: to await word from the Duke of Kelbrook.

Her mother picked up the last envelope on the salver and studied the handwriting before looking up to meet Rosalind’s eyes.

Rosalind’s heart stuttered. “Is it from him?”

Without a word, her mother broke the seal and withdrew a single sheet of paper. She glanced at the signature at the bottom of the page. “Yes,” she said simply. “Shall I read it out loud?”

Rosalind clenched her fingers beneath the table. “If you would.”

“Dear Lady Langton,” her mother began. “Please forgive this belated response to your letter dated July 29th—”

“Wait,” Rosalind interrupted. “You wrote to him?”

“I did.” She was unapologetic. “I thought he might need a gentle reminder that it was his duty to inform you of his intentions.”

Rosalind stared. Her mother was correct, of course. Not knowing what lay ahead had been almost as torturous as

imagining the worst. But few ladies were courageous enough to confront a duke with a charge of negligence. “Thank you, Mother.”

The look in her mother’s eyes reminded Rosalind of the Langton Manor barn cat’s fierce protectiveness when Rosalind had attempted to pick up its newborn kitten.

“You are my daughter, and I will not see you suffer needlessly. It was time to do something.”

Rosalind swallowed the lump in her throat. More often than not, women’s hands were tied, particularly with regard to legal matters. She knew full well that her mother could not undo the contract her father had drawn up with the late Duke of Kelbrook, but that she was watching out for her meant more than Rosalind could express.

“What else does he say?”

Her mother went back to the letter. “Please forgive this belated response to your letter dated July 29. I quit London the very day the parliamentary session ended and was already in Scotland when your letter arrived at Hartford House. As you can imagine, the postal service between London and East Lothian is frustratingly inefficient, and I received your missive only today.”

Her mother paused. “Oh my.”

“What is it?”

“This letter is dated September 3.”

Rosalind began counting days. “But that is almost four weeks ago.”

“Poor postal service indeed,” her mother said grimly before returning to the duke’s letter. “I hope to conclude my business in East Lothian before month’s end, at which point I shall return to London so that I might call upon you and Miss Ainsworth at Langton House on the first of October.”

“The first of October?” Rosalind could barely hear her own whispered words over the pounding of her heart. “But that is today’s date.”

“I believe it is.” Her mother set the paper down and squared her shoulders. “It appears we are to pay the price for the postal service’s delinquencies a second time.”

His Grace would be here today. Rosalind forced herself to breathe. “Did ... did he say anything more?”

Her mother shook her head. “It is signed, ‘Yours sincerely, Kelbrook.’”

No mention of the marriage contract or of his feelings about it. Had His Grace consulted his solicitors with regard to the document’s particulars? He must have. Else why would he be coming to speak with Rosalind at this particular time after having been silent for so long?

“It would have been helpful if His Grace had stopped to see us before leaving London,” her mother said.

“It would have been even more helpful if he’d attended some Society events over the last few years,” Rosalind said bitterly. “At least then I would know what my future husband looks like.” She took a deep breath, no longer able to hold back her fears. “Is there something amiss with him? I remember him as a tall, thin boy who seemed to have his wits about him, even if he wanted nothing to do with me.”

Her mother chuckled. “Since your naturally warm and welcoming disposition generally encourages friendships, I rather think most people would consider anyone who wanted nothing to do with you to be the epitome of witless, my dear.”

“Then why has he stayed away?”

“Perhaps he feels as uncomfortable about this marriage arrangement as you do.”

“Even if that were the case, it should not prevent him from socializing with others. I occasionally hear whispers that the Duke of Kelbrook is in residence at his townhouse, but he never appears at any of the balls or musical evenings,” Rosalind said. “If it weren’t for the fact that other gentlemen have mentioned his presence at Whitehall, I would think him a phantom.”

“I believe he does take his responsibilities in Parliament

quite seriously,” her mother said.

Rosalind had heard similar reports. Indeed, the little she knew of His Grace consisted of praise for his levelheaded comments and voting record in the House of Lords and curiosity over the inordinate amount of time he spent on the Continent in the company of the French brothers who purportedly believed they could make things fly by lighting a fire beneath a fabric canopy. She bit her lip. Perhaps His Grace was addlebrained after all; the latter endeavor did not seem remotely sensible.

Waves of despair licked at her simmering indignation. She dropped the serviette wadded in her hand onto the table and rose to her feet. “If you’ll excuse me, Mother, I should like to retire to my room for little while.”

Her mother’s sympathetic look did nothing to quell Rosalind’s warring emotions.

“As you like, my dear. No doubt, His Grace will wait until calling hours before making an appearance.”

Rosalind nodded and walked out of the room. The Duke of Kelbrook was coming to Langton House today. Today. He was coming today. Over and over again, the refrain echoed through her head, and by the time she reached her bedchamber, she feared she might lose the solitary piece of toast she’d managed to eat for breakfast.

Her maid, Nora, was in the room, placing Rosalind’s folded clothing in the chest of drawers. She looked up from the task as Rosalind entered.

“Pay me no mind, Nora,” Rosalind said, dropping into the nearest chair with a shuddering breath.

Nora went to pick up another chemise and then hesitated. “If you don’t mind me askin’, miss, are you feeling quite well?”

“Yes. No.” Rosalind moaned. “My stomach is a mite unsettled. That is all.”

“Can I fetch you something to relieve the discomfort?”

Rosalind mustered a weak smile. “That’s very thoughtful of you, but I fear that the only possible remedy to my current ailment would be to remove myself from Langton House entirely.”

Nora was too well trained to exhibit confusion at Rosalind’s odd remark; instead, she interpreted it as simply as possible. “I daresay a walk in the fresh air would be just the thing, if you feel up to it.”

Rosalind sat up, truly considering the idea for the first time. She would go quite mad if she stayed in her rooms until His Grace arrived. A walk would give her time to clear her mind and steady her nerves. “I believe I do. Would you accompany me, Nora? I should like to go right away.”

“Of course, miss.” Nora was already at the wardrobe. “Which hat would you prefer this morning?”

“The straw one with the large daisies, I think,” Rosalind said. She needed something cheery.

After handing Rosalind the wide-brimmed hat, Nora slipped out to fetch her own bonnet. Rosalind tied the ribbons beneath her chin and studied her reflection in the looking glass. Her thick dark hair was piled upon her head save for the ringlets framing her face. Her small nose and chin were unremarkable, the smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose regrettable, and her large brown eyes were currently filled with apprehension.

She took a steadying breath. This would not do. She was made of sterner stuff than this. Tugging at the lace on the sleeves of her gown, she raised her chin and nodded crisply at her reflection. Courage. She would find the courage she needed to face the Duke of Kelbrook, even if it took wandering the paths of the nearby park until midday to lay claim to it.

## CHAPTER 3

SEBASTIAN WALKED THE TREE-LINED STREET, enjoying the feel of the late morning sun on his shoulders. After having been confined to his carriage for the six-days' journey from Scotland to London, he had chosen to walk the short distance between Hartford House and the Langtons' residence. He had almost convinced himself that he was happy for the exercise, but truth be told, he was in no great hurry to arrive at his destination. This was a visit he had been postponing for some time.

He passed a governess with her young charges in tow. The lady inclined her head politely, the two children at her side chattering happily about their excursion to the park. A blackbird sang from a nearby ash tree, and from around the corner came the rumble of an approaching carriage.

“Quickly, Nora.”

The unexpected voice startled him. Sebastian slowed his steps, looking toward the sound. Beyond the bend in the road, the echo of feet hitting the pavement increased in speed, and over the sound of the vehicle's creaking wheels, the female voice reached him again.

“We must hurry. That may be his carriage.”

He spotted a blur of pale blue through the trees moments before someone barreled around the corner and ran straight into his chest. With a grunt of surprise, he staggered back a couple of paces. The young lady cried out in alarm, and he reached for her elbow.

“Steady now,” he said.

A large-brimmed straw hat covered in daisies effectively hid his assailant's face as she backed away.

“Oh my goodness! I do beg your pardon.” Her gloved hands rose to cover her cheeks.

“No harm done,” he said.

“I am glad to hear it, although that hardly absolves me from such unladylike behavior.”

Sebastian’s lips twitched. No matter the decoration on her hat, this lady was no wilting flower. Neither was she a tradeswoman or servant. Not only was her muslin gown of the finest quality and latest fashion, but her maid was also standing a few feet away, staring at them both with eyes the size of saucers.

He tilted his head slightly, hoping to catch a glimpse of the person beneath the wide head covering. “Is your balance restored?”

The hat moved up and down. “I believe so.”

Releasing her arm, he took a step back. She lowered her hands from her cheeks and raised her face. Her eyes were a deep, warm brown. Tiny freckles smattered her nose, and her perfectly shaped lips were parted in a hesitant smile. A red welt marked her left cheekbone, and unless he was mistaken, the injury was recent.

“Forgive me. I neglected to inquire as to whether you were hurt,” he said.

She raised her left hand again and probed her cheek tentatively. “It is nothing.”

Sebastian frowned. Surely she would not know to touch her face unless it pained her. She moved her fingers, and he spotted a drop of blood on her glove.

“You have grazed your cheek.”

She looked from her glove to Sebastian’s jacket, a hint of pink coloring her face. “I did not realize that a close encounter with a brass button might prove dangerous.”

Sebastian glanced down. Two rows of etched brass buttons sparkled against the cream-colored silk of his waistcoat, and to his dismay, those at the top were positioned at the exact height of the young lady’s wound.

“I confess to being equally uninformed. My tailor gave me no warning that these buttons might be hazardous to bolting



females.” He raised an eyebrow. “I hope you can forgive us both.”

The hint of a smile teased her lips. “There is nothing to forgive; I was completely at fault. I was in too great a hurry to reach ...” She paused midsentence, her open countenance shuttering before his eyes. “The mark ... is it terribly noticeable?” She looked at her maid. “Nora, can this scratch be concealed?”

The maid stepped forward and studied her mistress’s cheek. “I believe a little powder will do the trick, miss.”

The lady sighed with relief. “Then we’d best go and apply some right away.” She turned back to Sebastian. “Please accept my apologies once more, sir. I would promise to never fall victim to such unladylike behavior again, but as I shall have to run all the way home to make up for this delay, I would instantly be guilty of uttering a terrible falsehood—which would only add to today’s list of failings.”

Sebastian chuckled. Her forthright confession was as refreshing as it was unusual. “Be assured, your honesty is commendable and more than makes up for our somewhat indecorous meeting.”

Her smile was brief but lovely. “That is very generous of you, sir. Good day to you.”

“Good day,” he replied.

She glanced up and down the road. Upon finding it free of traffic, she darted across, leaving Sebastian standing on the pavement, watching in bemusement as she and her maid disappeared from view around the corner.

\* \* \*

Miraculously, despite being slowed down by the mortifying experience with a handsome stranger on Westchester Street, Rosalind arrived back at Langton House before the Duke of Kelbrook made his appearance. Albeit barely. Nora was applying the first dusting of face powder to Rosalind’s injured cheek when a footman arrived at the door of her bedchamber.

“I beg your pardon, miss,” Frederick said. “Lady Langton

requests your presence in the drawing room.”

Rosalind’s chest tightened. For almost two hours, she had pushed aside her anxiety regarding what lay ahead; with the footman’s words, it all came flooding back. “Thank you, Frederick. Please tell her ladyship that I shall be there momentarily.”

“Very good, miss.”

He turned to go, and she closed her eyes, digging deep for the fortitude she so badly desired. “I do not have time to put on a fresh gown, Nora, but do what you can to tidy my hair and hide the blemish on my face.”

“Don’t you worry, miss. I’ll have you lookin’ as fresh as one of them daisies on yer hat. The redness is not nearly so noticeable as it was. And if I may say so, this gown is lovely on you.”

Touched by her maid’s kindness, Rosalind opened her eyes. “Thank you.”

Nora smiled and patted a little more powder on Rosalind’s cheek. “’Tis nothin’ but the truth, miss.”

Truth or not, Rosalind found herself clinging to her maid’s reassurances five minutes later when she stood outside the drawing room door. Her mother was speaking—something about the weather—and a male voice replied. There could be no denying it any longer; the duke was here. Rosalind clasped her hands together, took a deep breath, and walked in.

“Ah, Rosalind!” Her mother spotted her immediately.

Across from her mother, with his back to the door, a gentleman rose to his feet. He turned to greet her, and Rosalind’s gaze moved from his gray coat with its gold embellishment at the cuffs and collar to his cream-colored waistcoat with eight finely etched brass buttons. Her gaze flew upward, and her mouth went dry. Surely this was some sort of cruel trick. How could the lanky youth with disheveled blond hair and a permanent frown be the same person as this broad-shouldered gentleman with well-groomed, light-brown hair and teasing blue eyes? Furthermore, how could he be the very

gentleman she'd literally run into on the corner of the street not more than a quarter of an hour ago? If she'd not caught a fleeting glimpse of his initial shock, she would have suspected he'd purposefully duped her. As it was, he concealed his astonishment and recovered his faculties almost immediately.

“Good day, Miss Ainsworth.” He bowed politely.

On shaking limbs, Rosalind dropped to a curtsy. “Your Grace.”

“It is a pleasure to see you again.”

Heaven help her. Would he say anything about their earlier, undignified meeting?

“Truly, it has been too long,” her mother said. “It must be almost ten years since we were all together at Finley Park.”

Rosalind grasped for the lifeline her mother had unwittingly thrown her. “Indeed. It has been ten years, three months, one week, and two days.”

A glint of humor shone in the duke's eyes. “Your visit to Finley Park must have been memorable if you have counted every day since then.”

Blast it all. Could she do anything else to make herself look more idiotic in front of this man? Attempting to ignore the warmth creeping up her cheeks, she moved to take a seat beside her mother. “I like numbers,” she said.

“As do I.” The duke waited until she was seated before reclaiming his chair. “Although I cannot claim to have ever made such an accurate accounting of the calendar.”

Rosalind refrained from telling him that she was equally adept at calculating time and that, according to the clock on the mantel, he had precisely twenty-three minutes before social protocols and her nerves dictated that he take his leave. “Is there anything in particular that you enjoy calculating, Your Grace?”

His blue eyes met hers, and she sensed that he was genuinely surprised by her question. “In order to manage the affairs of my family estate, I am called upon to tabulate figures

on a regular basis.”

“Do you not have a steward to do such tedious work?”

He chuckled. “I do, indeed, have a steward—a mighty good one, at that—but, I confess, I do not find adding and subtracting numbers to be tedious.”

Truth be told, neither did Rosalind, but His Grace undoubtedly considered her peculiar enough as it was. There was no need to add fuel to that flame.

“You are fortunate to be so inclined. But there is a vast difference between deriving satisfaction from a well-balanced ledger and the thrill of seeing numbers work their magic with such things as weights and measures.”

This time, there could be no doubt that she had taken His Grace off guard. He sat very still, as though contemplating his words carefully.

“You are correct, Miss Ainsworth, although I know very few who see it that way. I have seen numbers work their ‘magic,’ as you say, many times, and each has been a thrill.”

Rosalind leaned forward, her earlier unease temporarily superseded by her eagerness to know more. “Would you tell me one?”

He smiled, and she saw her own enthusiasm mirrored in his countenance. “Perhaps the most marvelous example occurred in France a few months ago. A gentleman by the name of Joseph-Michel Montgolfier built a box out of thin strips of wood. He carefully measured the sides so they were exactly three feet by three feet by four feet, and then he covered it in fine taffeta. Once completed, he crumpled some paper and set it alight beneath the box. The contraption then took to the air.”

Rosalind gasped. Were the rumors about a French contrivance that could fly true? “Did you see it yourself?”

The Duke of Kelbrook shook his head. “No, but that was only the beginning. Monsieur Montgolfier called in his brother, Jacques-Étienne, and together they increased the size of the original box by three so that its volume was twenty-seven times greater than the first one.”

“But that would make it too heavy to leave the ground.”

His Grace smiled. “So you would think, and so we all believed. But every skeptic was proven wrong. Not only did the craft take to the sky, but it also traveled over a mile before returning to the earth.”

“And this time, you witnessed it,” she guessed.

“I did.” His smile widened. “And it was every bit as thrilling as you might imagine.”

Rosalind could barely conceive of such a thing, but His Grace’s account left her wanting to know more. Not for the first time, she wished that ladies were offered the same liberties as gentlemen and that she were free to participate in such events. She looked away, wonder over what he had witnessed evaporating as awareness of her own confining reality returned.

“Is that what took you to the Continent last winter, Your Grace?” Her mother’s question filled the sudden silence.

“Yes,” he said. “I was there for several weeks.”

Rosalind heard the change in his voice and hazarded a glance at him. He was looking at her, his former enthusiastic expression replaced by a puzzled frown.

“And you were recently in Scotland?”

“I was.” His tone had become formal. “My return to London was made for the express purpose of meeting with you and Miss Ainsworth to discuss the details of the forthcoming marriage.”

*The forthcoming marriage.* Rosalind stiffened. Could the gentleman be any more impersonal? Any more disinterested?

“Am I to suppose that you would rather not participate in said marriage?” Rosalind asked.

He did not flinch. “Would you?”

She experienced a flicker of hope. There was nothing she or her mother could do to change a legal document, but perhaps His Grace had more influence. “Have you studied the contract

yourself?”

“I have. And I have discussed it at length with my solicitor. Regardless of your preferences or mine, our fathers drafted an inviolable bond. According to the law, not only is the release of significant estate funds tied to our marriage, but neither of us is free to wed another.”

“Why?” Rosalind’s voice was barely above a whisper, and yet it echoed around the room. “Why would they do this to us?”

“Because they wanted what was best for you,” her mother said. “Your father and the late duke had happy marriages that were arranged for them at birth. I allow that such contracts are less common now than they were fifty years ago, but that does not signify that they are inherently bad.

“You were our firstborn, Rosalind. Had we not had Jonas a few years later, the Langton estate would have been entailed to another, and your future would have been in jeopardy. Your father sought to protect you through this marriage contract.” She turned to face His Grace. “I believe the same can be said for your father, Your Grace. As the sole heir to the entire Kelbrook fortune, you would have been the target of every fortune-hunting young lady—and her parents—in England. I believe the late Duke of Kelbrook wished to spare you that.”

“I have no doubt the contract was drawn up in good faith, my lady, and I am grateful that my father chose to align my family with one as upstanding as yours.”

It was decided, then. Tears threatened, and Rosalind hung her head to hide them.

The duke cleared his throat. “Is there someone else whom you would prefer to marry, Miss Ainsworth? For my part, there is no one.”

Startled by the personal question, and his own admission, Rosalind looked up. He was watching her. His formal mask was still in place, but she thought she saw hesitancy in his eyes. A vision of the many gentlemen who had sought her out at social functions this Season flashed through her mind. Lord

Montgomery, Mr. Coombs, Mr. Sellers, Lord Marshall, and Lord Eppingham. Their attentions had been flattering, and she could own to being somewhat enamored by Lord Montgomery's friendliness and Mr. Sellers's handsome appearance. And yet, neither of them had invaded her dreams at night or captured more than a few minutes of her thoughts each day. She supposed that, at least, was something to be thankful for. "No, Your Grace."

She caught something—relief, perhaps—in his look before he spoke again. "Then, would you do me the honor of marrying me the day after your twenty-first birthday?"

It was the most unromantic proposal Rosalind could have ever imagined. The prospective groom was as dispassionate as the stone hearth, and she felt as though she were being offered entry into a gilded cage. And yet, in the oddest of ways, she was touched. The duke had shown her a basic courtesy. He had not needed to ask. They were to be married regardless, but somehow, his asking, and her voicing her assent, made a difference.

"Yes, Your Grace."

Theirs would always be an arranged marriage, but now, at least, it was one they had agreed upon.

His smile was more perfunctory than warm; her mother's was more relieved than happy. Rosalind could not bring herself to smile at all.

"Have you considered where you should like the ceremony to take place?" he asked.

"At one time, we thought perhaps the church in Little Tilbury, near Langton Manor, would be best," her mother said, "but seeing as we are gathered in London and the date is less than a fortnight away, perhaps a church here in Town would be a wiser choice."

"Do you have a preference, Miss Ainsworth?" he asked.

"No, Your Grace." Rosalind was discovering that it was impossible to have strong feelings when one was completely numb.

He shot her a troubled look. “None at all?”

Acknowledging that it was decent of him to consider her feelings, she attempted to rally. “Somewhere close by would seem to be the most sensible,” she said.

She had brought most of her belongings to London with her. It was not needful that she return to Langton Manor before the wedding. Indeed, it might be less heart-wrenching to leave for Finley Park from their townhouse than from her childhood home.

“I can make arrangements with the rector at St. George’s in Hanover Square,” His Grace said.

Her mother smiled warmly. The church situated in the well-to-do area of London was a highly sought location for a wedding.

“That would be ideal, Your Grace.”

“Then, consider it done.” He paused. “Would a small, private ceremony be acceptable?”

Rosalind nodded. She had no desire to be on public display. “My brother, Jonas, is presently on the Continent. He ... he left not knowing that my marriage would likely occur in October, and I would rather not call him home before he is ready. There is no one else other than my mother whom I would wish to be there.”

“We shall require two witnesses,” he said.

“Lord Bloxley is in London, Your Grace,” Rosalind’s mother spoke up again. “He and Jonas have been the best of friends since their school days. I believe he would be willing to take my son’s place as escort and witness.”

“Very well,” he said. “I shall provide a second.”

He stood, and Rosalind glanced at the clock. In precisely three minutes, the Duke of Kelbrook would outstay the customary half-hour limit for a morning call. It appeared that he kept track of time as well as she did.

“Will you not stay for tea, Your Grace?” her mother said as she and Rosalind also rose to their feet.



“You are very kind, my lady, but I do not wish to outstay my welcome on my first visit. Perhaps next time.”

“I suppose there will be a next time,” Rosalind said faintly.

The hint of a smile tugged at his lips. “If we are to be married, I think that might be for the best, don’t you?”

“Yes. Yes, I suppose so.”

He undoubtedly considered her comment completely irrational, but he had chosen to stay away for almost ten years and had given her no reason to believe he would suddenly change.

“You are welcome anytime, Your Grace,” her mother said.

The Duke of Kelbrook bowed politely. “Thank you, Lady Langton. Miss Ainsworth. I shall be in contact soon.”

## CHAPTER 4

LANTERNS GLOWED ALONG THE DRIVE, welcoming the Marlboroughs' guests to their large London home. Sebastian's carriage moved slowly toward the front of the house, pausing every few yards as those arriving in the carriages ahead of him disembarked. Through the window, he watched the steady stream of finely dressed ladies and gentlemen ascend the stairs and enter the building. It had been so long since he'd attended a London ball; his arrival would undoubtedly cause a stir. The muscles in his jaw tightened. He usually did everything in his power to avoid undue attention, but this time, he needed to be here. It was time to be seen with Miss Ainsworth.

Sebastian leaned back in the carriage seat. It had been three days since he'd stood in the Langton House drawing room to greet his future bride. His initial shock that the girl he recalled from his youth was so changed that he had not recognized her when she'd run into him on the street had turned to unexpected pleasure when she'd expressed genuine interest in the Montgolfier brothers' hot-air balloon. But then something had changed.

He had thought through their exchange countless times since then but still could not pinpoint what had happened. The engaging Miss Ainsworth had suddenly become aloof and indifferent, and he was left wishing he understood her better. He'd been a fool to put off their meeting as adults. The prospect of forcing himself upon a reluctant bride—particularly one he remembered in a negative light—had been so onerous he had allowed it to hold his future hostage. And by so doing, he had unwittingly held Miss Ainsworth's future hostage as well.

The carriage lurched to a stop, and a footman stepped forward to open the door. Sebastian exited. He stood at the bottom of the stairs and watched Lord and Lady Winchester enter the house together. Strains of music floated through the open door. Straightening his coat, Sebastian rolled his

shoulders. That Miss Ainsworth had not expected him to call again had been telling. It had also been motivating. He could do better, and this evening he would prove it.

Lord and Lady Marlborough were standing in the main hall, greeting their arriving guests. The elderly baroness's hair had whitened since Sebastian had last seen her, and the baron had gained a few more pounds around his ample girth, but they both welcomed him warmly.

"Honored to have you here, Kelbrook," Lord Marlborough said.

"Thank you, my lord."

Lady Marlborough tapped his arm with her closed fan and gave him a knowing look. "There will be many a young lady thrilled by your presence here this evening, Your Grace."

Sebastian forced a smile. There would be many a young lady sorely disappointed, then. He was here for one purpose and one person. Another gentleman approached from the doorway, ushering his wife and two daughters ahead of him. The Marlboroughs turned to speak with him, and Sebastian made his escape. He crossed the hall in a few long strides, coming to a stop at the entrance of the ballroom.

Candles flickered around the vast room, reflecting off the silver candelabras and casting wavering shadows across the walls. A small orchestra played in the far corner, surrounded by potted plants on Grecian pillars. Large portraits—presumably of Marlborough ancestors—hung in ornate gold frames around the room, watching the current occupants with glazed eyes.

Sebastian took the opportunity to survey the room himself. The dancing had already begun. Matrons sat in clusters around the perimeter of the room, watching and gossiping, while several of the gentlemen were situated beside the refreshment table. Already, the rapidly growing number of attendees made it difficult to identify specific individuals.

"By Jove, Kelbrook. Didn't expect to see you here."

Sebastian turned to see Lord Eppingham standing at his left.

“Good evening, Eppingham.”

“Well, yes. I’d say it’s a rather remarkable one if the Duke of Kelbrook deigns to grace Society with his presence.”

Sebastian shifted uncomfortably. Is that how his absence at these events was construed? That he considered himself above them? “I am only just returned to London,” he said.

“Is that so.” Eppingham appeared unconvinced. “Well, I hope you enjoy the evening, old fellow. Don’t suppose there will be many more Society events this Season.”

The music came to an end. On the center of the floor, the dancers bowed and curtsied. All around the room, people clapped. Sebastian turned to watch the flow of couples head toward the sides of the room. And then he spotted her. Miss Ainsworth was walking toward the rear of the ballroom on the arm of a tall, dark-haired gentleman. Sebastian did not recognize him, but before he could ask Eppingham for a name, his former schoolmate stepped forward.

“If you would excuse me, Kelbrook,” Eppingham said. “There is someone I should like to invite to dance, and experience has taught me that if I wait, another will claim her first.”

“Of course.”

Sebastian watched as Eppingham walked briskly across the room. The gentleman greeted a few people as he went, but his course remained fixed, and it wasn’t long before Sebastian realized Eppingham’s end goal. As the dark-haired stranger bowed deeply and kissed Miss Ainsworth’s gloved hand a fraction too long, Eppingham stepped in to offer her his arm.

From a distance, Sebastian watched her smile warmly and nod at the other gentleman. His stomach clenched. Unprepared for the involuntary response, he took a moment to order his thoughts. Reason told him that he had no call to be irritated. Miss Ainsworth looked beautiful in her peach-colored gown, with her hair pulled up in a mass of ringlets. That her small nose crinkled charmingly when she smiled was also indisputable. Ergo, every gentleman at the ball would likely

desire a turn on the dance floor with her.

He took a slow breath. None of the gentlemen in this room knew that Miss Ainsworth was already spoken for. Sebastian could not fault them for taking advantage of his absence. But it was well past time to put a stop to it. Eppingham had needed to move quickly to claim this dance. Miss Ainsworth would likely be requested for the next one moments after the gentleman returned her to her two friends in the corner. Sebastian would need to ensure that he was in position to reach her first. With a polite nod to a slight acquaintance at his right and the avoidance of eye contact with a mother and her two daughters on his left, Sebastian started around the room.

\* \* \*

The orchestra played the last notes of the minuet, and Rosalind dropped into a curtsy. Across from her, Lord Eppingham bowed and reached for her hand to lead her off the floor.

“Thank you, Miss Ainsworth,” he said. “It was a delight, as always.”

She smiled, as was expected, but it took effort. Ever since the ball had begun, she'd struggled to muster her usual enthusiasm for the dances. She had wondered if her melancholy was due to this likely being her last ball before she was a married woman. Although, if that were the case, it would seem that she should be all the more anxious for a wide array of partners rather than wishing for a turn at being a wallflower.

When Mr. Sellers's lips had lingered a little too long on her gloved hand, she had been tempted to snatch it from his grasp. And although Lord Eppingham was a pleasant enough dance partner, she had no desire for him to remain after returning her to her place at the edge of the ballroom. She hoped that he would move quickly to claim another partner.

Her friend Elinor Spencer was already off the dance floor. Elinor's partner for the minuet, Mr. Michaels, had claimed Margaret Fotheringham for the next dance. Elinor barely seemed to have noticed. Her attention was riveted upon something beyond Rosalind's shoulder.

Rosalind's curiosity burned, but to turn around and stare would be impolite, so she mustered one last smile for Lord Eppingham and slipped her hand free of his. "You have my thanks, Lord Eppingham," she said.

"The pleasure was all mine, Miss Ainsworth." He inclined his head politely, and then, to her relief, he turned to go.

The moment his back was to them, Elinor seized her hands and pulled her closer. "You are not going to believe who is here!" Excitement rippled through her whisper.

"Who?" Rosalind went to look, but Elinor stopped her.

"Do not turn around," she hissed. "He is coming this way."

"Who? Who is coming this way?"

"Oh my, but he appears even more striking in a ballroom than he does exiting the House of Lords."

"Elinor." Rosalind gave her friend's hands an impatient shake. "About whom are you speaking?"

"None other than the elusive Duke of Kelbrook," Elinor whispered.

Rosalind forced herself to breathe. "He is here? Are you sure?"

Elinor nodded. "I saw him once from across the road when Mother and I met my brother, Harry, at Whitehall."

Rosalind's heart raced. Why was the duke here? He never attended balls.

"Good evening, Miss Ainsworth."

Elinor's eyes widened. She released Rosalind's hands and took a small step back. Willing herself to remain calm, Rosalind slowly turned to face the Duke of Kelbrook.

"Good evening, Your Grace."

Although the ball was a formal affair, he had opted to forgo a white wig in favor of a slight dusting of powder on his light-brown hair. His coat and breeches were pale blue, offset by a gray waistcoat. This time, she noted, his six buttons were

mother-of-pearl, and they were polished to a smooth shine. The lace at his neck and wrists was crisp and white. He was, in fact, unnervingly handsome.

He met her eyes. “May I have the pleasure of the next dance?”

Did the Duke of Kelbrook know how to dance? The question was ridiculous. Of course he did. And yet, up until three days ago, she could not have envisioned the ungainly youth or the habitually absent adult doing anything so societal.

He raised one eyebrow, and to her horror, she realized she had yet to lower her eyes or respond. She hid her agitation in a curtsy. “I would be honored, Your Grace.”

He smiled and offered her his hand. She took it. His fingers were strong, yet his touch was gentle. He led her back onto the dance floor, and Rosalind felt the stares.

“Why are you here, Your Grace?”

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eyes. “Believe it or not, I was invited.”

Warmth flooded her cheeks. What was wrong with her? Whenever she was in the presence of this man, she spoke out of turn.

“Forgive me. I did not mean to imply that you were not welcome. Rather, I wonder what prompted you to accept the invitation when you so rarely attend such functions.”

This time, he met her eyes completely. “I came for you.”

“For me?” She stumbled, and his fingers tightened, steadying her as they took their places for the allemande.

“Indeed. And to alleviate any concern you may be harboring on the subject, I will add that despite my infrequent attendance at balls, I do know how to dance.”

Did the Duke of Kelbrook possess the gift of mind reading? If not, Rosalind’s face had surely given her away; it must be the color of a beetroot by now.

“I am glad to hear it,” she said, not daring to look at him.

“But if memory fails, the steps are easily counted. The trick is to do so without moving one’s lips. That way no one else is aware you are doing it.”

He chuckled. “Is it possible that you know someone who may have employed that very device herself?”

She fought to keep a straight face. “For shame, Your Grace. Are you suggesting that my footwork is not what it should be?”

“I have yet to see you dance the allemande, Miss Ainsworth, but if your skills are commensurate with your counting proficiency, I fear that I shall be hard-pressed to keep up.”

The musicians played the opening bars of the next dance piece, and Rosalind lost her battle. A small laugh escaped, and she could not stop herself from teasing him further. “Then you will simply have to try exceptionally hard, Your Grace.”

His blue eyes sparkled, and he lifted his arm. She turned beneath it, and the allemande began.

As far as Rosalind could tell, His Grace completed the dance without counting out a single step. And he did it flawlessly. She had rarely moved across the floor so smoothly. His lead had been just strong enough to place her in the correct positions without being so demanding as to prevent her from enjoying the dance. Indeed, when the orchestra played the dance’s final notes, she experienced an unexpected stab of regret.

His Grace bowed politely and then raised an eyebrow. “Well? Was I passable?”

“I believe you have been practicing in secret, Your Grace.”

“I cannot be sure, but I think that might have been a compliment.” He offered her his arm.

She smiled and placed her hand on his sleeve. “You may think that if you will.”

At the sound of his chuckle, a small chip of the ice around Rosalind’s heart fell away. His Grace may not be whom she



would have chosen to marry, but they had spent the last ten minutes very pleasantly. Perhaps there was reason for hope after all.

## CHAPTER 5

THE DUKE OF KELBROOK WALKED Rosalind across the room to return her to her friends. Margaret and Elinor watched their approach with undisguised interest. Mr. Sellers and Lord Eppingham were standing beside the ladies. Their eyes, and those of most of the matrons in the room, were also trained upon her and the duke.

“Do you always elicit this much attention?” Rosalind whispered.

“Unfortunately, it seems to be an occupational hazard when you are an eligible duke.”

Beneath her fingers, his arm was tense, and the teasing tone was gone from his voice. She glanced at him, noting the discomfort in his face. And like the first rays of sun in the morning, a glimmer of understanding came. Although she was comfortable in most large gatherings, she was not enjoying these curious stares at all. How much worse would it be for someone who, by nature, preferred to be in a private study, examining ledgers?

“You may have attracted people’s notice because you have not been seen for some time,” she said.

“Perhaps,” he conceded, but he did not sound fully convinced.

They had reached Elinor and Margaret.

Rosalind removed her hand from the duke’s arm. “Ladies,” she said, “may I present His Grace, the Duke of Kelbrook. Your Grace, this is Miss Elinor Spencer and Miss Margaret Fotheringham.”

The ladies curtsied, and the duke bowed.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance,” he said.

“Your Grace.” Elinor managed a wobbly smile.

“Such an honor, Your Grace,” Margaret said. “I had very

much hoped I would have occasion to meet you this Season.”

The duke smiled politely even as Rosalind squirmed at Margaret’s effusive greeting. Before her friend could say anything more, however, Mr. Sellers and Lord Eppingham joined the small group.

“I say, Kelbrook,” Lord Eppingham said. “Is it true that you saw that French flying contraption with your own eyes?”

“It is.”

Puzzled, Rosalind glanced at him. She had expected him to show the same enthusiasm he’d exhibited in Langton House when they’d talked about this very thing. Instead, he seemed guarded.

“Dash it all! There were any number of geniuses at Oxford when we were there—you included. It should have been an Englishman who first discovered a way to take to the air.”

“There are plenty of new inventions to be had, Eppingham,” the duke said. “Just because bright, hardworking men of other nationalities succeed does not lessen the accomplishments of Englishmen.”

“Constantly being beaten to the finish line is bad for the country’s morale.”

“Or motivation to try harder,” the duke countered.

“Forgive me, we have not yet been introduced,” Mr. Sellers began.

“My apologies,” Lord Eppingham interrupted to rectify the situation. “Mr. Nigel Sellers, may I present His Grace, the Duke of Kelbrook. Your Grace, Mr. Nigel Sellers.”

“How do you do?” the duke said, inclining his head.

Mr. Sellers bowed in return. “Quite well, thank you. And I own to being most intrigued by your suggestion that there are Englishmen on the cusp of new discoveries.”

“Yes, yes. Give us some details, Kelbrook,” Lord Eppingham said. “You were always one to be tinkering with one thing or another. I daresay you have a grasp on what some

of the great brains in the country are working on.”

From the corner of the ballroom, the orchestra began to play again. Vaguely aware that Elinor and Margaret had disappeared on the arms of other gentlemen, Rosalind remained where she was. It seemed that the Duke of Kelbrook’s presence at her side was enough to discourage other gentlemen, a fact that suited her very well. She was far more interested in the current conversation than in performing another minuet.

“Richard Arkwright’s spinning frame has revolutionized the textile industry, and he has recently taken out a patent for a carding engine,” His Grace said. “Then there is Thomas Farnolls Pritchard. One should not overlook the daring of his cast-iron bridge across the River Severn. It is a masterpiece of engineering.”

Lord Eppingham snorted. “Come now, Kelbrook. You can do better than that. Sellers here was asking for something fresh, something beyond the imagination of those in this ballroom. As praiseworthy as Arkwright’s and Pritchard’s work is, those creations are old news.”

His Grace’s blue eyes flashed icily. “Then I can be of little help to you. It is my understanding that inventors keep their designs to themselves until they have a fully functioning prototype to show the world.”

As far as Rosalind was concerned, the Duke of Kelbrook’s tone brooked no argument. It seemed, however, that Mr. Sellers was not of the same mind.

“What of you, Miss Ainsworth?” He shifted his gaze to her. “I have always been led to believe that young ladies enjoy being the first ones to hear the latest news. Do you not wish His Grace to share what he knows with us?”

Mr. Sellers’s overly familiar smile made Rosalind uncomfortable. She took a step back and bumped into the duke. “I beg your pardon,” she murmured.

His Grace slipped his hand beneath her elbow. His touch was remarkably reassuring, and she drew strength from it.

“It must be that I am unlike other young ladies, then,” she said. “For I would not wish His Grace to break a confidence simply to satisfy my curiosity.”

Mr. Sellers’s frown came and went in an instant. He replaced it with a knowing look. “A prudent response.”

“Not at all,” she said. Why the handsome and charming Mr. Sellers should suddenly seem so irritating was a mystery. “I am simply stating the situation as I see it.”

A slight increase of pressure on her arm communicated His Grace’s approval. “It seems that we are at an impasse, Mr. Sellers,” he said.

“Good evening, Your Grace.” The strident female voice cut through the tension humming between the two gentlemen and caused them to turn toward its source. The Dowager Marchioness of Pendleton arrived at the duke’s side in a flurry of silk skirts and feathers. Despite her advancing years, her white hair was ratted to perfection and her sharp eyes moved across the group, quickly dismissing all but His Grace. “I have a young lady I should like you to meet.”

She ushered her youngest—and only unmarried—daughter, Lady Marian, forward. Lady Marian’s hair was as dark as her mother’s was white. She wore a stunning yellow gown that floated out around her as she dropped into a curtsy.

“Your Grace,” she said.

The duke removed his hand from Rosalind’s elbow and bowed to the beautiful young lady. “A pleasure, Lady Marian.”

Feeling unaccountably discarded, Rosalind schooled her features into a pleasant smile. The Dowager Lady Pendleton ignored her.

“Your dear, late mother and I were such good friends, Your Grace. I have no doubt that you will soon discover that you and Marian also have much in common.”

“I daresay you are right,” His Grace said.

It seemed to Rosalind that the Dowager Lady Pendleton’s

logic was patently flawed. If the Duke of Kelbrook could not see that, perhaps he was not as brilliant as Lord Eppingham believed.

The Dowager Lady Pendleton smiled smugly. “Well then, I shall leave you to enjoy a dance together.”

Rosalind stared. She could not help herself. If anyone in the vicinity had the right to be called a genius, it was the dowager marchioness, at least when it came to the art of matchmaking. Rosalind glanced at the Duke of Kelbrook. His shoulders were stiff, his expression unreadable. The music filling the room came to an end with a smattering of applause. His Grace inclined his head toward Lady Marian.

“Would you do me the honor of the next dance, my lady?”

Lady Marian smiled warmly. “It would be my pleasure, Your Grace.”

He extended his arm to the lady. Rosalind took another step back. She should be glad. With His Grace’s dominant presence removed from beside her, other gentlemen would undoubtedly be more willing to ask her to dance. She waited for the feeling of relief to come. Instead, she experienced an absurd mixture of disquiet that His Grace was walking away and gladness that he had offered Lady Marian his arm rather than his hand.

Someone cleared his throat, and Rosalind turned to discover Mr. Coombs at her left.

“May I have the honor of this dance, Miss Ainsworth?”

Forcing all thoughts of the Duke of Kelbrook and Lady Marian aside, Rosalind smiled at him. “With pleasure, sir.”

\* \* \*

Sebastian leaned back in the seat of his carriage and closed his eyes. He had survived. Barely. He’d come deucedly close to leaving the Marlboroughs’ ball before its conclusion. Only the knowledge that an early exit would elicit even more talk had prevented him from acting on the impulse. That, and the promise he had made to himself to try harder. He smiled into the darkness. Those were the very words Miss Ainsworth had admonished him with at the start of their dance.

Their dance together had been the highlight of his evening. Unfortunately, it had also been at its beginning. For the remainder of the night, he had been fending off insistent matrons and making polite small talk with every eligible female in attendance. He pinched the bridge of his nose and gave a deep sigh. Even if his pending wedding were not of his choosing, he would not be sorry to do away with his current marriage eligibility status.

He allowed his thoughts to dwell on Miss Ainsworth. When they'd danced, he'd been reminded of the understated humor she'd shown when they'd first met. And when Eppingham and Sellers had pushed him for information, he'd recognized the intelligence she'd shown when they'd spoken of the Montgolfiers' invention at Langton House. Despite Sellers's goading, she had taken a stand. Few young ladies of his acquaintance had the courage or the wherewithal to make up their own minds on a matter.

Miss Ainsworth hardly owed him any loyalty, and yet, he was glad she had supported his decision to remain close-lipped about new developments being made around the country. In truth, he was aware of several up-and-coming innovations, not least of which was Meikle's threshing machine. But quite apart from the fact that they were not his undertakings to share, talking about them opened the inventors up to the risk of theft. Years of work could disappear in an instant only to be claimed by someone else. Personal accolade aside, most inventive thinkers were in dire need of financing. To lose their end product before it could be launched on the world was the worst possible scenario for any of them.

The carriage pulled up in front of Hartford House, and a footman appeared to open the door. Sebastian alighted and looked up at his London townhouse. Lanterns hung on either side of the large black door, illuminating the steps leading to the house. Candles glowed in the windows of his study and bedchamber. Otherwise, a blanket of quiet darkness covered the imposing building.

"Welcome home, Your Grace." His butler stood at the door.

Sebastian took the stairs two at a time. "Thank you, Bellon.

It's good to be back."

He walked inside, handing his hat and coat to Bellon before starting down the passage. His shoes tapped his progress across the tiled floor, the sound echoing up the empty stairwell, and for the first time since his return to the bustling city, Sebastian felt lonely. He entered the study. A low-burning fire lessened the chill of evening. Candles flickered on the mantel, leaving the large mahogany desk and leather armchairs in shadow but illuminating the painting of Finley Park above the fireplace.

Sebastian moved closer, studying the painting in the wavering light. A wave of longing washed over him. He was ready to go home. His gaze traveled from the illustration of the magnificent house to the manicured lawn and grounds beyond. Was he ready to share this special place with Miss Ainsworth? He lowered his head, memories of the Marlboroughs' ball flitting through his mind in a jumbled array of color and sounds. He did not wish for that level of chaos, but neither did he want to be so completely alone as he was now.

A vision of Miss Ainsworth on the dance floor, twirling under his arm with laughter in her eyes, filled his thoughts. Was it possible to make something more of their marriage than merely the fulfilling of their fathers' wishes? He did not know. But for the first time ever, he could think upon his wedding without dread settling in the pit of his stomach. And that was a start.

Lifting one of the candlesticks off the mantel, he walked across the room and took a seat behind his desk. Setting the candlestick down, he reached for a piece of paper and quill. It was late, and he was tired, but he would write a brief invitation before retiring. For this week, at least, Miss Ainsworth would be unable to accuse him of not trying hard.



## CHAPTER 6

ROSALIND CROSSED HER ROOM FOR the thirteenth time and pressed her hand to her stomach. This was ridiculous. She had taken a ride in the park with gentlemen before. Why on earth was she so nervous? Her eyes strayed to her writing table, where a letter stood propped against a candlestick. Her name and address were written across the envelope in bold, masculine lettering. She did not need to open it again; she already had it memorized.

*Dear Miss Ainsworth,*

*May I call upon you this Monday at 1 o'clock? I thought a ride in the park would be a pleasant excursion and might give you an opportunity to ask any questions you may have regarding Finley Park.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Kelbrook*

She took an unsteady breath. Of course she had questions about Finley Park. Her childhood memories consisted of little more than vague images of a vast house, a colorful rose garden, and the dratted tree house. She was hardly equipped with enough information to be a good houseguest, let alone a worthwhile mistress. Thankfully, her mother had prevailed upon her to spend hours at her side, learning how to manage the Langton Manor household. The ledger books had been a big enough draw to carry her through the more tedious job of coordinating activities with the housekeeper, but that did not mean that she felt remotely prepared for the duties of a duchess.

Upon receiving His Grace's letter, she had written back immediately, expressing her pleasure at the prospect of an outing with him. She groaned at the memory of penning those words. It had been a lie. She had rarely felt so anxious over anything. She pressed her hand more firmly to her corset, glanced at the clock, and crossed the room for the fourteenth time. Seventeen minutes until he came. Counting minutes would be spectacularly unhelpful. Perhaps itemizing things on a list would calm her turbulent feelings.

