



The
COUNTESS'S
SECRET

AMAZON BESTSELLING AUTHOR
FANNY FINCH

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The Countess' Secret

Prologue

Rosaline

Buckinghamshire, 1815.

“Oh, if only I could be still,” Rosaline murmured to herself as she bobbed on her toes. It was a nervous habit of hers, constantly moving, as if dancing, though she prayed some of the action was hidden by the grand gown she was wearing tonight.

Casting a glance down at her dress, Rosaline breathed in deeply, laying her fingers to the gossamer thin layers of the skirt. It was quite stunning, in every way.

Never did I think I would be so fortunate to wear a gown like this.

The gown was ivory white, with a thin lace over the skirt falling down from the high waist under the bust. Along this

same seam were dark red accents with bold thread. Circling her body, the red thread stood out, complimenting the color of her hair, as it wound its way up the chest line in a rose pattern and culminated in tufts of red at the shoulders.

“At this rate, you’ll be exhausted before any man can ask you to dance.” The witty words of Chloe, Miss Green, earned Rosaline’s attention. She turned around in the ballroom to greet her friend with a smile.

“Oh, Chloe. I should not be here!” Rosaline said in a hasty whisper.

“Whyever not?” Chloe took her arm and purposefully drew her forward, across the ballroom.

“This is the opposite direction of where I was going...”

“You thought I had not noticed you were hiding in a corner?” Chloe asked with a smile. “Well, you will not be

permitted to hide anymore.

“It is not that I was hiding, merely observing. I never thought *I* would be so fortunate to see an event like this. It is quite wondrous,” Rosaline gushed, ooh-ing and ahh-ing as they passed punch bowls full of glistening red punch topped with crystallized oranges. “From the smallest detail to the grandest spectacle, oh...what a sight this is!”

Rosaline smiled as her eyes cast around the ballroom. To their left, the dancers took to the dancefloor, each one smiling and hopping to the happy tune of the cotillion that was playing. Ladies’ heads trussed with feathers or pearls turned back and forth, as gentlemen sweated a little in the heat of the room, occasionally patting their black tailcoats with the palms of their hands in the hope their perspiration would not be noticed. Tables were full of crystal glasses, some stacked high in amazing displays. One stack even resembled a swan, around which, a multitude of ladies stood together, whispering into one another’s ears.

“I have walked into a dream, Chloe,” Rosaline whispered.

“I know what you mean.” Chloe sighed. “Never did I think I would be so fortunate as to see my designs here.”

“You deserve it.” Rosaline squeezed her friend’s hand in comfort, and thought of how far Chloe had come.

Born to a Baron, but one that had fallen from fortune, Chloe did not have the money to her name that many ladies had here. Yet, that did not discourage her. Working with her own wits, she was quite the seamstress and designer, and was hoping to open a modiste’s shop in town. Tonight was the announcement of her designs to the ton, and so far, it was going well. Many ladies stared and longed to know just who had designed these dresses.

Rosaline wore one such design, along with two other seamstresses, just like her. Chloe wore a fourth, and finally,

the fifth and finest gown was worn by their hostess for the evening, the Duchess of Suffolk, a great friend to Chloe.

Self-consciously, Rosaline looked between herself and the other ladies in the room, just as the Duchess walked past, not far in the distance. Ladies followed in her wake, eager to know the designer of the Duchess' gown.

I truly do not belong here. Who would invite a seamstress to an event of the ton?

“Now, no more hiding,” Chloe pleaded in Rosaline’s ear. “Let us circle for a while, so people can see your gown, and...” She paused, evidently seeing that Rosaline’s eyes had trailed away.

Rosaline kept looking toward the dancefloor, finding the ideas of her heart running away with her.

What would it be like to dance tonight with a gentleman?

“And maybe you will be asked to dance if I introduce you to enough men?” Chloe said, tugging on Rosaline’s arm to draw her attention back. “Clearly, it is what you hope for.” Chloe smiled, showing she was being playful.

“No, I do not.” Rosaline shook her head.

“Why should you not hope for it? You have just as much right to dance with a gentleman here as any lady does.”

She is kind to me.

Rosaline was drawn away by Chloe, following in her wake. It wasn’t long before Rosaline found herself amongst the wealthiest of the guests.