She took her seat at her writing table and reached for her diary. Turning to the back of the book, she stared at the blank page for a moment, then picked up the quill and wrote *The Duke of Kelbrook*. Beneath his name and to the left, she wrote *Bad Things*. On the right, she wrote *Good Things*. Starting on the left, she wrote, *1. He refused me entry to his tree house, 2. I do not love him, 3. I do not like him*. She paused and studied the last entry. A week ago, that would have been true. But there had been moments since then when he had not seemed nearly as horrible as he once had been. She chewed her lip and then drew a line through *I do not like him* and wrote *I do not know him*.

She studied the other side of the paper. This one was harder, but before she saw him again, she wanted both sides of her list to be equally weighted. She thought back on their few interactions. Dipping her quill in the inkwell, she began to write: *1. He likes numbers, 2. He dances well, 3. He is no longer scrawny*. She leaned back in her chair. It was not much, but it was a beginning, and it helped her feel better.

The muffled sound of knocking on the front door reached her from downstairs. Startled, she pushed aside her diary and came to her feet. The clock on the mantel showed eight minutes before the hour. Why had she assumed the duke would be here exactly at one o'clock? She had no desire to keep him waiting, but rushing down the stairs while still tying on her bonnet was not how she'd hoped to greet him.

Nora had set out Rosalind's gloves and shawl beside her favorite hat on the bed. With trembling fingers, Rosalind donned her bonnet and moved to stand in front of the looking

glass. Her face was pale, and her eyes were anxious, but her floral gown was lovely, and the pink rosebud print matched the color of the ribbons on her hat. She raised her chin a fraction. It was a ride in the park. She could manage it.

Slipping her shawl over her shoulders, she picked up her gloves and stepped out of her room. When she crossed the landing to the top of the stairs, the murmur of male voices reached her from below. Focusing on descending the stairs with as much poise as she could muster, she walked slowly. Footsteps crossed the tiled hall, coming to a halt near the base of the stairs.

“Good day, Miss Ainsworth.”

Rosalind’s head shot up. “Mr. Sellers!”

With a winning smile, the tall, dark-haired gentleman inclined his head and then offered her a colorful posy. “It’s a beautiful day, and I am come to see if you would take a ride with me.” His gaze moved from her hat to the shawl about her shoulders, and his smile widened. “It appears that luck is with me. You are ready for an outing, and my phaeton is outside the door.”

Rosalind’s grip on the posy was threatening to break off the stems. If luck was with Mr. Sellers, it had most certainly abandoned her. Whatever would His Grace say if he arrived to find her entertaining another gentleman? Mr. Sellers must leave. Immediately.

“I fear you have caught me at an inconvenient time, sir.” That was a euphemistic way of putting it.

He frowned. “If you are set on a particular errand, I should be happy to drive you.”

“That is very kind of you but is unnecessary.”

“I am motivated by something far stronger than kindness, ma’am.”

Something in his voice had changed. Panic fluttered in Rosalind’s chest. She raised the posy. She had broken the heads off two violets already. “Thank you for the flowers; they are lovely. But I’m afraid I must decline your offer still.”

It was a valiant effort at bringing their conversation to a close, but she should have known that Mr. Sellers, who was far more used to turning the heads of young ladies than of being rebuffed by them, would be impervious to the dismissal.

He looked at the posy, his smile returning. "I thought of you the moment I saw the delicate purple blooms." He moved closer, and Rosalind took a step back. Her heel hit the lower stair. She winced. On the other side of the hall, the longcase clock whirred, and a single note rang out, marking the one o'clock hour. The resonant sound had barely begun to fade when there was a loud rap at the door. Rosalind froze. Mr. Sellers raised a questioning eyebrow and turned to face the door. Rutherford was already there.

"Good day, Your Grace," the butler said, bowing low and opening the door wide. "Please come in."

The Duke of Kelbrook entered the hall. His gaze fell upon Rosalind and then moved to Mr. Sellers. His frown was so fleeting Rosalind wondered if she'd imagined it, but she caught his momentary hesitation before he continued across the hall toward them.

"Mr. Sellers," he said, his polite mask in place. "I had not expected to see you again so soon."

"Nor I you, Your Grace," Mr. Sellers said, inclining his head slightly. "I am here to invite Miss Ainsworth for a ride in my new phaeton."

"I noticed it outside. A fine-looking vehicle." His Grace met the gentleman's declaration without flinching. "It's a shame that she is unable to accompany you, although I daresay you will have no difficulty in finding another companion."

Indignation rippled off Mr. Sellers in waves. "I beg your pardon, Your Grace, but as I arrived at Langton House first, I think it only right that Miss Ainsworth be given the choice as to who she steps out with."

The Duke of Kelbrook's gaze was glacial, and three more violet heads landed on the floor at Rosalind's feet. Given their difference in station, His Grace could justly accuse Mr. Sellers

of being overly bold, but to the nobleman's credit, he did not pull rank. Neither did he tout the invitation he had sent to Rosalind two days before. Instead, he extended his arm to her. "If you are ready, Miss Ainsworth, my barouche is outside."

Rosalind's throat went dry. As much as she hated being the prize in this duel of wills, she had no choice. She placed her hand on His Grace's arm. His muscles were taut. "Although I appreciate your invitation, Mr. Sellers," she said, "I have a previous engagement with the Duke of Kelbrook."

Mr. Sellers's eyes narrowed. "I see." Resentment simmered beneath his succinct words. "Then I shall take my leave." He inclined his head, first to Rosalind and then to His Grace, before marching across the tiled floor.

Rutherford already had the door open. Without giving the butler a passing glance, Mr. Sellers exited the house. Rutherford waited. Rosalind heard a whip crack, followed by the sound of hooves. Then Rutherford closed the door and stepped away. The hall was suddenly uncomfortably silent.

"Well, that was not exactly how I envisioned the beginning of our outing," His Grace said.

Rosalind swallowed. It did little to help her dry throat. "I ... I apologize, Your Grace. Mr. Sellers arrived unexpectedly."

"So I suppose." He glanced at the bedraggled posy in Rosalind's hand. "But he came better prepared than I, it appears."

She removed her hand from his arm. "Rutherford!"

"Yes, miss." The butler had not gone far.

"Would you dispose of these for me?" She gave him the flowers.

"Shall I give them to Nora to put in your room?" Rutherford asked.

"No." Rosalind was firm. "I do not wish to see them again."

Rutherford nodded. "Very good, miss." He started toward the servants' entrance and what she hoped was the closest rubbish receptacle.

Straightening her shoulders, she turned back to the Duke of Kelbrook. “May we start again as though the unfortunate incident with Mr. Sellers never happened?”

Would he be willing to move past the awkwardness of the last few minutes? Their carriage ride would be torture if he were not.

His Grace lifted one eyebrow. “Do you consider a gentleman bringing you flowers and offering to take you on a drive to be an unfortunate incident? Or was my untimely arrival the unfortunate incident?”

She knew she was walking on dangerous ground. On the one hand, she did not wish to appear ungrateful when a gentleman went out of his way to show her extra consideration. His Grace was making such an effort himself. On the other hand, she needed him to realize that she had done nothing to encourage Mr. Sellers’s attention.

The memory of His Grace’s quick wit when they had danced together flashed into her mind. She seized upon it. Was it possible that the nobleman possessed sufficient good humor to turn this uncomfortable experience around?

“Surely you agree that to take a turn around the park in anything other than a barouche is unfortunate indeed.”

His face registered surprise. He had not expected her teasing. She held her breath, waiting for his response.

“In truth, I would have thought that bringing a posy covers a multitude of sins—including, perhaps, arriving in the wrong vehicle.”

There was a hint of banter in his voice, and Rosalind allowed herself a small smile. “You would think so, would you not?” She placed her hand on his arm again, glad to note that the tension she had felt earlier had lessened. “But violets are no lilies, Your Grace. And lilies are my favorite flowers.”

He chuckled softly and led her toward the door. “Duly noted, Miss Ainsworth.”

## CHAPTER 7

SEBASTIAN DID NOT KNOW WHAT to make of his present, somewhat disconcerting state of mind. When he'd first stepped into the Langtons' house and seen Mr. Sellers standing so close to his future wife, Sebastian had been pierced with something that felt disturbingly like jealousy. The stab had been as unexpected as it had been unpleasant. He'd noticed the posy in her hand immediately and had mentally berated himself for coming so unprepared.

Mr. Sellers's antagonism toward him was understandable, especially given how lovely Miss Ainsworth looked today, but Sebastian could not bring himself to feel sorry for the man. Sellers was far too self-assured for his own good.

They reached the Kelbrook barouche carriage, and Sebastian assisted Miss Ainsworth inside. The glossy black phaeton, with its red-upholstered seats, that had been parked in front of the Langtons' house when Sebastian had arrived was gone. He could admit to some relief that the confrontation with Sellers had not lasted long, but he now had a ride with Miss Ainsworth to navigate. And that was even more daunting.

He entered the carriage. Did she expect him to sit beside or across from her? Wishing he had more experience in these matters, he eyed her wide skirts. The floral fabric covered much of the seat. It seemed that sitting opposite Miss Ainsworth might be preferable to crushing her gown. He felt her gaze as he took his place.

"To the park, if you please, Perkins," he called.

His driver clicked his tongue, and the carriage moved forward. Miss Ainsworth's gaze moved to the row of trees lining the road. Their leaves were a glorious mixture of green, yellow, orange, and red. A thrush trilled its song before taking to the air as the carriage rolled by.

Sebastian cleared his throat. "I am glad for the sunshine today. October's weather is notoriously unpredictable." It was

a banal statement, but at least it broke the silence that had fallen over them.

“Yes. It has been unseasonably warm these last few weeks.”

Lud. Could she not offer him anything more to work with than that? What had happened to her wit?

“I daresay it will be colder by the time we reach Finley Park.”

That caught her attention. She turned from watching the sycamores go by to face him. “You said that you would tell me about Finley Park.”

“I did.” Was that anxiety he saw in her eyes? “What would you like to know?”

She raised her hands. “Everything.”

“That would take an exceptionally long carriage ride.”

“Yes, I suppose it would. Then, tell me whatever you think is most needful for me to know.”

Sebastian pondered that. It was quite likely that Miss Ainsworth’s list of things considered “needful to know” would be very different from a list he would draw up for himself. “The housekeeper’s name is Mrs. Frost. The butler is Vickers.” She nodded. Encouraged, Sebastian continued. “Between the two of them, they manage the house and the staff very well.”

Miss Ainsworth’s hands were now clasped tightly on her knee. “Mrs. Frost. Does she live up to her name?”

“Her name?”

“Is she ... is she frosty in personality?”

A vision of Mrs. Frost bustling through the rooms at Finley Park entered his head, and he grinned. “Mrs. Frost is a short, plump lady who has been at Finley Park for as long as I can remember. She fusses over me like a mother hen. I would say she errs more toward smothering than frosty.”

To his surprise, rather than smile, Miss Ainsworth caught her lower lip between her teeth. “Does she know that you will be returning home with a wife?”



The question caught him off guard. Blast it all. He'd never even spoken of his marriage contract to Mrs. Frost, let alone the imminence of his wedding.

"I shall write to her today."

Miss Ainsworth nodded, her face pale. "It might be best."

His list of failures was growing. Arriving at Langton House without flowers now seemed insignificant compared to neglecting to inform his staff of the rather significant change about to occur in the household. He'd had almost ten years to prepare for this event, and yet, he had never felt so wholly unready for anything.

"Perhaps you should continue to ask me specific questions," he said.

"Tell me about Finley Park itself."

He relaxed slightly. Surely this was something that would not expose his shortcomings so blatantly.

"The house has been in the family for four generations," he said. "My grandfather added an east and west wing to the original structure, but not much has changed since then. The grounds are extensive. My mother created a large rose garden."

"I remember my mother walking through it with her when we visited," Miss Ainsworth said. "I think it may have been the inspiration behind a similar rose garden at Langton House." She offered the ghost of a smile. "My mother's favorite flowers are roses."

Sebastian filed that tidbit of information away. Knowing his future mother-in-law's favorite flower would seem to be almost as important as knowing his wife's.

"What else do you recall of the grounds?" he asked.

"The vast lawn and a grove of trees." Her eyes met his. "There was a tree house."

She remembered the tree house. It had been years since he'd sought sanctuary there, but for a long time, it had been his place of refuge. The former head gardener had helped him

build it, and it had been the one place he could escape the weighty demands his father had insisted on placing upon his young shoulders. At some point during his later years at school, discovering new innovations had replaced remodeling his lofty fort, and the tree house had been displaced by his workshop.

“You have a good memory,” he said.

“Yes.” She had yet to look away, and the single word seemed to convey more than it should.

“Do you remember the river beyond the grove of trees?”

She shook her head, her shoulders drooping slightly. “I do not believe that I ventured that far.”

“The river cuts through Finley Park land. Most of the land farmed by tenants is to the west of the river. Luckily, their homes are also on that side.”

“Luckily?”

He nodded. “There’s an old bridge that connects the manor to the tenant cottages, but it’s in danger of collapse, and I have forbidden anyone from crossing it until it is replaced. The threat of it giving way when the river is high is too great.”

“Is there another way to reach the cottages and that stretch of land?”

“Yes, but it takes considerably longer. The road from the village of Aylesbury goes past the manor and continues to the cottages before joining the main thoroughfare to London.”

“Why has the bridge not been replaced before now if having it unusable is such an inconvenience?”

Sebastian chose his words carefully. “The last two bridges built in that spot have not withstood time or the elements. Having heard of the success Pritchard’s iron bridge has had in weathering strong currents and flash floods, I wish to erect something similar. Unfortunately, such a structure requires considerable funding.”

Understanding illuminated her face. “You mentioned that your father had placed money in a trust that could only be

accessed after your marriage. How much longer will you have to wait?"

Miss Ainsworth was proving sharper than most of his peers at Oxford. "No time at all. Once the ceremony is performed and the registry signed, my solicitor can release the funds."

She looked away, but not before Sebastian spotted the sadness in her eyes. "I am glad to know that something good will come from our marriage."

He should not care that she was unhappy. He had managed to avoid caring about her or their wedding quite successfully all these years. But to his great discomfort, he found that he currently cared rather deeply. "You do not consider becoming a duchess to be beneficial?"

"Not especially." Her shoulders lifted. "I suppose I am rather odd in that way."

"Not odd," he said. "Refreshing. You would not believe how many young ladies of my acquaintance would willingly marry a ninety-year-old gentleman with no teeth, poor vision, and chronic gout simply to claim the title of duchess. Not that I have anything against infirm older gentlemen, you understand, but that fact does little to boost a young duke's self-confidence."

His comment elicited a half smile.

"I thought that by virtue of their position in Society, dukes need little assistance with their self-confidence," she said.

They were approaching the entrance to the park, and the number of carriages on the road had increased significantly. Most of the vehicles had their tops down, their occupants more than happy to see and be seen by all they passed. Sebastian spotted the Dowager Marchioness of Pendleton's carriage in the distance and barely resisted the urge to tell Perkins to turn his around.

"I cannot speak for all dukes, Miss Ainsworth, but this one will gladly accept all the help he can get." The Pendletons' carriage was drawing close enough that he could see the Dowager Marchioness and Lady Marian seated beside her.

“Indeed, if you could muster a smile—no matter how weak—whilst we drive past one of Society’s most influential biddies, I would be most appreciative.”

With the intelligence he was beginning to expect of her, Miss Ainsworth did not turn around to look. Instead, she leaned forward and lowered her voice. “Whom exactly are we attempting to bamboozle?”

“The Dowager Marchioness of Pendleton.”

“I fear that will take considerably more than a weak smile, Your Grace. Her ladyship is not easily fooled.”

The marchioness’s carriage was only a few hundred yards away.

“Could you perhaps manage an engaging smile?”

“I think we can do better than that.” Miss Ainsworth swooped up her skirts and shifted to the left. “Quickly,” she said. “Sit beside me.”

He rose and exchanged seats. All at once, she was close enough that he could feel her warmth. The scent of jasmine lingered in the air between them.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” It seemed to Sebastian that he had gone from incurring the dowager marchioness’s ire for being out with someone other than her daughter to causing a veritable scandal amongst the *ton*.

“We are sending a signal, Your Grace. A strong one.”

“Strong enough to ruin your reputation?” he asked.

An impish light appeared in her eyes. “Not quite. There is ample room on this seat for two people, and thanks to your driver, we are not alone.”

“True.” He could not argue otherwise, even though Perkins had kept his back to them the entire time.

“And we are to be married within days, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Then I think it might be just as well to give select ladies

some warning that you are no longer on the market.” She raised a delicate eyebrow. “I believe I can manage an engaging smile, Your Grace. Can you?”

“I ... uh ...” He cleared his throat, hoping it would also clear his head. “Yes. Of course.”

Sitting this close to Miss Ainsworth was muddling his senses. He took a deep breath of jasmine-filled air. It did little to help his situation. Tearing his eyes away from his captivating companion, he turned his attention to the road. The dowager marchioness’s carriage was almost upon them.

“Allow the marchioness’s carriage to enter the park ahead of us, Perkins,” he called to his driver.

Immediately, the barouche slowed.

“Now would be a good time, Your Grace.” Miss Ainsworth’s whisper was followed by a smile that illuminated her face. Her brown eyes sparkled, her small nose crinkled, and Sebastian’s heart stuttered. Of their own volition, his lips curved upward. The look in her eyes softened, and he felt himself sinking.

“Good afternoon, Your Grace.” The dowager marchioness’s voice cut through the air like a rapier.

Miss Ainsworth blinked, and the connection was gone. More shaken than he cared to admit, Sebastian turned to see that the dowager marchioness’s carriage had rolled up beside his. Perkins brought the barouche to a halt.

“Good day to you, Lady Pendleton. And to you, Lady Marian.” He gestured toward the park gates. “Please enter ahead of us.”

Lady Marian inclined her head in response. Lady Pendleton gave him a terse nod but did not so much as glance at Miss Ainsworth.

“Into the park, driver,” Lady Pendleton commanded. “There is no reason to delay.”

Her carriage moved ahead. Sebastian watched until they passed through the open gates before turning back to Miss

Ainsworth, an apology on his lips. The dowager marchioness had been abominably rude to the lady. To his surprise, however, Miss Ainsworth did not look the least put out.

“That went remarkably well, I think,” she said.

Sebastian stared at her. “Forgive me if I am wrong, but I was under the distinct impression that Lady Pendleton slighted you.”

“Oh, she most certainly did.” Her lips twitched as though she were fighting another smile. “And for that reason alone, I have decided that becoming a duchess may be advantageous after all.”

With a rather alarming sense of satisfaction, Sebastian leaned back in his seat beside her. “On the assumption that you do not see her again before we are married, I rather hope that I am in attendance when that occurs,” he said.

“I fear that it would require another appearance in Society, Your Grace.” The playful tone had returned to her voice.

“It may be a sacrifice worth making.”

“Lady Pendleton would be pleased to know that her presence at a function may determine whether or not you attend.”

“It would not be *her* attendance that mattered, Miss Ainsworth. It would be yours.”

There was a moment of silence.

“It is good of you to say so, Your Grace.” Her voice had dropped, all trace of humor now gone. “Although, I rather wish that you had acted upon that inclination sooner. I should have liked to have had a chance to get to know you before this.”

“It was remiss of me to wait so long,” he said, all the more sure of that now. “Forgive me.”

She nodded, and he noticed that her hands were clasped tightly on her lap once more. He waited for her to speak, his chest unaccountably tight. A few carriages passed by. He felt their occupants’ curious looks, but he ignored them. His

attention remained fixed upon the young lady at his side.

“I loved my father very much,” she finally said. “Although I argued against the marriage contract he drew up with the late Duke of Kelbrook, my respect for my father and our family name demands that I honor it.” She met Sebastian’s eyes, and he saw the hesitancy there. “I hope that you will be patient with me as I learn to be a duchess.” She swallowed hard. “And as I learn to be your wife.”

He recognized her vulnerability. He felt it. With more daring than was comfortable, he reached out and placed his gloved hand over hers. She did not move away. “I have learned a little of patience as I have helped various gentlemen around the country hone their inventions. It seems to me that something truly marvelous always takes effort and time to perfect.” He squeezed her hand gently. “We shall both need to be forbearing as we adjust to our new circumstances. May I ask for your consideration also?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

Encouraged, he took one more step into the unknown. “My name is Sebastian,” he said.

“Mine is Rosalind.”

He tilted his head to one side and studied her. She was beautiful. No matter his distorted childhood memories of Miss Ainsworth, there was no denying that truth now. “The name suits you.”

“My mother chose it,” she said.

“Because of her love of roses,” he guessed.

At last, she smiled again. “You remembered.”

His heart lifted. It was a seemingly insignificant detail, but it meant something to her. And after a day full of failures, Sebastian was more than happy to claim one victory—no matter how small.

## CHAPTER 8

ROSALIND STARED AT HER EMBROIDERY with sightless eyes. No amount of counting stitches was helping her concentration. It had been two days since her outing to the park with the Duke of Kelbrook—Sebastian, she corrected herself—and her emotions had been riding a bandalore ever since. Just like the round disc of wood that spun up and down the string, she had gone from hope to despair and back again. Multiple times.

Setting her fabric down with unsteady hands, she rose to her feet and crossed the drawing room. The window looked out over the townhouse's narrow back lawn. Not for the first time, she wished she were at Langton Manor, with its expansive gardens. It would be far easier to mute the confusing voices in her head if she were on a long ramble through the grounds or a fast ride across the meadows. She had long since stopped trying to analyze her feelings. They were too turbulent to offer her any meaningful insights. She knew only that in five days she would be a married woman. And a duchess.

A knock interrupted her musings. She turned to see Rutherford at the door, a single calling card on the silver salver in his hand. Her breath caught.

“Mr. Sellers is here to see you, Miss Ainsworth.”

The rush of disappointment she experienced was telling. Had she unknowingly needed a lighthearted conversation with Elinor or Margaret? Or had she secretly been hoping that Sebastian would call again?

“Has my mother returned from visiting Lady Bloxley?” she asked.

“No, miss.”

Rosalind hovered in indecision. It would be easier—and far more appropriate—to entertain Mr. Sellers in the company of her mother. She could send the gentleman away, of course, but given his disgruntled departure the last time he was at Langton House, that would seem to be somewhat inconsiderate.



“Have him come in,” she said.

Rutherford bowed. “Very good, Miss Ainsworth.”

“And ask Nora to join me in the drawing room, if you would.”

“Right away, miss.”

She had barely reached the sofa when Rutherford reappeared at the doorway. “Mr. Sellers to see you, Miss Ainsworth.”

Without giving the butler a passing glance, Mr. Sellers entered and walked across the room. “Good afternoon, Miss Ainsworth.” He bowed.

“How nice to see you again, Mr. Sellers.” The expression rolled off her tongue without forethought, and when the gentleman stepped closer and took her hand, Rosalind immediately wished it unsaid.

“I am glad to hear it,” he said, “for my afternoon is free, and my phaeton is at your disposal.”

Rosalind withdrew her hand from his and glanced at the door. Where was Nora?

“That is very good of you, Mr. Sellers, but it is not possible for me to take a drive with you.”

“Not possible?” A flicker of something that looked suspiciously like anger entered his dark eyes. He doused it and smiled charmingly at her. “If you tell me you have yet another prior engagement, I will simply return again.”

She was quite sure he would not believe her if she told him just how long her engagement had been in place. And yet, she must dissuade him from pursuing her further. “I am to be married, Mr. Sellers.”

There was no mistaking his anger this time. He stepped away from her, his nostrils flaring. “May I be sufficiently bold to ask who is fortunate enough to have won your hand?”

“The Duke of Kelbrook.” She braced for dread’s familiar tightening around her heart, but this time, it did not come.

“I had not taken you for someone who could be wooed by a title, Miss Ainsworth.”

“Then you were correct, Mr. Sellers.” Rosalind held her head high even as she felt the sting of his words. “My marriage to the Duke of Kelbrook has nothing whatsoever to do with his title.”

He snorted. “His Grace is the most unsociable gentleman in Society. He may own some interest in innovation and industrialization, but his passion ends there. No matter how pleasant your carriage ride with him may have been, you cannot persuade me that it caused you to fall in love with the man. The Duke of Kelbrook is incapable of bringing happiness to a lady so vivacious as you.”

Indignation burned in Rosalind’s chest. She may not have spent a great deal of time in Sebastian’s company, but their time together had been far more enjoyable than this encounter was proving to be. “I was under the impression that you had not met His Grace before the Marlboroughs’ ball,” she said. “To make such a sweeping judgment on so slight an acquaintance does you no credit, sir.”

Her reprimand appeared to have some effect.

“Forgive me.” His voice rang with desperation. “You must understand that for some time, I have held you in particularly high esteem, and until this moment, I had hoped that *I* would be the one to play such a role in your future.”

With rapidly mounting unease, she faced him. “I confess, I had not realized the depth of your feelings for me, Mr. Sellers. I apologize if my announcement is unwelcome, but you must understand that as of today, there can be nothing more than friendship between us.”

“Surely you do not believe—”

Mr. Sellers’s words were cut short by the sound of hurried footsteps in the hall. Rosalind glanced toward the door in time to see Nora slip into the room. Relief threatened to overwhelm Rosalind. The maid bobbed a curtsy and stood quietly, awaiting instructions.

Mr. Sellers must have noticed Nora's arrival also because he clamped his mouth shut and straightened his shoulders. "If you will excuse me, Miss Ainsworth," he said stiffly. "I believe it is long past time that I took my leave."

Rosalind inclined her head. "Good day, Mr. Sellers."

He offered her a curt bow and walked out of the room.

Rosalind waited until she heard Rutherford close the front door behind him before dropping onto the sofa. "Oh, Nora. I do not think I have ever been so grateful to have you walk into a room."

Nora eyed her anxiously. "I was emptying the ashes in the back when Rutherford sent for me, miss. A terrible mess, I was. I knew I couldn't come inside with my hands all black, but I didn't mean to take so long to get 'ere."

"You came when it mattered the most," Rosalind said. She took a deep breath and sat up in the chair. "I need a brisk walk, Nora. One that will clear my head. Would you accompany me?"

"Yes, miss. I'll fetch yer things right away." Her maid bobbed another curtsy and hurried out of the room.

\* \* \*

Word of Rosalind's attachment to Sebastian spread quickly. She did not know whether the source of the rumors was Mr. Sellers, Lady Pendleton, or one of the many other people she and Sebastian had passed whilst riding together in the park, but when Elinor and Margaret arrived at the house the next day, they were agog with the news.

"Is it true, then?" Elinor asked the moment she was seated in the drawing room.

"Is what true?" Rosalind focused on pouring the tea, even as her hand trembled.

"That you are engaged to be married to the Duke of Kelbrook."

Rosalind glanced at her friend. Elinor's eyes resembled the saucers beneath their teacups. "It is true," she said.

With a dreamy look on her face, Elinor set her hand upon her chest and gave a dramatic sigh. “He is the most handsome of men.”

“He’s a duke,” Margaret said, shortly. “You would likely think him handsome even if he were actually the plainest of men.”

Her comment was a little too close to the one Sebastian had made for Rosalind’s comfort. “Whether or not he is handsome or a duke has little bearing on my reason for accepting his hand,” she said.

Margaret eyed her suspiciously. “Then, why did you? We have associated with one another all Season. I feel sure that Elinor and I would have known had he been courting you these last few months.”

She had walked into a trap of her own making.

But before she could formulate a response, Elinor spoke again. “Unless you purposely kept it a secret.” If possible, Elinor’s eyes were even rounder than they’d been before. “That would be so romantic.”

Now that all possibility of nullifying the marriage contract was gone, there was really no reason that the decades-old agreement should remain a secret, and yet, Rosalind found herself reluctant to make it public knowledge. Perhaps it was because a portion of her heart still grieved for the loss of her freedom of choice—that the love match she had dreamed of in her youth would never be. Then again, it might be that she simply did not wish her name and Sebastian’s bandied about by disparaging Society gossips. Her marriage agreement with him was a private thing, and for now, she would like it to stay that way. She rather thought that he would too. “It was a well-kept secret,” she admitted. “Although His Grace does not frequent Society events often, his family and mine have been friends for many years.”

“I knew it!” Elinor was in raptures again.

Rosalind handed her a cup of tea and then offered one to Margaret. By the look on Margaret’s face, she was still

unconvinced.

“His Grace is quite remarkable, Margaret,” Rosalind said. “He is intelligent and kind and has a quiet sense of humor.” As she spoke, memories of her time with Sebastian flitted through her mind, and she acknowledged the truth of her own words. The gentleman she had interacted with recently was very different from the taciturn youth she’d known ten years ago.

“And he dances divinely,” Elinor added.

Margaret raised her eyes to the ceiling as Elinor began to giggle. Rosalind smiled at the two of them. Although dissimilar in their approaches to life, she knew that her friends both had her best interest at heart.

A light knock sounded on the door to the drawing room, and Rutherford entered, carrying a bouquet of flowers.

“Forgive the intrusion, miss,” he said. “These just arrived for you. And there is a card attached.”

Rosalind’s heart began to pound. Silently praying that she would not have to explain away a delivery from Mr. Sellers, she reached for the bouquet.

“Thank you, Rutherford.”

The butler bowed and left the room.

“How pretty,” Elinor said.

Eyeing the purple asters curiously, Margaret took a sip of tea. “Are they from a soon-to-be-disappointed beau or your betrothed, I wonder?”

Rosalind withdrew the envelope from the center of the bouquet. Her name was written across it in a masculine script. Fighting a wave of nausea, she broke the seal and withdrew the paper within. She glanced at the signature at the bottom. *Sebastian*. Relief brought a smile to her lips. “They’re from the duke,” she said. Then, starting at the top of the page, she began to read.

*Dear Rosalind,*

*Following our meeting at Langton House last week and your agreement to move forward with our wedding, I petitioned the archbishop for a special license. The document arrived by courier yesterday afternoon. I spoke to the rector at St. George's at Hanover Square this morning. He has agreed to marry us at eleven o'clock on Sunday, October 13th, by which time, he assures me, those participating in Holy Communion will have vacated the church. If this meets with your approval, I shall write to Mrs. Frost, telling her to expect us at Finley Park that evening.*

*Yours sincerely,  
Sebastian*

*PS As far as I can ascertain, there is not one lily to be had in all of London. I realize that asters may be considered a pitiable substitute, but I hope they will brighten your rooms regardless.*

Rosalind set the note on the nearest end table and gently touched the delicate purple petals. The blossoms were lovely—not pitiable in the least. She shook her head in bemusement. How long had Sebastian devoted to searching the city for a flower that was currently out of season?

“Well, you have persuaded me.” Margaret’s voice brought Rosalind’s attention back to her guests with a start. “If a bunch of asters and a short note can produce such a look on your face, there must be more to your marriage to the Duke of Kelbrook than I had supposed.” She eyed the bouquet critically. “After all, they’re not even roses.”

The wedding Rosalind had dreaded for so long was now arranged, yet her focus remained on the flowers in her hand. “No,” she said, and something that felt oddly like hope warmed her heart. “They are not roses.”

## CHAPTER 9

SEBASTIAN SEALED THE LETTER TO his steward, Grayson, and set it on the small pile of correspondence at the corner of his desk. All being well, that was the last letter he needed to write before the wedding. Mrs. Frost had undoubtedly whipped the household staff into a frenzy of activity upon receiving his earlier message. He was rather glad that he was not there to witness it. Writing to Grayson had simply ensured that his steward would be prepared to meet with him to discuss the needs of the estate upon his return. It would be a relief to reclaim some semblance of normalcy in his life after having been without it for the last two weeks.

He pushed back his chair and rose to his feet. How different would things be at Finley Park with Rosalind there? Over the last few days, the loneliness of his present situation had struck him more forcibly than ever, and there had been times when he'd considered going to Langton House to visit Rosalind. But he had held off. Between packing and preparing for both her birthday and her wedding, she had plenty to occupy her time without him making unannounced calls.

Her birthday. Already halfway across the room, Sebastian stopped in his tracks. Dash it all, should he have bought her a gift? He had no idea what was expected of a gentleman in his situation. He was not yet Rosalind's husband, but it seemed wrong to completely ignore the occasion.

Crossing the remaining distance to the door in a few short strides, he opened it and called for the housekeeper. "Mrs. Pargeter!"

Hurried footsteps reached him, coming down the stairs. "You called, Your Grace?"

Mrs. Pargeter was a good decade younger than Mrs. Frost, but she had been the housekeeper at the Kelbrooks' London home for several years before his parents had died.

"I did." He waited for her to reach him. "Miss Ainsworth is

celebrating her birthday tomorrow. I wondered if you might have a suggestion as to what I might give her.”

Mrs. Pargeter blinked, appearing momentarily nonplussed. Sebastian had told his London staff of his impending marriage and departure for Finley Park, so his mention of Miss Ainsworth should not have come as a surprise. He tried a different tack. “Perhaps you remember my father purchasing gifts for my mother.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” She appeared thoughtful. “It seems to me that more often than not, the late duke gifted your mother a piece of jewelry.”

Sebastian ran his fingers through his hair. She was right. He should have remembered as much himself. His mother had loved anything that sparkled. He could give Rosalind a beautiful necklace or set of earrings from his mother’s collection. Unfortunately, that did not solve his current need since the pieces were all safely ensconced in the safe at Finley Park.

“A gift of jewelry may have to come later,” he said.

“What do you know of Miss Ainsworth’s preferences?” Mrs. Pargeter asked. She had obviously picked up on his desperation. “Does she have a favorite flower?”

“Lilies,” he said without hesitation.

She frowned. “You’d be hard-pressed to find lilies at this time of year, Your Grace.”

“So I understand,” Sebastian said, wishing he’d thought to consult Mrs. Pargeter before spending an entire morning attempting to purchase the very flowers a few days previous.

“Does she like anything else in particular?”

“Numbers.”

“I see,” Mrs. Pargeter said, even though her puzzled expression made it quite clear that she did not.

Sebastian sighed. It made perfect sense to him, but perhaps she needed more clarification. “Miss Ainsworth likes counting things.”



“Then I would suggest that you give her something she can count.”

Mrs. Pargeter’s recommendation was so simple it was almost offensive, but Sebastian knew how often the most basic of solutions was the best possible answer. “Brilliant, Mrs. Pargeter. You have my thanks.”

His housekeeper blinked again, but when she realized that he was completely in earnest, she bobbed a curtsy. “My pleasure, Your Grace.”

\* \* \*

It was her twenty-first birthday. Rosalind had considered waiting out the day in her bedchamber, but regardless of how much she wished that she had not reached this momentous milestone, ignoring it seemed as cowardly as it was pointless. So, instead, she dressed in her pale-blue gown, offered a silent prayer for any serenity the lovely color might evoke, and went downstairs to breakfast.

The hall was filled with trunks. Nora had been organizing and packing Rosalind’s clothing for the last couple of days, and if the number of pieces of luggage awaiting transportation to Finley Park was any indication, she had emptied every wardrobe and drawer in the house. Whatever Rosalind wore today and tomorrow would go with her in a separate, smaller trunk, but she likely would not see the ones in the hall again until she was settled in Finley Park.

Lifting her chin, she entered the dining room.

Her mother was seated at the table, a cup of tea in her hand and a plate containing a roll and a slice of ham before her. “Good morning, Rosalind.” She welcomed her with a smile. “Happy birthday, my dear.”

“Thank you, Mother.” Rosalind placed a piece of toast on a plate and took it to the table. One day, eating would become enjoyable again. Today was not that day.

Her mother was wise enough not to comment on her parsimonious breakfast. Instead, she lifted two rectangular packages off the chair beside her and set them beside

Rosalind's plate. Each was wrapped in brown paper and tied with string.

"What are these?" Rosalind asked.

"Birthday gifts," her mother said. "The small one is from me. The larger one is from Jonas."

"Jonas?" A lump formed in Rosalind's throat. Jonas knew nothing of her marriage contract. She had wanted it that way. But as glad as she was that he had not been obligated to curtail his tour of the Continent for her wedding, she missed him fiercely.

"He knew he would be missing your birthday and asked that I give you his gift along with this note." She handed Rosalind an envelope.

Rosalind's name was written across the front in Jonas's distinctive hand. She broke the seal and withdrew a small card. The message was short.

*Dear Rosalind,*

*Forgive me for not being there to celebrate your birthday. I hope you enjoy the day to its fullest.*

*I will likely be in France when you open the gift I have given to Mother, so consider it a prequel to whatever I buy for you in Paris. Knowing you as I do, I believe it will be difficult to find something you will be prouder to display.*

*With much love,*

*Jonas*

She set down the card and lifted the larger of the two parcels. Initially, she had thought it might be a book, but now she felt its raised edges. Tugging gently at the string, she

untied the bow and pushed aside the brown paper to uncover a framed painting of her home. Langton Manor sat bathed in sunlight, the surrounding lawn and trees fully green with some of her mother's roses in bloom in the foreground.

"Oh." Rosalind pressed her hand to her chest and fought back her tears. "Did he know I would be leaving?"

"No." Her mother smiled tenderly. "He commissioned it to be done for you before he left and told me that he'd struggled to decide between a painting of the house or one of the sea."

"He knows I love them both."

Her mother's eyes twinkled. "Perhaps you can persuade him to give you one of the sea for your next birthday."

"Yes." Finley Park was so far from the ocean it made her heart ache. "I think that would be better than anything he could bring me from France."

She gazed at the painting a few more minutes before turning her attention to the smaller package. "Thank you, Mother."

"You have not even opened it yet."

"I already know that I will love it."

Her mother smiled again. "I hope so."

Rosalind peeled away the brown paper to reveal a narrow black box. Giving her mother an inquiring look, she lifted the lid. Lying on a velvet cushion was a string of gleaming pearls, and beside them were two drop pearl earrings.

"Mother," Rosalind gasped.

"Your father gave them to me the day before our wedding," she said. "But I think he would wish you to have them now."

Rosalind's lower lip trembled. "I will wear them tomorrow. It will make him feel closer."

"He would be inordinately proud of you, Rosalind." She leaned over and placed her hand comfortingly over Rosalind's. There were tears in her mother's eyes. "As am I."

\* \* \*

Sebastian descended from his carriage and faced the front door of Langton House with significant trepidation. He released a tense breath. This was ridiculous. There was something horribly wrong with him if he would rather face off with another one of Rosalind's suitors than simply hand her a small birthday gift. Dukes were not supposed to worry about whether a gift would be well received. They were above such things. He shook his head slightly. The words had never sounded more hollow.

Straightening his shoulders, he raised the knocker and let it fall. He did not have to wait long before the door opened.

"Good day, Rutherford."

The Langtons' butler bowed. "Good day, Your Grace. Please come in." He stepped aside so that Sebastian could enter the main hall.

"Is Miss Ainsworth at home?" he asked.

His question was answered by a chorus of female voices coming from the direction of the drawing room. Moments later, Rosalind appeared beside Miss Spencer and Miss Fotheringham.

"It was very good of you to come," she said.

"But of course," Miss Spencer gushed. "It is your birthday after all."

"And we had to see you one more time before you become an old married woman," Miss Fotheringham added.

Rosalind's smile looked forced, and Sebastian's grip on the small box in his hand tightened. He glanced at the butler. Things would only become worse if the young ladies continued their conversation unaware of his presence in the hall.

Rutherford did not miss the cue. "I beg your pardon, miss." His voice carried across the hall. "His Grace, the Duke of Kelbrook, is here."

One of the young ladies gasped. Sebastian was not sure which one. It did not matter greatly, but he rather hoped it had

not been Rosalind. The titter that followed made him even more uncomfortable, but he knew that particular response did not originate from her.

“Please excuse me,” Rosalind told the other ladies before stepping away and crossing the hall to greet him. “Good afternoon, Sebastian.”

“Good afternoon.” He inclined his head. “Forgive me. I did not mean to interrupt your time with your friends.” Although his eyes were on Rosalind, he could feel Miss Spencer’s and Miss Fotheringham’s gazes on him.

“This feels very much like it did when we crossed the Marlboroughs’ ballroom together.” She spoke softly, keeping her back to her friends. “Are they watching us like hawks?”

“They are indeed.” It was an all-too-familiar sensation.

“Well, that is decidedly unpleasant of them.”

Sebastian barely managed to cover his surprised chuckle with a cough. He was not sure what he’d anticipated when the three ladies had exited the drawing room together, but to have Rosalind choose to be his ally was as heartening as it was unexpected. He cleared his throat. “I brought you something for your birthday. It’s nothing much. A token, really. But I did not want you to think that I had forgotten.” He handed her the small box in his hand and was gratified to see the look of pleasure in her dark eyes.

“That is very kind. Thank you.”

He nodded. “I will leave you now so that you may bid your friends a proper farewell.”

“Would you like me to open your gift first?”

“No. It’s best opened when you are on your own.”

She looked at the box curiously. “Very well.”

More than happy to avoid a drawn-out exchange with Miss Spencer and Miss Fotheringham, he inclined his head politely to acknowledge them across the hall before turning back to Rosalind. “Until tomorrow, then.”

“Yes.” To his relief, she did not hesitate. “Until tomorrow.”

\* \* \*

Rosalind returned to the drawing room alone. Having fielded Elinor’s questions about why Sebastian had departed so quickly and deflected Margaret’s curiosity over what Sebastian had given her for almost five minutes, she had waved them off with far less sorrow than she likely would have otherwise experienced. She sighed. Sebastian’s sudden arrival—and her friends’ reactions to it—had been discomforting, to say the least, yet she could not deny her rather bewildering feeling of regret when he’d left.

She took a seat beside the fire and studied the box in her hands. It was not large, but it rattled as though it contained many pieces. A folded square of paper was tucked beneath the string tied around the box. She slid it out and opened it to discover a short note.

*Dear Rosalind,*

*Once you are situated at Finley Park, I would very much like you to choose a piece of jewelry from my mother’s collection as my birthday gift to you. Until then, and knowing that you may feel the need to count your way through several things in the days ahead, I offer you this small token in remembrance of your birthday.*

*May you count, eat, and recount to your heart’s delight.*

*Sincerely,*

*Sebastian*

Intrigued, Rosalind untied the string and lifted the lid. A sweet, nutty smell assailed her, and she smiled with delight.

The box was filled with sugared almonds. She immediately popped one into her mouth, savoring the delicious treat and reaching for another. Had Sebastian guessed that she would need to set a numerical limit on how many she consumed rather than on how many were in the box? The thought was bemusing. It was absurd to think that he could know her so well already, but she suspected that he might.

## CHAPTER 10

SEBASTIAN SLIPPED HIS WATCH OUT of the pocket in his silver silk vest and glanced at it. Three minutes before ten. He released a tense breath, the sound echoing off the arched ceiling high above his head. At his side, his solicitor, Mr. Frandsen, shifted his feet.

“Are you well, Your Grace?” Frandsen’s voice ricocheted off the rows of pews behind them and filled the cavernous church.

“Quite well, thank you.” Sebastian tamped down his irritation with the overly attentive man. Surely it was forgivable to be somewhat nervous on one’s wedding day.

Resisting the urge to roll his shoulders, Sebastian kept his eyes on the stunning stained glass window in the apse before him. He knew full well that anxiously watching the main doors at the rear of the church would not make Rosalind appear any sooner. He took another deep breath. She would come; she told him she would. She had written to approve the wedding arrangements—had even expressed her pleasure over the asters he’d sent. She may not desire this union, but she had accepted it when he’d asked.

Mr. Baldwin stepped out of the vestry. The rector’s soft leather shoes and long cassock swished across the tiled floor as he moved toward the two gentlemen standing at the front of the church. Light from the huge candelabra above their heads reflected off his bald pate and off the gold lettering on the cover of the Book of Common Prayers in his hand.

“Do we have a bride, Your Grace?”

Given the vast emptiness all around them, the question was ludicrous, but Sebastian took the opportunity to check his watch once more. Ten o’clock. The first dong of the church clock reverberated through the hallowed building. Before the second one sounded, the doors at the back of the church creaked open and Lady Langton entered. She paused



momentarily before starting down the aisle, and two people moved out of the shadows behind her.

Rosalind stepped into the light, and Sebastian could only stare. She was stunning. Her cream-colored gown was cinched tightly around her small waist before cascading into a wide circle of silk and lace. Ruffles decorated her sleeves and bodice, and around her neck, she wore a string of pearls. More pearls winked from her ears and from amid the dark curls piled upon her head, and her gloved hand lay on the arm of a sandy-haired gentleman.

Another dong. And then another. The sounds of the new arrivals' footsteps and Rosalind's skirts brushing against the pews filled the short pauses between the clock hammer's strikes, and when the last one rang out, she was standing before Sebastian.

"Your Grace." Rosalind's escort bowed, and Sebastian recognized him immediately. Although he was one of the youngest members of Parliament, Lord Bloxley was well on his way to establishing himself as one of the most well-respected peers in the House of Lords.

"Bloxley," Sebastian said, inclining his head in return. "You have my thanks."

"My pleasure," the earl said. He glanced at Rosalind. She gave a brief nod and lifted her hand from his arm.

Without another word, Lord Bloxley stepped away. Sebastian waited until the earl had taken his place beside Lady Langton, then he offered Rosalind his hand. She met his eyes.

"We shall make this work, Rosalind," he said softly. "Better than most, I think."

She held his gaze. He waited, wanting—no, needing—her to make the next move. And then, with an unsteady breath, she surrendered her trepidation to trust and placed her trembling hand in his. He curled his fingers around hers.

"Fifty-seven," he whispered.

A line creased her brow. "Fifty-seven?"

“I took fifty-seven steps from the door to this spot. How many did you take?”

Her expression relaxed into a small smile. “Seventy-two.”

A few feet away, Mr. Baldwin cleared his throat. “Are you ready to start the ceremony, Your Grace?”

Sebastian released her hand and turned to face him. “I am.”

“And you, Miss Ainsworth?”

“Yes, Rector.”

“Very well.” Mr. Baldwin opened his book and cleared his throat once more. “Let us begin.”

\* \* \*

The marriage ceremony passed in a blur. Vaguely aware of the white-wigged gentleman standing beside Sebastian, and her mother and Lord Bloxley behind her, Rosalind kept her eyes on the narrow red ribbon marking Mr. Baldwin’s place in the prayer book. She knew that when the rector closed those pages, her life would be forever changed.

As if from far away, she heard Mr. Baldwin’s sonorous voice recite the familiar marriage ceremony. Sebastian repeated his vows, and she echoed them. The gentleman beside him produced a ring, and Sebastian waited patiently while she fumbled to take off her glove. Then he took her hand. His was warm against her icy cold one. He slipped the gold band onto her finger.

“Please kneel,” the rector said.

Placing his hand at her back, Sebastian gently guided her to her knees. Her gown puffed out in a large cloud around her, and even though her head was bowed, she could feel him close beside her. The rector read a final prayer, pronounced them man and wife, and shut his book.

It was over. A traitorous tear leaked out from beneath Rosalind’s closed eyelids. She brushed it away and looked up at the brightly colored stained glass windows above the altar. There was light in the darkness of the apse; there would be happiness in her uncertain future. No matter how long it took,

she would find it.

Sebastian rose and offered her his hand. She took it, and he helped her to her feet.

“Congratulations, my dear.” Rosalind’s mother stepped forward to greet her. After kissing her on both cheeks, her mother held her close. “I am exceedingly proud of you, Rosalind,” she whispered. “All will be well. His Grace is an honorable man and will take good care of you.”

Rosalind swallowed past the lump in her throat. “Will you come and visit me at Finley Park?” Up until this moment, they had avoided discussing their separation. Now that it was imminent, Rosalind experienced a moment of panic. “I will miss you horribly.”

Her mother smiled and ran her hand gently across Rosalind’s cheek. “You need some time to adjust to your new home and your new role without your mother interfering. But the moment you and His Grace are ready for guests, I will come.”

Rosalind could not imagine being any more needful of her mother’s steadying presence than she would be when she first took up the reins as the Duchess of Kelbrook. Unfortunately, it was unlikely that Sebastian would feel the same.

“But you will write to me often.”

“Of course I will.” Her mother released her hold on her and stepped back. “Now, go with your husband. Sign the registry, and be on your way.”

Mr. Baldwin led the way to the vestry. Sebastian offered her his arm, and they followed, with Lord Bloxley and the mysterious white-wigged gentleman bringing up the rear.

“Who did you bring as your witness, Your Grace?” Rosalind asked.

“Forgive me.” Sebastian halted. “I was so focused on the wedding ceremony, I neglected to make the proper introductions.” He turned as the two gentlemen reached them. “Rosalind, this is Mr. William Frandsen. Mr. Frandsen, my wife, Her Grace, the Duchess of Kelbrook.”

At Sebastian's introduction, Rosalind tightened her grip on his arm. She was no longer Miss Rosalind Ainsworth. Sebastian must have guessed the cause of her stiffening because as Mr. Frandsen bowed politely, he gave her a reassuring smile.

"Mr. Frandsen is my solicitor," he said.

His solicitor. The trust money. Rosalind put the pieces of the puzzle together in an instant.

"It is very nice to meet you, sir," she said. "Have you met Lord Bloxley?"

"I have, Your Grace," Mr. Frandsen said. "I am honored to be Lord Bloxley's solicitor as well."

Lord Bloxley grinned. "Glad to know my family's legal documents are in such excellent company, Your Grace."

"Likewise, Bloxley," Sebastian said.

Mr. Baldwin stood at the vestry door. As was his wont, he cleared his throat to draw everyone's attention. Lord Bloxley raised an eyebrow at the clergyman's obvious impatience; Sebastian ignored it.

"I am grateful to you both for coming this morning," Sebastian told the gentlemen. "As it seems that Mr. Baldwin is ready for us, we shall not keep you much longer."

It took only minutes for everyone to sign the book. After exchanging a few quiet words with Sebastian, Mr. Frandsen left with purpose in his step. Lord Bloxley and Rosalind's mother walked with Sebastian and Rosalind to the church's front doors. The Kelbrook carriage stood waiting for them outside. Rosalind's brown trunk was strapped to the back beside a larger black one. The rest of her luggage had gone ahead.

"Best wishes to you both," Lord Bloxley said.

Rosalind's mother grasped her hands. "You possess all the qualities necessary to be a marvelous wife and duchess, Rosalind. Remember that; strive for that. I promise you, it is well within your reach."

“Thank you, Mother,” Rosalind said, her voice breaking. “I will watch for your letters.”

“And I for yours,” she said. She kissed Rosalind’s cheek once more before taking Lord Bloxley’s arm.

“I shall escort Lady Langton home as soon as you are on your way,” he said.

“My thanks again, Bloxley,” Sebastian said.

Lord Bloxley inclined his head. “Travel safely.”

Rosalind walked through the grand portico and down the stone stairs toward the Kelbrook carriage. A hackney drove by, and on the other side of the road, a gentleman stepped out of the shadows of a narrow doorway. He stood on the pavement, watching. Slowing her steps, Rosalind turned to look at him. Mr. Sellers acknowledged her with an inclination of his head, and then a footman moved forward to open the carriage door.

She entered the vehicle without looking back. Sebastian followed and took the seat across from her. The door closed. Moments later, the carriage lurched forward and started rolling down the street. Turning her head, Rosalind gazed sightlessly through the window and allowed her tears to fall.

\* \* \*

Sebastian did not know what to do. Rosalind had been silently weeping for the best part of an hour. At first, he’d thought it best to offer her what little privacy could be afforded in a shared carriage by pretending that her distress had escaped his notice. But when her tears continued all the way to the outskirts of the city, he started to genuinely worry about her. How long could young ladies cry before they became ill? He had absolutely no idea.

For perhaps the fiftieth time, she dabbed her wet cheeks with her handkerchief. The small fabric square was wadded into a damp ball. He reached into his pocket and withdrew a clean, larger one.

“Rosalind.” He spoke her name tentatively. She sniffed and turned to him. He held out the handkerchief. “Take this.”

She reached for it and touched it to her puffy, red eyes. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“Is there anything more I can do?”

She shook her head, her lower lip trembling. “F ... forgive me. I do not know where all this is coming from.”

Truth be told, neither did Sebastian. It was nothing short of a biological miracle that her body had tears yet to shed. But regardless of her love of numbers, he did not think she was currently of a mind to discuss the scientific phenomenon.

“Are you in pain?”

She shook her head again.

He waited, not sure what else to say.

She took a shuddering breath. “Over the last few weeks, I have spent hours dwelling upon our upcoming marriage. I ... I thought I had prepared myself. But I failed to anticipate how difficult it would be to drive away from everyone and everything that is familiar to me.”

Relief that it was not him, per se, that was causing her distress quickly made way for a poignant memory. He had once been in a position similar to the one in which Rosalind found herself. Years ago. When he had entered a carriage at Finley Park with no one but his governess. Miss Shaw had been charged with delivering him to boarding school before continuing on to her new position with another family in Norfolk. He had been but eight years old at the time.

Knowing how important it was to his father that he behave in a manner befitting a future duke, Sebastian had stoically contained his emotions whilst bidding farewell to his parents and to the household staff whom he had known since birth. Only when his dog, Patch, had chased after the carriage and stood at the end of the drive, watching it disappear with doleful eyes, had Sebastian let down his guard and cried.

Miss Shaw had never been so important to him as she'd been that day. She had known exactly what to do to help. But was it what Rosalind would want? He did not know his wife nearly as well as his governess had known him, and if he

offered Rosalind the type of comfort he had received, it could go terribly wrong. He eyed the seat across from him. Rosalind was sitting in the corner, huddled up against the cold window. No matter that her skirts covered a good portion of the bench, plenty of room remained.

Silently praying that he was not making a huge mistake, he rose and dropped onto the seat beside her. Startled by his unexpected move, she looked at him with wide, red-rimmed eyes.

“Rosalind,” he said gently. “As difficult as it is to leave behind those you love, you are not completely alone.” He paused. “I am with you.”

When she did not withdraw farther into her corner of the carriage, he gathered his courage and held out his arms. Muffling her sob with his handkerchief, she leaned toward him, and he wrapped her in his arms. She buried her face in his shoulder, and he pulled her close, closing his eyes as the scent of jasmine assailed his senses.

# CHAPTER 11

THE RHYTHM OF THE ROLLING carriage wheels against the hard-packed road changed. Gravel crunched, and the vehicle swayed. Rosalind stirred, her eyelids fluttering open. Her cheek was pressed against silk. Silk that smelled of bergamot and ... Sebastian. She froze.

“Rosalind?” The arm wrapped around her loosened slightly.

Slowly, she raised her head, her heart pounding. He was so close she could see the flecks of green in his blue eyes.

“You are awake,” he said.

“How ... how long have I been asleep?”

“A couple of hours, I believe.”

“A couple of hours!” She pulled back in alarm. Outside the window, rolling green meadows, stone walls, hedgerows, and trees had replaced the sooty buildings and busy streets of London. She had no clear memory of making this drive in her youth, but she knew their destination could not be much farther. “We must be getting close to Finley Park.”

He nodded. “We just turned off the main road and onto the drive that leads to the house. You shall see it shortly after we round the next bend.”

Panic seized her. Not only would the new mistress of Finley Park be arriving with the puffy eyes associated with her earlier weep-fest, but her face undoubtedly also sported lines that corresponded to the pleats on Sebastian’s vest.

“Why did you not wake me sooner?”

He eyed her uncertainly. “You were emotionally spent. I rather thought you needed the rest before facing any more hurdles.”

Her indignation deflated as quickly as it had risen. He was right. Without sleep, she would have been in no fit state to meet the entire household staff. “Forgive me. I have not yet



thanked you for your kindness.” She winced. “You sacrificed your own comfort for mine for far too long.”

“It was no sacrifice,” he said. “Indeed, I have rarely been so content on a carriage ride.”

Rosalind caught the spark of something—teasing, undoubtedly—in his eyes. Warmth flooded her cheeks, and she looked away. Heaven help her. She would now be adding a flushed complexion to her list of undignified attributes when she exited the carriage. She smoothed her hands over her skirts, but the wrinkles remained.

“I fear I will make a very poor first impression arriving in such a disheveled state.”

“Rosalind.” Sebastian reached out and placed his hand over hers. She stilled, unnerved by the power of his touch. She’d experienced it, in large part, when he’d offered her comfort in his arms; she felt it again now. “When you arrived at the church this morning, you were quite the most beautiful bride I have ever seen. You are no less so now. A few tears and the crush of a carriage ride are not so powerful as all that.”

She stared at him. He appeared in earnest. “That is a very gallant thing to say, even if it cannot possibly be true.” She cocked her head to one side and eyed him suspiciously. “Exactly how many brides have you seen, Your Grace?”

He chuckled softly. “I believe chivalry dictates that I refrain from answering that question.” The carriage slowed still further, and as it crested the rise, Sebastian pointed to the window. “There it is. Your first view of Finley Park.”

Rosalind turned to look. In the hollow below, a magnificent structure stood surrounded by manicured gardens and woodland. Built of light-gray stone, the main part of the house boasted three floors, with an east and west wing of two floors each. At the front of the house, an ornate pediment surmounted a portico of columns, and a decorative trim ran along the roofline.

The late afternoon sun had painted the windows golden, and even from this distance, she identified potted shrubs lining the

wide staircase on either side of the large front doors.

“Oh my!” She struggled to find the words. Her childhood memories of this place had failed her completely. “It is exceptionally beautiful.”

“I am glad you think so.”

There was something in Sebastian’s voice that reminded her of her brother, Jonas. He used the same tone, a blend of gratitude and pride, when he spoke of Langton Manor. New regret that Jonas had not been with her this morning pricked at her. He would be distraught to learn that he had missed her wedding, but it was better this way. Perhaps by the time he returned to England, she would have found her footing as the Duchess of Kelbrook.

They were nearing the square courtyard in front of the house, and as Rosalind watched, the front doors opened. An older lady dressed in a sensible blue gown exited beside a tall, thin man wearing a white wig and the dark livery of a butler.

“Mrs. Frost and Vickers,” she guessed.

“Yes. They will be most helpful in orienting you to the running of the house and will assist you in learning the names of the other members of staff.”

A steady stream of servants had followed the housekeeper and butler into the courtyard, and the men and women were now standing in two tidy lines that ran from the center of the courtyard all the way to the bottom step leading to the front door. It was a grand, somewhat overwhelming, welcome.

Rosalind placed her hand to her stomach. The ring Sebastian had placed on her finger this morning pressed against the boning in her corset. Its presence was a timely reminder of the vows she’d taken and the commitment she had made. She could do better than this. Taking a deep breath, she straightened her shoulders. She was arriving as the Duchess of Kelbrook, the mistress of Finley Park. It was time to put her fears and insecurities aside and act the part.

\* \* \*

Sebastian clasped his hands behind his back, watching in silent

bemusement as Rosalind and Mrs. Frost made their way slowly down the long queue of waiting servants. Upon their arrival at Finley Park, he had anticipated introducing his new wife to his butler and housekeeper and then offering the remaining members of staff a polite nod before entering the house. Rosalind, it appeared, had a different plan. She had already stopped to talk to every footman and maid. Not only had she inquired of their names, but she had also asked each of them a question or two. Where were they from? How long had they been in service? How many siblings did they have? One by one, he had watched their faces light up as they shared a little about themselves with the new mistress of Finley Park. His cook, Mrs. Shoup, laughed at something Rosalind said, and Sebastian stepped closer to listen.

“Oh, yes, Your Grace. You remember rightly. His Grace was thin as a rail when he were young. I reckon it were all my Chelsea buns that did the trick in the end. He couldn’t get enough of them, see.” The plump, white-haired lady leaned closer to Rosalind. “Truth be told, he still loves them, only he don’t pilfer them from the kitchen the way he used to.”

Rosalind laughed delightedly, and Sebastian found himself torn between his indignation that Mrs. Shoup’s loyalty seemed to have evaporated in the face of Rosalind’s charm and amazement at Rosalind’s natural way of relating to each and every servant. There was no sign of her unhappiness now. Indeed, the only evidence he retained of her tearful collapse in his arms was the way in which his pulse quickened at the memory of holding her close.

She moved on to talk to the two young scullery maids standing at the very end of the line. They beamed in response to her attention, and Sebastian stepped away, waiting for her to finish before escorting her into the house.

“I beg your pardon, Your Grace.” Vickers appeared at Sebastian’s elbow, his voice low so as not to interrupt Rosalind’s nearby conversation.

Sebastian turned to him. “Yes, Vickers?”

“You received a special delivery yesterday. It came in a

rather large leather satchel. The courier seemed to think it was a matter of some importance, but as you were expected here today, I did not forward it to Hartford House.”

Sebastian frowned. It was too soon for anything to have arrived from Mr. Frandsen regarding the trust fund, and he could not think of any matter sufficiently urgent to warrant a courier. “Did the man give you the name of the sender?”

“No, Your Grace. Only that it had come from Scotland.”

Meikle. It could only be him. But did a special delivery from the Scottish inventor mean good news or bad? “Where is the satchel now?”

“In your study, Your Grace.”

Sebastian nodded. If Meikle felt that the communication was significant enough to warrant a courier and it had been awaiting Sebastian’s attention for over twenty-four hours, he had best see to it posthaste. “Thank you, Vickers.”

His butler bowed. “You will find several other items of correspondence on your desk, Your Grace, and Mr. Grayson has asked to speak with you at your earliest convenience.”

Sebastian’s steward undoubtedly had a great deal to discuss—not least of which was the need to replace the bridge between Finley Park and the tenants’ cottages. They would have to work swiftly if they were to beat the upcoming winter weather.

“Send word to Grayson, asking him to come by the house tomorrow afternoon,” Sebastian said. “In the meantime, I shall examine the contents of the satchel as soon possible.”

Vickers bowed again. “Very good, Your Grace.”

Rosalind exchanged a few last words with the youngest scullery maid and then joined him at the base of the stone steps. He offered her his arm.

“I am impressed. I believe you may have won over every member of the household before setting foot through the front door.”

She placed her hand on his arm, and they started up the

stairs together. "I fear I will only remember half their names."

"Since that number is well over ten, it is still highly commendable."

She glanced at him, one eyebrow raised, and his heart warmed to see a familiar hint of humor in her eyes. "Really, Your Grace? Are there so many servants in your employ that you have lost track of their number? There were eighteen in line today, half of which would be nine."

"True enough," he said. "But you neglected to count the coachman and the grooms currently taking care of the horses, not to mention my steward and gamekeeper, who are undoubtedly away from the house."

"Keeping employees hidden from view is cheating," she huffed.

"As is wheedling top-secret information about me out of my cook."

Her lips twitched as though she were fighting a smile. "Do not worry. I shall be sure to ask her to make Chelsea buns occasionally."

They had reached the main doors. Vickers pushed them open, and Sebastian led Rosalind inside. If she had intended to continue their banter, the words died on her lips as she gazed around the vast entrance hall. She had given him the impression that she remembered very little about the house from her visit here as a child, so Sebastian tried to imagine how it would be to see this room for the first time.

Portraits of his ancestors in large gilded frames covered the walls, and a huge chandelier hung suspended from the decorative ceiling. Tall urns adorned the pedestals standing in each corner. Notwithstanding the splendor of the decorations, however, the most imposing feature in the room was the staircase. It swooped into the lobby from the floor above, the intricately carved wooden banister rail as highly polished as the marble floor beneath their feet.

Two passages led off from the hall, one leading to the east wing and one to the west. Sebastian glanced to his left now,

toward the east wing. His study was not far away. Indeed, he could see the closed door from where he stood. Perhaps he could retrieve the satchel and check on its contents before dressing for dinner.

“Mrs. Frost.”

The housekeeper was standing near the staircase, orchestrating the return of the staff to their assigned places in the house. At Sebastian’s call, she looked up. “Yes, Your Grace.”

“Would you be good enough to show Her Grace to her rooms so that she may freshen up and dress for dinner?”

“Of course.”

Rosalind gave him a puzzled look. “Are you not also coming upstairs?”

“I have some business that I must see to first. When you are ready, one of the servants will show you where the dining room is located. I shall join you there at five o’clock.”

“Very well.” Rosalind removed her hand from his arm and stepped away. A mask of politeness covered her normally expressive face, and Sebastian experienced a flicker of unease. Had he misstepped? Surely it was not important that he personally walk her to her rooms. Especially when his housekeeper was just as capable of the task.

“Whenever you are ready, Your Grace,” Mrs. Frost said.

Rosalind crossed the hall to join her and started up the stairs. Sebastian watched her until she was almost to the landing. She did not turn around. Pushing aside his misgivings, he headed for his study.

The large satchel was lying on his desk. He crossed the room quickly and released the leather straps. Lifting the flap, he put his hand inside and withdrew a large scroll tied with string. A quick look in the satchel revealed a small envelope. He took it out and opened it. It contained a single sheet of paper covered in a barely legible scribble. Sebastian grimaced. Meikle must have rushed to write this note. Although the Scotsman’s penmanship lacked finesse, his writing was not

usually so ink blotted.

*East Lothian, Scotland*

*10 October 1782*

*My Lord Duke,*

*You can imagine my dismay when I recently learned that Mr. John Avery is close to developing a machine intended to simplify the harvest. The details of his proposed enterprise remain unknown, but the news has brought with it a fresh sense of urgency to complete my design for a functioning threshing machine without delay.*

*Since your departure, I have adjusted the tilt of the sieve and the speed at which the weights traverse the grain. Neither alteration has brought the desired results, and I now feel sure that the error lies in an arithmetical miscalculation associated with the beaters. Your skill with numbers is unparalleled, and so I am writing to humbly ask for your assistance.*

*If you would be so good as to review the latest design plans (paying particular attention to the calculations) and return your findings by my courier, I would be most grateful. I have instructed him to wait a fortnight before coming for them. If you do not have the papers ready, he will try again two days later. At that point, regardless of your progress—or lack thereof—please return everything with him.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Andrew Meikle*

Sebastian's heart sank. He'd pored over Meikle's earlier

plans enough to know that a fortnight was scarcely enough time to review every calculation. And yet, he could not in good conscience walk away from the request. He knew full well that after having devoted years to this project, his friend would be financially sunk if he was not the first to produce a fully functioning mechanical threshing machine.

Setting the letter on his desk, he picked up the scroll of papers. How many sheets had significant changes on them? Was it possible that if he focused on the ones Meikle had altered, he would find the mistake without having to read every page? It might be the best place to start, at least.

Taking a key from the top drawer of his desk, Sebastian placed the scroll back into the satchel, tucked the large bag beneath his arm, and left the room. He continued down the passage until it turned a corner. The first door on the right was closed. Placing the key he had taken from the study desk into the lock, he turned it and heard the bolt slide back. He opened the door and walked in.

A damp chill hung in the air. Grateful that he was still wearing his jacket, he set the satchel on the large table and crossed the room to the fireplace. Taking a flint from the mantelpiece, he bent down and struck it over a piece of kindling. The downside to forbidding servants from entering his workshop while he was gone was that he usually returned to a frigid room and often had to take care of lighting the fire himself.

Once the wood was burning, he straightened and moved to the window to pull back the curtains. His caution likely bordered upon paranoia, but what had begun as a place dedicated to tinkering on small projects that fulfilled his desire to create had become a workshop where new and seemingly fanciful modernizations were born. He had spent enough time with inventors to know that the theft of their ideas was as real as it was devastating. Whenever an associate trusted him enough to share such material, he was honor bound to protect it.

The rays of the sinking sun illuminated the thin layer of dust coating the few furnishings in the room. The decorations were



sparse. This was not a place for relaxation but, rather, for creativity and work. Along with the large table, there were three chairs and a tall shelving unit. Most of the shelves were covered with an eclectic collection of scientific, engineering, and geographic text, but the top shelf housed a globe and the model of a frigate that Sebastian had built when he'd been fifteen. He had built several more model ships afterward. A row of miniature schooners, galleons, and sloops graced the mantelpiece, but the frigate had been his first attempt and remained a poignant reminder of what heartfelt effort could accomplish.

Returning to the table, he pushed aside the assortment of calipers, set squares, compasses, and protractors littering its surface and withdrew Meikle's documents from the leather bag. He untied the string that bound them, and unrolling the papers, he separated the sheets. Seventy-eight. To his relief, each page was numbered. That would make things easier if he started studying the sheets out of order. He frowned. First, he would need to find all of Meikle's recently made alterations.

## CHAPTER 12

“THANK YOU, POLLY.” ROSALIND SMILED at the maid Mrs. Frost had assigned to assist her. “I would have been lost without you.”

The fifteen-year-old bobbed a curtsy, her cheeks coloring at the praise. “You’re welcome, Your Grace. It’s a treat to see all your gowns hangin’ in the wardrobe next t’ each other.” She smiled shyly. “Lovely, they are. Every one.”

“I confess, I did not realize how many I owned until it was time to pack my trunks.” Rosalind eyed the empty containers lying around the large bedchamber. “You’ve made short work of emptying them.”

“There’s just that little one left.” Polly pointed to the small brown trunk in the corner. “Would you like my help with that one too?”

“Thank you, but, no.” The last remaining unopened trunk was filled with more personal items: the painting of Langton Manor she’d received for her birthday, a few of her favorite books, her diary, and her grandmother’s brass candlesticks, to name a few. She wished to unpack those things on her own.

She glanced around the elegant room, wondering where she might place the picture of her former home. There were a few paintings on the paneled walls in the bedchamber and the adjacent sitting room. Most of them were pastoral scenes and complemented the pale blues and greens of the decor. The four-poster bed boasted a floral bedspread with swags of matching fabric hanging from the framework above.

Three large windows looked out over the manicured lawn, the rose garden, and the ornamental pond beyond. A comfortable armchair was positioned beside the closest window, and Rosalind eyed it longingly. Curling up with only a book for company this evening sounded completely wonderful. But it was not to be. Not yet, at any rate. The clock on the mantel showed ten minutes to five o’clock. She glanced

in the mirror hanging above the dressing table. Polly had done a marvelous job of teasing Rosalind's errant curls back into submission, and her violet gown was fresh and wrinkle free. According to her reflection, she was ready for her first dinner in her new home—her first dinner with Sebastian.

She clasped her hands to hide their tremor and turned back to Polly. "If you would be so good as to guide me to the dining room, I believe it is time to go down to dinner."

Ignoring the connecting door that led to Sebastian's rooms, Rosalind walked through the small sitting room and out of the door that led into the passage beyond. Disappointment had been swift in coming when Sebastian had handed over the chore of guiding Rosalind to her chambers to Mrs. Frost. He had been so kind in the carriage and so convivial when they had entered the house together that she had begun to believe he enjoyed her company. But all too soon, work had taken precedence over introducing his new wife to Finley Park. Now that he was back in his own environment, perhaps he would revert to being as unsocial as he had been before.

"This is the east wing, is it not?" Rosalind asked as Polly started toward the stairs.

"Yes, Your Grace. You and His Grace 'ave rooms on this side. Some of them other doors lead to guest rooms, but they're not used much. Leastways, not since I've been 'ere."

"What about the west wing?"

"There's more bedchambers there too," Polly said. "And the west wing's where the library, the billiard room, and the ballroom are. But they're on the ground floor, of course."

"I see. And the east wing? What is on the ground floor on this side of the house?"

They were already descending the stairs, and Polly peered down the passage in question. "Well, let's see. There's the master's study, the dining room, the drawing room, and the grand saloon. Oh, and, of course, the master's workshop."

"His workshop?"

"That's right. But no one's allowed in there unless His

Grace is in the room, and then it's only t' clean the fireplace.”

“No one?” Rosalind stopped. She was only one step from reaching the entrance hall. “Not even Mrs. Frost or Vickers?”

“No, Your Grace. He keeps the door locked when he's not inside.” Polly appeared suddenly stricken. “I didn't mean to speak out of turn. It might be different for you. His Grace ...” She swallowed. “Well, he's not 'ad a wife 'ere afore.”

“Of course,” Rosalind said. “I understand.”

Polly gave her a hesitant smile, and behind her, the mechanism in the longcase clock whirred in preparation for chiming the five o'clock hour.

“Would you like to go directly to the dining room, Your Grace?”

“I think that would be best,” Rosalind said. She did not want to be late, and there would be time enough to explore the house tomorrow.

Polly led her down the passage to the sound of the clock's chimes. Stopping beside an open door on the right, she stepped aside to allow Rosalind to enter.

“Will there be anything else, Your Grace?”

“I do not believe so. Thank you, Polly.”

At Rosalind's dismissal, the maid bobbed a curtsy and hurried back the way they had come, leaving Rosalind to enter the magnificent dining room alone.

White plaster molding decorated the ceiling and walls, standing out against the eggshell-blue walls. Alcoves containing marble busts of Sebastian's ancestors ran the length of one wall whilst half a dozen enormous windows all but replaced the wall on the opposite side. A multicolored Persian rug lay on the hardwood floor beneath a long mahogany table and twelve matching chairs. Two place settings had been laid out on one end of the table, and although there was no sign of Sebastian, a footman stood in the corner of the room, ready to assist with the meal.

Grateful that she would not be required to maintain a

conversation with Sebastian along the entire length of the table, Rosalind crossed the room to look out of the window. The sun was setting, casting shadows across the stone terrace outside and turning the water in the distant pond dark. She rubbed her arms with her hands, feeling unexpectedly chilled, and moved to stand closer to the fire.

The silverware and crystal on the table glistened in the light of the chandelier above the table. Rosalind counted the candles. Then she counted the fleur-de-lis on the crown molding, followed by the plaster roses along the mantel. And still Sebastian did not come. From out in the hall, the longcase clock chimed a single note marking the half hour and awaking Rosalind's ire. It was one thing to pass his unwanted bride off to his housekeeper upon their arrival; it was quite another to fail to show up for dinner. She looked at the footman. He shifted uncomfortably.

Visualizing where the redheaded servant had been standing when she had alighted the carriage, she dug deep to remember his name. "It's Marcus, is it not?" she said.

Surprise lit his face. "Yes, Your Grace."

"Well, Marcus, it appears that His Grace will be taking his dinner later, so if you would be good enough to inform the kitchen that I am ready to eat, I should like to begin my meal."

"Of course, Your Grace." He stepped away from the wall and pulled out one of the chairs.

Rosalind sat, and when he was sure she was comfortable, Marcus stepped out of the room. Moments later, the first course appeared at her elbow. Wedding jitters had prevented her from eating more than half a piece of toast for breakfast. Anger was doing its utmost to spoil her dinner. Only the knowledge that Mrs. Shoup would be hurt if she refused to eat kept her at the table. Somehow, she forced down half a bowl of soup, a few bites of venison, and even fewer pieces of boiled carrot.

At last, when her stomach could stand it no more, she set down her serviette and rose to her feet. Startled, Marcus stepped forward to help with her chair.

“Would you pass along my apologies to Cook, Marcus? Everything was lovely, but I find that I am suddenly not feeling well. I think it best if I retire early.”

A look of concern crossed his countenance. “Do you require assistance, Your Grace?”

“No. I can find my own way,” she said, and holding her head high, she walked out of the room.

She swept down the passage and into the entrance hall. Lifting her violet skirts, she started up the stairs, her breath coming out in short bursts as she battled her emotions. Why would a gentleman who had been so solicitous to her in the carriage be so rude to her now? Surely he could have endured sharing a meal with her for a short time. It was as though the adult Duke of Kelbrook had reverted to his fourteen-year-old self the moment he’d set foot inside his stately home.

She reached the door to her chambers and thrust it open. Cutting through the small sitting room, she entered the bedroom. A fire was burning, and Polly was turning down the bedcovers.

“Your Grace!” The maid started, dropping the sheet in her hands. “Forgive me. I had not expected you to return so soon.”

“It has been a long and exhausting day, Polly. Help me with my stays, and once I am out of my gown, you may go.”

Polly nodded and hurried around the bed. She worked quickly and quietly, and before long, Rosalind was sitting on the edge of her bed, wearing a dressing gown over her shift.

“May I fetch you something to help you sleep?” Polly asked anxiously.

“No.” Rosalind summoned a smile. There was no reason for Polly to suffer for what Sebastian had done—or not done. “I need nothing more.”

“And tomorrow? Would you like your breakfast brought to your room in the morning?”

“That would be lovely.” As far as Rosalind was concerned, the longer she avoided Sebastian, the better.

Looking pleased, Polly bobbed a curtsy. “Good night, Your Grace.”

Rosalind waited for the maid to close the door behind her before rising to her feet. With purpose in her steps, she crossed the room and turned the key in the lock. She then eyed the door that connected her rooms to Sebastian’s. There was no key in that lock. Even if she were to set a chair up against the door, the gentleman could enter should he truly wish to. But a chair’s presence there might send a message nonetheless.

Taking the nearest chair by one arm, she dragged it across the floor and pushed it against the connecting door. The chair was solid, but the door was even more substantial. So too was the doorframe. Acting on little more than hope and a hunch, Rosalind climbed onto the chair. Standing on tiptoes, she reached her arm up and ran her fingers along the top of the wide doorframe. Dust. She slid her hand a little farther down. More dust. And then something long, smooth, and metallic.

Wrapping her fingers around it, she lowered her arm and examined her find. Just as she’d hoped, it was a key. She scrambled off the chair and slid the key into the keyhole. It fit, and it turned. As the bolt slid into place, Rosalind released a tense breath. It was just as well that Sebastian learn right away that he was no longer the only one in the house who could bar people from entry.

It took under a minute to return the chair to its rightful place and even less time to open her small trunk. She pulled out the painting of Langton Manor that Jonas had given her, but she did not look at it. Tomorrow, or perhaps in a week or two, she would gaze on it with fondness. Tonight, her feelings were too raw. Digging through the pile of books she’d brought with her, she uncovered her diary. She pulled it out of the stack and straightened. Ink and a quill sat on the small desk in the corner, and yet, she hesitated. The details of one’s wedding day were surely something worth recording, but she did not have the stamina for a lengthy entry tonight.

She moved to the desk, flipped open her diary to the back page, and read the list of the Duke of Kelbrook’s good and bad qualities that she’d begun days ago. Dipping the quill in ink,

she added to her *Bad Things* list: 4. *He abandoned me*. She stared at the page, thinking back on all that had transpired that day. There had been some tender moments along with challenging ones. And if she truly wished to keep her list balanced, she must include the good no matter her current feelings. She dipped her quill in the ink again and added a fourth line to the *Good Things* list: 4. *He comforted me*.

To an outside observer, the one entry would appear to cancel out the other. It made no sense that one man could play such opposing roles. And yet, her aching heart was proof that he had. She closed her diary and blew out the candle on the desk. Rising, she moved around the room, blowing out the candles on the mantelpiece and the dressing table. When the room was dark except for the glow of coals in the fireplace, she took off her dressing gown and crawled into bed.

The downy softness of the feather mattress embraced her. She curled up in a ball and closed her eyes. A coal slid in the fireplace, and from somewhere outside, a dog barked. Footsteps, firm and hurried, sounded in the passage. They stopped outside her door. She tensed. She heard the soft rap. Then nothing. A few seconds later, the footsteps moved away, and she heard the click of a nearby door open and close. She waited, her eyes drawn to the shadowy form of the connecting door. Another soft rap sounded.

“Rosalind.” Sebastian’s whisper reached her through the connecting door.

She remained perfectly still. The doorknob shifted a fraction but held firm. She clutched her sheets in the darkness. Silence filled her bedchamber, and then she heard the faint thuds of movement from the neighboring room. She turned her back to the door and closed her eyes again. Tomorrow would be soon enough to face him.

\* \* \*

Sebastian dropped into the chair beside his bed and buried his head in his hands. Surely no gentleman had ever failed his new bride so completely. He should have known better than to open Meikle’s papers before dinner. Whenever he devoted his



attention to a project, time ceased to exist. He'd lit a candle when he'd first begun studying the calculations and had not looked up again until his stomach had growled in protest. Only then had he realized that beyond the small circle of light around the table and the glow of the lowering fire in the fireplace, the room was in shadow.

He'd been so convinced that the clock on the mantel was wrong that he'd checked it against his pocket watch. When both instruments had displayed the same appallingly late hour, he had doused the candle and exited his workshop without looking back. Barely remembering to lock the door, he'd gone directly to the dining room only to find it dark and empty. It had been absurd to expect anything different since he'd been over two hours late for dinner, but the sight of the vacant room had caused the pit in his stomach to widen.

Marcus had met him in the entrance hall and confirmed what Sebastian had already guessed. After waiting for half an hour, Rosalind had eaten a small portion of the evening meal on her own before retiring to her rooms.

Sebastian had taken the stairs two at a time, slowing his pace only when he'd approached her chambers. No light shone beneath the door, but he'd knocked anyway. He'd not intended to use the door that connected their private rooms without consulting her first, but when he'd received no response, desperation had sent him there. And he'd found it locked.

He groaned and raised his head to stare into the low-burning fire. Never, in all their years of marriage, had he seen his parents lock that door. In truth, he had assumed the key was lost. And yet, in less than twenty-four hours, he had driven his wife to barricade herself in her room.

For a short time today, he had harbored a slim hope that a deeper relationship might develop between them. In the carriage, the trust she'd placed in him had shown in her tear-filled eyes when she'd collapsed into his arms. He had not expected the surge of protectiveness he'd experienced when he'd held her close. At least, he thought that was what it had meant when his heart had told him Rosalind did not belong anywhere else or with anyone else.

He leaped to his feet and paced across the room. After breaking that fledgling trust so completely, what could he possibly do to regain it? An apology—if she would ever allow him audience—would be a place to start. But an apology alone would be insufficient. Offering her a piece of his mother’s jewelry now would seem more like he was attempting to buy her good favor. That gift would have to wait until he had shown her that his apology was heartfelt. He stopped his pacing to stare at the locked connecting door. The sturdy barrier may prevent him from speaking to her face-to-face, but the gap beneath the door was wide enough to allow a letter through. And that, at least, was a place to start.

## CHAPTER 13

ROSALIND AWOKE TO THE FIRST light of dawn filtering in through the heavy curtains. She blinked, taking in the unfamiliar bedchamber as memories from the day before flooded her mind. She lay still, listening to the chorus of birds outside her window. Did their hearts ever ache as hers did now? If so, they sang regardless of the discomfort. Could she summon enough courage to do the same? She rolled over and faced the connecting door. A white square lay on the floor before it. Sitting up in bed, she squinted to see it more clearly. She was quite sure it had not been there the night before. It would have become caught on the chair legs.

Curiosity won over her reluctance to leave her warm bed. She slid out from under the covers and reached for her dressing gown. Sliding her arms into the sleeves, she tied the belt around her waist and hurried across the room. The fire was long gone, and the floor was cold against her bare feet. She reached the door and picked up the paper. It was a sealed envelope. She flipped it over and read the name written across the front: *Rosalind*. Her breath caught. It was from Sebastian.

She shivered. The room's chill was penetrating her dressing gown. Clutching the letter in one hand, she scampered back to the bed and slipped in between the sheets again. Curiosity bubbled inside her. But with it came a healthy dose of fear. As much as she wished to know why Sebastian had left her alone for so long last evening, she was afraid of what it would reveal of her future life at Finley Park. If he had written to tell her that she must become used to being alone, her aching heart might actually break.

Sitting up against the pillows, she opened the envelope and withdrew two sheets of paper, then began to read.

*Dear Rosalind,*

*I hardly know where to begin. To ask for your forgiveness seems presumptuous, yet I must. That you ate in the dining room alone on your first evening at Finley Park is deplorable. That I am fully to blame is reprehensible. I am truly sorry.*

*To help you understand how such a slight could occur, I must confess to a personal flaw. Although I pride myself upon being prompt and reliable in parliamentary, business, and social settings, those valued qualities are completely lost to me when I immerse myself in work of a creative or innovative nature.*

*When we arrived at Finley Park, Vickers informed me that a special courier had recently delivered a satchel from a Scottish colleague. I had intended to simply review the satchel's contents before meeting with you for dinner. Instead, I became so absorbed in the details of my associate's project that time ceased to exist. I had no notion that I had missed our appointed dinnertime until hunger drove me to consult my pocket watch. By then, I was inexcusably late.*

*Much as I desire it, I am unable to correct my behavior this evening. I can, however, commit to do all in my power to prevent it from happening again. I intend to speak with Vickers, informing him that he is to interrupt my work whenever you require my presence.*

*I should very much like to give you a tour of my ancestral home in the morning. In the hope that you are willing to join me, I shall come to the door of your chambers at ten o'clock.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Sebastian*

Rosalind lowered her hands, the letter coming to rest on the

bed covers. Sebastian's apology appeared genuine. And to be willing to have Vickers interrupt his work on her behalf was concession indeed. Knowing that his absence at dinner had not been because he had already tired of her was reassuring, although to be so easily forgotten was hurtful.

She lifted the pages and reread the last paragraph. Should she go with him? A small part of her wished to make Sebastian suffer a little longer for the wound he had inflicted upon her, but a far larger part longed to see all that Finley Park had to offer. And if she were truly honest with herself, she would far rather tour the house with him than with Mrs. Frost.

A soft knock sounded at the door. Startled, Rosalind glanced at the clock on the mantel. It was barely half past eight. Surely Sebastian would not wish to make up for being so late last night that he arrived an hour and a half early this morning.

"Who is it?" she called.

"Polly, Your Grace."

Her shoulders sagged with relief. "Come in."

The doorknob jiggled. "I believe the door is locked, Your Grace."

Groaning at her foolishness, Rosalind peeled off the bedclothes and padded across the wooden floor. She turned the key and pulled open the door. "Forgive me, Polly. I had forgotten."

"'Tis nothing." Concern shone in the maid's eyes. "I didn't wake you, did I?"

"No. I was simply staying warm under the covers." Rosalind wrapped her dressing gown around herself more tightly, and Polly gave an understanding nod.

"Let me get a fire goin' for you, and then if yer ready for it, I'll fetch your breakfast."

\* \* \*

Sebastian checked his pocket watch once more. One minute before ten o'clock. It was time. Exiting his chambers, he traversed the short distance to Rosalind's rooms and stood in

the passage facing her door. Had she read his letter? And if so, how would she respond? Tamping down his anxiety, he tugged on the lace at his sleeves and lifted his chin. He would not give up. If she chose not to answer, he would keep coming back until she did.

He raised his arm and knocked. There was a moment of silence, and then he heard footsteps drawing near.

The door opened to reveal one of the housemaids. She bobbed a curtsy. "Good morning, Your Grace."

"Good morning," he said. "I am here to see my wife."

The maid moved aside, and Sebastian watched from the doorway as Rosalind crossed the sitting room to join them. How had he forgotten how beautiful she was after an absence of only one night? She was dressed in a turquoise gown with a white floral bodice. Her dark hair was pinned up, ringlets touching the lace at her neckline.

"Good morning, Sebastian."

There was little warmth in her greeting, but her eyes had lost the redness of yesterday. He hoped that meant she had slept the night without any more tears shed.

"Good morning." He cleared his throat. "I am come to ask if I may take you on a brief tour of Finley Park?"

Her eyes met his, and he sensed her uncertainty. He did not look away.

"Yes," she said at last. "I would like that."

Relief flooded him. "Thank you."

His voice was low, meant only for her. She nodded, and he knew she understood.

She joined him in the passage. "Where are we to start?"

"You may choose," he said. "Top to bottom or bottom to top?"

She smiled then, and his heart lifted. "Top to bottom. Then we leave the exciting rooms to the end."

“Do you mean to tell me that you do not consider twenty-four unique bedchambers to be exciting?” he asked.

“Twenty-four?” There was no mistaking her shock. “Good heavens. No wonder you employ such a large staff. Dusting that many rooms would be a full-time occupation.”

“In total, Finley Park boasts one hundred and twelve rooms.”

She stared at him. “Truly?”

He laughed and offered her his arm. “Truly. This is no lightweight excursion.”

They started in the upper east wing and slowly moved over to the upper west wing. To her credit, Rosalind entered every single bedchamber and associated sitting room, pausing often to admire the views through the windows. She lingered in the nursery, peeked into the linen cupboards, but stopped short of climbing the back stairs to the servants’ quarters above. Instead, they made their way downstairs, across the entrance hall, and to the main library.

Sebastian opened the double doors and stepped back to allow Rosalind to enter ahead of him. She stepped over the threshold and went no farther. Her head slowly swiveled from the left to the right and back again as she took in the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves that ran the entire length of three walls.

“Oh, Sebastian!” She turned to him, her eyes lit with wonder. “It’s incredible.”

“Yes.” Sebastian smiled at her obvious awe. “It is rather.”

She moved farther into the room, extending her arms and slowly twirling in a full circle to take it all in. Her wide skirts brushed against the legs of a nearby end table before she dropped into one of the room’s leather armchairs.

“I remember my father especially enjoying this room when we visited you all those years ago.” Her gaze strayed to the french doors and large windows that monopolized the fourth wall. The stone terrace and the expansive lawn beyond were just visible. “Once, I entered the house through those doors and sat beside him in one of these big armchairs.” Her

forehead creased, and Sebastian found himself wondering if the memory distressed her somehow.

“I am glad that you can picture your father here,” he said. “My father was also fond of sitting beside this fireplace with a good book. I think reading was his escape from the more tedious work of being a duke.”

“As designing and creating are yours,” she said.

“Yes. I suppose so.”

She looked around the room again. “I believe I could stay in here for hours, but as we have another fifty-one rooms to view, I had better return another time.”

“Are you actually keeping track?”

With a grin, she rose to her feet. “I stopped counting after thirty-three, but one day when I am not so distracted by the marvel of it all, I shall most certainly count every room.”

“Since I have not tallied them since I was twelve. I sincerely hope my arithmetic is not found lacking.”

“Oh, you shall hear about it if it is.”

He chuckled. “Of that, I have no doubt.”

They paused briefly at the billiards room and two staterooms before reaching the ballroom. After Rosalind’s response to the library, he had a fairly good idea of how she would feel about this room.

He set his hands on the door handles. “Are you ready?”

“What is it?”

He pushed open the doors. “The ballroom.”

She took two steps before coming to a full stop. The wood floor was polished to a shine. An enormous circular mural on the ceiling was echoed in the smaller murals on the walls. The molding on the ceiling and the walls was painted gold, as were the pillars that stood between the murals. The remainder of the room was painted pale blue, and dark-blue damask curtains hung at the windows.



“I have never ...” She swallowed and began again. “Have you ever held a ball in here?”

“My parents hosted a harvest ball every year.” Long-forgotten memories flitted through his mind. Watching his father place a glittering necklace around his mother’s neck before escorting her down the stairs, sneaking into the ballroom from the nursery to watch the ladies and gentlemen in their finery, and the music and laughter that had filled the house. An unexpected feeling of regret assailed him. “There has not been a dance here since they passed away.”

“Next year, Sebastian.” Rosalind reached out and grasped his hand tightly. “Do you think we could hold a harvest ball here next year?”