She stood near the entrance as Chloe was introduced to many approaching ladies by the Duke and Duchess of Suffolk.

Rosaline hung just behind them, trying to listen into every word with keen interest, yet she kept growing distracted.

The group of ladies she had noted earlier kept drawing Rosaline's eye. Turning away, she watched them for a few minutes, then recognized what was afoot. Whilst some were admiring the gowns on display here tonight, others were turning their noses up, quite literally, and angling their chins away, in derision.

They are gossiping!

More than one lady whispered to a friend behind a cupped hand or a fluttering fan, then gestured rather subtly in the direction of another amongst them, before sharing a giggle with their friend. They seemed to take delight in putting another woman in their group down.

Why must some ladies behave this way?

It all rather reminded Rosaline of being a child and playing in the streets of Covent Garden outside of her father's shop. When he was hard at work, creating gowns or fine suits, he would urge her outside to play with the other shopkeepers' children. Some children were welcoming, others were fond of belittling each other, pulling at hairs tied up with ribbon. Rosaline could remember once being belittled for the color of her hair, for it was so red, and having a white ribbon tugged out of her locks by another girl, who had left the ribbon in a dirty puddle.

It riled at Rosaline so much to think that some ladies had not changed with age, it meant she was so fixed upon watching them, she quite forgot to pay attention to the introductions by the door to the ballroom. She was aware of Chloe speaking with a lady, someone Rosaline didn't recognize, then the Duchess abruptly moved to Rosaline's side.

“Rosaline, how are you enjoying your first ball?” the Duchess asked.

“Oh, your Grace.” Rosaline hurried to curtsy, catching the glimpse of humor in the Duchess’ eyes. The Duchess was never one for great reverence. She had hired Rosaline as one of her seamstresses shortly after marrying the Duke and had often been known to come and sit with Rosaline and the other seamstresses to talk.

I do not imagine many duchesses do that!

“It is quite spectacular,” Rosaline whispered in a hurry to the Duchess. “Thank you so much for inviting me, your Grace.”

“Do not thank me. It is we who should be thanking you. After all, you are wearing one of Chloe’s gowns. I have so long hoped to help my friend with her career. Now, we have our opportunity to do so. It gladdens me, more than I can say.”

“Me too, your Grace.” Rosaline looked at Chloe a couple of strides away. Her long dark hair was curled delicately at the

back of her head, and as she turned to smile at two people she was talking to, the light in her eyes was visible.

Chloe was always like this, full of life, wit, humor, and kindness. Rosaline had much to thank Chloe for, as she had helped Rosaline with her own work when it came to being a seamstress. She would be glad to see Chloe do well.

“Who is Chloe talking to?” Rosaline asked the Duchess.

“The lady beside her is Lady Shrewsbury, a friend to me and particularly to Chloe.” At the Duchess’ words, Rosaline recognized the gown. It was the last gown to be designed by Chloe for the evening. She had heard of Lady Shrewsbury before, talked of by Chloe and the Duchess, who was a keen supporter of Chloe’s designs. “The gentleman you see is the Earl of Gloucester, Simon Bingley.”

With these words, the Duke moved an inch to the side, revealing fully the Earl of Gloucester to Rosaline.

Oh my...

Rosaline felt her mouth turn dry at the very sight of the gentleman. She had seen enough handsome gentlemen here tonight, but she had not expected one to have such a piercing stare. He was looking straight at her, with his dark green orbs unrelenting. Then he smiled, such a lovely smile that Rosaline couldn't help returning it.

“Perhaps I should have started by introducing him,” the Duchess whispered with a smile. Rosaline tried to look away from the earl, as if she had not been staring so openly at a gentleman so startlingly above her in position.

He's moving this way!

The Earl of Gloucester must have said something to Chloe, for the next thing Rosaline knew, Chloe and Lord Gloucester were walking toward her, away from the others.

“Rosaline?” Chloe called. The Duchess quickly whispered to Rosaline that she’d leave her alone for this introduction and left. “May I introduce the Earl of Gloucester to you. He has been admiring your gown.”

Rosaline was so busy staring at Lord Gloucester as he approached in surprise, that she quite forgot her manners. She thought of his tall height, the athleticism there, and the dark auburn hair that was coiffed so neatly. His features were long, and handsome for it, emphasizing that lovely smile.