She had taken his hand without thought. Logically, Sebastian knew that. Unfortunately, it seemed that his heart was not the least bit logical and had taken to pounding just to prove it. The thought of having his home overrun by guests—guests he would be required to entertain—was horrifying. But if Rosalind was by his side—no, if she was at the helm—and all he needed to do was make an appearance ... and dance with her ... “I think that is a distinct possibility.”

Rosalind gasped. “Thank you, Sebastian!” Rising onto her toes, she leaned forward and brushed her lips against his cheek. “It will be magical.”

Sebastian nodded mutely. At this precise moment, if Rosalind were to tell him that she was magical, he would likely believe it. She released his hand and took a few steps toward the center of the large room. He took an unsteady breath. Distance helped.

“Is this where you learned to dance?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Well, if I had known that at the Marlboroughs’ ball, I never would have questioned your ability to dance the allemande,” she teased.

“Ah. The dance floor makes the dancer, does it?” Perhaps he was not completely undone after all; he could match her

bantering yet.

“In this instance, I should say so.” She walked back to him and took his arm. “Although I daresay it helps that you can count.”

He grinned. “I shall hold you to that commendation when you go to total Finley Park’s rooms.”

They retraced their steps through the west wing and into the entrance hall. Vickers emerged from the servants’ entrance and bowed politely.

“That is the fastest way to the kitchen,” Sebastian said. “I do not use it as often now as I did when I was a boy, but it is always good to know such things.”

“Most assuredly.”

“The east wing begins with my study and, across from it, the large drawing room. You may prefer to use the smaller, more private parlor a little farther down the passage, but this one works well if company comes to call.”

Rosalind glanced in each room. “The furnishings are lovely.”

“My mother’s influence.” He paused, considering that reality from Rosalind’s perspective for the first time. Perhaps she would not see it so positively. “Aside from my chambers, the study, and my workshop, if you wish to make changes, to alter the furnishings or decorations so they are more to your liking, you are free to do so. You are the mistress of Finley Park now.”

“Thank you.”

He had thought his comment would please her, but instead, he sensed an emotional retreat. The light in her eyes had dimmed. Up ahead, the door to the dining room stood open, and his heart sank. “Rosalind, I assume that you read my written apology regarding my lack of appearance at dinner last night. Let me reiterate how awful I felt—I still feel—about what happened.” He met her eyes. “Having a wife is new to me. Indeed, having anyone else to think of beyond myself is new to me. That is not meant as an excuse but rather as an

explanation.”

“This is all new to me too.”

“I realize that. So perhaps we can be especially patient with one another. For a little while, at least.”

She nodded. They stood in silence for a moment, and then she looked away.

“What else is down the east wing?”

He took her elbow, and they started forward again. “Next is the small parlor I mentioned to you earlier. And then my workshop.”

“The one that no one else is allowed to enter.” She was not teasing anymore. Then again, neither was he.

“Correct.”

She lifted her chin slightly. “Will you show me the parlor?”

“Of course. And afterward, if you find that you are flagging, perhaps we should visit Mrs. Shoup in the kitchen. I did hear rumor that she might be making Chelsea buns today.”

Rosalind smiled, but it did not quite reach her eyes. “I believe I should like to try them.”

\* \* \*

The kitchen was warm and filled with the tantalizing aroma of freshly baked bread. Mrs. Shoup was standing over the stove, stirring something in a large pot. Her sensible white blouse and brown skirt were covered with a large apron, and a mobcap covered her head.

At the sound of Sebastian’s and Rosalind’s footsteps on the red tile floor, she looked up from her work. When she caught sight of Sebastian, her smile was instant. “Good day, Your Grace. I wondered how long it would take before you made your way into the kitchen. I believe you can smell Chelsea buns cooking all the way in that workshop of yours.”

Somewhat surprised by his cook’s familiar greeting, Rosalind glanced at Sebastian to see him grinning.

“I confess, when I became too old to sneak down here without suffering a reprimand from my governess, I put Vickers under oath to inform me whenever Chelsea buns were coming out of the oven,” he said.

“Well, I must say, that explains a great deal,” Mrs. Shoup said with a chuckle. She lifted two small plates from a cupboard above her head and set them beside a large pan of freshly baked buns. “Take a seat, and I’ll bring you both a bun and a cup of tea.”

“Thank you.” Sebastian took Rosalind’s elbow and guided her to a large wooden table in the center of the room. A handful of chairs surrounded it. He pulled one out for her, and once she was seated, he took the one beside her.

Across the room, two scullery maids were hard at work. One was scrubbing pans in a large pail of water. The other was peeling carrots. They each glanced at Sebastian and Rosalind, but neither seemed remotely shocked to see the duke and duchess sitting at the kitchen table.

“I gather you frequent the kitchen more than most noblemen,” Rosalind said.

“Probably,” Sebastian replied. “Mrs. Shoup has been the Finley Park cook since before I was born. It’s hard to break a habit that started in your childhood ... especially if the habit is rewarded by baked goods and copious cups of tea.”

“You could just ask to have them brought to you,” Rosalind pointed out.

“True. But I find that I rather like having somewhere I can go that is as far removed from my work as it can possibly be.” He shrugged. “My visits to the kitchen rarely require any calculations or financial decisions but always include something tasty to eat and an insight into the inner workings of the house that I would not acquire any other way. I would fully recommend regular excursions to the kitchen to any gentleman with the good fortune to have a skilled cook.”

“So the rumors were wrong; you do seek out the company of others occasionally.”

A deep line furrowed his brow. "I am not quite so unsocial as all that, Rosalind."

Her attempt at humor had fallen flat, but before she could do anything to rectify it, Mrs. Shoup appeared at her elbow, a plated Chelsea bun in one hand and a cup of tea in the other. "Forgive me, Your Grace. I did not welcome you to the kitchen when you first arrived. It's a pleasure to have you here."

"Thank you, Mrs. Shoup."

The cook inclined her head and set another plate and cup of tea before Sebastian. "There you are, Your Grace. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll go back to my soup and let you be."

An uncomfortable silence fell over the two occupants of the table, and Rosalind recognized that it was her turn to apologize. "My comment was flippant. Forgive me. I did not mean to be disparaging."

He released a heavy sigh. "I am well aware that many in Society consider me a recluse, and I will own to being more comfortable on my own than in large groups. But that does not signify that I do not ever enjoy the company of others."

"I know."

"Perhaps not." His smile was weak. "But I hope that in time, you will."

She bowed her head. She had not meant to sound critical, but she could not deny that it had come across that way.

"Rosalind." Reluctantly, she met his eyes. "We agreed to be patient with each other, but I think being patient with ourselves may be just as important." He smiled, and this time, it held more warmth. "Having said that, I should note that Mrs. Shoup was not privy to our pact, so I suggest we drink our tea and eat our Chelsea buns with alacrity. It would not do to upset her."

Rosalind hazarded a glance at Mrs. Shoup. Her back was to them, and she was humming over her pot. "Will she really be put out if we do not finish every morsel?"

Sebastian raised one eyebrow. “She prepares all our food. Do you believe it worth the risk to find out?”

A giggle escaped her. “No. Not at all.”

He grinned. “Try the bun. Finishing it will come easily.”

## CHAPTER 14

ROSALIND LAY IN HER BED, staring at the shadowy swathes of fabric draped across the tall bedframe above her head. She should be asleep. Darkness had fallen hours ago. And yet, her mind refused to listen to her exhausted body. A day full of words and pictures spun through her head in a pirouetting frenzy. Her vacillating emotions were a study of confusion. How could the gentleman who had abandoned her only yesterday—and who had shown no more inclination to invite her into his workshop today than he had into his tree house years ago—be the same person who made her heart race when he stood beside her, met her repartee with his own, and willingly shared with her his beloved Chelsea buns?

She groaned, hardly daring to revisit the moment she had taken his hand and kissed his cheek. Her face warmed at the memory. It had been an impulsive reaction after his unexpected willingness to host a ball in that marvelous ballroom. Had he thought her presumptuous? Somehow, they had navigated that moment, along with the awkwardness of the empty dining room and locked workshop, and had spent a pleasant half an hour in the kitchen, eating a luncheon of Chelsea buns and tea.

They had parted ways after that unconventional meal. Sebastian had gone to attend to whatever had so captured his attention in the workshop, and she had met with Mrs. Frost to review the household expenses. Rosalind draped her arm over her eyes as the memory of the rows and rows of tabulated expenses marched through her head. No matter that Rosalind had an affinity for numbers, if it had not been for her mother's insistence that she learn from Langton Manor's books, she would have been sunk. As it was, Finley Park's monthly financial outlay was staggering, and Rosalind had already determined that she would need to receive some reassurance from Sebastian before she was willing to purchase anything more expensive than a serviette.

Was it wrong that she was glad for an excuse to see Sebastian again? She groaned a second time. She was lonely. That was why the unfamiliar longing in her heart was so palpable. Perhaps she should have gone downstairs to eat, even if it was only to see more servants. But she was not quite ready to sit at the vast dining room table and relive the hollow feelings of yesterday. Not even if Sebastian had deigned to emerge from his workshop this time.

With a grunt of frustration, she tossed back the covers and got out of bed. She put on her dressing gown, and taking the one candle still burning at her bedside, she tiptoed across the chilly floor to the writing table. Her diary sat where she'd left it the night before. Opening to the back page, she reached for the quill and dipped it in the inkwell. It was time to put today behind her.

She began with the *Bad Things* list. 5. *He refused me entry to his workshop.* Her quill hovered over the page, and she was surprised to realize that she truly had nothing more to add. She turned her attention to the *Good Things* list. 5. *He apologized.* 6. *His house is magnificent.* 7. *He promised to consider hosting a ball.* 8. *He invited me to redecorate.* 9. *He shared Chelsea buns with me in the kitchen.*

Rosalind leaned back in the chair and stared at the page with a frown. Her lists were looking curiously lopsided, yet there was nothing she wished to change. She flexed her fingers. Polly had banked the fire over an hour ago, and the cold was making it difficult to write. Setting down the quill, Rosalind closed her diary and picked up the candle.

She was halfway to the bed when a rustling sound caught her attention. Fear that a mouse—or worse, a rat—was sharing her bedchamber froze her in her tracks. Raising her candle, she studied the far side of the room. Barely daring to breathe, she inched forward, watching for movement in every shadow. And then with a whoosh, an envelope shot across the floor from beneath the connecting door.

Too frightened to utter more than a petrified squeak, Rosalind placed her hand to her heart in a vain attempt to calm its racing. Another letter from Sebastian was less alarming



than coming face-to-face with a rodent but hardly less surprising. Hurrying across the room, she picked up the envelope and carried it back to bed.

When the candle was returned to the bedside table and her cold feet were under the covers once more, she opened the envelope and withdrew a single sheet of paper. Leaning toward the flickering flame, she read the short note.

*Dear Rosalind,*

*Now that you have toured the halls of Finley Park, are you ready to explore the grounds? If the weather allows, I thought an introduction to the stables might be in order, followed by a walk through the gardens.*

*I shall come to your chambers at 10 o'clock to see if you are amenable.*

*Sincerely,*

*Sebastian*

Rosalind's smile was instant. She slid the letter back into the envelope and set it on the bedside table. Leaning over, she blew out the candle and slipped under the bedcovers. Perhaps now sleep would come.

\* \* \*

The next morning, the skies were overcast and the wind blustery, but when Sebastian knocked on the bedroom door at ten o'clock precisely, Rosalind was ready. At least, she thought she was. She had taken into consideration the breezy conditions and had chosen to wear her navy redingote over her cream floral gown, and she had affixed her hat to her head with her longest hatpin. But the moment Polly opened the door, Rosalind discovered that she had neglected to prepare herself in another far more important way.

Sebastian greeted her with a smile that sent a thousand butterflies dancing in her stomach. He carried his hat and gloves in one hand and was dressed in a brown coat, vest, and breeches. Gold embroidery decorated the edges of his sleeves and button closures, and wide lace showed at his cuffs and on his cravat. His hair was pulled back in a narrow brown ribbon.

All in all, he was far too handsome for comfort.

“Good morning, Rosalind. Am I to assume by your dress that you are prepared to face the elements outside?”

Willing the cavorting internal butterflies to still, she returned his smile. “Langton Manor is located close to the sea, Your Grace. I believe I am more used to walking in gales than not.”

“Your experience may yet prove beneficial, but since the distance between the house and the stables is short, I daresay we can manage that far, at least.”

“Of course.” She took his arm and forced herself to think on something other than the man at her side. “Tell me about your horses.”

Sebastian began a brief overview of each of the mounts in his stables, and by the time they’d battled the gusts across the courtyard to the large building located at the rear of the main house, she felt that she knew the animals already.

One of the young grooms must have been watching for them, for he opened the large wooden door as they drew near.

“Mornin’, Your Grace.” He bowed to Sebastian and then to Rosalind. “Your Grace.”

“Good morning, Wesley,” Sebastian said. “How are the horses today?”

“I reckon they’re not too keen on the howlin’ and the rattlin’, but there’s nothin’ serious to worry ’bout.”

“Is Tempest behaving himself?”

Sebastian had already told Rosalind that Tempest was his newest, most spirited mount, and if Wesley’s expression was anything to go by, the boy was completely taken with the stallion.

“Yes, Your Grace. He’s a beaut, that one.” He shrugged. “‘Course, he knows it already, so I don’t tell ’im that much.”

Sebastian laughed, and warmth filled Rosalind’s chest. When Sebastian had stood aside whilst she’d greeted the

servants upon her arrival at Finley Park, she'd assumed it had been because he rarely interacted with them. That perhaps he refrained from making the introductions because he did not know their names. Mrs. Shoup had offered Rosalind her first clue that her assumption was wrong. Yesterday's impromptu luncheon at the kitchen table was further proof. And now she was witnessing him talking and laughing with a stablehand as though they were friends.

Mrs. Frost was obviously fond of her master, and Rosalind was beginning to ascertain that those feelings were reciprocated. It was quite possible that Sebastian had allowed Mrs. Frost to introduce Rosalind to the servants so as not to usurp the housekeeper's role as head of the female staff.

"Morning, Your Grace." A man who appeared to be a little older than Sebastian approached from the back of the stable.

Wesley immediately reached for a nearby pitchfork and scurried into a nearby stall.

"Good morning, Dawson," Sebastian said. He turned to her. "Rosalind, this is Dawson, my head groom. He was attending the horses when you were introduced to the household staff. Dawson, this is my wife, Her Grace, the Duchess of Kelbrook."

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Dawson."

The head groom bowed. "Welcome to the stables, Your Grace."

Rosalind smiled. "Tell me, can you recommend a mount that might be a good fit for me? A horse with enough spirit to enjoy a good gallop but one that does not constantly require a firm hand on the reins?"

Sebastian had already told her of a young mare named Belle that sounded ideal, but she was interested to see if her newly formed theory regarding her husband's respect for his servants' positions held merit. She caught his look of surprise at her question, but when it was instantly followed by a smile of approval, she knew she had guessed correctly.

"It seems to me that Belle might be just what you're looking

for, Your Grace. If you'll come this way, you can meet her and see what you think." He led the way between the stalls.

Sebastian came up behind her and touched her elbow. "Nicely done, Rosalind." He spoke softly.

"I am simply learning by example, Your Grace."

## CHAPTER 15

SEBASTIAN LED ROSALIND AROUND THE perimeter of the rose garden. In the summer, when the blooms were at their best, it was possible to wander the narrow paths between the wide variety of rose bushes for hours without tiring of their beauty and fragrance. Today, however, with many of the bushes displaying little more than a handful of leaves and their ever-present thorns, Sebastian deemed it best to shorten their visit.

The wind tugged at Rosalind's skirts, and she moved a little farther from the threatening barbs.

"Is the gale becoming too much?" he asked.

When they'd left the stables about a quarter of an hour ago, she had insisted that she was not yet ready to return to the house, but it seemed appropriate to ask again since she had been clutching her hat for the last few minutes.

"Not at all. It's invigorating." Her face shone with delight. "This reminds me of home. All we are missing is the sea."

"I cannot produce that, I fear, but we do have a sizable river nearby."

Her eyes sparkled with interest. "The one that is traversed by the bridge that needs to be replaced?"

"Indeed." He pointed at the woodland to their left. "It's just beyond the trees. Would you like to see it?"

She nodded enthusiastically. "Very much."

"Be advised that although it is a wide and fast-moving river, it is sadly lacking waves and tides. Seagulls do make an appearance occasionally, but a sighting cannot be guaranteed."

She laughed. It was such a joyous sound that Sebastian found himself wanting to hear it more often.

"I will settle for moving water and a sparrow or two," she said.

“That, I believe, I can manage.” He steered her toward the trees. “There are two ways to reach the river. The narrow trail through the woods and a more open path across the lawn and through the fields.”

“Perhaps we could go one way and return the other,” Rosalind suggested. “Then I will experience both.”

“Very well.” He pointed to a small opening between the trees ahead. “Cutting through the woods is the most direct path from here. The other way is actually a little shorter if you are coming from the house.”

“The trees, it is, then,” she said. She lowered her head slightly as they walked into the wind, raising it to look around when they entered the grove. “Is this where your tree house is located?”

The tree house again. His childhood play area must have made a great impression upon her.

“Yes, but it is closer to the house. It’s easier to spot from the lawn.” She nodded, lapsing into a silence he felt compelled to fill. “I can point it out to you when we walk that way if you would like.”

She offered him a polite smile. “Thank you.”

Unsure as to what had happened to the joyful demeanor she’d exhibited only minutes before, he reached for her hand. “Come,” he said. “Watch for tree roots and overgrown branches. I daresay it has been some time since this path was properly cleared.”

Grateful that she did not resist his overture, he wrapped his fingers around hers and guided her through the trees. The branches swayed above them, clacking against each other and knocking free a steady shower of browning leaves to add to the many already carpeting the ground. A bird flew past in a flurry of feathers.

“There’s your first sparrow,” he said.

“It was a blackbird.”

He glanced back at her, relieved to see humor shining in her

eyes. “It was a bird—in flight even. I believe it counts.” Her giggle was so soft he barely heard it over the sounds of the wind above and running water ahead. He squeezed her hand. “I hear the river. We are almost there.”

The trees thinned, opening onto a wide strip of grass that ended at the riverbank. Sebastian drew Rosalind forward so she could see the view more clearly. Tangled shrubs and long grasses lined the river. On the other side of the rapidly flowing water, a field dotted with sheep undulated up a gentle slope. At the crest of the knoll, a low stone wall divided the meadow from a small cottage.

“You can see the roof of one of our tenants’ cottages,” he said, pointing up the hill. “We have almost a dozen tenants in total, but most of their homes are clustered a little lower down, in the vale beyond this one. David Beckett and his family live in that cottage. He’s a shepherd.”

Rosalind studied the distant house and its pastoral setting. “It is a truly beautiful prospect.”

“Yes. I have always thought so.”

She smiled at him. “You have reason to be proud of Finley Park, Sebastian. I do not mind if you say so.”

Startled by her perception, he met her look. “I *am* proud of it—proud of what my ancestors have built here and for the care they took of the land and those living on it. But pride has such ugly connotations, it is not a word I choose to use often.”

“Which makes you a most unusual duke,” she said.

“An accusation I cannot deny. Do you happen to know of any other noblemen who would rather design a bridge than attend a foxhunt?” Purposely redirecting the conversation onto a less discomfoting subject, he pointed at the nearby wooden structure. “That one in particular.”

Her eyes widened. “You have designed the replacement yourself?”

“Yes.” He led her closer to the old bridge. “My grandfather commissioned this one to be built over sixty years ago, but neither he nor the engineer took into account the flooding that

occurs whenever we have heavy rainfall. The debris that regularly washes down the river combined with the frequent high water levels have severely impacted the integrity of the wooden piers. The one closest to the other bank has started to split.”

Rosalind leaned forward to study the distant pillar. “I see the high-water-mark stain on the wood.”

“Do you see the crack running through it?”

She strained to see through the buffeting wind. “Yes. It appears as a dark line near the water, but it becomes wider the higher it goes.”

“That’s right. On the backside, a portion has actually broken off. Thankfully, David heard the wood crack when he was in the field last spring, otherwise we may not have noticed until the pier gave way. We roped off both sides of the bridge to prevent people from using it, but closing it has been an inconvenience for the tenants, who have a considerably longer walk when they have business at the house.”

“Now that we are married and Mr. Frandsen has promised to release the trust fund money, how long will it take to replace?”

“That will depend a great deal upon Mr. Darby’s willingness to cast the new piers.”

“Mr. Darby?”

“Abraham Darby. He is the man responsible for building the iron bridge over the Severn.”

“I thought you attributed that bridge to a Mr. Pritchard.”

Once again, Sebastian was impressed by her memory for details. “Pritchard was the engineer who designed the structure. Darby runs the iron works responsible for casting all the pieces.

“Unfortunately, Finley Park is too far removed from his iron works to make a large iron bridge feasible. The cost of transportation would be prohibitive, not to mention how long such a project would take to complete.” He looked over at the roped-off bridge. “But if Darby’s bridge over the Severn is any



indication, iron piers withstand a river's wear and tear far better than wooden ones. My design calls for an iron foundation with a wooden deck above."

"How marvelous." Her face shone with excitement. "I should love to see your renderings for such a structure."

He had expected mild interest. Polite enthusiasm, perhaps. He had not anticipated genuine eagerness. "You wish to see my diagrams?"

"Yes." She suddenly looked unsure. "If I may."

He smiled, hoping to reassure her. "Of course you may. I would be delighted to show them to you."

"Well then," she said, "perhaps it is time to return to the house after all."

This time, they followed the river until they bypassed the wooded area and came to the hedgerow that separated the river from Finley Park's expansive lawn.

"Over here," he said, leading Rosalind to the narrow access hidden between the bushes.

"A kissing gate," she said, pushing against the wooden slats so she could step into the V-shaped enclosure. "Do you know why these means of access are so named, my Lord Duke Engineer?"

He chuckled. "I do. The gate is built so that it pivots on a hinge. If a person pushes against the gate so that it touches, or kisses, the far post, it allows him or her entry into the widest part of the enclosure. The same person can then swing the gate back until it touches, or kisses, the nearer post, allowing him or her exit but confusing the most wily of cattle."

She had stepped around the center mark and turned to push the gate back toward him. "Although your technically correct response cannot be faulted, it is not my preferred answer."

He raised his eyebrows. "Is that so? How would you best explain the kissing gate's appellation?"

She stood on the other side of the gate, her hands on the top slat. "I have heard it said that the kissing gate came about its

name because the first person to pass through is required to close the gate on the second person, providing the second person an opportunity to offer a kiss in exchange for entry.” Her dark-brown eyes met his, and awareness hummed between them.

He took a step toward her, his heart pounding uncomfortably in his chest. “I concede,” he said. “Your explanation is far superior to mine.”

“I ... I am glad you think so.”

Slowly, he lifted his hand, brushing back a stray curl from off her face only to have the wind capture the enticing lock of hair again. He cupped her cheek in the palm of his hand, anchoring her soft ringlets in place with his fingers. “May I enter, Rosalind?”

She did not drop her gaze. “Yes,” she whispered.

“And would you accept the forfeit stipulated by the kissing gate?” Already, he was leaning in, wanting this more than he had even realized. If she said no ... if she pulled back ...

“Yes.” The softly spoken word had scarcely disappeared on the breeze before Sebastian’s lips claimed hers.

He reached over the gate. Her arms snaked up around his neck, the faint scent of jasmine teasing his senses. The touch of her fingers on the skin above his collar sent a tremor coursing through him. He pulled her closer and lost himself in the kiss.

“Sebastian.” She murmured his name, pulling back slightly.

He opened his eyes and took an unsteady breath. Dear heaven, what had happened to him? One minute he was thinking clearly, and the next minute he was not thinking at all.

“Someone is coming.”

At Rosalind’s words, Sebastian released her and raised his head. The steady pounding of hooves vibrated through the ground. She was right. Someone was coming. And he was close. Rosalind took a step back, pulling the gate with her. He entered, rounding the V-shaped center and pushing the gate

closed behind him. Taking her hand, he turned to face the rider.

“Your Grace.” The gentleman on horseback reined his mount to a halt and slid out of the saddle.

“Good day, Grayson.” His steward bowed, and Sebastian turned to Rosalind. “Rosalind, this is Mr. Mark Grayson, my steward. Mr. Grayson, I should like you to meet my wife, the Duchess of Kelbrook.”

“I’m pleased to meet you, Mr. Grayson.” Rosalind’s greeting was calm and cordial. Only her tight grip on his hand suggested that she was not quite herself.

“And I you, Your Grace.” Grayson removed his hat and bowed again.

“To what do we owe the pleasure of your unexpected and hurried arrival?” Sebastian asked.

“Vickers told me I might find you here, Your Grace. I just came from the Becketts’ house. All this wind has brought down the ash tree beside his front gate, and the biggest limb has gone through the roof.”

Sebastian’s chest tightened. He knew the tree well. It was one of the largest ash trees on the property, and earlier this summer he’d noted that a goodly portion of it had not leafed. He had intended to mention the observation to his gardener, but it had slipped his mind. If the tree was dying or, worse, if parts of it were rotting, it was little wonder that it had fallen victim to today’s strong winds. “What of his family?” he asked. “Was anyone injured?”

“Thankfully, no. Mrs. Beckett had taken the children to the market. They’re back now, and she has the little ones picking up sticks to keep them occupied. David’s on the roof, trying to clear the hole well enough to patch it until old Bill Greenwald, the roofer, can get there. I’m wondering if we can send over some men to help with the bigger branches.” He glanced at the sky and frowned. “Shepherd that he is, David’s forecasting rain tomorrow.”

“Then we must act quickly. I’ve never known David to miss

the mark with the weather. I shall escort Her Grace back to the house, and then I will ride over to the cottage myself. Have the gardeners gather all the axes and saws they can find, and tell Dawson to hitch up the cart and saddle my mount. With the bridge out, everyone will need to go by road.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Grayson was already halfway back into his saddle.

“I shall join you soon,” Sebastian said.

Grayson nodded. He wheeled his horse around and started toward the stables at a canter.

“Go after him, Sebastian.” Rosalind released his hand. “You are needed elsewhere, and I am perfectly capable of reaching the house by myself.”

Abandoning her was precisely what he had pledged to eschew, yet with a hole in the Becketts’ roof and limited hours of daylight remaining, time was of the essence. “You truly do not mind if I leave you here alone?”

“Not nearly as much as I will mind if young children are forced to go to bed with a hole in the roof over their heads because you were not there to ensure that it is mended.” She smiled. “Go. If Mr. Grayson knows what he’s about, your horse will be ready by the time you get there.”

He nodded. She was right. “Thank you, Rosalind.”

## CHAPTER 16

ROSALIND SAT UP IN BED, a candle flickering on the table beside her, her eyes on the gap beneath the connecting door. She had no reason to believe that Sebastian would send her another note, but after hearing nothing from him since he'd left for the stables on the run, sleep was impossible. She had spent the afternoon alternating between attempting to read and pacing back and forth across the length of the library.

For hours, her imagination had run wild, picturing the poor Beckett children huddled in a cold corner of a drafty cottage with Sebastian and the Finley Park servants crawling all over the roof, attempting to remove half a tree from an enormous crevice in the tiles. She'd taken herself to task multiple times over the awful scenarios her overactive mind had conjured up—particularly when they'd included Sebastian falling through the hole in the roof.

When there was no sign of him at dinnertime, she'd asked that her meal be delivered to her rooms and had retired there for the evening. She'd watched the setting of the sun and the deepening of the darkness, and although she'd remained alert for any sounds coming from the neighboring rooms, her attentiveness had consistently been met by silence.

Of their own volition, her fingers moved to her lips. She touched them gently. She'd not intended to suggest that Sebastian kiss her to gain entry to the manor's manicured lawn, but when her childhood explanation for kissing gates tumbled forth, there was no calling back the words. And now, she would never wish to. Just the thought of his lips on hers caused her limbs to tremble. It had been a very good thing that the gate had been there to keep her upright.

With another anxious glance at the connecting door, she pulled back the bedcovers and carried her candle to the writing desk. She could not continue like this. If conjuring up worst-case scenarios did not drive her mad, idleness surely would. Setting a piece of paper before her, she took up the quill and

faced the blank page.

*Dear Sebastian,*

She trapped her lower lip between her teeth and pondered how best to express the idea that had been developing in her mind all evening.

*I pray that you—and those who were with you—were successful in salvaging the cottage roof.*

*I have thought much on the poor Beckett family while you have been gone, and I wondered if I might take them a basket tomorrow. The task will likely require the use of a carriage or Belle, but if Mrs. Beckett has been unable to do any cooking since the accident occurred, I feel sure that the family would appreciate the gesture.*

*If this meets with your approval, I will speak to Mrs. Shoup first thing in the morning.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Rosalind*

She read the note and then added one more thing.

*P.S. I arrived back at the manor without harm and without seeing a seagull. There was a robin sitting on the terrace as I passed, but as that is neither a seagull nor a sparrow, your counting abilities are once more in question.*

After folding the paper and putting it into an envelope, Rosalind melted some wax over her candle and sealed the

envelope closed. She turned it over and wrote Sebastian's name on the front and then hurried across the room, where she crouched and slid it under the connecting door. She heard it skim across the polished wood floor, but when no footsteps sounded, she rose and returned to the desk.

Pulling out her diary, she turned to the back page and studied her list. Taking her quill in hand again, she studied the *Bad Things* side of the page for a full minute before determining that she could think of nothing more to add, so she turned her attention to the *Good Things* side. This list, by contrast, took little thought at all. *10. He cares about his servants and tenants. 11. He is an engineer. 12. He kissed me.*

Warmth filled her cheeks, and she hurriedly set down her quill and closed the book. It would be best if she remembered that she had all but required Sebastian to kiss her. It would not have happened otherwise.

Carrying her candle back to the bedside table, she climbed under the covers and blew out the flame. Darkness filled the room. Forcing aside her worries over what had become of Sebastian, she closed her eyes and focused instead on what she and Cook might put into a basket for the Becketts. Fresh baked bread and pasties were much happier thoughts.

\* \* \*

Sebastian shrugged out of his jacket and grimaced as his valet set it on the chair.

“You have my apologies, James. It is likely unsalvageable.”

It would be all but impossible for James to return the garment to its former pristine condition after what it had been subjected to today. He glanced at his breeches. Dirt smeared his knees, and a jagged tear caused by the branch one of the gardeners had been carrying marred the fabric.

“Not to worry, Your Grace. It is quite remarkable what a good scrubbing can do.”

His valet was as unflappable as he was optimistic, but Sebastian doubted he would see this particular jacket again. There was only so much that could be done with a snag that

ran the entire length of one sleeve and ended in a hole.

He had not expected to be at the cottage for so long. Similarly, he had not anticipated participating in almost eight hours of manual labor. He rolled his shoulders, feeling the ache developing there. It had taken almost a dozen men to remove the downed tree limbs from the roof, and notwithstanding his position, Sebastian had refused to simply stand aside and watch the effort.

The hole in the roof had been substantial, and with a storm coming in, it had been vital that it be patched before the rain began. Every man hauling away branches and broken tiles knew that the damage would be magnified if water entered the house, and they had continued working even when darkness had fallen. Someone had produced lanterns, and the flickering light had enabled the men to see well enough to set strips of timber over the opening and to secure them with large rocks. Sebastian prayed it would be enough to protect the small family inside the house until the roofer could repair the hole properly.

A light knock sounded at the door. James went to answer it, returning with a tray containing a bowl of steaming soup and a wedge of fresh bread.

“That may well be the best thing I’ve set eyes on all evening,” Sebastian said as James placed the tray on a nearby table.

In truth, the only thing that could top the sight of a warm meal would be to see Rosalind. He’d scarcely been able to get her out of his mind since that earth-shattering kiss—which made returning home so late all the more disheartening. She would be asleep by now, blissfully unaware of the inner tumult she was causing him. He glanced at the door that separated their chambers. And that was when he noticed the white envelope lying on the floor.

His pulse quickened. James had already set out his nightshirt. The valet did not need to stay simply to watch Sebastian eat—or read a letter.

“I appreciate your assistance this late at night, James,”



Sebastian said. “There is no need for you to stay any longer. One of the maids can take care of returning this tray to the kitchen in the morning.”

If James was surprised, he did not show it. “Very good, Your Grace.” He gathered Sebastian’s damaged clothing and dirty shoes.

“Good night, James,” Sebastian said.

“Good night, Your Grace.” His valet bowed and then exited the room, closing the door behind him.

Sebastian retrieved the letter before the sound of James’s footsteps faded. Moving closer to the candle at his bedside, he broke the seal and pulled out the paper inside. The letter was short, but despite his weariness, it had the power to cheer him. That Rosalind wished to reach out to the Beckett family brought him unexpected pleasure, and her ridiculous postscript made him smile. He had intended to visit the Becketts again tomorrow, but doing so with Rosalind and her basket would make the trip far more enjoyable.

\* \* \*

Rosalind was putting the last pork pie in the basket when Sebastian entered the kitchen.

“Good morning, Rosalind,” he said.

She looked up from her work, her heart racing at the sound of his voice. “Good morning,” she replied. “I’m surprised to see you up so early. Rumor has it you were eating soup at eleven o’clock last night.”

Sebastian leveled Mrs. Shoup with a knowing look. “And where exactly did that rumor begin?”

His cook wiped her wet hands on her ample apron and smiled nonchalantly. “My job is to feed you, Your Grace. When and where you choose to eat is your responsibility. Of course, if someone specifically asks me what time you took your dinner, I may share that information if the person asking is important enough.”

“Understandable,” he said, mirth dancing in his eyes.

“Important people can be very hard to refuse.”

Rosalind averted her gaze. Mrs. Shoup had all but told him that she'd been asking about his comings and goings last night. Hoping he would not notice her discomfort, she began tucking a cloth over the food hamper.

Cook disappeared into the pantry, and Sebastian's footsteps crossed the tiled floor toward Rosalind. Already, he was close enough that he would likely notice that her hands were trembling. She lowered them to her sides.

“Thank you for your note.” His voice was low enough that the two scullery maids peeling vegetables in the far corner of the kitchen would not hear him. “I am here because I was hoping that you might allow me to accompany you to deliver the basket to the Becketts.”

She swung around. “You would do that?”

“Of course. It's a marvelous idea. Mr. and Mrs. Beckett will be grateful; the children will be thrilled.”

“But I did not think you enjoyed making social calls.” The softly spoken words escaped before she'd thought them through. She had made this same slip before. “Forgive me. It's just that you show so little interest in associating with others when you are in London.”

He inclined his head. “I think it fair to say that it is not conversing with others that I choose to avoid when I am in Town, but rather, it is giving attention to those whose artificial facades hide personal agendas.”

Rosalind pondered that observation. In the short time she had been at Finley Park, she had witnessed Sebastian speaking freely and cheerfully with every one of his servants. Indeed, the only instances she could recall him showing any reticence to converse had been when being harassed by Mr. Sellers and Lord Eppingham or being pressed by the Dowager Marchioness of Pendleton. And if she had been the recipient of their badgering, she would have acted exactly the same way. “I apologize. I should have known better.”

He shook his head. “Your estimation of me is shared by

every other member of the *ton*, and I have likely only enhanced it by neglecting you for so many years.”

She stilled. He had given her the perfect opening, if she was bold enough to take it. “Why did you stay away?”

“Would your opinion of me fall even lower if I were to admit that fear played a great part in it? Fear that you would always resent me for not finding a loophole in the marriage contract. Fear that we would never be compatible. Fear of how much my life would change with a socialite wife ...”

“A socialite wife?”

His smile was fleeting. “I may not have visited you, Rosalind, but I knew of you. A man would have to be living in the West Indies for the last decade to have not heard of the beautiful and gregarious Miss Ainsworth.” He paused. “I retract that. It is quite possible that you are spoken of in high-society circles even there.”

“That is not true.”

“I beg to differ.”

“Then I shall take a firm stand against your earlier claim.”

He raised his eyebrow in surprise. “Which claim is that?”

“I believe that your admittance to owning some fear regarding our future together is cause for admiration rather than censure. I appreciate your honesty.” She took a deep breath. Having been sufficiently audacious to broach this subject, it behooved her to be brave enough to verbalize her own thoughts. “I too was fearful of what this marriage would bring, but in the spirit of full disclosure, my opinion of you now is higher rather than lower than it once was.”

Something in Sebastian’s eyes changed, and the heightened sense of awareness she’d experienced at the kissing gate crackled to life. She reached for the basket, needing something to cling to.

“Here we are, Your Grace.” Mrs. Shoup bustled back into the kitchen with a couple of apples in each hand. “From the apple tree in the manor garden, they are. I felt sure we had a

few extra. Put them on the top beside the pork pies.”

Rosalind turned to face Mrs. Shoup and heard Sebastian’s breath release in a low hiss.

“Thank you. You have thought of everything.”

Mrs. Shoup clucked her tongue. “That sweet Mary Beckett is like a daughter to me. Has been ever since her mother died. I’m right grateful you’re doing this for her.”

“Are you hoping to go to the cottage immediately?”  
Sebastian asked.

“I thought it might be best, especially if Mrs. Beckett has been unable to prepare food since the tree came down.”

“I agree,” he said. “Have one of the footmen carry the basket out for you. I shall go ahead so that I can send word to the stables to make ready the carriage.”

“Thank you, Sebastian.”

He nodded. “I shall meet you in the entrance hall.”

## CHAPTER 17

THE RAIN DAVID BECKETT HAD predicted was falling hard. Water ran down the carriage windows, obscuring Rosalind's view of the passing landscape. Fields became a sea of green separated by hedgerows and stone walls. Trees—some of them standing alone, others clustered in thick groves—appeared like tall, dark scarecrows, their foliage sparse and their branches wet.

“I am sorry that the horses had to come out in such weather,” Rosalind said. Sebastian had been unusually quiet since they'd entered the carriage, and reverting to talking about the weather seemed a good ploy.

“There is no need to apologize. I think the horses rather like the wet, and they certainly enjoy being outside the stables.”

“Perhaps it is the driver who deserves my commiseration, then.”

Sebastian offered her the ghost of a smile before turning to peer out of the window again. “Perhaps. Although I am more worried about the Becketts than I am about the driver. Perkins will return to a dry room when this errand is over. If the patch on the roof does not hold out the rain, the Becketts will be unable to escape it.”

“Is there nowhere else they can go?”

“I offered them temporary lodging at Finley Park last night, but David would have none of it.”

“Ah. So not even shepherds are immune to the downfall of pride?”

“It would appear that way.”

“Well, if Mr. Beckett shows any sign of preventing us from delivering the basket to his family, I shall expect you to hold his attention whilst I hand out apples and pork pies to his wife and children.”

Sebastian chuckled softly. “Why do I get the feeling that refusing your gift is not an option open to Mr. Beckett?”

Rosalind leaned back against the seat, a smile tugging at her lips. “Because after these last few days together, you are coming to know your wife.”

The carriage crested the hill, and suddenly, the cottage was before them. Rosalind moved closer to the window. A large tree, split down the center, stood beside the front gate. A pile of branches chopped into an assortment of sizes lay at its base. Twigs, leaves, and splinters of wood floated in the rain puddles along the path that led from the gate to the front door, and on the roof, an assortment of large rocks sat in a roughly circular shape atop mismatched strips of timber.

“It appears that the covering has stayed on, at least,” Sebastian said. His gaze was on the roof. “Whether or not it is watertight, however, remains to be seen.”

The carriage came to a halt opposite the gate, and a moment later, Perkins opened the door. Sebastian exited, then turned around and reached for the basket on the carriage floor with one hand before extending the other to Rosalind. She took it, and he tightened his fingers around hers as she dismounted.

“Mama! Come quickly!”

At the sound of a child’s voice, Rosalind looked toward the house. The front door was now open, and a young girl of four or five years of age was standing in the doorway, staring at them.

“It looks like we’ve been spotted,” Sebastian said.

“It does.” Rosalind lifted her skirts and stepped over a large puddle before taking his arm. “Do you know her name?”

“Edith, I believe.”

Someone in the house must have spoken to Edith because the young girl turned to look over her shoulder. “It’s His Grace and a pretty lady,” she called.

Sebastian grinned. “Come along, pretty lady. If we stand out here much longer, we shall end up dripping more water onto

their floor than the damaged roof will do.”

By the time they reached the door, a young woman, not much older than Rosalind, was standing beside Edith with another smaller child in her arms. The woman’s fair hair was pulled up beneath a mobcap, and although her blue eyes revealed her surprise at their unexpected arrival, she greeted them warmly.

“Good day, Your Grace.” Her curtsy was understandably labored. The white apron hanging over the front of her brown skirt could not hide the sure sign that another child would soon be joining the family. “Please, come in.”

Mrs. Beckett led them into a small parlor. A low fire was burning in the fireplace, and two rather worn armchairs sat on either side of it.

Sebastian removed his hat. Water sprayed off the brim and onto the wood floor. “Mrs. Beckett, I should like you to meet my wife, Her Grace, the Duchess of Kelbrook. Rosalind, this is Mrs. Mary Beckett.”

Mrs. Beckett curtsied again. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Your Grace.”

“Likewise, Mrs. Beckett.” Rosalind smiled at Edith, who had sidled up to her mother and was watching her with wide eyes. “Your daughters are quite lovely.”

Mrs. Beckett ran her free hand over Edith’s plaited hair. “Thank you, Your Grace. They are good girls.”

“This is Edith, His Grace tells me.” Upon hearing her name, the little girl instantly hid behind her mother’s skirts.

“Yes. And this one is Elsie. Edith recently had her fourth birthday, and Elsie is two years old.”

Elsie popped her thumb into her mouth. Like her older sister’s, her blonde hair was twisted into two plaits, but they were considerably shorter and stubbier than Edith’s.

“And when do you expect your baby’s arrival?” Rosalind asked. Mrs. Beckett was so pear shaped, there was no avoiding the subject.

“Early next month, Your Grace.”

“How wonderful.” Rosalind bent down so that she was closer to Edith’s height. “What do you think about having another brother or sister, Edith?”

The little girl glanced from Rosalind’s face to her mother’s. Mrs. Beckett gave her an encouraging nod. “Tell Her Grace what you think, Edith.”

“I think it should be a little brother because I have a sister already.”

Rosalind smiled. “That would be perfect, would it not? I have a younger brother. He’s all grown up now, but we played together very often when we were little.”

Elsie squirmed down from her mother’s arms and inched closer to Edith. “Is dat your bwother?” she asked, pointing at Sebastian.

“No, dear. My brother is far from here. His Grace is my husband.”

Sebastian instantly became the subject of two sets of curious blue eyes.

“Papa is Mama’s husband,” Edith informed her.

Rosalind smiled. “That’s right.”

“I assume Mr. Beckett is currently away from home,” Sebastian said as Rosalind rose from her crouched position.

“Yes, Your Grace. He’s down in the lower pasture. Seein’ as he was workin’ on the house most of yesterday, he felt that he should check on the ewes this mornin’.”

“Of course. How did the roof do last night?”

“We had a few drips in the kitchen, but nothin’ that a couple of buckets couldn’t manage.” Mrs. Beckett laid her hands on top of her rounded middle. “We’re most grateful, Your Grace. I don’t know what we’d ’ave done if you and the other men hadn’t been here.”

“I’m only sorry that you have been so sorely inconvenienced,” he said. “Given the size of the ash, I should



have sent someone to cut it back years ago. I have no doubt Mr. Grayson will see to it that the roofer comes out as soon as the weather improves, but in the meantime, should the rudimentary patch on the roof fail, I would ask that you have Mr. Beckett inform me or Mr. Grayson right away.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

He nodded. “My wife wished to bring your family a few things to tide you over whilst you put things to rights in your kitchen.” He smiled. “I believe Mrs. Shoup was rather heavily involved.”

Mrs. Beckett turned to Rosalind, moisture evident in her eyes. “Thank you for your thoughtfulness, Your Grace.”

Although Rosalind had never been with child, she was aware of the physical and emotional toll it could exact on a woman, and her heart went out to this young mother. “It is very little when compared to what you are doing, Mrs. Beckett. I am quite sure that I would not be nearly as cheerful as you if my home had a large hole in the roof.”

“We have a lot to be grateful for, Your Grace. It was really only the kitchen that was badly affected, and the girls have been good to help pick up the mess.” She looked at her daughters fondly. “I told them that these are the things that make good memories.”

“So you see, I was right. You are a marvelous example of optimism in the face of adversity,” Rosalind said. “I am quite sure that if I were in your position, I would be telling everyone that a tree coming through my roof had all the makings of a nightmare.”

Her self-deprecation had its desired effect. Mrs. Beckett’s cheeks pinked, and she smiled. Her girls, however, had lost interest in the conversation around them. They were fully focused on the basket.

“What is it, Mama?” Edith inched away from the safety of her mother’s skirts, curiosity overcoming her shyness.

“Me see. Me see,” Elsie said, bouncing up and down.

Sebastian set the basket on the floor. “Come along, girls.

Why don't you pull back the cover and take a look?"

The girls hurried forward, and each took a corner of the cloth. Edith carefully peeled back her side whilst Elsie gave hers a tug.

"Gently, now." Mrs. Beckett stepped in to save the apple that had been dislodged and was threatening to roll out.

"Apples!" Elsie cried. She was bouncing again.

"And pork pies." Edith studied the basket's contents in wonder. "Can we truly eat one?"

"Whenever your mother approves it, you may," Sebastian said.

"Mama?"

"We shall have them for luncheon," Mrs. Beckett said. "But first, what do you say to the Duke and Duchess of Kelbrook?"

"Thank you!" Their voices joined in chorus and Rosalind's heart melted at the simple joy on their faces.

"You are most welcome, young ladies," Sebastian said, bowing his head politely.

Elsie covered her mouth with her hand and giggled.

"Hush, Elsie," Edith said in a big-sister tone that Rosalind recognized all too well.

"But we's not ladies."

Sebastian's cough sounded suspiciously like a smothered laugh, but he manfully kept a straight face.

"I believe Her Grace and I should take our leave so that you may enjoy the pork pies while they are fresh," he said, donning his hat once more.

Mrs. Beckett nodded and slipped past them to open the door.

"Good day, Mrs. Beckett," Rosalind said.

"Thank you for coming and for bringing the basket."

"The pleasure was ours. Truly."

Sebastian offered Rosalind his arm, and they stepped outside. The door closed behind them, and she tilted her head to protect her face from the rain as he led her around the largest puddle.

On the other side of the garden gate, Perkins appeared. He stood waiting beside the carriage door as she and Sebastian navigated the muddy path.

“Do you think I might visit the Becketts again soon?” she asked.

“I am sure they would be happy to see you, especially if you come bearing such tasty gifts as you did today,” Sebastian said. “But is there a specific reason why you wish to return?”

She contemplated his question. Why *did* she feel such a strong desire to spend time with Mrs. Beckett and her girls again?

“Edith and Elsie are dears.”

“I agree.”

“And Mrs. Beckett is lovely.”

“As you said yourself, she is remarkably positive, given her current situation. And in contrast to London Society, she and her girls are refreshingly unaffected.”

“Yes.” Rosalind acknowledged. “But to be clear, you do not remotely resemble my bwother.”

He chuckled at her mispronunciation. “I am very glad to hear it.”

They had reached the carriage. Perkins opened the door, but when Sebastian went to assist Rosalind inside, she hesitated.

“Jonas is quite handsome, you know,” she said.

“Of that, I have no doubt.”

The rain was beginning to soak through her redingote, yet she stood facing him still. “Then why—”

“I would not wish to be your sibling, Rosalind,” he said.

His explanation took her off guard, and she was unprepared

for the pain it inflicted. Lowering her head, she climbed into the carriage. The vehicle swayed as he followed her in, and then the door slammed closed behind him.

## CHAPTER 18

SEBASTIAN WANTED TO KICK HIMSELF. His automatic response to Rosalind's teasing had hurt her. No matter his limited experience conversing with young ladies, even he knew that their feelings were more tender than those of the gentlemen with whom he usually associated. His fellow engineers and peers in the House of Lords consistently took his comments at face value. Rosalind, it seemed, was disinclined to be so logical. She did not simply hear words; she felt them. And if her current air of dejection was any indication, his last comment had wounded her rather badly.

He glanced at her now, and his stomach tightened. He could not allow her to come to tears again. Not when it was quite obvious that this time, he was the cause of her unhappiness. And not when he was just coming to realize how much he cared for her.

The carriage's momentum increased as it began its descent of the hill toward Finley Park. Sebastian clenched his fists. What could he say to her? Honesty was surely the best course, but if he were to expose his fledgling feelings with no sure indication of the direction of hers, he could make matters infinitely worse. And yet, when they walked together to the river he had all but professed his desire to resist succumbing to the kind of pride so often found in gentlemen of his rank. Was he prepared to prove it now?

"Rosalind?"

"Yes." Her voice was small.

"I need to explain." The light was gone from her eyes, and Sebastian discovered that he desperately wanted it back. Gathering his courage, he pressed forward. "When I said that I would not wish to be your sibling, it was for one reason only."

"It's all right, Sebastian," she said. "I understand. Over the years, I'm sure Jonas considered me an irritating and far too officious sister a great deal of the time too."

Shock made him momentarily speechless. Lud. Is that truly what she thought? If nothing else came of this conversation, he must cure her of that belief.

“I would hope that Jonas realizes how fortunate he is. I spent all of my growing-up years longing for a brother or sister. As an adult, I have observed the relationships others have with their siblings—such as yours with Jonas—with significant envy. I would gladly claim a brother or sister if I could.”

“But you would not wish that person to be me.”

“Someone *like* you would be absolutely marvelous. But I do not wish it to be *precisely* you because then you could not be my wife.”

She blinked. “But you gave me to understand that you did not want me to be your wife, that you had gone so far as to search for a way out of our marriage contract.”

“A month ago, I would have owned to those claims.” Sebastian braced himself. “Today, I find myself feeling immense gratitude for my father’s wisdom and foresight.”

“Stop talking in riddles, Sebastian. Tell me what you really mean.”

His straightened his shoulders. A straightforward approach to communication was considerably easier when he was discussing theories of motion, the calculation of mass, or the passage of a bill in Parliament. “I feel very fortunate to have you as my wife.”

“Fortunate?”

When she repeated the word, it sounded dull and impersonal—and not at all right.

“Blast it all, Rosalind, I do not know how to say what I mean. I simply know that the happiest hours I’ve had in a long time are the ones I’ve spent with you. Ever since we were married, you are in my thoughts when I go to bed, and you are still there when I arise.”

She stared at him with wide eyes. Had he distressed her

further? He'd been a fool to try to communicate his feelings when he had yet to understand them himself. Rosalind shifted forward in her seat. Setting her hand on the side of the moving carriage, she stood and took an unsteady step. The carriage rolled over a bump in the road, and she dropped onto the seat beside him. He smelled the hint of jasmine that always accompanied her, and his breath caught.

“Rosalind?”

Her fingers touched his. He opened his hand, and she slipped hers into it.

“Perhaps we should try eating dinner together again,” she said.

He looked at her. Her smile was tentative, but the light had returned to her eyes. He tightened his grip on her hand. “I should like that very much.”

“As would I,” she said.

The Finley Park portico came into view through the carriage window, and the vehicle rolled to a stop. A footman appeared at the door. Sebastian rather wished he had not. But it was raining still, and no one—Marcus included—wished to stand outside waiting for too long. Sebastian released Rosalind's hand to exit the carriage and then immediately reclaimed it to assist her out. Lowering his head against the driving rain, he led her into the house.

Vickers was there to greet them. “May I take your hat and coat, Your Grace?”

“Yes. Thank you, Vickers.” Sebastian handed him his hat.

“And you, Your Grace?” The butler turned to Rosalind.

“Thank you, but no. I believe I am sufficiently wet that an entire change of wardrobe is in order. I shall have Polly assist me.”

Vickers bowed. “Very good, Your Grace.”

Rosalind slipped her hand from Sebastian's. “Would a five o'clock dinner time meet with your approval?” she asked.

“It would.” Truth be told, if she’d suggested midnight, he would have agreed. He would not—could not—betray her trust again.

She smiled, and his heart lifted. “Until then, Your Grace.”

He waited until she was partway up the stairs before turning to Vickers once more. “If I am not standing outside the dining room door at ten minutes before five o’clock, you are to retrieve me from my workshop. If, by any chance, I am not there, take my pistol from the study and fire a warning shot over the housetop.”

Had Sebastian not known better, he would have sworn that Vickers chuckled. But the staid butler hid his face with a bow.

“As you wish, Your Grace.”

\* \* \*

Rosalind paced across her small sitting room, glanced at the clock, and started back the other direction again. Her anxiety was beyond ridiculous. Since the day Sebastian had walked into Langton House, they had spent many hours in each other’s company. She had laughed and cried with him. They had each listened and talked, danced and walked. And yet, this evening’s dinner felt as though it was to be their very first time together. She checked the clock again and released a shuddering breath.

“It is time, Polly. Will I do?”

“You look ever so pretty, Your Grace.” Polly’s gaze moved from Rosalind’s floral peach-colored gown to the elaborately pinned curls she had worked on for so long. “I’ve never seen the like. And I’d wager His Grace hasn’t either.”

Rosalind refrained from mentioning that Sebastian had seen ballrooms full of young ladies dressed far more elegantly than she was presently. Now was not the time to test her young maid’s loyalty; she simply needed a small measure of her confidence. “Thank you for all your help,” she said.

“It was my pleasure, Your Grace.” She smiled shyly. “I wish I could be there to see His Grace’s face when he sees you.”



Rosalind pressed her hand to her stomach. It was an ordinary, everyday dinner, she reminded herself. No guests. No special occasion. Just a dinner that she may not be able to eat.

Polly seemed to sense that Rosalind needed a little extra encouragement, because she walked over to the door and opened it. Raising her chin, Rosalind walked out and did not look back.

She saw Sebastian from the entrance hall. He was standing outside the dining room door, dressed in a blue coat with silver trim and matching breeches. The white lace at his neck and sleeves contrasted with his silver-colored vest. It was impossible to deny his handsome appearance, but it was his expression as she approached that set the butterflies loose within her.

“You are stunning, Rosalind.” He took her hand, and a frisson of awareness skittered up her arm.

“As are you,” she said.

He smiled. “Are gentlemen supposed to be stunning?”

She recognized the humor in his eyes, and a little of her tension eased. They may have each spent a little longer preparing for this meal than they did when they ate separately, but that did not mean that they must assume an unnatural formality. “Probably not.” She feigned thoughtfulness. “Passable, then. You are certainly passable.”

He laughed. It was a warm, rich sound that touched the hidden places in her heart.

“I shall be sure to tell James that we need to do better next time.”

“No, indeed. I do not wish to compete with anything higher than this level of passable. And I am quite sure that Polly will not either.”

“Very well,” he said. “Passable it is.”

He waited for her to sit and for Marcus to slide her chair closer to the large table, and then he sat at the head of the table

immediately to her left. Moments later, the first course arrived. Marcus set the soup bowls before them, then slipped away on silent feet.

“Tell me about growing up at Langton Manor,” Sebastian said.

“What would you like to know?”

“Anything.” He shrugged. “Start with the things that are most important to you.”

“That would be my family,” she said. “You’ve met my mother. She is one of the most remarkable women I know. My brother, Jonas, recently completed his studies at Cambridge and is currently doing a tour of the Continent. He had to take upon himself the responsibilities associated with being Viscount Langton earlier than any of us had anticipated when my father was killed in a tragic accident.”

“I remember hearing of it,” Sebastian said. “My father was devastated by the news.”

Rosalind nodded. After so many years, the pain associated with losing her father had diminished but not fully disappeared. “When did you lose your parents?”

“My mother died when I was nineteen years old. My father survived for only eight months more.” There was sadness in his smile. “Their marriage was arranged from birth, yet they came to love each other dearly. I do not think my father could countenance living without my mother for very long.”

“A doubly hard loss for you,” she said.

“It was.”

Their plates disappeared, and new ones arrived. Rosalind searched her memories for something that might lighten the somber mood that had fallen upon them.

“Another of my favorite things about Langton Manor is that it is located by the sea. I would spend hours walking the beach with my governess. Somehow, I managed to convince her that I could combine my comportment lessons—because it is remarkably difficult to walk in a ladylike manner on shifting

pebbles—with chanting French verbs or memorizing poetry.”

“When in actuality, you simply wanted to be outside counting seagulls,” Sebastian supplied.

“I can see that I have already shared far too much with you. You really must keep my love of counting to yourself. It is not the most ladylike of attributes.”

He chuckled. “Your secret is safe. Although, I respectfully disagree with your assessment: I believe a good head for numbers is a very fine trait.”

“Arithmetic was by far my favorite subject when I was a young girl. I only wish I could have studied it more extensively and learned to apply it to something more than balancing housekeeping books.”

Sebastian eyed her contemplatively. “Are you still interested in seeing my design for a new bridge?”

“Most definitely.” Her response was as emphatic as it was enthusiastic, but as far as Rosalind was concerned, this was no time to be demure. She had desperately hoped that Sebastian would extend this offer again.

“Then you shall see them after dinner,” he said.

Marcus set their dessert plates on the table. Rosalind had never seen such perfectly fashioned orange puddings. They looked and smelled divine, but no orange pudding could compete with the opportunity to see Sebastian’s design. She lifted her spoon. The meal could not end soon enough.

## CHAPTER 19

SEBASTIAN WITHDREW THE WORKSHOP KEY from the small pocket in his vest and slid it into the lock. Over the past year, he had shown his plans for a new bridge to several of his colleagues. Each of those gentlemen possessed a solid understanding of engineering principles, and they had all given his designs their approval. It made no sense, therefore, that the thought of showing the plans to Rosalind would cause him such anxiety. No sense at all.

He pushed open the door and waited for her to enter ahead of him. She hesitated, looked at him, and then crossed the threshold. He followed, moving past her to reach for the candlestick standing on the corner of the large table. He took it to the fireplace. The embers were still glowing, providing just enough fuel to light the candle in his hand. He touched the flame to another candle on the mantel and then added a piece of wood to the fire. Flames appeared, licking at the fresh log. He turned. Rosalind was still standing just inside the door, her gaze slowly traversing the room.

“It’s a rather unremarkable space,” he said.

“That is what makes it so extraordinary.” Her eyes met his, and he saw the wonder there. “If your workshop had housed as many books as the library or been as opulently decorated as the ballroom or the drawing room, it would not have the same feel at all.”

“The same feel?” Sebastian tensed. If Rosalind were to enter those unchartered, illogical female waters again, he was sunk.

“Yes.” Slowly, she approached the bookshelves and studied the model ship on the top. She reached out to gently touch the globe before turning back to face him. “Do you not sense it?”

Intuition told him to gather more data before answering. “Not many are so perceptive. Is there something in particular that is triggering that impression?”

She looked from the scientific texts on the shelf beside her to the scrolls of paper and mechanical instruments on the table. “The room’s uncluttered walls are like an open canvas for fresh ideas, yet the tools and insights developed by those who’ve made unique discoveries in the past are all here—yours to use for even greater things.”

Sebastian could only stare. What could he possibly add when she had articulated his own feelings about the workshop so perfectly?

She watched him, looking suddenly unsure. “I received my education at home, you understand. Perhaps this atmosphere is common enough in a university classroom. But it is something that I have never experienced before.”

“I have felt what you describe at various times and locations whilst working with some of the country’s brightest men. That you sense that same ambiance in this room is the highest of compliments.”

“It is undeniable.” She smiled. “And it makes me all the more eager to see your plans.”

His plans. Yes. That was the purpose of their presence here. Mentally shaking himself, he crossed to the shelves and removed a large scroll.

“This is the master,” he said, sliding some of Meikle’s papers to one side and unrolling his design on one corner of the table. “I sent a copy to Mr. Darby so that he can ascertain whether his ironworks is capable of casting the necessary pieces. If not, I will have to decide whether to modify the design or settle for a wooden structure.”

He set a candlestick on each end of the large sheet of paper to weigh it down and to provide sufficient light for Rosalind to see the detailed markings. She moved closer, leaning over the desk to study the design more carefully. Sebastian stood to one side, his hands clasped behind his back as he awaited her verdict. The seconds ticked by. She inched a little farther to the right, one finger following the lines of calculations he’d written beneath a drawing of the abutment.

“Incredible.” The whisper had scarcely passed her lips when she swung to face him. “Sebastian, this may well be the most amazing thing I have ever seen. That you did this ...” She gestured to the paper. “All of this ...” Her eyes shone, and she reached for his hands, not bothering to finish her thought. “I want to see it spanning the river on Finley Park land. I want to watch it being built and see the pieces coming together just like you’ve envisioned.”

Sebastian was quite sure that a ride in the Montgolfier brothers’ hot air balloon could not have produced a greater sensation of floating than he experienced at that moment. He’d been unaware of how much he desired Rosalind’s approval until she’d offered it. “Thank you.” He cleared his throat. “Your good opinion means a great deal.”

She cocked her head to one side, her beautiful brown eyes on his. “Does it?”

The candlelight flickered, and their silhouettes swayed across the floor. He pulled her nearer. “Yes,” he said softly. “It does.”

Her slightly parted lips curved upward. He ached to touch them, to kiss them. She was so close he could feel her warmth. And yet, he held back. What of her feelings?

“Sebastian.” Her voice was little more than a murmur. “You do not need a kissing gate.”

He released her hands to wrap his arms around her. Slowly and deliberately, he lowered his head. “Do I not?”

“No.” It was a breath. “You do not.”

His lips touched hers, and she leaned in. He tightened his hold on her, deepening the kiss until there was nothing and no one in his world but Rosalind.

In the fireplace, the log shifted and cracked. The sound filled the room. Sebastian raised his head in time to see the sparks spiraling up the chimney. Reluctantly, he relaxed his grip around Rosalind. She offered him a shy smile and stepped out of his embrace. Instantly, his arms felt empty.

“I think perhaps I should design a bridge every day,” he

said.

Her light laughter filled him with hope. “There is no need to limit yourself to bridges.” She pointed at Meikle’s papers scattered over the other side of the table. “What is this that you are working on?”

He hesitated. It was a reaction born of years of keeping innovation secrets to himself. Rosalind caught his reluctance to speak and took another step back. He reached for her hand, relieved when she did not pull away. “This is someone else’s project,” he said. “If it were my own, I would gladly share it with you. As it is, I am honor bound to say as little as possible.”

“This is the one that came from Scotland the day we arrived at Finley Park,” she guessed.

“Yes. A colleague requested my assistance in discovering whether an error in calculation is preventing his invention from functioning as he believes it should.” He looked at the scattered sheets of paper and frowned. “Unfortunately, if there is one, it continues to elude me.”

“When does he wish the papers returned?”

“He asked that I send them back by courier within a fortnight,” Sebastian said. “I will make every effort to review all the computations by then, but I will be glad to have the papers safely back in the original creator’s hands afterward.”

A vision of Andrew Meikle bent over his table in the drafty workshop in East Lothian entered his mind. “I wish you could see how many of Britain’s brightest gentlemen live. They barely acknowledge their shabby accommodations because they spend every waking moment and every brass penny on developing new inventions. Every one of them works feverishly to break through an earlier barrier in industrialization or innovation, fully aware that someone else is racing toward the same goal.

“For a select few, the knowledge that their name will be forever associated with a new product is enough. For most, however, years of work without an end prize can be dire. If

they do not see the financial remuneration that comes from being the first across the line, they face destitution.”

She was listening intently. “Which is why you feel so much pressure to do your part in a timely fashion.”

“Yes. And why I tell no one what I am about. For the sake of the inventor and the safety of his plans, it is better that any assistance I offer remains anonymous.”

“What concerns you most, the possibility of a document’s loss or its theft?”

“Both are heavy burdens, especially as either one could occur at Finley Park or in transit.”

“Do you truly believe that someone in your own household is capable of such a crime? Is that why you keep the door to your workshop locked?”

He caught the shock in her voice and hastened to clarify the situation. “I trust every one of my employees. If I did not, they would not work here. But this is not a case of preventing someone from stealing a design the way one would abscond with a painting or a set of candlesticks. I lock the door to protect anyone in the house from seeing something written on a piece of paper that would appear harmless to a casual observer, such as the name of an engineer or the working title of the machine they are trying to produce.

“My association with engineers and innovators is well known. Unfortunately, there are those with sufficiently unscrupulous morals who would lower themselves to extracting information from innocent staff members simply to get ahead. I lock the door in an effort to deny them that possibility.”

“Thank you for explaining.” She seemed sincere. He hoped he had said enough. She glanced at the scattered papers again. “How many pages do you still need to work through?”

He grimaced. “Forty-three, by the last count.”

“Then I had best let you be about your calculations.” She started toward the door.



“Rosalind.”

She stopped and turned to face him.

“Would you have dinner with me again tomorrow?”

She smiled. “Yes.”

He released a tense breath. “And breakfast?”

Her smile widened. “What time do you take breakfast?”

“Whenever you do.”

Her laughter cleared the air between them better than his explanation had. “Nine o’clock.”

“Nine o’clock,” he repeated. “I shall look forward to it.”

She reached for the doorknob. “Good night, Sebastian.”

“Good night,” he said, and the door clicked closed behind her.

\* \* \*

Rosalind sat at the writing desk in her bedchamber, staring sightlessly at the glowing coals in the nearby fireplace. The rain had not abated all day, and the raindrops were maintaining a rhythmic tapping against the windowpanes. She glanced at the clock. It was quarter to eleven, and there had been no sound from the neighboring rooms. Sebastian must have become lost in his work again.

She opened her diary to the back page. If she’d ever needed a list to sort through her tangle of emotions, it was now. Her eyes landed on her most recent entry in the *Good Things* list: *12. He kissed me.* Butterflies danced in her stomach at the memory of the kiss she and Sebastian had shared this evening. What had she been thinking? She pressed her cool hands to her warm cheeks. That was just it. She hadn’t been thinking; she’d been feeling. And it had been completely wonderful.

She groaned, forcing her mind back to earlier in the day and their visit to the Becketts. What more could she add to her list? *13. He likes children. 14. He does not want me for a sister.* She pondered the last entry. It was an odd item for the *Good Things* list, and it had not been something she had entertained

in a positive light initially, but after what had happened between them in the workshop, she could assuredly say it was a very good thing.

The workshop. There was something she must change on her *Bad Things* list. She read through the entries again. *1. He refused me entry to his tree house. 2. I do not love him. 3. I do not know him. 4. He abandoned me. 5. He refused me entry to his workshop.* Dipping her quill in ink, she penned a straight line through the fifth item. She may never be invited into Sebastian's workshop again, but now that she understood why he kept the door locked, it was no longer a bad thing.

Her quill hovered over the list. So much had changed since the day Sebastian had walked into Langton House as a complete stranger. It would likely take years to truly know him as well as she would like, but she now understood and appreciated him in ways she could never have anticipated. Indeed, she knew and liked Sebastian better than any other gentleman of her acquaintance. That simple yet profound truth shone as a bright light in an uncomfortably large abyss of unknowns, and before she could second-guess herself, she drew a line through *3. I do not know him.*

Setting aside her quill, she closed the book. Tomorrow morning, she might learn what Sebastian liked to eat for breakfast, but that would do little to change what she already knew of his essential characteristics. And if she were being fully honest with herself, those were qualities she was coming to admire rather a lot.

## CHAPTER 20

ROSALIND WAS ALREADY SEATED AT the dining room table when Sebastian entered. His pulse quickened at the sight of her. No matter that it had been after two o'clock in the morning before he'd finally collapsed into bed, knowing that he was to see her at breakfast was motivation enough to rise again a few short hours later.

"Good morning," she said.

"Good morning." He took a plate and quickly filled it from the row of platters on the sideboard before taking a seat beside her.

She glanced at his plate. "Kippers? I would have taken you for a gentleman who preferred sausage."

"Actually, I am a gentleman who prefers Chelsea buns, but I generally hear from Mrs. Shoup if I do not eat something more than that at breakfast."

Rosalind laughed. "You are a duke. I am quite sure you may dictate what you have for breakfast."

"Unfortunately, I have never had much success in convincing Cook that my elevated status carries sway in the kitchen." He cut into his kipper with resignation. "It may have something to do with how many times I pilfered treats as a child."

"Ah." Her eyes sparkled with humor. "Your reprobate past has returned to haunt you."

"So it would seem."

"Well, as it happens, I am meeting with Mrs. Frost to discuss menus today. Am I to assume that you would like me to add Chelsea buns to the list of breakfast offerings?"

He grinned. "You assume correctly."

"Do you have any other preferences I should be aware of?"

“No offal.” He shuddered. “Especially first thing in the morning. If you can persuade Mrs. Frost and Mrs. Shoup of that, I shall be eternally grateful.”

Her lips twitched as though she were fighting a smile. “I shall do my best.” She took a sip of her drinking chocolate, and Sebastian passed over the remainder of his kipper in favor of a bread roll. “I was also wondering if I should suggest that Cook make a few extra biscuits and cakes this week in case we have visitors. I assume word of our marriage will reach your neighbors soon and they will feel it their duty to pay a call.”

Sebastian swallowed a piece of bread, and it entered the newly formed pit in his stomach. Of course his neighbors would come to meet his bride. Likely in droves. Given how quickly such news spread, it was a wonder no one had come already.

“I think that would be wise,” he said. “Some of our neighbors may be considerate enough to wait a week or two before coming, but they will undoubtedly make an appearance within a fortnight.”

For a fraction of a second, he caught the hint of vulnerability in her eyes. But when she spoke, she appeared calm and assured. “I know that you are anxious to complete your assignment in the workshop, so I will strive to keep interruptions to a minimum.”

He set down his bread roll. Regardless of how much he disliked social calls, he knew that she should not be required to entertain their neighbors alone.

“Have Vickers alert me when I am needed in the drawing room,” he said. “I shall come.”

As if summoned by Sebastian’s use of his name, Vickers appeared in the doorway, a silver salver in his hand. “Good morning, Your Graces,” he said with a bow. “The post has arrived, and there are two letters for Her Grace. I thought perhaps she would like them right away.”

Rosalind’s countenance brightened. “I would indeed. Thank you, Vickers.”

He nodded and handed her two envelopes. “And you, Your Grace?” he asked, turning to Sebastian. “Would you like me to place your letters on your study desk as usual?”

Sebastian glanced at Rosalind. She was already opening the seal on one of the envelopes. She would undoubtedly be distracted for a little while, so it might be just as well to read his own letters now. “No. I can take them,” he said.

Vickers passed him the remaining four envelopes on the salver. Sebastian flipped through them, his fingers stilling when he came to one addressed in a rather haphazard script. Setting the other letters aside, he broke the seal and withdrew a single sheet of paper. It took mere seconds to read the short note and for his elation to rise.

“Rosalind.” She looked up from her letter. Her eyes were moist. Instantly, his excitement ebbed. “Is something wrong?”

She shook her head. “Not at all.” She raised her letter slightly. “It is from my mother. She has removed from London to Langton Manor and writes to tell me all the news from there.” She attempted a smile. “As wonderful as it is to hear from her, I suppose it makes me miss my former home a little.”

He did not know what to say. “Would you like to go and visit?”

“Yes.” She stared at the letter in her hand as though seeing Langton Manor and her mother in its pages. “But I think I should like to wait for a while. I ... I should like to find my place here first.”

Her words touched him. As did her courage. “I am glad. But whenever you are ready, the journey can be arranged.”

“Thank you, Sebastian.” She turned to look at him. “Was there something you wanted to tell me?”

Lud. When had his concern for Rosalind become such a priority that it erased all other thoughts from his head? “I have heard from Mr. Darby,” he said. “He has agreed to cast the pieces for the new bridge.”

“Sebastian! That is marvelous news.”

He smiled at her obvious delight. "It is. I shall write back to him immediately, asking him to begin without delay." He hesitated. He did not want to leave her until he knew she was over the worst of her homesickness. "Who is your other letter from?"

She picked up the envelope and studied the handwriting with a puzzled look. "I do not know."

He watched while she opened it and read the letter within. When she raised her head, her expression appeared all the more confused.

"It is from Mr. Sellers," she said.

Sebastian had suffered a stab of jealousy when he'd encountered Mr. Sellers with Rosalind at Langton House. But it was nothing to the fiery lancing he was currently experiencing. "What does he say?" He considered his nonchalant tone to be a major accomplishment.

"He is visiting family members in Surrey and wishes to call on me." She paused, her brow furrowed. "Is that entirely proper? He knows that I am married; the name and address on the envelope prove it. Why would he wish to see me?"

Sebastian could think of several reasons. And every single one of them made his blood boil. "Does he say what dates he will be in the area?"

She studied the letter again. "No. Nor the name of the family he is visiting."

"Then he will have to accept his fate if you are unavailable when he arrives."

"Yes." She slid the letter back into the envelope. "I suppose he will."

Sebastian gritted his teeth. He wanted to ask Rosalind to have Vickers tell the gentleman that she was not at home when he called. The Society code for not wishing to further the acquaintance would go a long way toward putting Sebastian's mind at ease. But with their relationship still at its beginning stages, he was reluctant to appear heavy-handed. He would place his trust in her to navigate this social connection

quandary, but he would also put Vickers on high alert. His butler could be counted upon to monitor all visitors to Finley Park—especially if any of them posed a threat to the duke’s or duchess’s well-being.

“I had best reply to Mr. Darby,” he said, coming to his feet.

“Yes.” Her pensive expression cleared, and she smiled. “You must have him start on your designs right away.”

A gnawing urgency propelled Sebastian to his study, but it had nothing to do with an iron bridge and everything to do with his wife. By the time he reached his desk, he knew what he must do. Setting aside the letter from Mr. Darby, he withdrew a sheet of paper from the drawer, dipped his quill in ink, and began to write.

*Finley Park, Surrey*

*17 October 1782*

*Dear Lord Bloxley,*

*The Duchess of Kelbrook recently received an unsolicited missive from Mr. Nigel Sellers. She was good enough to share its contents with me, and although the application he made of her appears harmless, the fact that he made it at all gives me considerable cause for concern.*

*As you likely are aware, other than the weeks expended fulfilling my obligations in Parliament, I have spent little time in London over the last few years. Indeed, I met Mr. Sellers for the first time under a month ago, and my knowledge of his character and background is minimal. For this reason, I am writing to ask if you would be so good as to share any factual information you may possess regarding the gentleman that may help in assessing*

*his motives.*

*I should add that it is your reputation for integrity and your close connection with the duchess and her family that makes my request possible. I also wish to reassure you that said request is made solely out of my earnest desire to protect the duchess from harm.*

*Your prompt reply would be most appreciated.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Kelbrook*

Sebastian read through the letter once before setting his quill down and blotting the ink dry. He then addressed an envelope, enclosed his letter, and sealed it. Rising from his seat, he marched to the door.

“Vickers,” he called.

The butler appeared immediately, and Sebastian handed him the letter. “This must reach London tomorrow,” he said.

Vickers nodded. “I shall see to it immediately, Your Grace.”

Sebastian returned to his desk and dropped into the chair. It was possible that he was overreacting. Mr. Sellers’s desire to visit Rosalind truly might be motivated by nothing more than friendship. He ran his hand across his face. Instinct told him there was more to it than that, but it was hard for someone who worked with numbers and proven theories to argue a point based on nothing but a vague feeling. He needed something more. He only hoped Bloxley could provide it—and that he would do so without delay.



# CHAPTER 21

THE RAIN CONTINUED FOR A week. Rosalind used the many hours that Sebastian was shut away in his workshop to review housekeeping books, create menus, write letters, read, and work on her latest needlepoint project. They were all worthwhile pastimes, but they were also lonely endeavors. The bright spots each day were her scheduled breakfasts and dinners with Sebastian.

Their discussions during those meals ranged from whether the steam engine would ever replace horsepower to whether roast pheasant tasted better than roast duck. No matter the subject, there was always something to think on and almost always something to laugh over. When a meal ended and they separated, Rosalind found herself counting the hours until she could sit at the table with him again.

There had been a couple of times when she had so longed for his presence that she'd walked to his workshop only to turn around when she'd reached the door. Interrupting him would only slow his progress and risk frustrating him.

By the eighth day, she determined that she had remained indoors long enough. She was going to take some air even if it meant a good soaking. Telling Polly that she would require a hat and her warmest cloak upon her return, she went downstairs for breakfast.

Sebastian was already seated at the table. A half-finished roll sat on his plate, and he was sifting through the letters Vickers had placed beside him. There were no letters at her place at the table. She had received very few since arriving at Finley Park. Perhaps when she was better known in the neighborhood, more invitations would come.

“Good morning, Sebastian.”

The duke's attention had been fixed on the letter he'd just opened, and he looked up with a start. “Rosalind.” He stood, his smile warming her even as she noted the air of weariness

hanging over him. “How are you this morning?”

“I am well.” Ignoring the food on the sideboard, she studied him. “Better than you, I would say. Your reddened eyes suggest that you did not sleep much last night.”

“It shows, does it?” he said ruefully.

She moved closer. “You cannot keep up this pace much longer. You will be of no use whatsoever to your colleague if you make yourself ill.”

“I appreciate your concern.” He offered her a wan smile. “You are right, of course, but I believe the end is finally in sight.”

“You have gone through all the pages?”

“Almost. I have five left. I wanted to finish them last night, but ultimately, my stamina failed me.”

Rosalind gave him a troubled look. “What time did you go to bed?”

“That is a closely guarded secret.”

Her gaze moved from his tired face to his crooked cravat and his unusually wrinkled jacket. Unless he owned two green jackets with gold trim, it was the same one he had worn to dinner the night before.

“Sebastian, you need to sleep.”

“I know. And I will. As soon as I’ve worked through those last five pages.”

“Have you found the error yet?”

He shook his head. “No. And it’s maddening. According to the papers, the prototype should work. I’ve gone through each formula, line by line. As far as I can tell, the numbers have been computed correctly every time.”

“Then you simply send them back with a covering note to that effect,” she said.

He grinned. “Are you always this authoritative?”

“According to Jonas, I border on imperious.”

His laughter erased the lines of fatigue on his face. "I hope Jonas returns before too long."

"I do too, but it would be most ungentlemanly for you both to side against me," she warned.

"Agreed," he said. "And as much as I look forward to seeing your brother again, I would much rather be on your team." He gathered up his letters.

"Are you leaving so soon?"

He met her gaze. She saw reluctance in his tired eyes. "Will you forgive me if I do not stay today? I must finish before the courier arrives."

She nodded. "And then will you sleep?"

Leaning forward, he brushed his lips across her forehead. "And then I will sleep."

Rosalind stood rooted to the spot as Sebastian walked out of the room. His kiss had been so fleeting and so natural, it was over almost before she knew it had happened. And yet, her skin still tingled from his touch. She pressed her hand to her fluttering stomach and eyed the row of food platters on the sideboard uneasily. He had not made eating breakfast without him easy.

\* \* \*

The moment the workshop door closed behind him, Sebastian reopened Bloxley's letter. He had read nothing more than the return address at the top of the page before Rosalind had arrived in the dining room. As anxious as he was to put Meikle's project behind him, discovering what Bloxley had to say on the matter of Mr. Sellers took precedence.

Setting the other letters down on the corner of the table, Sebastian took a seat by the fire. He was not sure if Rosalind had guessed that he'd been in his workshop the entire night. Admittedly, the last three hours had been spent dozing in this chair, but that was a far cry from a solid night's sleep in his bed. He shook off his fatigue and focused on the letter in his hand.

*Claremont House, London*

*21 October 1782*

*Dear Duke of Kelbrook,*

*I have had very little personal interaction with Mr. Nigel Sellers beyond polite pleasantries. Up until today, my knowledge of the gentleman was limited to the general observation that he is a regular attendee at Society functions in Town and is known to be a great favorite with the young ladies.*

*Given the underlying urgency of your letter and my respect for the Langton family, however, I took a trip to White's today so that I might make a few discreet inquiries. The following information was extracted from a conversation with a well-respected member of the House of Lords whose country estate lies within ten miles of Mr. Sellers's home in Norfolk.*

*Mr. Nigel Sellers is the only son of the late Mr. and Mrs. Anthony Sellers. His two sisters, both older than he, are married and live in Yorkshire and Northumberland, respectively. Since his parents' passing, most of the land associated with his estate has been sold, and the household staff has been cut to a minimum. He rarely makes an appearance there, preferring to stay in rented rooms in London even after the Season is over.*

*All indications are that the house in Norfolk is in dire need of repair; but Mr. Sellers appears to be in no hurry to attend to it. With his landholdings seemingly unprofitable, his source of revenue remains a mystery. He regularly places large wagers at White's, but if he is doing so as a means of increasing his income, he has been sadly disappointed. It seems that he has lost far more than he has gained.*

*I believe each of these claims can be corroborated.  
The details are scant, but I hope they are sufficient to  
be of assistance to you.*

*I send my best wishes to you and the Duchess of  
Kelbrook.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Bloxley*

Sebastian raised his head and released a long breath. So, Mr. Sellers was lacking in funds. His pursuit of Rosalind made perfect sense. Not only was she a beautiful, highly intelligent, and lovely young lady, but she also came from a wealthy titled family. If Rosalind's dowry had been the gentleman's primary objective, however, surely he would have shifted his attention to another young lady of means upon Rosalind's marriage to someone else.

It was entirely possible that Mr. Sellers truly had feelings for Rosalind, but if that was so, why would he torture himself by coming to see her when she was now outside his grasp?

Sebastian ran his fingers through his hair. An affair with the Duke of Kelbrook's wife had all the makings of an opportunity for bribery. But the same instinct that had urged Sebastian to act upon Mr. Sellers's letter told him that Rosalind was not languishing for a lost love.

If her nonplussed reaction upon receiving the letter was not indicator enough, then her response to Sebastian's kisses surely was. He released another breath—this one far more unsteady than the first. If Rosalind was half as shaken by those kisses as he was ... He allowed the thought to trail off and swallowed against his dry throat. No matter Rosalind's emotional leanings, Sebastian would do all in his power to protect her from Mr. Sellers's underlying intentions. He cared about her too much to do anything less.

\* \* \*

The grass squelched beneath Rosalind's feet as she walked across the lawn. For now, at least, the rain had stopped, leaving the world damp and clean. Deep puddles lined the paths that meandered through the rose garden, and water dripped from the tree branches. In the distance, above the river, a small patch of pale-blue sky appeared between the clouds, and without any real forethought, she headed that way.

The sound of rushing water reached her long before she saw the river, and by the time she passed through the kissing gate, it was obvious that days of rain had impacted the volume of water rushing along the riverbed. She moved closer to the bank. The high-water mark she'd noticed the last time she was here was now covered. Sticks, branches, and leaves swirled in the muddy river, some of the larger debris catching on the bridge piers as the water flowed downstream.

On the other side of the river, a man was bent over one of the shrubs that lined the bank. Rosalind watched as he used a small axe to slice a thick branch in two. Bending one piece of the branch back, he wove it between the other branches to fill a hole in the hedgerow. As soon as he was satisfied, he moved a little to his left and repeated the process on the next bush. She studied the hedgerow more carefully, noting that the gaps between the shrubs that were so prominent to the man's left were missing to his right. Not only must he have been working for some time, but his skill was undeniable.

Movement near the bridge caught her eye, and she turned to see a sheep wander away from the small herd grazing behind the man. As it ambled toward the bridge, Rosalind eyed the broken pier anxiously. No matter the deluge below, the sheep obviously had no qualms about testing the bridge's integrity. It ducked under the warning rope that hung across the bridge's entrance and meandered onto the deck.

Rosalind moved closer to her end of the bridge. "Go back!" she shouted, waving her arms in warning.

The sheep paused, staring at her with unblinking eyes. Seconds later, it continued forward.

"Botheration," Rosalind muttered. "No wonder sheep are

considered senseless creatures.”

Still unaware of the sheep’s movement, the man sliced another branch and worked to free it from the tangle of shrub limbs.

“Excuse me!” Rosalind shouted, but the river snatched her voice and washed it downstream.

Taking a step back, she scoured the hedgerow. A rock, almost double the size of her fist, was half hidden in the long grass. Rosalind seized it. Walking to the edge of the riverbank, she hurled it across the water in the direction of the man. It barely made it halfway across the river, but the splash was enough to catch his attention. He looked up and spotted her immediately.

“The sheep,” she called, pointing to the bridge.

He took in the situation in one glance. Straightening, he put two fingers in his mouth and blew a piercing whistle. A black-and-white sheepdog darted out from behind the hedge and started for the bridge. The man whistled again. This time the tone was different, and the dog crouched on its haunches, crawling under the rope, its eyes on the sheep. The third whistle was a short burst, and the dog circled the sheep. The foolish animal skittered sideways to avoid its rescuer, but once again, the dog shifted, moving to stand between the sheep and the bridge’s drop-off.

Rosalind watched spellbound as the shepherd and his dog worked as one to drive the sheep back across the bridge to the safety of the pasture. The sheep gave a disgruntled bleat as it rejoined the herd and then dropped its head and began to graze.

“Many thanks, Your Grace!” The distant voice drew her attention back to the shepherd and his dog. The man tugged on the brim of his hat.

“That was marvelous,” she called back.

She could not tell if he heard her, but he issued a final whistle to call his dog to his side and then resumed his work on the hedge.

The man was undoubtedly David Beckett. Her gaze shifted from the shepherd at the hedge to the distant cottage. A thin spiral of smoke was drifting upward from the chimney. How had the roof fared after all this rain? Rosalind assumed that Sebastian's steward would have informed him if the family's situation had worsened severely, but her heart went out to Mrs. Beckett and the children. They had probably been trapped indoors with a dripping, drafty roof all this time.

The possibility of another outing—one with more purpose than a simple morning stroll—took root in her mind. With one last look at Mr. Beckett and the sheep, she headed back to the house.



## CHAPTER 22

WHEN ROSALIND ENTERED THE FINLEY Park kitchen, the smell of baking bread filled the large room. A pan of Chelsea buns sat on the wooden table, and Mrs. Shoup was putting another pan into the oven.

“Good morning, Mrs. Shoup.”

“Well, good morning, Your Grace.” The cook bobbed a curtsy, her look of surprise softened by pleasure. “What can I do for you?”

Rosalind eyed the steaming buns. They looked divine; they would likely taste the same. “When I wrote the menus with Mrs. Frost earlier in the week, I requested Chelsea buns for tea today. I realize now that I did not specify how many, and I wondered if perhaps you made a few extra.”

“Not to worry. I learned a long time ago that if the master is in residence, one batch of Chelsea buns is not enough.”

“How many extra will he eat?”

“As many as I’ve made,” Cook said with a chuckle. “But if you’re needing some yourself, there’s plenty to share.”

Rosalind smiled. “I am coming to understand why His Grace holds you in such high esteem.”

Mrs. Shoup waved away her compliment with a tea towel. “I’m glad to be of service—to you both. Now, tell me how many buns you’ll be needing.”

“I was hoping to take them to the Beckett family,” she said.

“Ah, well then.” Mrs. Shoup took a basket off a shelf. “I reckon you’ll want half a dozen at least.” She put a clean cloth in the bottom of the basket and set seven buns on it. “There,” she said, folding the upper edges of the cloth over the warm bread. “If anyone asks, we shall say that seven is a baker’s half dozen.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Shoup.”

“I’m glad you’re going up there, Your Grace. I’ve told Mary to get word to me when the baby comes, but with all this rain ... Well, it will be right good to know that she’s coping.”

“I agree,” Rosalind said. She lifted the basket off the table. “I shall have Vickers send for the carriage right away. Perhaps I will arrive at the cottage in time for Edith and Elsie to have your Chelsea buns for luncheon.”

Mrs. Shoup looked pleased. “That would be grand.”

\* \* \*

Perkins opened the carriage door when it stopped before the Becketts’ home. He took Rosalind’s hand, guiding her around the large puddle as she alighted.

“Thank you, Perkins.”

The driver handed her the basket of rolls and bowed. He had been both helpful and courteous, but he was not Sebastian. She glanced back at the mud-splattered carriage. It had been an unexpectedly lonely ride.

“I should not be long,” she said.

“Very good, Your Grace.”

Perkins stepped aside to open the garden gate. Rosalind lifted her skirts and walked up the muddy path toward the door.

Elsie answered her knock, then stood staring at her with her thumb in her mouth.

“Good day, Elsie,” Rosalind said. “Is your mother about?”

Elsie nodded but did not remove her thumb or change her position.

“Would you be so good as to fetch her?”

Another nod. But before Elsie could act upon Rosalind’s request, Mrs. Beckett arrived at the door.

“I do apologize, Your Grace.” She had one hand pressed against her back. “Edith is outside gathering eggs, and I was lying down. I’m afraid I did not hear the door.”

“If you were resting, it is I who should apologize for coming unannounced,” Rosalind said.

Mrs. Beckett shook her head. “No, no. You are welcome.” She opened the door wider. “Please, come in.”

She waited for Rosalind to enter, then closed the door behind her. With a stiff gait, she led Rosalind into the parlor.

“Are you quite well, Mrs. Beckett?”

“Mary,” she said with a shy smile. “Please call me Mary.”

Rosalind nodded, glad to see the lines of pain removed from the young woman’s forehead, if only for a few moments. “Are you experiencing significant discomfort?”

Mary waited for Rosalind to take a seat before lowering herself slowly into the faded chair across from her. “My back has been complaining over this extra weight I’m carrying,” she said. “That’s all.”

“That would seem to be rather a lot when you are caring for two little girls and a house.”

“We are managing,” Mary said. “Edith is a good helper during the day, and when Mr. Beckett comes home, he does any heavy lifting that needs to be done.”

“Like buckets full of water that has dripped from the roof?” Rosalind guessed.

Mary smiled. “Yes. But Mr. Grayson stopped by earlier to say that the roofer will come tomorrow as long as the weather stays dry.”

“I am very glad to hear it.” She paused, wondering what else she might say. They had all but covered the state of Mary’s health and the roof already. “I believe I saw Mr. Beckett in the pasture by the river this morning.”

“I daresay you did. He went out at first light. Worried about the sheep going through the hedge with the river running so high, he is.”

“I don’t suppose sheep are the most sensible of creatures,” Rosalind said, thinking back on the one that had aimlessly

wandered onto the bridge.

“No, Your Grace. They can be terribly silly.”

The back door slammed shut, and light footsteps clattered across the tiled floor. “Three eggs today, Mama,” Edith said, bursting into the parlor, a small basket in hand.

“I beg your pardon, Your Grace,” Mary said, her cheeks pink.

“There is no need.” Rosalind smiled at the windswept little girl. “I am happy to hear that you are counting, Edith. How high can you go?”

“Up to twenty,” she said proudly.

“Up to twenty, Your Grace,” her mother prompted.

Edith tried again. “Up to twenty, Your Grace.”

“That is very commendable.” Rosalind drew back the cover on her basket. “I believe you should manage to count the contents of my basket very easily, then.”