Abruptly, Rosaline felt Chloe’s hand on her wrist, pulling her into a curtsy.

“Lord Gloucester, this is my good friend Miss Rosaline Baker. She is a seamstress here at the estate and helps me with the Duchess’ gowns.”

“You helped make these creations?” Lord Gloucester seemed impressed as he offered Rosaline a rather deep bow.

When hearing I am just a seamstress, why is he bowing so deeply?

Rosaline would not have blamed him for turning his nose up at her at this revelation. She was sure many a gentleman here would have done, yet Lord Gloucester didn't.

“They are all Chloe’s designs, of course. I mean, Miss Green’s.” Rosaline hurried to correct herself, knowing in formal company that she should use Chloe’s proper address. “But yes, I help as a seamstress. I must confess how lucky I feel tonight to be here, my lord.”

“You do?” the Earl said with a smile. If Rosaline wasn't mistaken, he found amusement in the ball as he looked around it.

“Of course.” Rosaline nodded eagerly. “Never have I been to such an event before. I do not think I have ever witnessed such beauties, such...grandeur!” Something about what she said made that lovely smile flicker a little wider.

Rosaline found herself staring at him some more, quite entranced.

“In my experience, Miss Baker, it is the people that can make these events special, rather than the grandeur.” He spoke as if they were alone, in a whisper, sharing a great secret, quite ignoring Chloe was beside them. Rosaline offered him a quizzical look, one he must have understood, for he went on. “As much as it pains me to say it, not all of these events are as fun as they should be.”

“Oh, I hope this one turns out to be,” Rosaline said excitedly. This was to be her one and only ball. Never would she be so fortunate to be invited to something like this again, so she intended to make the most of it.

“Have no fear, Rosaline.” Chloe seemed to inch back a little as she spoke. “As Lord Gloucester here has said, these events are made wondrous by the people in attendance, and I have no doubt the Duke and Duchess have invited many fine friends here tonight.”

Rosaline nodded, though in truth, she didn't one look away from Lord Gloucester. He seemed to be staring at her too, just as openly.

Does he feel this too?

Rosaline had heard of such things before. *Attraction...* That deep feeling of being drawn to another, yet never had she thought she could be so attracted to a gentleman she had just met. Perhaps there was something in the way he spoke too, this deep voice and the way he whispered to her, sharing secrets. It all made her long to know him better.

“Ahem.” Chloe cleared her throat. Rosaline snapped her eyes to Chloe, noticing the rather amused smile Chloe was trying to bite down on.

Oh no, she can see it!

“Lord Gloucester, I know Rosaline here was eager to dance tonight, so that she could enjoy the event to its fullest.” Chloe’s words were not subtle. Rosaline felt a wave of embarrassment and widened her eyes, but it did little to stop Chloe’s question. Rosaline feared her cheeks would soon be as red as her hair.

“Well, I’d be keen to be your first dance partner of the night, Miss Baker, if you would do me the honor?” Lord Gloucester offered Rosaline his hand.

He wishes to dance with me?

Rosaline struggled to find the words, yet her body acted of its own accord. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she supposed a part of her thought it might look odd to others, that a seamstress was dancing with an earl, but when it was this earl offering to dance with her, everything seemed very *natural* about the idea.

“I would love that, my Lord,” Rosaline said, finding her voice as Lord Gloucester drew her toward the dancefloor.

As they approached the other dancers, Rosaline grew aware of Lord Gloucester stealing as many glances at her as she did him. The attraction was mutual, it was plain not just in those looks but in the touch of their hands, feather light, as if the very tips of a feather were brushing her hand.

When they reached the dancefloor and parted, ready to bow and curtsy, Rosaline was quite breathless. She couldn't help feeling that this moment changed things. It wasn't just the attraction that burned there, but the meeting in itself.

I hope Lord Gloucester stays in my life.

The music began and they bowed and curtsied. When the music struck up a waltz, Rosaline felt herself taken into his arms, with one light hand on her waist and the other taking her palm.

“Well, I did not think I would be so fortunate as to have a dance partner such as you tonight, Miss Baker,” Lord Gloucester said as he began the dance.