Elsie, who had sidled up to her mother when they’d first entered the parlor, suddenly appeared ready to venture closer. She and Edith inched toward the basket.

“It smells good,” Edith said.

“It does,” Rosalind agreed. She tipped the basket slightly so the girls could see inside.

“Buns!” Elsie cried. “It’s buns!”

“How many, Edith? Can you tell me?” Rosalind asked.

Edith screwed her little face in concentration and began counting. “One, two, three, four, five, seven—”

“Six,” Rosalind corrected.

“Six, seven.” Edith looked up. “There’s seven buns.”

“And is that enough for your family?”

“Yes.” The little girl nodded furiously. “There’s only four people in my family.”

“Perfect. I shall leave them here for you,” Rosalind said.

Both little girls broke into beaming smiles.

“Mama, did you hear?” Edith said.

“I did.” Mary smiled at her daughter and then turned back to Rosalind. “You are too kind, Your Grace.”

“It is my pleasure,” Rosalind said. “I was fortunate to visit the Finley Park kitchen at just the right time.” She rose, and Mary pushed herself to her feet. “I will leave now, with the hope that you may rest once I’m gone.” She handed Mary the basket. “From what His Grace has told me, the other tenants live some distance away. Do not hesitate to send word to the house if your condition worsens.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

“Good day, girls.”

Edith tugged on Elsie’s frock, and the two of them managed stumbling curtsies. “Good day, Your Grace.”

The return drive to Finley Park was just as lonely as the outgoing one had been, and by the time the carriage rolled up in front of the portico, Rosalind had determined that if Sebastian had not already emerged from the workshop with the last five pages of his project completed, she would make another Chelsea bun delivery—this time to her husband.

“Welcome home, Your Grace,” Vickers said as she entered the house.

“Thank you, Vickers.” She handed him her redingote, hat, and gloves. “Tell me, is His Grace in his workshop still?”

“I believe so, Your Grace.”

“Has he asked for luncheon?”

“No, Your Grace.”

Rosalind nodded. She considered it likely that when Sebastian was working, he forgot to eat as readily as he forgot to sleep. She crossed the entrance hall, making directly for the kitchen. The aroma of baking bread had been replaced by the smell of roast duck. Mrs. Shoup was stirring a large pot, her cheeks pink from the heat of the stove. One scullery maid was

washing a small mountain of dishes in a large basin, and another was chopping cabbage. It seemed that dinner preparations were well underway.

“Good day, Mrs. Shoup.”

The cook gasped, dropped her wooden spoon into the pot, and placed her hand over her heart. “Forgive me, Your Grace. I did not see you there.” She walked away from the stove. “How’s Mary?”

“She’s as cheerful as ever,” Rosalind said, “but she is suffering from some discomfort in her back.”

Mrs. Shoup clicked her tongue. “You mark my words, that baby will be here before we know it.”

“I told her to send word to the house if her situation worsens,” Rosalind said.

“That was right good of you, Your Grace. Finley Park is a fair bit closer to her than any of the other cottages on the estate.” She wiped her hands on her apron. “Now that you’re home, would you like some luncheon sent to your rooms?”

“In a little while, perhaps, but I actually returned to the kitchen to ask for a couple more Chelsea buns. For His Grace, this time.”

If Mrs. Shoup was taken aback that the Duchess of Kelbrook was choosing to order food from the kitchen for her husband, she did not show it. Indeed, given her familial relationship with Sebastian, Rosalind thought it likely that the cook was rather glad to have someone else taking an interest in whether or not he was eating.

“I’ll have a plate made up in no time,” she said, already reaching for a dish on the shelf above her. “Shall I have Marcus take it to the workshop?”

“No. I shall take it myself.”

Mrs. Shoup offered her an approving look. “Very good, Your Grace.”

## CHAPTER 23

ROSALIND STOOD OUTSIDE SEBASTIAN'S WORKSHOP, staring at the closed door. She had knocked twice, and he had yet to answer. In her hand, she carried a plate containing three Chelsea buns—Mrs. Shoup had insisted upon adding one for her—some cheese, a pear, and a slice of cold pork. By Rosalind's estimation, it was an offering worthy of an interruption. But perhaps he would not think so.

She squared her shoulders. It had been foolish to think that he would welcome her in, but he needed to eat regardless. Without food and sleep, he would surely collapse. The unsolicited thought caught her off guard, and she tightened her grip on the plate. With Sebastian's penchant for privacy, it might be hours before anyone checked on him. She knocked one more time and reached for the doorknob. It turned.

Easing the door open a couple of inches, Rosalind peeked inside. The curtains were open, filling the room with light. Papers lay in piles on the table, but there was no sign of Sebastian. She pushed the door open wide enough to step inside. Coals glowed dimly in the fireplace, but the room was beginning to chill. Fear clutched at Rosalind's throat. Where was he? Surely he would not have left the room unlocked and unattended.

She crossed the distance to the table and set down the plate. And then she heard a breath. She swung around, her heart pounding. There he was, reclining in an armchair, with his legs outstretched before him, fast asleep. Taking a moment to allow her heart rate to resume its normal tempo, she approached him quietly.

He looked younger in repose. A lock of his light-brown hair had fallen across his forehead. His cravat was undone, his collar open. One arm hung over the side of the chair; the other lay across his lap atop a bent piece of paper. Rosalind reached for the paper, sliding it out from under his arm and smoothing away the creases. She glanced at it. Diagrams of rectangles

and a cylinder covered the sheet. Beside them were rows of figures.

Curiosity overcame her. She studied the numbers. Each of the rectangles was marked with its width and height. The calculations beside the rectangles showed the units of measurement and the multiplication necessary to determine their area.

The cylindrical diagram was similarly marked, but it had figures showing the radius of the circle and its height. She had expected to see some reference to pi, the symbol William Jones had made popular at the turn of the century, but instead, the multiplication resembled the ones above, with only the height and radius represented. What did that mean? She frowned, wishing she'd had the opportunity to study arithmetic more deeply. Her gaze moved to Sebastian. Would he be willing to teach her?

Setting the paper down carefully on the end table beside Sebastian's chair, she moved closer to him. She hated to wake him when he so desperately needed the sleep. But if he had completed all that he wanted to do, surely the papers would be rolled up in the satchel, awaiting the courier, rather than scattered across the table. She crouched down and touched his hand.

"Sebastian," she said softly.

He stirred.

"Sebastian," she tried again.

His fingers moved, intertwining with hers. "Rosalind?" His eyes were still closed, his voice groggy.

"Yes. I brought you some food."

Slowly, as though he were surfacing from a deep well, he opened his eyes. Blinking several times, he glanced around the room, finally focusing on her face. "Rosalind? What are you doing here?"

"I came to bring you some food. When you did not answer my knock, I became worried. I came in to check on you and found you asleep in this chair."



His grip on her hand tightened, and he sat up. “What time is it?”

“Almost two o’clock”

“Deuce take it, I missed him!”

“The courier?”

“Yes.” He ran the fingers of his free hand through his hair. “He sent a message to say that he would be here by one o’clock.”

“Will he return another time?”

“If there was nothing for him today, he was told to return in two days.”

“Then all is not lost. He will be back.”

“Two days, Rosalind.” His voice rang with regret. “It can make all the difference in the race these inventors have embarked upon.”

“Have you finished reviewing the sheets?”

“All but the last one, which, in actuality, is the first one.”

“I do not understand.”

He smiled. “Forgive me. It must seem as though I am talking in riddles. I have completed all the paperwork that outlines how the mechanism functions. The only pages remaining are the ones that list the specifications of the machine itself. Those figures are static and are used within the more complex calculations as necessary.”

Rosalind picked up the paper she had rescued. “This was crushed beneath your arm. Is it the one?”

“Yes.” He sighed. “I’ve been unable to find a flaw anywhere in the mechanical engineering equations. I had thought I would read through the final specifications just so that I could tell Meikle I had looked through every page.”

“Meikle? He is the inventor?”

“He is.”

Rosalind swallowed the lump in her throat. Sometime

between when Sebastian had taken her hand and now, they had crossed an indiscernible line together. “I will not betray your trust, Sebastian. Or Mr. Meikle’s.”

“I know,” he said.

“I ... I glanced at this page when I tried to smooth out the wrinkles. I long to understand how numbers can be used in the way you describe. Would you show me one day? When you are not too busy or tired or ...”

“Yes,” he said. “And this page would be the perfect place to start.”

“Now?” she gasped. “What about your food?”

He tilted his head so that he could see the plate on the table. “Did you bring Chelsea buns?”

“Two for you and one for me.”

He grinned. “Perfect. It will be our reward for reviewing this last page together.” He rose and drew her to her feet. “Come. We will sit together at the table.”

When Rosalind was seated, Sebastian set all the other papers in a tidy pile at the far end of the table and placed the page he’d been holding before her. “Do you know how to calculate the area of a surface?” he asked, sitting beside her.

“Yes. You take the length of the object and multiply it by the width.”

“Very good.”

Rosalind warmed at the admiration in his eyes.

“What about the volume of a cylinder?”

“You find the area of the circle and multiply it by the length,” she said.

Sebastian raised his eyebrows. “Your governess has my deepest respect.”

Rosalind squirmed uncomfortably. “In truth, my governess taught me little more than addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. I learned about area and volume in one of my

father's books in the library.”

He chuckled. “Somehow, that does not surprise me.”

“Yes, but I must have misunderstood something.” She pointed to the calculation she had noticed earlier beside the diagram of the cylinder. “Why is the volume of this cylinder derived from multiplying two numbers with no mention of pi?”

Sebastian looked at the lines of arithmetic above her finger. His brows came together, and his mouth moved as he whispered the calculations aloud. When he reached the total at the end, he flipped the paper over. It was blank.

“No,” he muttered. “It cannot possibly be that simple.” Reaching across the table, he pulled the pile of papers toward him and began riffling through them, finally pulling out a page showing a larger version of the cylinder Rosalind had already seen, but this one was connected to two big cogs.

He studied the page, his forefinger running along the lines of calculations as he read through them. He turned another page. And then another.

“Sebastian? What is it?”

He leaned back in his seat and stared at her. “Unbelievable.”

“What is unbelievable?”

“You are, my incredibly brilliant Rosalind.”

“But I have done nothing.”

“On the contrary, my dear, you have just saved me. And Meikle, come to that.”

If Sebastian did not stop talking in circles, she would go mad. “Please explain,” she said.

“In under a minute, you spotted a rudimentary error in calculating the volume of a cylinder,” he said. “It was so incredibly basic that it has been overlooked for weeks—possibly months.” He shook his head. “I would be willing to bet that Meikle did not even bother to check this page before he sent me all seventy-seven others.”

“You mean to tell me that you have found the problem you’ve been looking for all this time?”

“No, Rosalind.” His eyes met hers, and the very air seemed to still. “You found it.”

Not only was the workshop extremely bad for Rosalind’s heart rate, but her head was also beginning to spin. “So ... so what happens now?”

His gaze flickered to her lips, and he took a short breath. “Now? Now we each eat a Chelsea bun to celebrate.”

“But I have not yet done any arithmetic.”

He drew the plate closer. “I believe you did it while I was asleep.”

Rosalind shook her head. “Not really. You must know that.”

He offered her a bun before claiming one himself and taking a big bite. Chewing slowly, he closed his eyes and uttered an appreciative sound. “Tell me that is not the best thing you have tasted all day.”

She swallowed a piece of sweet, fluffy goodness. “It is most definitely the best thing I have tasted all day.”

“You see?” He opened his eyes. “Further proof that you are a genius.”

“Sebastian.” He was incorrigible. He knew full well that she could not do anything more with the lines and lines of numbers on all those pages.

He laughed. “Very well. After we have eaten, you may help me recalculate the volume of that all-important cylinder. I will need to then redo all the sums that include the incorrect figure.”

“How long will that take?” She tried not to show her dismay. He had been so close to putting the project behind him.

Perhaps he was experiencing similar regret because he stared at the sheets littering the desk and squared his shoulders. “I will have it finished before the courier arrives the

day after tomorrow, if it's the last thing I do.”

\* \* \*

Rosalind stared at the new entries in her diary, a smile playing across her lips. *15. He is willing to teach me arithmetic. 16. He trusts me.* She was not sure which one brought her more joy.

For as long as she could remember, she had secretly envied Jonas his university education. She had known it was something she could never realize, but that had not stopped her from dreaming of sitting in a classroom and learning from the greatest minds in England. Science, engineering, and arithmetic were all considered inappropriate subjects for young ladies to pursue—or even discuss, come to that. But she could not—would not—let that stop her from gleaning what little she could on those topics from books.

She had studied in secret. Not even her father, whose library had provided her with the reading material, had known the full extent of her fascination with numbers. No one had. Until now. Her smile grew. That Sebastian was willing to entertain her unwonted interest was miracle enough; that he wished to assist her in furthering her knowledge was truly marvelous. Indeed, she had been bubbling with happiness ever since they'd determined the correct volume of Mr. Meikle's cylinder together.

Mr. Meikle. Rosalind did not know the man. She would likely never meet him. And she would surely never speak of him with anyone other than Sebastian. But to have Sebastian take her into his confidence regarding his important and confidential work meant more than she could express.

She closed her diary. It was late. Polly had banked the fire almost an hour ago, and the evening chill was settling in. But Rosalind had one more thing to do before she retired. Rising from her place at the writing desk, she took her chair and carried it to the door that connected her chambers to Sebastian's. When it was positioned against the door, she climbed onto it.

Standing on tiptoes, she reached up to touch the top of the doorframe. Almost immediately, her fingers found the key.

Seizing it, she climbed down and unlocked the door. Before she could reconsider her actions, she set the key back on top of the doorframe and returned the chair to its position beside the desk. Lifting the candle, she walked to her bed and studied the closed door from across the room. It looked exactly as it had when she'd locked it a fortnight ago, yet somehow, it felt completely different. Then again, so did she.

## CHAPTER 24

THE NEXT AFTERNOON, ROSALIND WAS sitting in the drawing room alone, reading a book on the development of steam engines that she'd found in the library, when Vickers knocked on the door.

"Forgive the intrusion, Your Grace," he said. "You have some callers."

"Callers?" Sebastian had been in his workshop since breakfast, attempting to beat his self-imposed deadline on the corrections to Mr. Meikle's computations. Protocol dictated that he be here to introduce her to new acquaintances, but she was reluctant to interrupt him. "Who is it, Vickers?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Abernathy, Your Grace." Anticipating her next question, he continued. "Mr. Abernathy is the local clergyman. I believe he and his wife are come to welcome you to the neighborhood."

"How very kind." The prospect of having someone to talk to was welcome. Surely a visit from a minister and his wife might be considered informal enough to bypass the need for Sebastian's presence. They had quite obviously come without calling cards. She tucked her book out of sight behind a pillow. "Please invite them in."

The butler bowed. "Very good, Your Grace."

A few moments later, Vickers returned, a middle-aged couple following behind. He ushered the visitors into the drawing room. "Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Abernathy, Your Grace."

Rosalind stood to greet them. The gentleman's brown hair was thinning. A pair of spectacles sat upon his thin nose, and he wore a somber expression. In contrast, his wife's face was plump, and her gaze darted around the well-appointed room with undisguised curiosity.

"Good day, Your Grace," Mr. Abernathy said, bowing low.

“It is a pleasure to meet you.” At his side, his wife curtsied.

“And I you, Mr. Abernathy. Mrs. Abernathy. Please excuse the duke. I’m afraid he is unavailable at present.” She gestured toward the sofa. “Do take a seat.”

The couple sat across from Rosalind. Mrs. Abernathy fiddled nervously with her reticule and looked to her husband.

He cleared his throat. “May I say how pleased we were to hear of the Duke of Kelbrook’s marriage. Indeed, I believe I can speak for all my parishioners in offering you our congratulations and a warm welcome to the neighborhood.”

“Thank you, Mr. Abernathy. I have not been here long, but already, I have come to appreciate the beauty of this area, and I look forward to getting to know our neighbors.”

“Have no fear, Your Grace,” Mrs. Abernathy said. “The recent inclement weather has kept people shut in their homes, but once word of your arrival reaches them, you will surely receive many visitors and all manner of invitations.”

“Yes, indeed,” her husband concurred. “The Duke of Kelbrook was not in the habit of entertaining callers, you understand, but now that he is married . . .” He perused the room through his spectacles as though to assure himself that Sebastian was truly not there. “Well, I daresay you will be more available to visitors than he has been in the past.”

Rosalind smiled politely. Only a few weeks ago, she would have concurred wholeheartedly with the minister’s observation, but now she found herself battling an unexpected wave of defensiveness. If Sebastian chose to help produce new inventions or assist a tenant in repairing a roof over chitchatting in the drawing room with a cup of tea, so much the better. “The Duke of Kelbrook’s work demands a great deal of his time,” she said.

“Of course.” Mr. Abernathy’s voice was ingratiating. “He is a very busy gentleman.”

The memory of Sebastian’s exhausted state at the breakfast table the day before entered her mind. “Yes. He is.” It was time to change the subject. “Tell me, where exactly do you



live?”

“At the rectory in the village,” Mrs. Abernathy said. “Have you visited Aylesbury yet?”

“I have not. Perhaps if the weather stays dry, I could make an excursion there in the next few days.”

“The village is small, but the haberdashery shop is well stocked, and I have yet to meet a more congenial butcher than Mr. Hatch.”

“And the church has a rather spectacular stained glass window,” Mr. Abernathy added.

“Oh yes,” Mrs. Abernathy gushed. “It’s quite the loveliest I’ve seen—outside of the one at Guildford Cathedral, of course.”

“Then I shall be sure to pay it particular attention when I am there,” Rosalind said.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Vickers slip into the room. He stood silently near the door, a silver salver in hand. When he saw that he had Rosalind’s attention, he bowed. “I beg your pardon, Your Grace, you have more callers.”

Rosalind attempted to tamp down her anxiety. It appeared that there were three calling cards on the salver. She could not very well turn anyone away with Mr. and Mrs. Abernathy watching, yet to entertain a room full of people without a formal introduction from her husband was extremely bad form.

“One of the gentlemen claims a prior acquaintance with you,” Vickers said, offering her the salver.

Rosalind took the calling cards, silently praying for a lifeline as she read the names one by one. *Mr. Theodore Fairfield. Mrs. Amelia Fairfield. Mr. Nigel Sellers.* Her mouth went dry. Heaven help her. Why could it not have been Jonas who had come? Or even Lord Bloxley? Mr. Sellers was no lifeline. In fact, if his interaction with Sebastian the last time they’d been together were anything to go by, he was quite the opposite.

Aware of Mr. and Mrs. Abernathy's gaze upon her, she swallowed hard and raised her head. "How nice to have so many visitors. Please invite them to join us."

"Very good, Your Grace." He hesitated. "Perhaps you would also like me to arrange for some tea to be brought in?"

She did not particularly wish to lengthen this torture, but he was right. It was the polite thing to do. And if her guests enjoyed their tea, they might be willing to overlook the awkwardness of the entire situation. "That would be lovely," she said.

"I shall see to it right away." He bowed, and his voice lowered to a whisper. "I shall also get word to the workshop."

Rosalind's breath caught. She met his eyes. He gave a surreptitious nod, and hope rose in her chest. "Thank you, Vickers."

\* \* \*

Sebastian rolled his shoulders. He ached from sitting at his desk for hours, and his hand was cramping from holding his quill. He set the utensil down, noting that his fingers were stained with black ink. It was unfortunate but a small price to pay for completing the corrections to Meikle's computations at such a feverish pace. And at this point, finishing quickly was all that mattered. He shook his head slightly. When had the gentleman who preferred to be in a workshop on his own become someone who was all but pining to be anywhere else with Rosalind?

A knock sounded at the door. For one foolish moment, he wondered if thoughts of his wife had somehow summoned her.

"Come in," he called.

The door opened.

"Good day, Your Grace." It was not Rosalind but Vickers who stepped inside. "I apologize for disturbing you, but your presence is needed in the drawing room."

Needed not requested. Sebastian pushed back his chair, rising to his feet immediately. "Is something amiss? Is the

duchess unwell?”

“When last I saw her, she appeared perfectly healthy.”

“You are sure?” Sebastian was already shrugging his arms into the jacket he had discarded hours ago.

“Yes, Your Grace. She has just requested tea for her guests.”

Sebastian froze. “We have guests?”

“Mr. and Mrs. Abernathy arrived about half an hour ago. Not wanting to interrupt your work, Her Grace agreed to entertain them herself.”

“But they have not been introduced.”

“So I gather.”

Sebastian groaned. “Is Mr. Abernathy looking down his long nose at her for such a misstep?”

“On the contrary. I received the distinct impression that Her Grace was holding her own remarkably well.”

He should not have been surprised. Of course Rosalind would entertain the persnickety minister with the poise of an experienced hostess. He moved to stand beside the window, attempting to use the reflection in the glass to straighten his cravat. “And yet she asked for me?”

“I confess, I took it upon myself to make the request.” Vickers stood his ground as only a trusted butler could do. “A second set of guests has arrived, and one member of the party is a Mr. Nigel Sellers.”

Sebastian swung around. “Sellers is here?”

“He is.”

His cravat forgotten, Sebastian crossed the room in rapid strides. “Where is he now?”

“He and Mr. and Mrs. Fairbanks are in the entrance hall, awaiting my return. I have informed Her Grace of their arrival. She is expecting them to join her and the Abernathys in the drawing room.”

The Fairbanks must be the relations Sellers had mentioned

in his letter to Rosalind. Mr. Theodore Fairbanks owned a modest estate not more than five miles from Finley Park, and since their arrival in the neighborhood some ten years ago, he had garnered a reputation as one of the most avid hunters in the district. Sebastian had seen the gentleman and his wife only a handful of times since his parents' deaths, but they had always exchanged cordial greetings, and he should not be surprised that they had come to welcome his new bride. That they had come so soon after Rosalind's arrival at Finley Park, however, was more than likely due to the urging of their houseguest.

"Thank you, Vickers. I shall join Her Grace directly, but if you would be so good as to take your time returning to the entrance hall, the extra few minutes would be appreciated."

Vickers gave him a knowing look. "With your permission, I shall send word to the kitchen to have tea brought up before I usher your newly arrived guests into the drawing room."

"Permission granted," Sebastian said.

He exited the workshop, and Vickers followed. Locking the door behind him, Sebastian pocketed the key and made directly for the drawing room. The door was open. He paused in the passage to adjust the lace at his sleeves, and then squaring his shoulders, he took a deep breath and entered the fray.

Rosalind saw him the moment he walked in. Her look of relief was almost instantly masked by her welcoming smile. She stood as he approached. Across from her, Mr. and Mrs. Abernathy did the same.

"Your Grace." The minister bowed. At his side, his wife bobbed a curtsy.

"Good day, Mr. Abernathy. Mrs. Abernathy. Forgive me for not being here to greet you when you arrived. I had hoped to have the pleasure of introducing you to my wife, but I was unavoidably detained by a pressing matter of business."

"So I understand," Mr. Abernathy said. "Her Grace was just now telling us how very busy you are."

The minister's comment seemed innocent enough, but Sebastian could not shake the feeling that it contained a hidden rebuke. Before he could respond, however, Vickers appeared at the door.

"Mr. Theodore Fairfield, Mrs. Amelia Fairfield, and Mr. Nigel Sellers," he announced.

Sebastian turned his attention to their new visitors. Mr. Fairfield stepped forward to greet him, a wide smile on his face. He was as portly and jovial as Sebastian remembered. Mrs. Fairfield's graying hair aged her, but her eyes sparkled with undisguised excitement as she surveyed the drawing room and its occupants. Behind her, Mr. Sellers looked particularly dashing in his dark-green jacket and breeches paired with an extravagant lace cravat.

Forcing a smile, Sebastian made the necessary introductions and then clasped his hands behind his back so as to prevent himself from tugging at his own limp cravat. He took a step closer to Rosalind. Unfortunately, he did not move quite fast enough to evade Mrs. Fairfield.

"Oh, Your Grace, what a marvelous vase!"

At Mrs. Fairfield's enthusiastic outburst, Mrs. Abernathy joined in. "I was just thinking the very same." The ladies moved closer to the decorative piece positioned on the table near the window. "Do tell us where it came from."

"China, I believe," Sebastian said, obliged to turn away from Rosalind to respond politely.

Mrs. Fairfield gasped. "I have never seen Ming porcelain before, but I've heard tell of its beauty."

"Is it truly Ming?" Mrs. Abernathy was agog.

"My mother purchased it many years ago," Sebastian said. "I seem to recall her saying that it was a Ming dynasty piece."

Mrs. Fairfield placed her hand to her heart. "Your mother, may God rest her soul, was the most refined of women. It does not surprise me in the least that she would own something so exquisite. Why, the Finley Park ballroom alone is so elegant it is quite beyond description."

“Is it really?” Mrs. Abernathy’s wonder held no bounds.

“Oh yes, indeed.” Mrs. Fairfield turned to Sebastian. “If it is not too great an imposition, Your Grace, perhaps Mrs. Abernathy might see the ballroom before she leaves today.”

Behind him, Sebastian heard Mr. Sellers speak and Rosalind’s soft reply. Blast it all. He needed a graceful way out of this inane conversation, and he needed it right away. “By all means,” he said. “I believe the duchess has requested that tea be brought in. Afterward, any who are interested may see the ballroom.”

Mrs. Fairfield beamed, and Mrs. Abernathy squeaked. The sound was not quite loud enough to be a squeal, but he assumed it was meant to convey delight.

He was not of a mind to wait to find out. “If you would excuse me, ladies, I will leave you both to admire the vase.”

To his relief they seemed quite content. He turned. Mr. Abernathy was standing beside Mr. Fairfield and was in the midst of a lengthy monologue. Sebastian caught references to all the rain, the damage done by the swollen river in the village, and Noah’s ark. Mr. Fairfield gave the appearance of listening intently, even going as far as to nod and murmur his agreement occasionally. Mr. Sellers’s attention, however, was directed elsewhere. He was at Rosalind’s side, maintaining another conversation entirely.

Sebastian crossed the distance between them in eight strides. Rosalind saw him coming and offered him a strained smile. His heart lifted. Mr. Sellers may be handsome and charming, but he did not know Rosalind well. If he did, he would recognize that smile as her please-let-this-be-over-soon look. Sebastian had seen it when she’d danced with a gentleman who’d been too far in his cups at the Marlboroughs’ ball and again when he’d walked in on Mrs. Frost reviewing the price of meat at the butcher’s shop with her.

“Good day, Kelbrook.” Sellers cut short his conversation with Rosalind to greet him.

Sebastian was not sure the gentleman was a close enough

associate to address him in such a way, but he inclined his head. "I had not thought to see you again so soon, Sellers."

"It was most fortunate that my aunt and uncle invited me to visit and that they live so close to Finley Park."

Sebastian could not help but wonder if scheming had more to do with it than fortune, but he played along. "Fortunate, indeed. Have you visited them in Surrey before?"

"Once or twice. When I was quite young." He shifted his feet. "I was long overdue for a trip this way."

"I see."

In the awkward pause that hung over them, the distinctive clink of china announced the arrival of their tea. Rosalind took control of the situation immediately, directing Marcus on where to set the tray.

"Please, be seated," she told their guests. "You must all have a cup of tea and try one of Cook's marvelous biscuits."

Sebastian waited until Mrs. Abernathy and Mrs. Fairfield took their places on the sofa before claiming the chair beside Rosalind. Mr. Sellers positioned himself directly across from her.

"Tell me, Your Grace," Sellers said as Rosalind began pouring the tea, "have you heard from any of your friends since removing from London? Miss Spencer or Miss Fotheringham, perhaps?"

"I cannot say that I have," Rosalind said, passing Mrs. Fairfield her cup and saucer.

"I ask because you likely have not heard that Miss Spencer slipped and twisted her ankle quite badly."

"I am sorry to hear it." Rosalind passed a cup to Mrs. Abernathy.

Sellers launched into a detailed account of Miss Spencer's situation and the many mutual acquaintances who had visited her while she recovered. Within seconds, Mrs. Fairfield had engaged Mr. and Mrs. Abernathy in another conversation, one that involved people they knew. Sebastian leaned back in his

chair and watched. He had to give Sellers his dues. In a room full of people, the gentleman had successfully singled out Rosalind as the only one able to participate in the discussion. Of course, he likely had not counted upon Sebastian noticing and outmaneuvering him.

Sebastian waited until Rosalind had her own cup of tea and had repeated her regret over Miss Spencer's accident for the third time before he engaged Mr. Fairfield. "Tell me, Mr. Fairfield, did Mr. Sellers drive his new phaeton to Surrey? When I caught sight of it in London, it appeared to be a very fine vehicle. Outclassed only by the pair of bays pulling it."

"Indeed, he did not." Mr. Fairfield turned to Sellers. "Why did you not tell me you have acquired a set of matching bays, Nigel? You know full well how enthusiastic I am about well-bred horseflesh."

"The bays are no hunters, Uncle," Sellers said. "Besides, I no longer own them."

"That is completely beside the point. A fine horse is a fine horse." He swung around so that he could give Sellers his full attention. "Tell me about them. Furthermore, tell me why they are no longer yours."

His task accomplished, Sebastian leaned toward Rosalind and lowered his voice. "I would have come sooner had I known."

She set her teacup on her saucer and met his eyes. "It is enough that you are here now," she replied softly.



## CHAPTER 25

“OH MY!” MRS. ABERNATHY TURNED in a slow circle, viewing the Finley Park ballroom from all directions. Her hands were clasped at her breast, and her awed voice echoed through the vast room.

Rosalind understood completely. Although she had returned to admire the ballroom a couple of times since her initial visit with Sebastian, her wonder over the room’s art and architecture had yet to dim.

“Is it not the most magnificent room, Mrs. Abernathy?” Mrs. Fairfield was standing a few feet from Mrs. Abernathy, her head back, staring at the mural on the ceiling.

“I cannot imagine anything finer,” Mrs. Abernathy enthused. “Do you not agree, Mr. Abernathy?”

The minister remained near the doors, standing beside Mr. Fairfield and Sebastian, but he responded to his wife’s eager question with a staid nod. “It does not hold the majesty of the great cathedrals, of course, but it is very fine.”

Rosalind bit her lip to prevent her smile from growing. The minister’s somber blend of politeness and piety seemed all the more stilted when compared to his wife’s rapturous delight. Rosalind glanced at Sebastian. His wink was so subtle she wondered if she’d imagined it. But her heart registered the intimate gesture and quickened its beat regardless.

“Rather appropriate, I would say.” Mr. Sellers’s voice jarred her back to reality. The gentleman was standing too close again.

“Appropriate?” She shifted to her left to put more space between them.

“Absolutely. London’s belle of the ball marries a gentleman with a ballroom such as this.”

If he had intended to issue a compliment, he’d missed the mark. The poorly veiled jab was only marginally less insulting

than the one he'd issued in London, accusing her of marrying for a title.

"There is virtually no end to the stunning rooms at Finley Park, Mr. Sellers." She met his look and raised an eyebrow. "Why limit my good fortune to the ballroom?"

His smile held no warmth. "Why indeed? Which of the other rooms are your personal favorites, Your Grace?"

Goading him had been a mistake; it had only extended their distasteful conversation.

"The library is quite remarkable," she said.

"So I imagine. Is that also the duke's preferred room?"

"No. I believe that would be his workshop."

The moment the words left her mouth, Rosalind knew she had made a grievous mistake.

"His workshop, you say? And what, pray tell, would compel him to spend time in a workshop when he could be enjoying the company of his beautiful new wife?"

"That, I could not tell you," Rosalind said. It was true. She could not tell him—even though she knew full well.

"Then, perhaps we should find out."

All at once, Mr. Sellers had gone from being an irritating blue bottle fly incessantly buzzing around her to a cunning fox with conspiracy in his eyes.

"I think not, Mr. Sellers."

"Come now, Your Grace. Surely you own a small portion of curiosity." His wheedling tone reminded her of their conversation at the Marlboroughs' ball when he had encouraged her there to coax information out of Sebastian.

"Apparently not." She took another step away from him. "The duke's workshop is his own domain. It is on the other side of the house and is securely locked. There is no reason whatsoever for anyone else to go there."

"Locked, is it?" Mr. Sellers's eyes narrowed. "Well, that

makes it all the more intriguing. Particularly as the duke's ink-stained fingers suggest that he has been doing rather a lot of writing."

Rosalind fought to keep her composure. "Mr. Sellers, might I remind you that you are speaking of my husband."

Instantly, his countenance changed and his charm returned. "Come now, Your Grace. We have been friends for a considerable length of time, whereas you have known the Duke of Kelbrook for—"

"Approximately ten years." Sebastian arrived beside her, and there was no mistaking the steel in his voice.

Mr. Sellers raised an eyebrow. "Really? I had no idea. And I am quite sure that no one else of any consequence in Society does either."

On the other side of the ballroom, the Abernathys and Fairfields were casually discussing the architectural value of pillars; beside Rosalind, Sebastian stood facing Mr. Sellers with his hands clenched.

"That is unfortunate for them, but of little import to me, Sellers," Sebastian said.

"Perhaps not. But have you stopped to consider whether it is of significance to your wife?"

Rosalind could feel the tension radiating off Sebastian. She moved her arm slightly so that she might touch his hand. "You forget yourself, Mr. Sellers. You are speaking to the Duke of Kelbrook. Quite apart from the title he holds, his reputation as an honorable gentleman precedes him. I defy you to discover one young lady in all of England who would not feel honored to be his bride."

Sebastian's fist unfurled, and he slipped his fingers between hers. A new sense of unity thrummed between them. Whether Mr. Sellers noticed, Rosalind could not tell, but the gentleman set his jaw and took a step back.

"Forgive me," he said. "I was evidently mistaken in my understanding of your situation."

“Clearly.” Sebastian ground out the word. “Now that you are better informed, however, I trust that you will not make the same error again.”

Mr. Sellers bowed stiffly. “As you say, Your Grace.”

Rosalind was quite sure that Sebastian had not missed Mr. Sellers’s patronizing tone or the gentleman’s return to calling Sebastian by his more formal appellation. But before either of them could say anything more, the other members of the party joined them, having completed their circuit of the ballroom.

“Many thanks, Your Grace,” Mrs. Fairfield said. “When we set off for Finley Park today, I had not anticipated this treat.”

“Yes, indeed.” Mrs. Abernathy was quick to agree. “I shall be thinking on this beautiful room for some time.”

“Then you will be pleased to hear that Her Grace and I intend to host at least one ball here next year,” Sebastian said.

The ladies gasped with delight; their husbands offered murmured words of approval. Rosalind did not look to see what Mr. Sellers’s reaction might be. She simply held Sebastian’s hand a little tighter.

\* \* \*

Sebastian stood in the entrance hall, watching Vickers return hats, gloves, and coats to their guests. A few more minutes. That was all he need endure before Mr. Sellers was off his property. He considered it a major accomplishment that he had maintained relatively civil conversation with the gentleman for going on an hour. Repeatedly having to break up his attempted tête-à-têtes with Rosalind had been infuriating. The final one in the ballroom had almost brought an end to Sebastian’s self-imposed courtesy. If it hadn’t been for Rosalind ... His heart lifted. Did she have any idea how much the feel of her hand in his had meant to him?

He looked at her. She was saying something to Mrs. Abernathy and Mrs. Fairfield. The two ladies responded with smiles, quite obviously fully taken with the new Duchess of Kelbrook. How could they not be? Rosalind was the perfect hostess.

“It was very nice to see you again, Your Grace,” Mr. Fairfield said. “Be sure to send word if you have any interest in joining this year’s hunt.”

“I will, sir,” Sebastian said.

“Very good.” He moved to take his wife’s arm. “I believe we are ready, Nigel.”

Sellers stepped forward from the other side of the wide hall. Why he had chosen to wait beside the entrance to the east wing, Sebastian could not tell, but Sebastian had been more than happy to see him remain some distance from Rosalind.

“Good day, Your Grace.” Sellers inclined his head but did not meet Sebastian’s eyes.

“And to you,” Sebastian replied.

Sellers repeated the gesture with Rosalind before following the Fairfields and Abernathys out of the house.

Vickers closed the door behind them, and Sebastian released a sigh of relief. Somewhat to his surprise, he was not the only one. With a moan, Rosalind leaned against the wall and closed her eyes.

“Vickers, please tell me the Fairfields’ carriage and the Abernathys’ pony cart are well on their way up the drive,” she said.

The obedient butler moved to the window and peered outside. “They are, Your Grace.”

“Thank goodness.” She opened her eyes and looked directly at Sebastian. “If today’s entertaining was any indication of what is to come, I respectfully request a spot on one of the armchairs in your workshop so that I may be unavailable whenever you are.”

He grinned. “That is the best suggestion I have heard in a long time.”

She pushed herself off the wall and crossed the short distance between them. “Is that a yes?” she asked, coming to stand in front of him.

“Most definitely,” he said. He was unprepared for the unqualified delight in her eyes.

“Thank you.”

“You are very welcome. But I thought you enjoyed having visitors and attending social functions.”

“I do. Most of the time.” She looked back at the closed door. “But sometimes, it can be a bit much.”

That was describing today’s interactions somewhat mildly, but he was happy to agree. “Yes, it can.”

“Pardon me, Your Grace.” Vickers was still standing at the window. “It appears that a vehicle is approaching the house ... and it seems to be moving rather rapidly.”

Sebastian ran his fingers through his hair. Dash it all! If the Abernathys or Fairfields were returning, he would take Rosalind to the workshop right now. “Can you tell who it is?”

“No, Your Grace. It appears to be a cart and horse, and the driver is dressed in the clothing of a laborer.”

Sebastian frowned and walked over to one of the other windows in time to see the cart arrive in front of the house with a clatter of hooves and a spray of gravel. A middle-aged man jumped off the driver’s seat and hurried up the stairs leading to the door. Moments later, a knock sounded.

Moving to stand beside Rosalind again, Sebastian waited for Vickers to answer the door.

“Is the master about?” The man was breathless.

“Your name?” Vickers said.

“Greenwald. Bill Greenwald.”

“And may I ask why you wish to speak with the Duke of Kelbrook, Mr. Greenwald?” Vickers asked.

“There’s been an accident.”

Sebastian did not wait to hear more. “Let him in, Vickers.”

The butler opened the door wide and admitted the man. He stood in the entrance hall, wringing his cloth cap in his hands.

“Good day, Yer Grace,” he said, bowing. “Me name’s Bill Greenwald. I’m from over Guildford way, but I’ve been at the Becketts’ place, puttin’ new tile on the cottage roof.”

The roofer. That explained why the man was so wholly unfamiliar.

“You say there’s been an accident?”

“Yes, Yer Grace,” Greenwald said. “I was on the roof when the lady who’d come to visit Mrs. Beckett left the ’ouse. She were in a bit of a rush, but I didn’t think nothin’ of it. None of my business, see.” He swallowed. “It weren’t until I spotted Mr. Beckett comin’ across the field, runnin’ like ’is life depended on it that I figured somethin’ was wrong.”

Sellers had already pushed Sebastian’s patience dangerously close to its limit. If the roofer didn’t come to the point soon, Sebastian would lose what little patience he had left. “What exactly was the problem?”

“The baby was comin’. Right then. Mrs. Tucker stopped by to see Mrs. Beckett on ’er way ’ome from the market and found ’er in a state where she needed the midwife right away.” He glanced at Rosalind, and his cheeks reddened. “I reckon Mrs. Beckett’s pains were bad enough that Mrs. Tucker decided there was no time to go fer the midwife, ’cause she set off fer the big ’ouse instead.”

Sebastian stared at him, the first hint of dread entering his chest. No matter the urgency, surely Mrs. Tucker would not have been foolish enough to cross the bridge. Not with the river running as high as it was presently.

“We have not seen her, Mr. Greenwald,” Rosalind said, joining the conversation for the first time.

“No, Yer Grace. She got stopped on the bridge. Mr. Beckett ’eard the wood crack an’ Mrs. Tucker’s scream from where ’e was workin’ in the pasture and raced over there. ’E says part of the deck’s missin’ and Mrs. Tucker’s ’anging on to the post underneath.”

Sebastian could imagine the nightmarish scene all too well. “Is Mr. Beckett with her now?”

“That’s just it, Yer Grace. Seein’ as ’ow Mr. Beckett’s ’elped bring so many lambs into the world, Mrs. Tucker shouted at ’im to get ’ome t’ be with Mrs. Beckett. ’E’s deliverin’ the babe as we speak, and ’e sent me ’ere to get ’elp fer Mrs. Tucker.”

Refusing to contemplate what may have happened to Mrs. Tucker during the time it had taken David Beckett to reach the cottage and Mr. Greenwald to arrive at the manor, Sebastian focused his attention on what must be done now. “Send word to the stables, Vickers!” he said. “I want the cart, ropes, blankets, and half a dozen strong men sent to the bridge directly. Have Wesley saddle my horse and send a footman to inform Grayson of what has happened. Grayson is to go to the Tuckers’ home and have Mr. Tucker join us at the bridge.”

“Right away, Your Grace.”

Vickers’s clipped footsteps crossed the hall, and he disappeared through the servants’ entrance.

“We could use your assistance, Mr. Greenwald,” Sebastian said.

The roofer didn’t hesitate. “Of course, Yer Grace.”

“Sebastian.” Rosalind’s eyes shone with concern. “What can I do?”

He pressed a brief kiss to her forehead. “Pray that we reach her in time,” he said.

She nodded, and without another word, he led Mr. Greenwald outside.



## CHAPTER 26

ROSALIND STOOD AT THE WINDOW, watching the cart full of men roll down the drive at breakneck speed. Mr. Greenwald's cart was just ahead of them. Sebastian and Dawson had left on horseback and were now out of sight. She had already offered up multiple silent, heartfelt prayers for the safety of all involved, but there had to be something more she could do. If not for the poor woman in peril, then for her family.

Vickers's measured tread on the entrance hall tile announced his return.

Rosalind swung around to face him. "Tell me about Mrs. Tucker," she said. Learning more about the woman might make the situation more difficult, but she needed to know.

"She and her husband have been His Grace's tenants for decades," Vickers said. "She's a good woman, always ready to help a neighbor in need."

"Does she have children of her own?"

"Yes, Your Grace. Two girls and a boy. But they're all grown and gone now."

Rosalind clasped her hands together tightly as the chilling reality of Vickers's description settled upon her. Mrs. Tucker was surely closer to Rosalind's mother's age than her own.

"Is she strong enough to withstand this ordeal?"

A worried line creased Vickers's forehead. "She's a small woman, Your Grace. Slightly built. But to the best of my knowledge, she is healthy."

A vision of the dark crack she'd seen running down the wooden pier filled her mind. She had no way of knowing what part of the bridge had given way under Mrs. Tucker, but if any portion of it had collapsed under the weight of a small woman, what would occur if a larger, heavier man were to attempt to reach her?

The memory of Sebastian's recent orders filled her mind, and Rosalind's head began to pound. He had specifically requested strong men for Mrs. Tucker's rescue. Nothing more than rudimentary arithmetic was needed for this equation. If the weight of a small woman had been sufficient to cause the bridge to break, there would not be a single man—Sebastian included—who was light enough to cross the rotting wood without more of it giving away.

Panic tightened her throat. She needed a horse. There was no time to wait for Vickers to get word to the stables or for her to change into a riding habit. If she was to catch Sebastian before any of the men set foot on that bridge, she needed to leave right away.

Hurrying to the door, she yanked it open.

The butler offered her a startled look and stepped forward. "May I assist you, Your Grace?"

A gust of cold air swirled around her ankles. She glanced outside. Tree limbs were shaking, and dark clouds were rolling in from the west. Another storm was coming.

"I must go after the duke," she said.

"Are you sure that is wise, Your Grace?" Vickers's expression of genuine concern made allowance for his unsolicited question.

"This has nothing to do with wisdom and everything to do with saving lives," she said, relinquishing the door to him and stepping outside.

The breeze tugged at her hair and gown. At her left, one of the lanterns hanging at the side of the front doors shifted, scraping against the stone wall. Rosalind hesitated. Sebastian had not requested that any form of light be loaded into the carts. If the skies continued to darken or if the rescue went into the evening, they might be needed. Riding at a gallop would make carrying one difficult, but if she wrapped it in her skirts, she could probably manage.

"I am going for Belle," she told Vickers. "If Wesley is in the stables, I shall be in the saddle in under three minutes. Please

have one of these lanterns and a flint ready for me. I shall stop for them on my way.”

Vickers obediently reached for the lantern. Rosalind raised her hem a fraction and ran down the portico stairs. Barely pausing when she reached the gravel drive, she continued running all the way to the stables.

\* \* \*

“Over there, Your Grace.” Galloping across the pasture at Sebastian’s side, Dawson pointed to the distant break in the hazel and blackberry bushes.

Sebastian nodded. Any moment now, he would be offered his first view of the bridge. Or what was left of it.

Bracing himself for the worst, he guided Tempest toward the gap in the hedgerow before reining him to a halt. Thunder rolled overhead and the horse tossed his head anxiously.

“Steady, boy.”

Sebastian gave his mount a reassuring pat before leaping from the saddle and running to the other side of the hedgerow.

The bridge was still standing. Near the center of the structure, a portion of the railing was missing and a large hole gaped menacingly on the decking. Sebastian’s stomach clenched. Mr. Greenwald had said that Mrs. Tucker had been clinging to a pole when David had seen her. Was it possible that she’d been unable to maintain her grip and had been washed away? With the current this strong, there was no telling how far downstream she would go or how long she might manage to stay afloat.

Dawson joined him. “Do you see her?”

A single raindrop landed on Sebastian’s cheek. Another roll of thunder followed. He crouched to view the bridge from underneath. A brief glance confirmed that the crack in the closest pier had widened. Given the volume of water and debris rushing downstream, it was a miracle it had not given way completely. His gaze followed the length of the bridge, focusing on the pier standing immediately below the hole on the deck. The flutter of fabric caught his eye. He shifted

farther to his left, straining to identify the shadowy shape immediately below the deck.

“Help!” A faint voice reached him on the wind. “Please help me!”

“Did you hear that?” Sebastian asked.

One look at his head groom’s face told Sebastian that he hadn’t imagined the cry.

“Praise the heavens,” Dawson said, squatting with Sebastian to study the bridge from beneath. “Where is she?”

“The third pier over. Wedged up against the pier cap.”

Dawson’s gaze fixed on the distant figure, and his jaw tightened. “Any ideas, Your Grace?”

“We’re going to need the ropes in the cart,” he said. “Although, I have yet to determine the best means of getting one to her.”

“I reckon it’s going to take a man or two crawling out there,” Dawson said. “It’s the only way to get a rope out that far, and it’s unlikely that Mrs. Tucker has the strength remaining to pull herself to safety.”

Dawson was right, of course, especially now that the rain was falling in earnest. Already, dark splotches covered the faded wood of the deck. It would not be long before it would be slippery.

“The entire bridge could give way at any time,” Sebastian said. “Whoever goes out there will have to be attached by rope to a couple of men on shore.”

“Agreed,” Dawson said. “And the faster we get out there, the better. This blowin’ rain’s not goin’ to help anyone. Least of all Mrs. Tucker.”

More shouts reached them. This time, male voices. Sebastian turned to see his servants running toward them from the cart, ropes slung over their shoulders.

“Put the heaviest men on anchor, Dawson,” he said. “I’ll go out on one rope. I’d like a volunteer for the second, but he has

to be made aware of the risks involved first.”

“I’ll go, Your Grace.”

Sebastian eyed him sternly. “I won’t have you feeling pressure to do this, Dawson.”

“Understood.”

Sebastian waited a moment, but when Dawson offered him nothing further, he gave a grateful nod. “Organize the men. We have no time to lose.”

\* \* \*

The rain was impairing her vision. Rosalind released the reins with one hand just long enough to swipe her dripping hair from her eyes. Perhaps it would have been wiser to have had Vickers pass her a hat and cloak rather than the lantern and flint.

A stone cottage appeared at the side of the road up ahead. The Becketts’ house. Surely that meant she was close. When she and Sebastian had stood near the bridge at Finley Park, he’d pointed out the roof of the shepherd’s house. It had been on the rise immediately above the river.

Slowing Belle’s pace slightly, she scoured the hedgerow for any sign of an entrance into the field. Not too far distant, cart-wheel tracks veered off the muddy road. Rosalind followed them. A wooden gate stood recessed between two thick hedges. Leaning over as far as she could go, she reached for the latch. Her fingertips brushed it. Belle skittered sideways, and the latch slipped away.

“No,” Rosalind cried.

She urged Belle back to the gate. If she was forced to dismount to open the latch, it would be almost impossible for her to regain her saddle alone.

Her leg brushed the wooden slat, and she reached down again. This time, she managed to slide her fingers beneath the latch. Pushing upward, she raised the bar. The moment it swung free, she pushed the gate open. A quick glance at the field showed no sign of sheep nearby. Offering a muttered

apology to Mr. Beckett if her negligence in leaving the gate open caused any of his flock to wander off, she touched her heels to Belle's side and flew down the hill toward the cluster of men gathered just beyond the two carts parked beside the hedgerow.

There was a crack of breaking wood, followed by a shout. Two men darted out of sight around the bushes. With her heart beating in time to Belle's pounding hooves, Rosalind raced down the lower portion of the hill.

"Stop!" she cried, pulling her mount to a halt just beyond the second cart.

A burly man she'd seen working in the garden at Finley Park swung around. His large hands were wrapped around a rope tied to his waist, and when he caught sight of her, his eyes widened.

"Marcus!" he yelled. "Tell His Grace that Her Grace has come."

The wind cut his words into fragments and blew them away, but Marcus must have been close enough to hear. The redheaded footman released the same rope the gardener was holding and darted toward the bridge. Dropping Belle's straps, Rosalind tossed back her skirts from around the lantern and flint. She grasped the lantern by its hook and slid out of the saddle. Stumbling to her feet, she ran toward the opening in the hedge. "Sebastian!"

Mr. Greenwald saw her coming and extended his arm to stop her.

"Steady, Yer Grace. The banks are right slippery."

"I heard the wood crack." She searched the men standing in front of her for Sebastian. "Where is His Grace?"

"E's on the bridge," Mr. Greenwald said. "'Elping Mr. Dawson."

Rosalind placed one hand to her wet throat. "Dawson? What of Mrs. Tucker?"

"She's still out there, on the post underneath the big 'ole. 'Is

Grace and Mr. Dawson were tryin' to reach 'er when Mr. Dawson's foot went through one o' the other boards."

The men standing at the start of the bridge moved aside as Sebastian and a second man, whom Rosalind recognized as another Finley Park footman, assisted Mr. Dawson off the bridge and onto the ground.

Sebastian tossed the rope tied around his waist out of his way and knelt down beside Mr. Dawson. "How bad is it?" he asked.

The head groom straightened his leg. Blood soaked his breeches, but he shook his head. "I've seen enough horses with fractured legs in my time to know that it's not broken." He raised his leg and lowered it again. "The splintered wood cut the skin, but it's nothin' that one of Mrs. Frost's salves can't fix."

Sebastian's expression was grim. "I certainly hope so." He glanced at the men standing closest to him. "You've now all witnessed how dangerous it is to attempt to cross this bridge, but we must do all in our power to rescue Mrs. Tucker. I am loath to ask, but is there anyone else willing to give it a try?"

"It must be me." Rosalind stepped forward.

Sebastian was on his feet in an instant. "Rosalind! What are you doing here?"

Shock, followed by displeasure, and then alarm flitted across Sebastian's drawn face before he settled on deep concern.

"It must be me," she repeated. "I realized it as soon as Vickers informed me of Mrs. Tucker's small stature. The only hope you have of reaching her without any more of the bridge disintegrating is for someone of similar weight to attempt it."

"You cannot be serious." If possible, Sebastian's face had become even more haggard.

"Completely." She pointed to the heavy rope at his feet. "Tie that around me. Not only will I be less weight on the rotting boards, but I will be easier for your men to pull in should the need arise."

Sebastian shook his head. "I cannot allow this, Rosalind."

She took his wet hand. "You are an engineer, so you know this is our best chance of reaching Mrs. Tucker before it is too late."

The burly gardener stepped up. "Let me anchor the duchess, Your Grace. I'll not let her fall."

"Help me! Please help me!" Mrs. Tucker's faint plea was like an echo in the wind.

"There is no time to debate the matter, Sebastian," Rosalind said. "Tell me what I must do."



## CHAPTER 27

ROSALIND SET ONE FOOT ON the plank before her and pressed down. It held. She shifted her weight, repeating the now-familiar procedure with her other foot before pausing again. She was so close. Three more steps would take her to the edge of the gaping hole. She glanced over her shoulder. Sebastian was standing about ten paces behind her, straddling two boards so as to disperse his weight. He'd insisted on following after her until they reached the broken boards.

"Now, Rosalind," he shouted.

She nodded. Drawing one of the two ropes tied around her waist over her head, she lowered herself to her hands and knees. She clutched the wet rope in one hand and crawled forward until she was close enough to the hole to look down upon the raging river below. Dropping to her stomach, she squirmed closer to the edge. A board creaked. She froze. "Mrs. Tucker?"

"Here! I'm down here!" The older lady's answer ended with a sob.

Grasping the ragged end of the nearest board, Rosalind shifted to her right, and Mrs. Tucker came into view. She was perched on the narrow lip of the pier cap, her arms wrapped around the pillar. Her bonnet, held on by the ribbons around her neck, lay against her shoulders. A corner of her shawl was pinched between her body and the pier; the remaining portion was flapping wildly in the wind. And no matter the partial covering of the bridge overhead, she was wet and shivering with cold.

"I have a rope," Rosalind called down to her. "There are men on shore ready to pull you up."

"If I let go, I shall fall," Mrs. Tucker cried.

"One hand, Mrs. Tucker. That is all you need to seize the rope." Rosalind began feeding the thick cord through the hole.

“I cannot ... I cannot ...” Mrs. Tucker was openly weeping now.

Lowering her arms into the opening, Rosalind swung the rope toward the pier. It hit the wooden pillar. Mrs. Tucker cried out, and the rope fell back.

“Try again, Mrs. Tucker!”

The older lady pressed her cheek to the pier, clinging to it as her shoulders shook with sobs. The rope swung past her arm before the wind caught it and tossed it aside. Rosalind tried once more. Still, Mrs. Tucker did not reach for the rope.

Disappointment and desperation swelled within Rosalind. Her arms ached. Jagged edges of the planks pressed against her skin, and she was beginning to shiver from the cold. She lowered her forehead to the deck and took two deep breaths. She could do this. Mrs. Tucker could do this. They could not have come this far only to fail.

Raindrops trickled down Rosalind’s face. She raised her head and squirmed a little closer to the opening, then began swinging the rope again.

“Listen to my counting, Mrs. Tucker,” she yelled. “When I reach five, I want you to let go of the pier with one hand and catch the rope. That’s all. Just grab it out of the air.”

She pulled the rope back, gauging the number of counts she needed so that it was right above Mrs. Tucker’s shoulder when she reached five.

“Get ready!” She swung. “One. Two. Three. Four. Five.”

For one paralyzing moment, time seemed to stand still. And then Mrs. Tucker’s arm shot upward, and the rope slid through Rosalind’s fingers as the older woman pulled it to her side.

“I have it! I have it!”

Tears sprang to Rosalind’s eyes. “Thread it over your head and shoulder,” she called.

A gust of wind swirled past. Rosalind’s sopping skirts flapped against her legs, and the broken railing rattled. Beneath her torso, the deck shifted. There was an earsplitting

groan, and across from her, another plank gave way.

Mrs. Tucker's scream was smothered by the splash of the wood hitting the river. The deck groaned again, and suddenly, Sebastian was kneeling beside her.

"We have no more time," he said, reaching for the rope in Rosalind's hands. "The bridge is collapsing."

She pressed her hands to the broken board. "Mrs. Tucker?" she shouted. "Do you have the rope around you?"

"Yes. Yes."

Rosalind rose to her knees. "Pull," she yelled to the men on the riverbank. "Pull!"

The rope tightened and slid across the deck. Mrs. Tucker cried out, and another creak rent the air. Sebastian leaned forward, reaching for the woman suspended below the deck. There was a splash as something else hit the water. A piece of the railing broke off and spiraled downward. The men at the end of the bridge shouted, their voices indistinct, their warning clear.

Rosalind crawled backward, making room for Sebastian as he grasped Mrs. Tucker's arms and hauled her clear of the hole.

"Quickly," he said, coming to his feet. The older woman stumbled. He caught her, lifting her off the deck. "Run, Rosalind. I beg of you. Run."

Rosalind scrambled upright. The board beneath her feet cracked, and the rope around her waist jerked. Barely able to keep up with the speed at which the men were reeling her in, she stumbled toward shore.

Someone had lit the lantern. It flickered like a beacon against a gray, overcast backdrop. Men lined the shore, urging them on. Sebastian crossed onto solid ground, immediately relinquishing Mrs. Tucker to someone else's extended arms. Right behind him, Rosalind slipped on the wet wood. The rope bit into her back, and she cried out. Sebastian swung around, lunging for her and pulling her onto the riverbank just as the plank beneath her feet gave way.

“I have you, my love.” His breathing was as ragged as hers.

She clung to him, pressing her cheek against his wet coat. All around them, the wind howled, men shouted, and the bridge groaned. But in his arms, she was safe.

“May I offer the duchess a blanket, Your Grace?”

Rosalind did not recognize the voice.

Sebastian relaxed his hold on her. “That would be most welcome.”

He took the blanket from the man’s outstretched hand and wrapped it around Rosalind’s shoulders. She grasped the corners, pulling them tighter. The blanket must have come from the bottom of a pile, for it was not fully wet.

“I ... I cannot thank you enough, Your Grace,” the man stammered.

“I am only sorry that Mrs. Tucker had to endure such an awful experience,” Sebastian said. “It never should have happened. You have my sincere apologies, Mr. Tucker.”

Mr. Tucker. This was the poor woman’s husband. Brushing the dripping curls from her face, Rosalind turned to face him. “How is she?” she asked.

“She’s shiverin’—with cold mostly—but she says her worst injury is a grazed arm and a few bruises.” Mr. Tucker glanced at the nearby cart. “Mr. Greenwald has kindly offered to take us home. She’s gettin’ settled in the back of the cart with a blanket.”

“I am very relieved to hear it,” Sebastian said. “But I should like the doctor to take a look at her, just the same. Grayson will take care of the payment.”

Mr. Tucker bowed. “I’m most grateful to you, Your Grace. And to you, Your Grace.” He turned to Rosalind. “What you did out there ...” He swallowed. “Well, if there’s ever anything I can do for you, consider it done.”

“Th-thank you, M-Mr. Tucker.” Mrs. Tucker was not the only one feeling the effects of the bone-chilling rain.

Sebastian held her close. “You’d best take your wife home, Mr. Tucker. And I shall do the same.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

Mr. Tucker hurried to join his wife. The other men were winding up coils of rope and tossing them into the back of the Finley Park cart. Dawson was already on the cart bench, his wounded leg extended and his mount tied to the back of the cart.

Mr. Grayson approached, leading his horse and Sebastian’s.

“It appears that Belle took refuge under the trees on the other side of the pasture,” he said. “I’ll fetch her for you, Your Grace.”

“Lead her back to the stable instead, would you, Grayson?” Sebastian said. “My wife will ride with me.”

Mr. Grayson inclined his head. “Of course, Your Grace. And may I say that Her Grace has my utmost admiration for what she did out there.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

“Th-thank you, M-Mr. Grayson,” Rosalind said. “H-have you heard anything of M-Mary Beckett and her b-baby?”

“Yes, Your Grace. Mrs. Beckett delivered a healthy baby boy not more than twenty minutes ago.”

Relief flowed through Rosalind, and with it came exhaustion. Her grateful smile was fleeting, and Sebastian seemed to sense that she had reached the end of her endurance.

“Come,” he said. “I am sure we will learn more of the new baby soon enough. For now, it is time to go home.”

## CHAPTER 28

THE DISTANCE BETWEEN THE BECKETTS' cottage and Finley Park had never seemed so long. The rain continued to fall, the wind buffeting them from every side. Sebastian's mount lowered its head against the inclement weather and crested the final rise. At last, the shadowy form of his large house came into view. A single light shone to mark the entrance rather than the customary two lanterns, but it was enough to know that they were close.

Sebastian was missing his hat. He had lost it somewhere on the bridge. Water dripped off his hair, running down his neck in icy rivulets. His fingers were stiff with cold. But tonight, no discomfort could offset his overwhelming feeling of gratitude. After so close a call with tragedy, Mrs. Tucker had been reunited with her husband, and now he held Rosalind safely in his arms.

As though sensing that his warm stable was near, Tempest pushed forward with more urgency. Rosalind stirred. Her violent shivering had lessened since Sebastian had lifted her onto his horse at the bridge, but he kept a firm hold on her.

"We are almost there," he said.

"I m-must apologize to Vickers."

"Whatever for?"

"I d-did not return the l-lantern."

Given all that Rosalind had gone through over the last few hours—and the miserable conditions she was currently enduring—a forgotten lantern was quite possibly the most nonsensical and inconsequential thing she could worry about.

"That would explain the missing light at the door," he said.

"Yes," she said. "P-poor Vickers. The lack of s-symmetry is likely completely upending him."

Sebastian laughed. He could not help himself.

The wind blew the sound away, but she must have felt his chest shake because she turned her head toward him. “Are you l-laughing at me?”

“Marveling at you, I should say,” he said, drawing her closer. “Simply marveling.” He reined Tempest to a stop in front of the portico, and by the time he had dismounted, Vickers was nearly down the stairs to meet them. Sebastian lifted Rosalind out of the saddle, scooping her into his arms and turning to face the butler. “Would you have someone see to my mount, Vickers?” he asked. “He’ll need a good rubdown after having been out in this terrible weather for so long.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

The butler offered Rosalind a concerned look but asked no questions, and Sebastian started up the stairs.

“There is n-no need for you to c-carry me, Sebastian. I c-can walk.” Rosalind’s stuttered speech belied her assertion. It was long past time for her to be out of her wet clothing.

“I came far too close to losing you out there,” he said. He would say no more of the terror he had experienced while she’d been on the deck of the rickety bridge. It was too recent and still too real. “If you don’t mind, I should like to hold on to you a little longer.”

To his relief, she relaxed against him, her head on his chest. “Truth b-be told, I d-do not mind at all.”

His heart swelled. Never in all his study of exponential growth would he have believed that he would experience it most fully by falling in love. But after today, he could no longer deny what he had only guessed at before. With every passing day, he loved his wife more deeply.

He carried her into the entrance hall, leaving a trail of wet footprints behind him.

“Good heavens, Your Grace!” Mrs. Frost hurried to greet them. “What can be done to help you?”

“Two hot baths as quickly as you can have them ready,” Sebastian said without pausing. “And make sure the fire in Her Grace’s bedchamber is blazing well enough to remove all chill

from the room.”

“Right away, Your Grace,” Mrs. Frost said, moving toward the kitchen even as he spoke. “I shall have Polly meet you up there.”

Mrs. Frost was as good as her word. Polly must have run every step of the way up the servants’ staircase to reach Rosalind’s rooms before Sebastian got there. And she had already stoked the fire in the bedchamber. Small flames were licking the fresh logs when he finally set Rosalind on a wooden chair immediately in front of the fireplace.

Polly offered her a dry woolen blanket. “Might I put this around you until the bath arrives, Your Grace? I can get rid of the wet one.”

“Th-thank you, Polly,” Rosalind said, peeling the sodden blanket off her shoulders.

Polly stepped away with the wad of dripping fabric, and from down the hall, the clang of metal pails reached them.

Reluctantly, Sebastian stepped away. “I shall leave you in the care of your maid,” he said.

Rosalind tightened her hold on the dry blanket and nodded. “Th-thank you, Sebastian.”

“May I come and see you later?”

She nodded again, and this time, she smiled. “I should l-like that very much.”

\* \* \*

Rosalind was warm. Blissfully warm. And so very tired. Curled up in an armchair before the fire, with a shawl over her shoulders, she eyed her bed with longing. Polly had turned down the covers when she’d left for the evening, but by the clock on the mantel, it was still too early to retire—no matter that Rosalind’s body thought otherwise.

A warm bath had done wonders to help her feel human again. And when Polly had suggested wearing a comfortable shift and dressing gown afterward, she had happily agreed. Mrs. Shoup had sent up a bowl of hot soup and a pot of tea. It



had been the perfect recuperative meal, and Rosalind sincerely hoped Sebastian and Mrs. Tucker were feeling similarly restored.

She glanced at the clock again. Only two minutes had passed since the last time she had looked. If she did not find something active to do, she would fall asleep in the chair before Sebastian came.

Coming to her feet, she moved stiffly to the writing table. Her arms hurt from where the broken plank had dug into them, and the graze on her back from the rope burn stung. Mrs. Frost had applied some healing salve to both areas, and Rosalind did not anticipate that they would trouble her long, but for now, the discomfort was an acute and sobering reminder of how easily things could have gone terribly wrong today.

The wooden chair beside the desk looked particularly uninviting to her aching body, so she picked up her diary, her inkwell and quill, and carried them over to the bed. Setting the items on her bedside table, she propped the pillows up against the headboard until they formed a cozy backrest, and then she climbed in between the covers. She sat in bed, supported by pillows, and opened her diary to the back page.

Over the weeks, her list of *Good Things* about the Duke of Kelbrook had grown to sixteen. She pondered all that had happened today, from the arrival of their unexpected guests earlier in the day to the rescue of Mrs. Tucker this evening. It did not take long for gratitude to surface. She dipped her quill in the inkwell and began to write. *17. He entertained guests with me even though he was busy. 18. He allowed me to help save Mrs. Tucker. 19. He is strong. 20. He rescued me.*

She leaned back against her pillows. The number twenty was a good stopping place. She turned her attention to the *Bad Things* list. It had been a long time since she'd added anything to this one, and she had already scratched off two of the five items listed. She read the remaining three again. *1. He refused me entry to his tree house. 2. I do not love him. 3. He abandoned me.*

With one sure stroke, she crossed off *He abandoned me*.

From arriving in the drawing room at the nick of time to setting himself as a buffer between her and Mr. Sellers to following her onto the broken bridge, Sebastian had repeatedly done the very opposite of abandoning her. It was his hand she longed to hold, his quiet strength that fortified her. Indeed, no matter what lay ahead, it was Sebastian she wanted at her side.

Rosalind hesitated for only a moment, then she drew an unsteady line through *I do not love him* and returned her quill to the inkwell. She leaned her head back against the pillows, her mind consumed with thoughts of Sebastian. Her heart fluttered, and a smile teased her lips. Her list did not lie. Despite all odds and every childhood fear she'd harbored regarding her arranged marriage, she had fallen in love with her husband.

\* \* \*

Half an hour later, Sebastian knocked on the door to Rosalind's chambers. He had wanted to give her time to recover before seeing her again, but since James had taken away his dinner tray some time ago and he'd heard no murmur of female voices through the wall they shared for far longer than that, he'd decided to venture forth. Now, with no response to his knock, he was beginning to wonder if he'd been mistaken.

He tried one more time, tilting his head to listen for the sound of footsteps or voices. Nothing. He frowned. Rosalind had seemed genuinely eager to have him return. Why would she not answer the door? He tried the doorknob. It turned. Pushing the door open, he stepped inside. "Rosalind?" He called her name softly and was met by silence.

The sitting room was dark, but light shone from the bedchamber beyond. He crossed the room and peered inside. The fire burned low in the fireplace. Three candles burned: one on the mantel, one on the writing table, and one on the bedside table. By their light, he spotted her. She was sitting up in bed, a colorful shawl around her shoulders and her dark hair spread across a mountain of white pillows. Her eyes were closed, her breathing deep, and in the flickering candlelight, her beauty took his breath away.

Moving forward on quiet feet, he approached the bed. He wanted to touch her, talk to her, confess how much she was coming to mean to him, but he recognized her exhaustion, and he could not bring himself to wake her.

She stirred then, muttering something under her breath before turning to face the other way. An open book slipped out from under her hand. He caught it as it slid off the bedspread, one of the pages bending against his thumb. Concerned that he had done noticeable damage, he smoothed out the crease, realizing for the first time that this was not a printed book but rather a notebook. The pages were covered in Rosalind's handwriting and comprised a list of some sort. Knowing that it was not his place to pry, he went to close the book. And then he saw his name written across the top.

### *The Duke of Kelbrook*

### *Bad Things Good Things*

Sebastian considered himself to be a man of honor, but a gentleman would have to be without a single grain of curiosity or an iota of feeling to turn away from such a list. And he had both of those things in significantly greater measure.

A quick glance at the bed reassured him that Rosalind still slept. He moved to the mantel. Standing beside the candle, he began reading through the twenty entries Rosalind had placed beneath the title *Good Things*. No dates were mentioned, but as he read, pictures from the last few weeks flitted through his mind: their first and only dance together, the letters he'd posted beneath the adjoining door, their tour of Finley Park, the Chelsea buns they'd shared, the time they'd spent sitting together at his desk in the workshop, and that first earth-shattering kiss.

Until this moment, he'd had no notion that any of those things had held much significance to Rosalind—except, perhaps, the kiss. He took an unsteady breath, bracing himself

for the second list. This, he was sure, would be more painful.

The images came again: their awkward meeting at Langton House, their disastrous first evening at Finley Park, and his stubborn refusal to allow Rosalind into his workshop and tree house ... His thoughts trailed off. His tree house? She had mentioned it before, but he had not even shown it to her. Indeed, he had not visited the tree house himself in years. Why would she put this claim at the very top of her list as though it had happened first?

Slowly, fractured pictures from his youth pieced themselves together. A young Rosalind following him around Finley Park, full of girlish chatter and questions—all of which had been fully beyond his limited fourteen-year-old realm of experience. He had escaped to the tree house. Jonas had come with him. For Sebastian, it had been a blissful escape; for Rosalind, it had been a crushing rejection. And she had remembered it all these years later.

He'd been a foolish green youth who was far too used to being alone. But that was no excuse for unkindness. He winced at the self-censure, and then, through the stifling fog of difficult memories, a single thought shone brightly. There were five entries on the *Bad Things* list, and all but number one had been crossed off. Did that mean Rosalind was willing to look past them? Or had he done something to alter her mind? He read them again, focusing on what had changed. And then he saw it. 2. *I do not love him.* had been scored through.

Hope surged within him—and with it came resolve. Closing the book, he set it on the writing desk and blew out the candle burning there. Retracing his steps to the fireplace, he snuffed the candle on the mantel and walked back to the bed. Bending over, he dropped a soft kiss on Rosalind's forehead before blowing out the final candle. Then, using the light from the dying fire to guide him, he slipped out of the room.

## CHAPTER 29

ROSALIND WAS NOT SURE WHAT had wakened her. Her bedchamber was dark. The fire that had burned so brightly earlier was nothing more than glowing embers. She lay still, and in the silence, she realized the rain had stopped and the wind no longer blew so hard as to cause the trees to rattle. The last thing she remembered was sitting up in bed, waiting for Sebastian. She gasped. Sebastian. Had he come to see her only to find her asleep? It would explain the doused candles.

Pulling back the bedcovers, she slid out of bed and crossed the room to the fireplace. She lifted the candle from the mantel. It was cold, a sure sign that it had been extinguished some time ago. Crouching over the glowing embers in the fireplace, she blew gently. The orange light in the center of the coals flared, and she touched it with the candlewick. Straightening, she raised the flickering candle closer to the clock. Fourteen minutes past two o'clock. Her heart sank. She had missed Sebastian's visit by hours.

To go back to bed was by far the most sensible course of action, but her traitorous body had other ideas. She was now fully awake. Setting the candle back in its place, she pulled her shawl more securely around her shoulders and claimed her slippers from beside the bed.

Polly had drawn the curtains closed before she'd left. Rosalind walked to the window and pulled the fabric back a fraction. Although the gale's intensity had lessened, clouds continued to scud quickly across the sky. Moonlight came and went, with a sprinkling of stars occasionally augmenting its light. All the world was shadowed and black—except for one bright light near the far corner of the house.

Puzzled, Rosalind watched as the light drew closer. She leaned forward, straining to better see its source. It was a lantern. It had to be. The person carrying it, whomever it was, was moving quickly, and it was not long before the light was close enough for Rosalind to make out the vague silhouette of

a man in a tall hat and breeches within the yellow glow. He climbed the stone stairs onto the terrace and moved toward the dining room windows directly below Rosalind's rooms. She watched from above as he lifted the lamp and shaded his eyes against the glass to peer inside. Rosalind was not sure if the curtains had been drawn in the dining room this evening since neither she nor Sebastian had eaten there. She suspected they had, because within moments, the man stepped back, then repeated the exercise at the next window.

Rosalind watched him systematically work his way along the terrace, staring into each of the windows he passed. With every stop he took, her unease grew. Who was this man, and what was he doing? No servant would feel the need to look through each ground-floor window in the east wing. Certainly not in the early hours of the morning. Someone should be told. But who? The staff was surely all abed, and she had yet to learn exactly where Mrs. Frost's or Vickers's chambers were located. She glanced at the connecting door leading to Sebastian's rooms. Did she dare disturb him?

She looked back at the shadowy figure outside. Already, he had reached the windows of the billiards room. He raised his hand again, but this time, it held something long that glinted in the lantern light. He hesitated, peering through the glass one more time before lowering the object and moving to the next window.

Rosalind's unease blossomed into genuine alarm. She hurried to the connecting door and knocked. There was no sound from the other side. She knocked again, this time more boldly. When she still received no response, she turned the knob and opened the door.

All was dark. A draught of cold air swirled around her ankles. Taking the candle she'd lit with her, she crossed the threshold into Sebastian's bedchamber. Bulky pieces of furniture created large, distorted shadows. She raised the candle, quickly identifying a desk and chair, a wardrobe, a chest of drawers, and a large four-poster bed.

"Sebastian," she called. She kept her eyes on the bed, but there was no movement. "Sebastian."

Urgency bolstered her courage, and she crossed to stand beside the bed. The covers were folded down in anticipation of its occupant, but the bed was empty. For a few short seconds, confusion fuddled her thoughts, but then cognizance came. The workshop. Sebastian had wanted to send Mr. Meikle's project with the courier tomorrow—today—but he had been taken from his work, first by their unexpected visitors and then by Mrs. Tucker's rescue. He must have returned to it this evening.

A second realization came hard and fast upon the heels of the first. The man outside was working his way down the east wing toward the workshop. And at the speed in which he was moving, he would be there in a matter of minutes.

Rosalind flew out of Sebastian's chambers. With one hand cupped around her candle's wavering flame, she ran the length of the passage and down the stairs. The ticking of the longcase clock followed her running feet across the entrance hall and into the east wing. Unfamiliar shadows filled the corners, and a sudden thud from somewhere outside sent her heart to her throat.

\* \* \*

Sebastian pushed his chair away from the table and rubbed the back of his aching neck. Finally. The last calculation was complete, and he could put this project behind him. With a weary sigh, he set aside his quill and read through his short letter to Meikle one more time.

*Finley Park*

*30 October 1782*

*Dear Mr. Meikle,*

*Enclosed you will find your original documents along with the adjustments I have made to the earlier computations. As you will see, an error was made in*

*calculating the volume of the primary drum. I am hopeful that upon implementing these changes to the threshing machine's design, you will discover the success you have been seeking for so long.*

*Yours sincerely,  
Kelbrook*

It was brief, but it was enough. Gathering up the papers scattered across the table, he set the letter on top of the pile. He refused to look at the clock. He had passed the point of exhaustion long ago.

Across the room, the remaining portion of the last log he'd placed on the fire shifted, splintering into crumbling sparks as a furious pounding sounded at the door. He shot to his feet, his heart thumping.

"Sebastian!"

In an instant, he crossed the room and pulled open the door. "Rosalind! Whatever is the matter?" A red-and-blue shawl covered her white dressing gown. Her hair fell below her shoulders in long dark curls, and she faced him with wide, terrified eyes.

"There's a man." She was out of breath. "He's outside, looking through all the windows."

Sebastian took her hand and drew her into the room. "Calm yourself. You must have been dreaming."

"No!" She pulled her hand free and pointed to the window. "He's coming, Sebastian. I saw him from my bedchamber. He's searching for your workshop. I'm sure of it." A faint yellow glow appeared in the narrow chink between the curtains, and Rosalind gasped. "He's here."

Grabbing the courier's satchel from the floor beside the table, Sebastian swept up Meikle's papers. "My study," he said, rolling the papers into a fat scroll and stuffing them into the bag. "There's a pistol in the top drawer of the desk."



Rosalind fled. Her running footsteps echoed down the passage as Sebastian cinched the buckle on the satchel closed and tossed the bag behind the nearest armchair. At the window, a sharp crack was immediately followed by the sound of broken glass raining down upon the floor. The curtains twitched as the outside breeze caught them, the movement increasing as a gentle grind signaled the raising of the casement.

Seizing the wooden chair from behind the table, Sebastian crossed the short distance to the window just as two feet appeared beneath the curtain. He raised the chair and swung it against the man's legs. The intruder cursed, tearing the curtains back and stumbling into the room, a gun in hand.

"Sellers!" Sebastian staggered back two paces.

"Indeed." He waved his gun at the chair in Sebastian's hands. "Put it down, Kelbrook. And walk away."

The man was dressed in black from head to toe, a fact that only accentuated his pale face and wild eyes.

"What the blazes is the meaning of this?" Keeping his hold on the chair, Sebastian pinned him with an icy glare. "Have you been in your cups, man?"

"You would like to think so, wouldn't you, Kelbrook," Seller sneered. "It must be beyond comprehension that any gentleman in his right mind would target so high and mighty a duke." He steadied his gun so that it was pointed directly at Sebastian's chest. "We shall chalk that up as your first disappointment of the night." He narrowed his eyes. "I believe I told you to rid yourself of the chair."

Sebastian dropped the chair. It thudded to the floor, landing on its side. If nothing more, it would serve as an obstacle for Sellers.

"Do not bring my title into this," Sebastian said. "Breaking and entering is a crime no matter where it is committed. Attempting it at Finley Park only proves that you are a fool as well as a felon."

Anger flashed in Sellers's eyes, and he took another step

toward Sebastian. "A fool? Oh, yes, I am a fool. I should have married Miss Ainsworth before you returned to Town and enticed her away with your money and position. Her dowry would have taken care of my debts quite nicely." He gave a hollow laugh. "At least for the time being."

"How very flattering." Rosalind spoke from the doorway. "I daresay every young lady desires to have her dowry used to postpone a gentleman's life of crime."

Sellers stiffened, but the gun in his hand did not falter. As long as it was pointed at him and not Rosalind, Sebastian could attempt to think rationally. Did she have his pistol? He did not dare turn to look at her.

"What an unexpected pleasure, Your Grace." Keeping his eyes on Sebastian even as he spoke to Rosalind, Sellers made no effort to conceal his sarcasm. "I did not realize that neither you nor your husband sleep at night."

"It is a night of surprises, then, Mr. Sellers, as I did not know that you had such despicable criminal tendencies."

Sellers flinched. He was not completely unfeeling, then. Her barb had hit its mark.

"I do not expect you to understand such things, but when a gentleman's business investments fail, he is forced to recoup his losses in other ways."

"Such as marrying for money."

Sellers inclined his head. "That is one way."

"And this is another?"

Sebastian's back remained toward the door, but Rosalind sounded closer than she had been. Was she attempting to distract Sellers with conversation?

"The Duke of Kelbrook has money to spare," Sellers said.

"And you believe you will find those funds in his workshop?" Her tone called into question the man's intelligence.

"I am not here for money, Your Grace. I am here for

papers.” Sellers smiled, a sickeningly self-satisfied smile. “Papers that will allow me access to new and lucrative investments.”

Sebastian’s ire simmered. “Stealing another man’s work does not qualify as sound business any more than does placing large bets at White’s.”

Sellers’s smile disappeared. “As much as I have enjoyed this exchange, I believe the time for talking is over. The papers you have been working on, Your Grace. I know they are here, so do not attempt to dissemble. I will take them now.”

Rosalind was close. Sebastian could feel it. He moved his arms behind his back and heard the soft swoosh of her dressing gown brushing the floor as she entered Sellers’s line of vision.

“No closer,” Sellers barked.

All sense of movement stopped.

“I do not see any papers, do you, Mr. Sellers?” Rosalind asked.

Sebastian held his breath. All he needed was for the man holding the gun to be distracted for one second. Sellers frowned. His eyes darted to the table, and in that fleeting moment, Rosalind pressed the pistol into Sebastian’s hand. How she’d hidden it all the way across the room, he did not know. But if he’d needed any assurance of how brilliant and brave she was, she’d handed it to him along with the weapon.

Sellers was not stupid either. He may not have seen the exchange, but he must have detected something because in the same moment Sebastian raised his pistol, Sellers lunged for Rosalind’s arm, dragging her to stand in front of him.

“I think not, Kelbrook.” The barrel of Sellers’s gun dug into Rosalind’s ribs, and she took a sharp breath. Sebastian’s fury was tempered only by his desperate fear. “Put down your weapon, and give me the papers.”

Slowly, Sebastian lowered the gun.

“I want it on the table, where I can see it,” Sellers

demanded.

Sebastian set his pistol down.

“Now walk away.”

Sebastian hesitated, and Sellers tightened his grip on Rosalind’s arm. She winced, and Sebastian moved.

“Well now, it seems that we are finally getting somewhere.”

At Sellers’s smug look, Sebastian’s hands fisted. He’d shown the man his weakness and could do nothing about it. Rosalind’s life was not—and never would be—up for barter.

“Let her go, Sellers.”

“I will need to be in possession of some papers first.”

Setting his jaw, Sebastian walked to the armchair and retrieved the satchel lying behind it.

“No, Sebastian!” Rosalind cried.

Sellers yanked her arm, and she hissed in pain.

“Hurt her again and I will throw this satchel in the fire,” Sebastian said.

“Throw it in the fire and I kill her,” Sellers responded scornfully.

Rosalind did not quail, but tears welled in her eyes.

Sebastian turned away, knowing that witnessing her distress would be his undoing. His only hope for outmaneuvering Sellers at this point was to act as dispassionately as possible. He walked to the table and set the satchel beside the gun. “Take it,” he said.

Keeping the gun firmly against Rosalind’s side, Sellers shifted her toward the table. He released her arm long enough to claim Sebastian’s pistol and tuck it into his pocket.

“Pick up the bag, Your Grace,” he said.

Rosalind reached for the satchel.

“Put it over your shoulder,” he ordered.

She threaded her head and one arm through the long strap.

The bag fell below her hip.

“Now, hold out one hand.” She did as Sellers asked, and the cad smiled. “That’s your cue, Kelbrook. She requires the workshop key.”

Sebastian slid the key out of the pocket in his vest. Stepping forward, he set it in Rosalind’s hand. Their fingers touched. The simple connection hummed between them with unseen force.

“In the corner, Kelbrook,” Sellers snapped, severing the tie. He jerked his head toward the far side of the room. “Over there, beside the bookcase.”

Sebastian backed into his designated spot. As far as he could tell, the only thing currently in his favor was the fact that Sellers’s arms were figuratively tied. With one hand on Rosalind’s arm and the other on his gun, he was not able to bind Sebastian.

As if he were reading Sebastian’s thoughts, Sellers glared at him. “Your wife and I are going to leave Finley Park through the front door. I am well aware that after we turn the key on your workshop, you can leave the room the same way I entered. However, I should warn you that any attempt you may make to rescue Her Grace or reclaim this satchel before I am gone from here will result in her demise.”

Dragging Rosalind with him, Sellers walked backward, keeping Sebastian in his sight all the way to the door. They crossed the threshold, and Sebastian allowed himself to meet Rosalind’s eyes. Her tears were gone, her gaze steady. He nodded. Her answering nod was so slight, he barely caught it, but it was there. She knew that he would come for her.

Sellers slammed the door closed between them, and Sebastian raced for the window. He was through the gap in the casement before the key had turned in the lock. Grabbing the lantern Sellers had left outside, he took off running, heading directly for the stables.

## CHAPTER 30

PERHAPS SEBASTIAN HAD BEEN RIGHT after all. This had to be a dream. Why else would Mr. Sellers be dragging her down the dark passage at Finley Park with a gun in her side?

“Stop,” Rosalind said. She pulled back, and pain pulsed up the arm he held. If it was correct that a person did not feel excruciating discomfort whilst asleep, she was truly in trouble. “Why are you doing this?”

Mr. Sellers did not look at her. “Because I must.” He yanked her forward, picking up his pace as the entrance hall came into view.

Rosalind stumbled to keep up. “I cannot believe that. I will not.”

“As you wish, *Your Grace*.” He spat her title with undisguised contempt. “It is not something I would expect you to understand.”

Rosalind pressed her heels against the tile floor. He may force her to go with him, but she would not make it easy for him. She was not yet ready to risk her life or the life of innocent servants by shouting for help, but she could buy Sebastian more time to escape the workshop. “You are right. I do not understand what would drive a gentleman—whom I once considered a friend—to perpetrate such violence and larceny.”

“This has nothing to do with you.” The gun bruised her ribs as he dragged her toward the door.

“I beg your pardon, but this has everything to do with me. Not only are you are stealing from my home, but you are kidnapping me at gunpoint.”

He pressed her against the wall as he fought to free the bolt at the front door with his other hand. “Very well.” He loomed over her, his eyes flashing dangerously in the dark hall. “It has everything to do with you.” The chill in his voice sent fear

skittering down her spine. “You were to marry me. With your money and my charm, no business venture would have been out of reach. We would have been welcomed into the best circles in Society, and I would no longer have creditors breathing down my neck, grasping for every brass penny I own.”

The door flew open, and he pushed her through. Damp, cold air instantly penetrated her thin dressing gown and shift. She clasped her shawl, tightening it across her shoulders and causing the satchel to swing back and hit the doorframe.

“Give me that.” The leather strap cut into her neck as he pulled the bag free. “I have neither the time nor inclination to court another affluent young lady, so I am choosing a second, equally lucrative option.” He threaded the satchel’s strap over his shoulder and towed her down the portico stairs at a run. “The Duke of Kelbrook is known for recognizing the value of new innovations. I have no doubt these papers will be all I need for a fresh start.” His teeth glistened in the moonlight. “And you, my dear, were my guide to locating them.”

\* \* \*

“Dawson!” Sebastian pounded on the door to the stables and yelled for his head groom.

From inside, the wooden latch creaked, and the door opened to reveal a bleary-eyed, tousle-headed Wesley.

The boy snapped to attention when he saw who was standing without. “Beggin’ yer pardon, Yer Grace.”

Sebastian pushed past him. “Where’s Dawson?”

“H ... he’s asleep in the loft.”

“Fetch him.”

The stablehand ran for the ladder and scampered up it at breakneck speed. Sebastian went directly to Tempest’s stall and was considering saddling the stallion himself when Dawson appeared at the top of the ladder, tucking his shirt into his breeches.

“Wesley can take care of Tempest, Your Grace,” Dawson

said when he reached the lowest rung. “He can saddle a horse faster ’n anyone.”

Sebastian stepped back. Wesley was already on his way down again and would know exactly where all the tack was kept.

“I need a gun,” he said.

Dawson limped to a cabinet in the corner. Taking a key from a hook above, he unlocked the stout wooden box and opened the door. Two pistols lay within. He handed one to Sebastian.

“Do you need an extra man?”

Dawson was the most skilled rider and best shot at Finley Park. He was also recently injured.

“What of your leg?”

“Mrs. Frost took good care of it when I returned to the house,” he said. “It will not affect me in the saddle.”

“How quickly can you be ready?” Sebastian asked.

“Three minutes,” Dawson said, claiming the second pistol before disappearing into the closest stall.

\* \* \*

Rosalind felt sick. None of this—the break-in, the threat to Sebastian’s life, and the loss of Mr. Meikle’s irreplaceable papers—would have happened were it not for her. She stumbled on the last step of the portico. Mr. Sellers did not care. Without another word, he jerked her upright and pulled her toward the nearest ash tree. A faint nicker greeted them, and two eyes shone out of the shadows beneath the lowest branches. His horse was waiting for them.

Frantically considering and then rejecting one escape scenario after another, Rosalind staggered across the remaining distance at Mr. Sellers’s side. His fingers were pressed into her upper arm so tightly the pain had turned to numbness. There would be no means of getting away until he released his grip. He was taller and stronger than she was, which meant he could likely outrun her. Her only advantage



would come from using the darkness to hide her movements and having a slightly better knowledge of the lay of the land.

If she still had the satchel, she would attempt to free herself when he went to mount, but she could not leave the bag behind. She had placed Sebastian's good name in jeopardy. And even if he were somehow able to restore Finley Park's reputation for being a place of privacy and security and inventors were willing to place their trust in him again, Mr. Meikle would never recover from the loss.

Mr. Sellers was keeping her around as leverage in case Sebastian caught up to him, but if he had to cut his losses, the villain would undoubtedly abandon her in favor of the satchel. That was the grand prize. She was merely a pawn. Somehow, she must orchestrate a means of escape that involved taking back the satchel first.

"You're riding in the front." He left no room for debate, and without further warning, he lifted her onto the horse. Seconds later, he was in the saddle behind her, urging the horse into a gallop.

Gravel crunched beneath the horse's hooves, filling the night air. The clouds had finally dispersed, and moonlight shone, illuminating the drive. An owl hooted from a distant tree. The breeze cut through Rosalind's clothing, chilling her. She shivered, and he clamped his arm around her, pinning her against him. Her skin crawled at his touch, and she shifted, trying to loosen his hold.

"Sit still," he hissed.

She moved her hand to steady herself, and her knuckles rubbed against something hard. Her breath caught. The buckle on the satchel's shoulder strap was positioned between her and the saddle. Keeping her face averted, she traced the metal clasp and the strip of leather with her fingers. If she could somehow release the pin from the hole in the leather, it might be possible to pull the strap through—and that would mean the satchel would no longer be attached to Mr. Sellers.

\* \* \*

The time it took Dawson to saddle his horse was the longest three minutes of Sebastian's life. As Sebastian paced back and forth in the confined space of Tempest's vacated stall, he gave his head groom an abbreviated version of what had happened in the workshop. Under four minutes later, when Wesley opened the door wide and the two men thundered out of the stable, Dawson knew exactly who they were after.

They raced around to the front of the house. No lights shone from the windows, but the front door was ajar.

"Looks like he left his horse over there," Dawson said, pointing to a mound of horse dung at the edge of the courtyard beside the nearest ash tree. He tilted his head, listening intently. "No sound of hooves on the gravel, so he's got a decent lead on us."

Sebastian nodded grimly. The thought of Sellers forcing Rosalind onto his horse made him want to punch the man senseless. "We must make up the distance quickly," he said.