“How strange, my Lord, I was just thinking the same about you.”

He smiled, that lovely smile again that made her heart beat harder, then all effort was devoted to their dance and the touch of their hands grew stronger.

Chapter 1

Rosaline

Six months later.

“Oh! Father, can you believe all that has passed in such a few months?” Rosaline asked as she stood by the mirror, turning back and forth excitedly, bobbing on her toes as she looked into her reflection.

“No, I can’t.” His voice missed any of her enthusiasm.

Rosaline didn’t take notice at first. She was too busy looking at her reflection, in scarce belief of the gown she was wearing, or the day that was upon her.

Today, I marry Simon.

She closed her eyes and thought back to the first dance they had shared the night of the Duchess of Suffolk’s ball.

From that first moment, there was a spark there, a bond, but she had not realized just how that bond was grow and blossom into something as strong as it was now.

I love him, dearly, more than I thought it possible to love.

Opening her eyes again, Rosaline looked at her wedding gown. Though Rosaline had said she did not need anything expensive, Simon had insisted she had the gown she desired. Chloe had designed it, of course, and Rosaline had even offered help with the sewing.

Cinched high on the waist, just under the bust, the gown fell to the floor in soft cream silks. Inspired by the gown Rosaline had worn the first night she had met Simon, there were red accents throughout. However, this gown had accents in the skirt too. Periodically, red roses bled through the cream silk, more concentrated toward the hemline, bordered with lace. Across the bust, there were dark red beads, leading to the

sleeves that were made of pale cream silk, finishing at the elbow.

“Is it not a beautiful gown, Father? Chloe has outdone herself,” Rosaline gushed as she giggled and turned round to face her father.

“Yes, quite beautiful.” Still, he did not share her excitement. He seemed rather morose to Chloe’s eyes, fussing with the bouquet she was to carry. He kept arranging the flowers, in the effort to make them just right.

“Father?” Rosaline said, her voice calmer this time. “Is all well?” She approached him and laid her hands over his on the stems of the bouquet. Between them, the red roses and the honeysuckle were filled with sweet scent. Alfred seemed to have his gaze set upon these blooms rather than her.

“I am sorry, Rosaline, you no doubt do not wish to hear my protests again.”

“Father, we agreed... No protests today.”

“Then let us not call them protests. Let us call them concerns.” He lifted his gaze to meet hers. “This courtship with Lord Gloucester. It has been so fast.”

“Do you believe it to be too fast?” Rosaline was tempted to dance on the spot, in her old nervous habit. She allowed herself just one bob instead, fearing her father’s next words.

“Sometimes,” he seemed to chew his lip with the thought. “I do not doubt the man’s devotion to you, Rosaline. I saw him turning up at our door every day for three months straight, he was so keen on seeing you.”

“Is that not enough then to assure you all is well, Father?”

“That is early love,” Alfred whispered, as if afraid to utter the words. “A love that lasts a lifetime, that can last a

marriage, well, that is quite different in my mind.” He fussed with the flowers between them. “Your mother had these in her bouquet,” he gestured to the red roses. “I remember them well.”

Rosaline took one of her father’s hands off the bouquet and clutched it in her own.

“I wish she were here too.” They smiled rather sadly at one another.

Rosaline’s mother had died long ago, of consumption, when Rosaline was still quite young. Never had Rosaline doubted the bond that had been between her parents, even after her mother’s death. Alfred had never thought of marrying again, and simply devoted himself to his business and to raising Rosaline.

“She should be here,” Alfred whispered then moved toward Rosaline. He kissed her on the forehead, a dotting touch

that brought such a smile to Rosaline's cheeks that any tension between the two of them seemed to disappear.

“Trust me, Father. I love Simon, and he loves me. Granted, maybe we are marrying quite quickly, but I have seen many a person marry earlier than we, and have been happy for it,” Rosaline said in a rush. “I do not doubt he and I will be happy together.”

“Yes, I am sure you're right.” Though Alfred's tone was not quite as buoyant as Rosaline's own. “I remember the early days of your courtship, partly because they weren't not long ago.”

“Oh, Father,” Rosaline laughed at him.

“He quite insisted on taking you promenading. He was never afraid of showing you off in front of the ton, was he?” Alfred seemed perplexed by the idea, with his own dark red brows that were beginning to turn white in his old age

furrowed together. “He was never ashamed of the disparity in your position.”

By now, Rosaline knew how true this was.

“Simon does not care for where one is born in this world. He says it is the heart and mind that count, not the estates and purses we come with.” She had heard him use these very words countless times.

Rosaline took the bouquet from her father as she thought about all that had passed between her and Simon. Early on, she had grown nervous, and knowing the vast difference in their stations, she had asked Simon to speak plainly of why he was not afraid to court her. He had been quite open on the matter.

‘What do I care for where you are born? It is who you are that matters! What bothers me about this world is the stock people put in such things as position. My father was the same.’

Over a drink and a rather stilted game of cards, Simon had told her of the difficult relationship he'd had with his father. How the last Earl of Gloucester had quite looked down on anyone who was not a part of the ton. Simon had rebelled and practically cut himself off from his father in his later years.

Simon never regretted it. Before his father had passed, they had talked, but Simon knew they would never see eye to eye on such matters. Simon saw the good in everyone and saw more nobility in the action of a miner working long hours to feed his family, than he saw in a lazy politician who fell asleep in the House of Commons, purporting to do good for the country.

“Simon is different to other gentlemen of the ton, Father,” Rosaline explained to Alfred. “He loves me, and I love him. We will be happy together; I promise you that.”

“Then I wish you every ounce of luck I can.” Alfred allowed himself his first full smile. “I hope the ton will accept

you with open arms, and will not be...”

“Be what?” Rosaline asked, prompting her father on.

“No. We have had enough doom and gloom today,” Alfred shook his head, refusing to go on. “Today is a day of celebration, so let us get to it. Here, I made you something. I know Lady Felton was to make your gown, but I have something special for you.” He turned away, delving a hand into a leather satchel in search of something.

Rosaline smiled to hear Chloe’s new title used. It had not been long since Chloe had married herself. She had married the Duchess of Suffolk’s brother, Lord Felton, in a very happy ceremony indeed.

“Here you go,” Alfred said, turning back and presenting a gift to her. Wrapped up in tissue paper, Rosaline took the bundle excitedly, unwrapping it in a hurry. “You’ve always had the same look with presents. Even as a child, those amber

eyes of yours went wide. I imagine any child of yours will be just the same.”

“Ha! You’re jumping ahead a bit.” Rosaline giggled as she pulled at the last bit of tissue paper, tugging it away.

When the cream silk fell before her, Rosaline smiled. It was a perfect match for her wedding gown, right down to tiny roses that were sewn into the hem. Unfurling it completely, Rosaline found it was a shawl, handmade by her father.

“You talked to Chloe about the design, did you not?” Rosaline asked, her eyes lighting up.

“I did.” Alfred nodded. “Lady Felton is a good woman. She has forgiven my...” He struggled to speak. It was still a sore spot between Rosaline and her father every now and then, the way that he had attempted to destroy Chloe’s business when it had first begun, but he had done much to make up for it since. “Well, anyway. She was kind enough to show me the design in advance, so I could make you this to go with it.”

“Thank you, Father. It is quite beautiful.” She stood on her toes and kissed her father on the cheek.

“There. Quite perfect, and ready to be wed.” Alfred encouraged her toward the door of the chamber, just as two excited knocks came from on the other side.

Rosaline smiled the closer she got to the door, listening to the voices beyond.

“She’ll be late!” the Duchess of Suffolk was panicking.

“And where is Lord Gloucester going to? He’ll wait at the church like a lapdog would its owner,” Chloe said with her usual wit. “Trust me, Lord Gloucester is not going anywhere.”

“I know that,” the Duchess continued on.

Rosaline opened the door, greeting her friends who both smiled wider when they saw her gown.

“Rosaline, my dear,” the Duchess gushed, her smile wide. “You look quite stunning.”

“You are too kind to me, your Grace,” Rosaline hurried to say.

“Indeed, she is not,” Chloe stepped forward, opening the door wider. “She speaks the truth. She also speaks the truth that we may be a little late. So, come on, it is time to get you and your father to the church.”

Rosaline looked back to Alfred one last time. She could see the nerves there. They were apparent in the way the muscles around his eyes had tensed, but then everything softened, and he smiled, assuring her all was well.