Dawson wheeled his mount around, his determined expression captured by the moonlight. "We will."

Sebastian took off down the drive, with Dawson right beside him. They galloped the entire length of the Finley Park drive, but when they reached the road with no sign of Sellers, Sebastian reined his mount to a stop.

"We will have to divide," he panted. "The fiend is just as likely to have headed directly to London as he is to have returned to his aunt and uncle's estate. Unfortunately, the two destinations are in opposite directions."

"They can't have gone far, Your Grace. If I come upon them, I'll sound a warning shot. Perhaps you could do the same."

"Agreed. And, Dawson ..." Sebastian simultaneously tightened his grip on his reins and his emotions. "If you spot them first, remember that Her Grace's safety is the highest priority—over anything else."

"I understand."

"Godspeed," Sebastian said and touched his heels to

Tempest's sides.

\* \* \*

Rosalind was so cold her fingers could barely move. And yet she needed them to. Desperately. They had left the Finley Park drive and were now on the country road that led toward the main thoroughfare to London. The road had been hard-packed the first time she'd traveled it in the carriage. It had been pocked with puddles when she'd ridden home with Sebastian. Now that the rain had had time to truly soak the ground, it had become treacherously muddy, and Mr. Sellers's horse was struggling to keep up the pace his rider was demanding.

They turned a bend in the road, and the horse's rear hooves slipped. Mr. Sellers cursed and kicked the terrified creature. Rosalind took advantage of the unexpected movement to hide her manipulation of the leather strap. The end was already free of the loop that had held it flush. All that remained was to pop the pin out from the hole and pull the strap through. She hooked her frozen finger around the pin and tugged. It moved a little but not enough.

Mr. Sellers leaned forward. Rosalind tensed, but his focus was on the horse. "Come on, you worthless animal," he growled through gritted teeth.

The horse strained to maintain its footing on the muddy slope. Rosalind moved her arm a fraction and tried pulling at the buckle pin again. This time, it popped free. She froze, but Mr. Sellers paid her no mind. Instead, he turned to look over his shoulder, and in one slow and steady movement, she raised two fingers to guide the leather strap out of the buckle. The metal piece fell away, and just like that, the strap was free.

"It seems to me that your devoted husband is somewhat slow to respond to your plight, Your Grace."

Rosalind reminded herself to breathe. She must do nothing that might alert him to the satchel's precarious position. "Do not discount him yet, sir."

"Oh, I do not intend to. I have a fairly good idea how much he would like to reclaim this satchel. And I daresay his sense

of honor will drive him to rescue his wife along the way, even if he is not inclined to race after her.”

She did not need to see Mr. Sellers’s face to know that he was gloating. Even if it were true that the satchel was of more worth to Sebastian than she was, she would not own to it in front of him. “You may think what you will, but I know he will come after you. And he will find you.”

“Then perhaps it would be better if I disappeared without drawing too much attention to myself. A gentleman riding through Town with a married woman dressed in nothing but her dressing gown and a shawl would surely draw some attention.”

Rosalind gasped, and he laughed a hollow, mirthless sound.

“You, sir, are a cad.”

“I prefer to think of myself as an opportunist. And now that I am no longer in dire need of a hostage, I believe my best prospects lie in abandoning you here for your useless husband to find. It will ease my horse’s burden and, therefore, speed my getaway whilst simultaneously slowing my pursuer.” His ugly laugh returned. “A damsel in distress and a duke’s noblesse oblige. I could not have planned it better.”

A large bird sailed overhead, its lonely call sending a shiver of apprehension through Rosalind. She did not know this terrain well enough to find her way in the dark. She could perhaps find shelter against a wall or under a tree until daylight, but if she were forced to toss the satchel from a moving horse, she would never be able to find it again unless she had some kind of landmark.

Desperate to make out something—anything—that might be familiar in the darkness, she scoured the landscape. Up ahead, a faint light shone. She strained to see it more clearly. What could it be? It did not seem bright enough to be a lantern, yet it was too low to the ground to be a star. She did not dare hope for another traveler on this quiet road at such an hour, and the light was coming from the wrong direction to be Sebastian. But whatever it was, it offered hope. As long as her captor did not see it.

Mr. Sellers slowed his mount. "It is time for us to part, Your Grace."

Rosalind barely had time to twist the satchel's leather strap around her hand before Mr. Sellers pushed her off the horse. She fell to the ground, landing in a heap in the mud. The satchel came with her, dropping beside her with a thud. She heard his shout when he realized what she had done. Making a frenzied lunge for the satchel, she seized the mud-covered object and scrambled to her feet.

A few feet away, Mr. Sellers was dismounting his horse. Rosalind turned and ran toward the light.

"You may just as well stop now," Sellers yelled. "There's no escape!"

Up ahead, a dog barked. Mr. Sellers swore, and his feet slapped against the mud as he started after her. Rosalind knew she could not outrun him. Already, her breath was coming out in ragged gasps. A stone wall appeared at her right, the angular lines like black blocks in the moonlight. It was not much of a marker, but it was better than none. Taking hold of the leather strap, she let go of the satchel and swung her arm wide. Like an enormous pendulum, the bag dropped and then lifted into the air. Releasing the strap when the satchel was at its highest point, she watched it sail over the wall seconds before Mr. Sellers seized her.

"You little witch!"

The dog barked again. A door creaked open, and a man called out.

"Who's there? Make yourself known, or I shall release the dog."

Rosalind's knees almost buckled in relief. They had reached the cottage. "Help me, Mr. Be—"

Mr. Sellers cut off Rosalind's shout by slapping his hand across her mouth. "Have you forgotten that I am carrying a pistol?" he hissed, pressing the cold, hard muzzle up against her rib cage.

She held perfectly still, fighting to catch her breath through

his fingers. The silence lengthened. Had her voice not been loud enough for Mr. Beckett to hear? The door creaked again, and then clicked closed.

“You have one minute to find the satchel.” Mr. Sellers kept his voice low, but there was no mistaking his fury. He pulled her along the wall until they reached the garden gate. “If you call for help, I will shoot anyone who opens the door.” He lifted the latch and thrust her forward. “Go.”

Rosalind stumbled into the garden. Tears flowed freely down her face, but she ignored them. Leaving the path, she started across the grass. There was movement in the shadows. Rosalind swung around in time to see Mr. Beckett’s sheepdog bound out from behind the cottage. The white marks on his black coat appeared as faint smudges in the darkness, but his eyes glistened, and they were trained on the man at the gate. The dog growled. Mr. Sellers spun around, his gun pointed at the animal.

“No!” Rosalind cried.

A piercing whistle rent the air. The dog dropped to his haunches just as Mr. Sellers fired.

# CHAPTER 31

THE CRACK OF GUNFIRE WAS unmistakable. Fear tightened Sebastian's throat. That had not been Dawson's warning shot. It had come from the road ahead of him. As had David's whistle. Sebastian would know the shepherd's sheepdog signals anywhere. And that one had chilled him. It meant that Mott had been sent in to guard and defend.

A second gunshot rang out and then a shout. Sebastian's heart plummeted. Lowering himself in the saddle, he urged his mount up the muddy slope. The Becketts' cottage was on the other side of the rise. He could not be this close only to be too late.

Tempest's hooves slipped, but the horse righted himself and powered on. He crested the hill and started down the other side. Candlelight, faint but sure, flickered in one of the cottage's upstairs windows, and moonlight outlined the edges of the building. Darkness shrouded the scene below. Where was Sellers? And more importantly, where was Rosalind?

"Call off the dog, or I shoot the duchess."

Sellers's chilling demand should have sent ice coursing through Sebastian's veins, but instead, it brought hope. David was out there somewhere, and so was his well-trained dog. And even more relieving, Rosalind was still alive.

Two short whistles sounded from the direction of the house. It was Mott's signal to retreat. Sebastian slowed his horse's approach. Mud muffled the sound of Tempest's hooves, and Sellers's attention was surely on what was happening in the cottage garden. The longer Sebastian's presence remained undetected, the better.

"Bring me the satchel," Sellers barked.

Sebastian kept his eyes on the cottage, searching for any sign of movement. And then, like a wraith, a figure in white flitted into view from behind a tree. Rosalind. Sebastian's heart pounded. Her white dressing gown had enabled him to

spot her, but it also made her a perfect target. She moved across the lawn, and Sebastian reined Tempest to a halt. He had almost reached the low stone wall that surrounded the cottage garden. It was time to go in on foot.

With Dawson's pistol in hand, he dismounted. Keeping his head low, he ran along the edge of the wall. A horse nickered nearby, and Sebastian started. Sellers had obviously chosen a mount as dark as his clothing. Both the horse and the gentleman were all but invisible. On the other side of the wall, however, Rosalind's ghostlike form was clearly discernible, moving back and forth across the grass.

"Your time is running out, Your Grace," Sellers warned.

"If you shoot me now, you will be forced to search for the satchel yourself," Rosalind responded. "Although, I daresay Mr. Beckett's dog would be happy to help."

Sebastian's heart swelled at her bravery. Sellers cursed, his foul mouth finally giving away his exact location. The man was standing beside the garden gate, not more than twenty feet away, his arm extended. His pistol followed Rosalind as she moved. Veering left, Sebastian came up behind Sellers and raised his gun.

"Get down, Rosalind!" Sebastian yelled.

Sellers fired. Rosalind dropped to the ground, and Sellers swiveled around to face Sebastian. David whistled two warbling notes, and with a rumbling growl, Mott leaped at Sellers. The dog's jaw clamped down on Sellers's arm. He shrieked in agony and dropped his gun. David came running from the shadows.

Sebastian circled Mott and kicked the weapon toward David. "Take the gun."

David reached for it and trained it on the writhing man.

"Call off the dog!" Sellers screamed.

David whistled, and Mott released his hold. The dog backed up a few paces, his eyes still on his prey. Sellers staggered sideways and put his uninjured hand into his pocket.



Sebastian knew exactly what was there. “Bring it out slowly and throw it to the ground,” he warned.

The moon shone down on them, reflecting off the pistols and illuminating Sellers’s vitriol-filled eyes. Mott growled and inched closer.

“Steady, Mott,” David said.

The dog stopped, poised to pounce.

“Do it now, Sellers.” Sebastian was losing patience. He’d heard nothing from the garden and could only pray that Rosalind was unharmed.

Sellers dropped the gun he’d taken from Sebastian in the workshop. It landed at his feet with a thud.

“Up against the gate post,” Sebastian ordered.

Cradling his injured arm in his other hand, Sellers took three steps back. The gate clanged as he hit it. Sebastian reached for his stolen pistol, reclaiming it without dropping his gaze from Sellers’s face.

“Someone’s coming, Your Grace,” David said.

The steady beat of hooves penetrated Sebastian’s focus. Dawson. The groom would have heard the gunshots.

“Dawson!” Sebastian shouted. “The garden gate.”

The pounding of hooves slowed to a stop, and moments later, Dawson appeared behind David. His gun was ready. “Is this the blighter?”

“It is,” Sebastian said grimly. “David, do you have rope?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“Fetch it. Dawson, stand guard over this fiend. I must find the duchess.”

Leaving Mott at the gate, David took off toward the back of the cottage. Sebastian turned, his eyes searching the darkness for Rosalind. He stepped onto the lawn, scouring the shadows for a trace of white. There was nothing. She was gone.

He heard a thud. Dawson cried out, and Sebastian pivoted in

time to see his head groom fall to the ground. Sellers bolted for his horse, but Sebastian was right behind him.

“Get him, Mott!” Sebastian yelled.

With a growl, the vigilant dog leaped over Dawson and launched himself at the fleeing felon. Sellers swung his uninjured arm, knocking the dog across his nose. Mott snapped and caught Sellers’s coat in his teeth. Sellers lunged for his horse’s reins to the sound of ripping fabric. The nervous animal skittered sideways. Sellers cursed, and Sebastian barreled into him.

Sellers hit the muddy road with a sickening thud. Sebastian pulled back his fist, but Sellers remained motionless.

Dawson appeared beside him, gun in hand. “Devil take him,” he said through gritted teeth. “He must have noticed my limp. The moment you looked away, he kicked me in the leg.”

David ran to join them, carrying a rope. Sebastian leaped to his feet.

“Tie him up,” he said. “I’ve had more than enough of him.” The moment David took his place, Sebastian sprinted back to the garden. “Rosalind!” he called. So help him, he must know that she was safe.

“Over here, Your Grace.”

He whipped around. A narrow crack of light shone around the cottage’s front door. He ran to it.

“Mrs. Beckett?”

“Is it safe to open the door?”

“Yes. The blackguard is unconscious, and David is tying him up.”

The door opened wider to reveal Mary Beckett with a bundle in her arms. “I was up with the baby when we heard voices outside, and Mott started barking. David told me to keep everyone inside with the door locked.”

“Have you seen Her Grace?”

She nodded. “I think you’d best come in.” She moved aside

to allow him entry. As soon as he crossed the threshold, she closed the door and locked it. “Her Grace made it to the door on her own. Edith woke up to the shouting and let her in. We’ve just started a fire in the kitchen.”

Sebastian followed Mrs. Beckett to the doorway of their kitchen. A wooden chair was pulled up to a small fire. Rosalind was sitting on it, wrapped in a brown wool blanket. Little Edith sat on her knee.

“What comes after eleven?” Edith asked.

“Twelve,” Rosalind said.

“Twelve,” Edith repeated. “Twelve. Thirteen. Fourteen. Thirteen—”

“Fifteen. Sixteen,” Rosalind corrected.

Edith sighed. “The Duke of Kelbrook is taking a long time. I thought he was coming before we counted to twenty.”

Rosalind squeezed her tightly. “We have not yet reached twenty, my dear. He will come.” Her voice broke. “Pray that he will come.”

Sebastian swallowed past the lump in his throat. Dear heaven, what had he ever done to deserve this woman?

“Seventeen. Eighteen,” he said, stepping into the room.

Edith gasped and scrambled off Rosalind’s knee. She ran to her mother, and Rosalind rose. The blanket fell from her shoulders, and she pressed a mud-covered hand to her mouth to cover her sob.

Sebastian closed the distance between them and wrapped his arms around her. “Oh, my sweet Rosalind,” he said.

She buried her face in his shoulder and cried.

\* \* \*

Rosalind had not realized how much she needed Sebastian—his strength, his support, his love. She choked back her tears and raised her hand to his face. “You are truly here and uninjured?”

“Yes.” He kissed her dirty palm. “And you? I have lived through hell since Sellers dragged you out of the workshop. Did he hurt you?”

Every part of Rosalind’s body ached, but she shook her head. “Nothing that Mrs. Frost’s salve and some sleep cannot cure.”

He kissed her forehead. She met his eyes, and he smiled. “I found a tiny patch just there that was without mud.”

“Mrs. Frost’s salve, sleep, and a bath,” she amended.

He released her from his embrace. She shivered. The small fire had removed the nighttime chill in the room but had not been enough to expel the cold that had penetrated her very bones when she’d been with Mr. Sellers. She picked up the blanket Mary had offered her and folded it before setting it on the chair. As much as she desired the extra layer, she had an inkling that this one had been taken from someone’s bed. It should be returned.

“Put this on,” Sebastian said. “You will need it.”

She turned. He had taken off his jacket and was holding it out to her. “No more than you.”

“I beg to differ,” he said softly.

She glanced down. Her flimsy dressing gown and shift were no real protection from the cold, and she had lost her shawl when she had gone after the satchel. She gasped.

“Sebastian. The satchel.” She hurried around the chair and picked up the filthy leather bag from the floor.

“You have it!”

“I tossed it over the wall in an attempt to keep it from Mr. Sellers. When I heard your shout, I dropped to the ground and discovered it beside me. I crawled to the Becketts’ door, hoping to keep it hidden from Mr. Sellers. Edith let me in.”

He took the satchel and released the clasp. “Did Sellers open it?”

“No.”

Sebastian tossed back the covering flap and checked the contents within. When he looked up, he was smiling. “It appears that, notwithstanding their flight across the wall and their clumsy landing, the papers are much as I left them. Not even the wetness from the grass and mud has penetrated the satchel.”

Relief filled Rosalind. “I undid the strap so as to pull it free of Mr. Sellers’s shoulder. It should be easy enough to reconnect.”

He threaded the narrow piece of leather through the buckle and cinched it tight. Then he slung the satchel over his shoulder and held out his coat a second time. “Come,” he said.

She slid her arms into the sleeves. He drew it around her, pulling her toward him as he enveloped her in the excess fabric. It felt safe and warm. Quite the opposite of how she’d felt only half an hour ago. She looked to the hall. Mary and Edith had disappeared, but the front door was just visible at the end of the short passage.

“I do not wish to see Mr. Sellers again,” she said.

“You shall not.” He was definite.

A knock sounded, and Rosalind caught her breath. Sebastian stepped out of the room and reached the door before anyone appeared from upstairs. He pulled his gun from his pocket and opened it a fraction.

“The villain’s tied up, Your Grace,” Dawson said. “He’s hunched over in his saddle like the sack of blackhearted coal that he is. Where do you wish him taken?”

“To Camden Hall. Mr. and Mrs. Fairfield should be the first to know the depths to which their nephew was willing to stoop to support his gambling addiction. No doubt Mrs. Fairfield will have someone see to his arm. I will have Grayson go for the magistrate in the morning. He can accompany the gentleman to Camden Hall and represent me there. You may tell them that I will be unavailable for the next couple of days.”

Dawson nodded. “Very good, Your Grace.”

“Thank you, Dawson. Your assistance has been invaluable.”

The head groom’s teeth flashed in the candlelight. “It’s been a sight more exciting than mucking out stalls.”

“I daresay,” Sebastian said. “But I shall be glad of some less exciting days after this.”

Dawson bowed and disappeared. Sebastian stayed standing at the open door. Rosalind ventured out of the kitchen but remained behind him, listening. She heard men’s voices, the words indistinguishable but the tones urgent. The dog barked. Mr. Beckett whistled, and then came the familiar thud of hooves.

“Is he gone?” she asked.

Sebastian turned to face her. “Yes.”

“May we go home?”

He took her arm and pushed up his jacket sleeve until her hand appeared. He wrapped his fingers around hers. “Right away,” he said.

Upstairs, a newborn baby cried. The sound of the back door opening and closing reached them. Moments later, Mr. Beckett appeared in the hall, pocketing the door key. “You have my thanks, David,” Sebastian said.

The shepherd rubbed his hand across his weary face. “A nasty piece of work, that, Yer Grace. Glad to be of help.” He inclined his head toward Rosalind. “Hopin’ you made it through the ordeal all right, Yer Grace.”

“I did, thanks largely to you and your remarkable dog.”

“Aye. It’s been a while since he’s had any practice goin’ against a predator.” He gave a satisfied smile. “Looks like he hasn’t forgotten how.”

“Not at all,” Sebastian said. “In fact, I believe Mott deserves a bone from the Finley Park kitchen.”

Mr. Beckett’s smile widened. “I reckon he’d like that very much.”

“Consider it done.” He led Rosalind outside. “Good night to

you, David—such as there is remaining.”

“And to you, Your Grace.”

## CHAPTER 32

IT WAS STILL DARK WHEN Sebastian and Rosalind rode into the Finley Park courtyard. The lack of lanterns at the door or candles at the window suggested that the household staff remained unaware of all that had occurred over the last few hours.

“I will need to take Tempest to the stables,” Sebastian said. “But I can help you dismount at the house first.”

Rosalind raised her head from its position against his chest. He could not make out the expression or muddy smudges on her face, but he knew that she was looking at him. “Let me come with you.” He detected the tremor in her voice. “I would rather not enter the house alone.”

“Very well, we shall go together.” He tightened his hold on her and guided his mount toward the stables.

They traveled the remaining short distance in silence. When Sebastian reined Tempest to a halt outside the stables, he dismounted and pounded on the door. Wesley must have been watching for them, because Sebastian did not have to wait long before the latch lifted and the boy’s face appeared in the narrow strip of light coming from within. He recognized Sebastian immediately and pulled the door open wide. Sebastian took Tempest’s reins and led his horse inside.

As soon as they were within the shelter of the stable, Sebastian released the leather straps and reached for Rosalind. She placed her hands on his shoulders, and he lifted her down. She took a shaky step.

He placed a steadying arm around her. “Can you manage?”

She nodded. Taking a deep breath, she straightened her narrow shoulders in his oversized coat and offered him a small smile. “I will be well.”

Wesley hovered nearby, watching with wide eyes. He was obviously awaiting instructions.



Sebastian dragged his attention from Rosalind to his horse. “Give him a good rubdown, Wesley. He had a hard run through the mud.”

Wesley nodded. “I’ll take good care of ’im, Yer Grace.”

“Dawson will return later this morning. I trust that you and the other hands know what to do in his absence.”

“Yes, Yer Grace.”

“Good lad. I’ll leave you to it.”

Wesley reached for the reins. He started leading Tempest away, but then he stopped and turned to Rosalind. “If you don’t mind me sayin’ so, Yer Grace, I’m right glad yer back safely.”

A flicker of surprise flashed through Rosalind’s eyes. She did not know that Wesley had been privy to Sebastian’s conversation with Dawson.

“Thank you, Wesley.”

How Rosalind could appear elegant dressed in a mud-spattered dressing gown and an oversized gentleman’s coat, Sebastian could not fathom. But she did. And when she smiled at the stablehand, color flooded the boy’s face. Wesley ducked his head and led Tempest into his stall.

“Come,” Sebastian said. “It is long past time that you were out of those muddy clothes and safely ensconced in a warm bedchamber.”

Rosalind sighed. “I rather think that we had this very same conversation a few hours ago.”

“It does seem that way.” He kept his arm around her. Since they had to brave the cold all the way to the house, it made perfect sense. It was also precisely what he wanted to do. “Do we need to confine you to your rooms for a few days to keep you from getting wet and muddy again?”

“Perhaps the workshop or the library would be better locations,” she said. “With you there to ensure that I stay dry.”

Her eyes twinkled in the candlelight, and Sebastian chuckled. “Worthy suggestions, Your Grace. I shall take them

under advisement.”

“Good, but in the meantime, I am ready for another warm bath.”

They hurried to the house, not wanting to be outdoors any longer than necessary. Winter’s long nights were almost upon them, and even though morning would soon be here, darkness bathed the house still. Sebastian pushed open the front door and ushered Rosalind inside. A maid was crossing the entrance hall, a coalscuttle in hand. She stared at Sebastian and Rosalind as though they were apparitions.

When Sebastian closed the door and moved farther into the room, she gulped and bobbed a hasty curtsy. “Good ... good morning, Your Grace.”

“Good morning,” Sebastian said. It felt like the wrong greeting entirely. Somehow, he’d missed an entire night’s sleep. “I need to speak with Vickers and Mrs. Frost. Have they arisen?”

“I’ll fetch them,” the maid said. “Right away.” She bobbed another curtsy and all but fled across the hall to the servants’ entrance.

Sebastian waited. Now that they were safely returned to Finley Park, tiredness was hitting him like a sledgehammer. He removed the satchel and rolled his shoulders.

“You must be exhausted.” Rosalind was watching him, concern in her eyes.

“I will survive.” He offered her a wry smile. “So long as I reach my bed within the hour.”

She glanced at the longcase clock and nodded. “One hour. I shall hold you to that, no matter how many seemingly urgent duties arise in the meantime.”

“Ah, my survival is important to you?”

“Yes.” He had spoken in jest; she had not. She met his eyes. “Most important.”

He took her hand. Across the hall, a door opened and footsteps—steady and sure—crossed the tile toward them.

Sebastian turned to greet his butler.

“Is something amiss, Your Grace?” Vickers kept his eyes on Sebastian, but he could not have missed Rosalind’s appearance.

“Yes. Rather a lot, actually.” Sebastian ran his hand across his face, attempting to gather his thoughts. His first priority was Rosalind. “Is Mrs. Frost available?”

“I am here, Your Grace.” The older lady tugged her mobcap into place as she hurried to join them.

“Her Grace has endured a grueling few hours and is in need of a warm bath, clean clothes, and rest,” he said.

It was a credit to his housekeeper that she exhibited no incredulity over Rosalind’s current condition and no dismay over his instructions. As far as he could remember, they were almost exactly what he had told her when they’d returned from rescuing Mrs. Tucker.

“I assure you, this will be the last time in the foreseeable future that I arrive back at the house in such disarray, Mrs. Frost,” Rosalind said, her thoughts obviously mirroring his.

“It seems to me that you’ve been put through far more than you should, Your Grace. I’m only sorry that you have had such a difficult time of things.” Mrs. Frost appeared genuinely concerned. It seemed that when it came right down to it, her motherly instinct was stronger than her decorum observance. “I shall have some water put on the stove, and we shall have you put to rights again in no time.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Frost,” Rosalind said. “And might I ask that the same courtesy be extended to the duke?”

“Of course. I shall notify James immediately.” Mrs. Frost crossed the hall with purpose.

Rosalind offered Sebastian a tired smile. “You have forty-one minutes remaining, Your Grace.” Wearily, she turned and took a step toward the stairs. She stumbled, and Sebastian reached for her, catching her elbow.

“Wait,” he said. “I will walk you to your rooms.”

She looked at the satchel he held. “You have other more important things.”

Sebastian’s grip on her arm tightened. “Nothing is more important.” Her eyes met his, searching, questioning. He did not look away. “Nothing,” he repeated softly. The look in her eyes changed, and his heart pounded a second witness that his words were true. He extended the bag to his butler. “Take this, Vickers,” he said. “Do what you can to brush off the dirt. Most of the mud has dried. There’s no need to open the satchel. I have already checked the contents; nothing is damaged.”

Vickers accepted the bag. “I will see to it immediately, Your Grace. Shall I put it in your study afterward?”

“Yes. Leave it there until the courier comes. I anticipate that he will be here by noon. I will be unavailable, but tell him that the bag contains all that he needs, and send him on his way posthaste.”

“Very good, Your Grace.”

“Sebastian, are you sure?” Rosalind’s voice was little more than a whisper.

“Absolutely,” he said. “I trust Vickers completely. Meikle obviously trusts his courier completely. My presence is unnecessary.” He guided her across the hall. “And at this moment, my priorities lie elsewhere.”

\* \* \*

Sebastian’s priority was getting some sleep. That was surely what he had meant. Rosalind’s head repeated the sensible refrain over and over again. Unfortunately, her heart was in vehement disagreement, and its unsteady rhythm was doing little to help her ascend the stairs. Perhaps he recognized her shakiness, even if he did not know its cause, because he kept his hand on her elbow all the way up the staircase and along the passage until they reached her bedchamber.

“I think it’s likely that we have beaten the servants here,” he said.

After all they’d gone through over the last few hours, it was hard to believe that everyone else in the household was just

waking up to a new day after having had a very ordinary night's rest.

"I imagine you are right," she said, opening the door.

The room was dark and uninviting.

"Allow me to light a candle." Sebastian moved ahead of her, walking through the small sitting area to the bedchamber. He picked up the candle on the writing desk and moved to the fireplace to find the flint. Moments later, the candle flickered to life and Rosalind entered. The fire in the fireplace had died, and her bedcovers were tossed aside—just as she'd left them. She glanced at Sebastian. He had not moved. His attention was on the open connecting door.

"I unlocked it a few days ago," she said, wondering if her heart would ever recover from the pounding it was receiving this night. "I ... I opened it to find you ... to warn you of the man ..." She swallowed. "Of Mr. Sellers outside."

"I see." He looked at her. "Would you like me to close it again?"

She hung her head. "Perhaps it might be best—"

"I should leave before the maids arrive." He set the candle on the mantelpiece and reached the connecting door before she knew what he was about.

"Sebastian, wait!" He stopped, his hand on the doorknob. "You did not allow me to finish." She moved closer. "I think it might be best if we close the door while Polly attends to my bath, but afterward, if ... if you do not mind terribly, I would prefer to have it open."

There was a moment of complete silence. Rosalind scarcely dared to breathe.

He crossed the threshold into his room, his hand still on the doorknob. "As a matter of fact," he said, finally turning to face her. "I would not mind at all."

Relief washed over her. She stepped forward, and he met her in the doorway. From the passage, the distinctive clang of pails reached them.

He cupped her cheek in his hand. “I will close the door behind me. Whenever you are ready, you may open it. We are both desperately in need of a few hours’ sleep, but later this afternoon, if the weather allows, would you take a walk with me?”

“Yes,” she said breathlessly.

A knock sounded on the other door. Sebastian leaned down and brushed her lips with his, then he stepped back and pulled the door closed behind him.

Rosalind stood staring at the closed door, her heart soaring.

“Your Grace?” Polly’s voice broke through her trance.

“Come in, Polly,” she said. “I am a mess, once again.”

## CHAPTER 33

ROSALIND OPENED HER EYES AND blinked. Daylight was streaming through the chinks in the curtains. She rolled over. A dull ache spread down her arm, bringing with it memories of all that had happened during the night. Pushing herself into a sitting position, she surveyed the room. The bathtub and pails were gone from before the fireplace. Polly and one of the other maids had taken them away after Rosalind had bathed and changed. Sebastian's jacket—the one she had worn back to Finley Park—lay draped across the back of a chair, but her soiled dressing gown was nowhere to be seen.

She looked at the adjoining door. It stood open. She'd not spoken to Sebastian since he'd retreated to his bedchamber. It had seemed best to wait for Polly to leave before slipping out of bed to open the door again. His room had been completely silent by then, and she had gone no farther than the doorway. But just knowing that he was there, within calling distance, had helped her push past the terrifying images of her time with Mr. Sellers. Sleep had been a welcome escape.

Stifling a moan at the discomfort associated with movement, she stiffly slipped out from under the covers and tiptoed to the adjoining door. She peeked into Sebastian's room. Although filtered by the curtains, pale light bathed the furnishings well enough for her to make out the bed in the center of the room. Its occupant was buried beneath the bedding. She waited a moment, but when Sebastian showed no sign of stirring, she hurried back across her own bedchamber and gathered up his jacket from the chair.

Moving quietly, she entered his bedchamber and draped his jacket over the back of the closest chair. He shifted in his bed. She froze, horribly aware that although her shift was modest, she was without her dressing gown. He muttered something in his sleep, but then his breathing became deep and even once more. She crept out of the room and closed the door behind her. She did not want him disturbed when Polly came to help

her dress.

She crossed to the window and pulled back the curtain a few inches. White clouds swept across a blue sky. The rain was gone, and the puddles on the terrace below were already beginning to dry out. It was probably damp and chilly, but that should not prevent her from taking a walk with Sebastian this afternoon.

“Please, do not rain,” she whispered to the sky.

A bird flew by and landed on one of the terrace’s stone pillars. It threw back its head and trilled a song. Rosalind smiled. She would take that as a good omen. Letting the curtain fall back, she glanced at the clock. Twenty minutes past twelve o’clock. She did not know whether to request breakfast or luncheon, but whatever arrived, she would be glad of it.

\* \* \*

Sebastian awoke to the distant murmur of female voices. Rosalind. She must be speaking with her maid in her chambers. He sat up in bed, his eyes instantly drawn to the connecting door. It was closed. Disappointment stabbed his chest, but he pushed it aside. She had unlocked the door—wanted it open on occasion—those changes were reason enough for optimism. He reached for the bellpull. There were a few things he must take care of before he saw Rosalind again. Dressing for the day would be a good start.

James arrived soon afterward, carrying a tray. “Cook insisted that I bring you some tea and Chelsea buns, Your Grace,” he said, setting the tray on the bedside table. “I believe her exact words were, ‘It’s what he’ll want no matter the time of day.’”

Sebastian laughed. “There are definite advantages to having a cook who has known one since childhood.”

“I should say so,” James said. He pulled back the curtains.

“How’s the weather?”

“A little blustery,” James said. “But the rain has stopped.”



Rosalind did not mind blustery. And neither did he, especially if she was with him.

James began pulling Sebastian's clothing from the wardrobe. He went to set a clean shirt on the nearby chair and stopped, a puzzled look on his face. "Forgive me, Your Grace. I must have left your jacket out last night. I assume you wish it to be laundered?"

Sebastian looked at the chair over the brim of his teacup. His blue jacket, the one Rosalind had been wearing when they'd parted last night, was lying there. If his valet had no memory of setting it down, there was only one other person who could have done it. His eyes darted to the connecting door, and a smile tugged at his lips. "I fear it is sporting too much mud for a quick brushing." He set his cup on the saucer. "Would you take it downstairs, and while you are there, I need a message delivered to one of the gardeners?"

"One of the gardeners?"

"Yes." Sebastian realized that his valet had likely never had occasion to seek out a gardener before, but it should not be too difficult. "I wish to have the old tree house swept clean and a sturdy ladder set against the tree." He reached for his shirt and began buttoning it. "And I require the job to be completed within the hour."

James placed the jacket over his arm and bowed. "I will see to it right away, Your Grace."

"Thank you, James." Sebastian paused his dressing. "And please tell Mrs. Shoup that she was absolutely right. Indeed, if she has not already sent Chelsea buns to Her Grace, I am quite sure they would be equally well received in her chambers."

"I believe Polly took a tray to Her Grace about half an hour ago, and its contents were very similar to yours."

Sebastian grinned. Rosalind was only thirty minutes ahead of him in her preparations for the day. He would not keep her waiting long.

\* \* \*

When Sebastian knocked on the door to her chambers,

Rosalind was ready.

He had chosen to come to the main door rather than the connecting door, and Polly greeted him with a bobbed curtsy. “Good day, Your Grace.”

“Good day,” Sebastian said. “I believe Her Grace is expecting me.”

Rosalind pressed her hand to her corset and released a breath. Beneath her redingote, she was wearing her favorite peach-colored gown. Polly had spent a little extra time on her hair, and even though her curls would likely be tossed about by the wind, she was perfectly presentable now. Why, then, was she so anxious? Sebastian had simply asked her to accompany him on a walk. Placing one foot before the other was not hard; she’d been doing it most of her life, after all. She stepped forward. “Good day, Sebastian.”

His smile did nothing to help her nerves. “Good day, Rosalind. You look lovely. How did you sleep?”

“Very well,” she said. “And you?” She refrained from commenting on his handsome appearance. It was best to focus on other things.

“I was asleep before my designated hour was up and heard nothing until I awoke at one o’clock.”

Rosalind felt color creep up her neck, but she ignored it. He had been completely unaware of her brief visit to his rooms, she was sure of it. “I am glad to hear it.”

He offered her his arm. “Shall we go?”

She placed her hand on his arm, and they started down the passage. Awareness hummed between them, and Rosalind knew she would be fully undone before they’d even exited the house if she did not do something—or say something—to distract from it.

“Have you spoken to Vickers this afternoon? Did the courier come?”

“He did. Vickers passed off the satchel at ten o’clock this morning. I imagine the courier is well on his way to Scotland

by now.”

“I feel the burden lifted,” she said. “I can scarcely imagine how you must feel at such news.”

He smiled. “Relieved that such vital documents are no longer under my watch care and grateful that, between the two of us, we were able to help Meikle move forward.”

To argue that she played no real role in reworking the calculations would be futile, so she did not try. Instead, she smiled and tucked her arm more securely around Sebastian’s as they descended the stairs together. Vickers was in the entrance hall. He nodded politely as they approached and opened the front doors for them. Sebastian donned the hat he held in his other hand, and they stepped out onto the portico.

The wind tugged at Rosalind’s skirts, and she laughed. “We are in for another blowy walk, I think.”

“Such is late October,” he said. “But I am glad that the rain has stopped, because there is somewhere I wish to take you.”

Intrigued, Rosalind allowed him to guide her down the stairs and along the gravel path that led around to the back of the house. They passed the stables, and it was impossible not to think of all that had happened during the night.

“Have you heard anything from Dawson or Mr. Grayson?” she asked.

Sebastian nodded. “I spoke briefly with Grayson half an hour ago. He came to Finley Park after meeting with the magistrate this morning. Dawson delivered Mr. Sellers safely to Camden Hall. The Fairfields are understandably distraught over the situation, but Mr. Fairfield has agreed to offer whatever assistance he can to liquidate Mr. Sellers’s few assets—primarily his rundown family estate—in an attempt to set things right with his creditors. The magistrate will issue formal charges of armed robbery and kidnapping before the end of the day.”

Rosalind processed that information as they walked. “It’s hard to believe that the thief who treated me so cruelly last night is the very same gentleman who was so gracious at

social functions all Season.”

“The kind of desperation that is brought on by poor choices can warp a man’s thinking,” Sebastian said. “When he realized he had lost his chance at the Langton money, Sellers found himself in an untenable situation: he could allow his clamoring creditors to expose him for the high-stakes gambler and bounder that he is, or he could try one more risky venture that could recoup the money he needed and keep his reputation untarnished.

“I daresay he had planned on breaking into my workshop and leaving with Meikle’s plans without anyone the wiser. It would have taken significant detective work to pin the crime on him, particularly if he had been in London by morning.”

“Your presence in the workshop must have been a bitter blow,” she said.

“As was your arrival.” He glanced at her. “I have not yet thanked you for coming to warn me. Or for retrieving my gun.”

“Neither was quite timely enough.”

“Both showed immense foresight and courage.”

They had reached the grove of trees, and Rosalind turned to face him. “I am fully aware that there were times last night when I was in grave danger, but I am only now coming to understand how much worse things might have been for me.

“If you and I had not been promised to each other, Mr. Sellers may have been successful in persuading me to marry him.” She looked away. After so many years of feeling betrayed by her father, she was starting to see that he had truly acted to protect her. “I would have discovered his subterfuge at some point, but by then, it would have been too late, and there would have been no escape.”

She shuddered, and Sebastian drew her into the protection of the trees. “We have a great deal to be thankful for.” He met her eyes. “I spent too many years resenting my father’s interference in my future instead of opening my eyes to the gift he had offered me.”

“As did I,” Rosalind said.

Sebastian’s smile was fleeting. “When you first visited Finley Park, I was an awkward fourteen-year-old boy who had been taught how to behave like a gentleman but had not yet made those habits my own.” He sighed. “I was rude to you, Rosalind. Abominably rude. I cringe at the memory of what I said to you all those years ago.”

She looked down. “I was hurt. I confess, now that I know you better and realize how unused to having your home overrun by others you were—especially a talkative female—I better understand your reaction.”

“That is no excuse for such poor behavior, and I am truly sorry.” He placed his finger under her chin and gently raised her head until she was forced to look at him. “Can you forgive me?”

The Duke of Kelbrook was a gentleman who could rightly claim that his position allowed him to behave however he wished. And yet, he was asking for her forgiveness. She searched her heart for the ache the memory of that day on Finley Park’s grounds always produced, but it was gone. “I think perhaps I already have,” she said.

With emotion-filled eyes, he took her hand and guided her silently through the trees until they reached a large oak where a wooden ladder stood propped against the trunk. She studied it curiously, counting the rungs until they ended at a square wooden structure in the branches above.

“It’s the tree house,” she said. It was smaller than she remembered. The wooden planks were weathered gray. A rope ladder hung from the narrow opening above, swinging slightly in the breeze. She turned to Sebastian. “Is this what you wished to show me?”

“Not just show you,” he said. “Share with you. I will help you climb up if you’d like to go inside.”

She cocked her head to one side and eyed him suspiciously. “Because I am your wife and you are obligated to?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“Then why?”

Instead of answering, he took hold of the ladder. “The wooden ladder is more secure than the rope version. I will ensure that it does not move whilst you climb.”

“You truly want me to go up?”

“Your mother would likely give me a tongue-lashing for even suggesting it,” he said. “But I think you have waited long enough.”

Rosalind grinned. “For your sake, we should probably keep this little escapade from her.”

“Agreed.” He waited, and when she remained where she was, he raised his eyebrows mischievously. “Well? Do you need me to count the rungs with you as you go?”

“Ten,” she said, raising her skirts and placing her foot on the first rung. “I already counted them.”

Sebastian’s laughter followed her up the ladder. She crawled through the entrance, tugging at her skirts as she went. There was no doubt her mother would be appalled, but Rosalind could barely contain her delight. She inched into the farthest corner and gathered her wide skirts about her. The open window was at her right, and she looked out, marveling at the view until a slight thud announced Sebastian’s arrival at the tree house’s entrance. He clambered in, sitting beside her and twisting so as to fit his long legs in the confined space.

“I think it must have shrunk,” he said. “I used to fit much better than this.”

Rosalind laughed. “It’s wonderful! I feel like a bird looking down on the world from the treetops.” She pointed off into the distance. “You see. There’s the river.” He smiled indulgently, and she suddenly felt foolish. “I forget myself. You ... you’ve seen it all before.”

“Yes. But not for many years, and never with you.”

“I do not suppose the view has changed very much, no matter how long it has been.”

“Rosalind.” His voice was low, insistent. “Over the last few

weeks, you have given me a glimpse of the joy that comes through sharing places and experiences with someone you love. That is why I wanted you to join me in the tree house.”

She turned to face him. He was close enough that she could see her reflection in his blue eyes and smell the citrus and bergamot cologne that was uniquely his.

“I’ve fallen in love with you, Rosalind,” he said. “I don’t know exactly when my feelings for you began to change. It may have been when you barreled into me on a street corner near Langton House and charmed me to distraction or when you stood up to Lord Eppingham and Mr. Sellers at the Marlboroughs’ ball.” His expression changed. “Perhaps it was when I held you in my arms in the carriage after our wedding and realized that I would do everything in my power to prevent you from ever being that unhappy again.” He reached out and touched her face. “I want you to be happy, my darling. More than anything else in the world.”

“How could I be otherwise?” she whispered above the thumping of her heart. “Not only am I married to the honorable Duke of Kelbrook, but I am completely and distractingly in love with him.”

His eyes darkened, the fingers that had been touching her face now in her hair. His other arm circled her back, pressing her against his chest as his gaze flickered to her lips. The wind blew, shaking the tree branches around them. Rosalind released an unsteady breath, and then he was kissing her, and she was soaring—higher than the tree house, higher than the treetops, caught in the swirling breeze with Sebastian.

A sheep bleated in the distance, and from somewhere nearby, a bird trilled its song. Slowly, gently, Sebastian released her. Her eyes fluttered open, and her surroundings came into focus once more.

“Forgive me, my love,” Sebastian said. “I have only now apprehended that we are going about this all wrong.”

“We are?” As far as Rosalind was concerned, nothing had ever felt more right.

He smiled, and she caught the hint of mischief in his eyes. “Indeed. I believe—based purely on my engineering background, you understand—that we would be far more comfortable in this confined space if you were to sit upon my knee.”

Rosalind laughed lightly. “Is that so?”

“Unquestionably.”

“I will gladly defer to your greater expertise.” She shifted to her left, and he lifted her onto his knees.

“Better?” he asked.

She slid her arms around his neck, and he tightened his hold around her waist. “So much better,” she said. “But there is now no doubt in my mind: my mother must never, ever know of this grand adventure.”

“Never,” he said, his eyes warm with emotion. “This secret is between you, me, and the tree house.” And then without another word, he claimed her lips again.



# AUTHOR'S NOTE

ALTHOUGH THE BRITISH INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION is often associated with the nineteenth century, it had its beginnings in the eighteenth century. By the late 1700s, advancements in basic building materials, energy sources, mechanical inventions, transportation, communication, and scientific applications were all in full swing.

In this novel, I chose to reference four innovations that emerged in the early 1780s:

French brothers Joseph-Michel Montgolfier (1740–1810) and Jacques-Étienne Montgolfier (1745–1799) were the inventors of the first practical hot-air balloon. Their experimental flights began in 1782, and the first nontethered human flight took place in 1783 outside Paris.

Sir Richard Arkwright (1732–1792) is sometimes referred to as the father of the modern industrial factory. In 1769, he patented the spinning frame, a machine that twisted threads using wooden and metal cylinders rather than human fingers. Several years later, he improved upon an existing design for a carding machine, and in 1775, he took out a patent for the invention that converted raw cotton into a long skein of thread.

The Iron Bridge, which opened in 1781 across the River Severn in Shropshire, is the first bridge in the world to be made of cast iron. The architect Thomas Farnolls Pritchard (1723–1777) originally proposed the bridge design, and Abraham Darby III (1750–1791) cast the iron at his nearby ironworks.

Andrew Meikle (1719–1811) was a Scottish engineer credited with inventing the threshing machine. Although an earlier version of a similar machine failed, his persistence eventually paid off when he devised a drum that removed the husk by beating the grain rather than rubbing it. Meikle took out a patent on his design in 1788, but other inventors were not far behind, developing threshing machines in the United States

and Australia soon afterward.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



SIAN ANN BESSEY WAS BORN in Cambridge, England, and grew up on the island of Anglesey, off the coast of North Wales. She left her homeland to attend Brigham Young University, where she earned a bachelor's degree in communications, with a minor in English.

She began her writing career as a student, publishing several magazine articles while still in college. Since then, she has published historical, historical romance, and contemporary romantic suspense novels, along with a variety of children's books. She is a *USA Today* best-selling author, a *Foreword Reviews* Book of the Year finalist, and a Whitney Award finalist.

Sian and her husband, Kent, are the parents of five children and the grandparents of three beautiful girls and two handsome boys. They currently live in Idaho, and although Sian doesn't have the opportunity to speak Welsh very often anymore, *Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwlllantysiliogogoc h* still rolls off her tongue.

Traveling, reading, cooking, and being with her grandchildren are some of Sian's favorite activities. She also loves hearing from her readers. If you would like to contact her, she can be reached through her website at [www.sianannessey.com](http://www.sianannessey.com); [her Facebook Group, Author Sian Ann Bessey's Corner](#); and on [Instagram, @sian\\_bessey](#).



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