Rosaline threaded the shawl around her shoulders and held onto the bouquet tightly, allowing her friends to lead her through the apartment and head downstairs toward the door. She had been invited to stay the night before the wedding at Chloe's apartments. Once the wedding was complete, she was to return to the house that would soon be her own, the one that she would share with Simon, for their wedding breakfast.

When they reached the door, Chloe fussed with the shawl, pulling it tighter around Rosaline's shoulders.

"The autumnal breeze is here today," she said in a hurry. "For so long summer seems to have staved off winter, but it is here at last!"

"Today of all days too," the Duchess declared with a smile. "If only we'd had one more day of sunshine."

"Is the sun not out?" Rosaline asked.

Chloe and the Duchess exchanged a nervous look before Chloe nodded to her butler.

“Yates, better to show poor Rosaline the damage now.”

The butler opened the door and stepped back, giving Rosaline a view of the busy town street beyond.

“Ah...” Rosaline sighed, looking out at the rain that was pouring down. Whereas the day before there had been a bright blue sky and a golden sun, today, the rain was coming down hard, creating puddles in the street and turning the front stoop that led up to the door into a practical waterfall.

Where the carriage in the road waited for her, the footman hurried to set the roof in place on the phaeton carriage, to shield where she would sit.

“Autumn is indeed here,” Rosaline remarked. It was perhaps not the perfect wedding day when it came to the

weather, but then she remembered just who she was going to meet.

Simon...

The last time she had seen him was in this very building the day before. They'd had a special goodbye, where he had stolen a quick kiss, far away from their chaperone. Rosaline could still feel the tingle of his lips pressed to hers.

'Soon, we won't have to say goodbye to each other again.'

He was right. It was worth getting through any weather to have that moment together.

“Oh well,” Rosaline stepped forward, making her tone buoyant. “I would go through a thunderstorm if it came to it. Besides, with the leaves beginning to fall, it might be quite beautiful, all those russet colors.”

“Beautiful and damp,” Chloe muttered. “Ow.” Rosaline looked round to see the Duchess had stood on Chloe’s toe to make her be quiet. “We best get you to the church, before I suffer any more injuries.”

They laughed together as they hurried toward the carriage, with Alfred standing by the coach and helping them all up one at a time. Once inside, they laughed together at how wet they already were.

Rosaline didn’t mind. She had never pictured a perfect wedding, never had she even thought she would have as grand a wedding as she was having now. Simon had been very particular in only wanting to invite the guests that mattered to them, so the party was to be small, yet his mother had urged him to invite her own guests too. The wedding had grown bigger and no expense had been spared on other matters, such as the flowers and the wedding breakfast.

Simon's mother, who he had recently reconciled with after the argument with his father, had been most insistent that an earl should marry in style. That meant a grand church had been hired for the ceremony, and judging by what Rosaline had overheard, she suspected the wedding breakfast to be quite a spectacle in itself.

"Nervous?" Alfred asked as he took Rosaline's hand. She held tightly onto her father's palm, finding she needed the support just then.

"Yes, but also excited. Deliriously so." Her words seemed to comfort Alfred, who smiled all the more.

"I hope he takes care of you," he whispered, so low that only Rosaline heard him as the Duchess and Chloe continued to talk together.

"Take care of me?" Rosaline frowned, confused by this choice of words. "Who do I need protecting from?"

“Nothing, no one. I’m being silly. Ignore me.” Alfred shrugged off the matter. “So, what do you expect to be served at this wedding breakfast of yours?” he asked, lifting his voice a little.

“I have some ideas,” the Duchess said from across the carriage. “I believe the Dowager Countess is going to some lengths to secure something impressive.”

“Does that mean lots of saffron and spices? Or jewels on the table?” Chloe asked, smiling at her own jest. “I hope it is not the latter, I might struggle to chew them.”

Rosaline laughed hard before looking out of the window, trying to see some glimpse of the church.

I’m coming, Simon. Very soon, I will be with you, and we won’t have to part again.

Chapter 2

Simon

“How is that?” Simon asked as he stood back, staring in the mirror. His valet had long since left, having finished the cravat once, but Simon had fidgeted so much that he had quite knocked it out of place and had to start again himself.

“It looks a little...” Lord Felton put his head on the side as he looked at Simon in the reflection. “Like it has had a drink or two.” He pointedly leaned sideways in emphasis.

Simon hurried to redo the cravat as the Duke of Suffolk chuckled on his other side.

“Were you like this when you got married?” Simon asked, hurrying to tie the cravat. At one point he tied the material around his fingers and had to shake it loose.

“Me?” the Duke asked, controlling his mirth. “I wasn’t so bad. I managed to get dressed and knock a bowl of water over my shoes, so they had to be changed. If you want more stories of disaster, ask Leo what happened at his wedding.”

“I remember the incident with the ring,” Simon laughed, recalling how Lord Felton had nearly dropped the ring he was to give to his wife.

“It was worse when I was getting ready,” Lord Felton called as he stepped away to find a chair. “I knocked over my valet. Quite a bit worse than knocking over a bowl of water.”

“Ah, why can’t I get this right?” Simon moved toward the mirror and tried yet again to tie the cravat just perfectly.

He could hear Lord Felton and the Duke jesting with one another, which left Simon alone with his thoughts as he stared into the mirror.

I can scarcely believe this day is here.

Since the moment Simon had met Rosaline, he thought a part of him knew she would be the woman he married. She was entirely different to any other lady he had ever met. Unaffected by the world of the ton as it was not the world she knew, she was a genuine person. She was honest in everything she did, full of heart, sympathy, and generosity. She had a delightful laugh, that whenever Simon heard it, it had a habit of making him laugh with her.

The first time they had danced together was scored on his memory. It hadn't just been the feeling of a beautiful woman in his arms, with amber eyes that seemed to stare straight into him, it was the fact that she talked to him without pretensions or reserve. She had always been herself with him, and that person was bubbly, excitable, and effervescent about life in general.

She's the champagne of women.

He snickered to himself as he loosened the cravat.

“This is hopeless. Why can’t I tie a cravat?” he asked, looking away from the mirror and turning to his friends, imploring them for help.

“It’s the excitement,” Lord Felton explained from where he was sat on a chair. The Duke leaned on the back of another chair beside him, nodding in agreement.

“It happens to us all.” The Duke shrugged. “Wait until you’re standing by the altar. I’ll be surprised if you can stand still at all.”

“That’s Rosaline’s trick,” Simon murmured to himself. He had a love for the way Rosaline could barely ever stand still, dancing on her toes, bobbing to-and-fro, especially when she was excited or nervous. “Is it the right cravat do you think? Should I be going for something a little more...?” Simone couldn’t quite finish the question, not sure what he was hoping for.

“The cravat is fine.” The Duke assured with a firm nod.

“I think most people tend to look at the bride’s clothes anyway on a day like today.” Lord Felton’s words brought Simon some comfort. “Though I don’t suggest turning up in a vegetable sack. That might stand out a little bit.”

“Just a bit,” Simon concurred and turned away. He abandoned fidgeting with the cravat for a minute as he moved to his window and looked down at the street. What caught his eye there startled him so much that he planted his palms on the window. “Good Lord...”

“What is it?” the Duke asked.

“Pigs might as well be flying,” Simon muttered.

Don't get angry. Not today. Today is a good day.

He could see a stream of deliveries, with delivery boys carrying boxes on their shoulders, and maids hurrying on with sacks behind them. Each one was heading around the townhouse, no doubt aiming for the servants' entrance.

"I fear my mother might have ordered from every market in London for this wedding breakfast," he said with a deep sigh.

"It's just a breakfast." Lord Felton's words didn't help matters.

"Not to my mother," Simon muttered quietly, watching as it started to rain and the delivery boys picked up their pace, running with their boxes. "To her, it's a chance to *boast*."

It was an argument Simon had often had with his father. When the late Lord Gloucester had instructed Simon again and again how it was an earl's duty to look the part, to act the part, and be constantly dignified, untouched by mud, never to cower, never to talk with the lower classes in the street, Simon

had scoffed. He knew the truth of the matter. There was no duty or *nobility* in behaving in such a fashion. His father had simply loved being above others.

It is never how I have wanted to be.

Yet now his father was gone, his mother seemed to be taking up where her husband had left off. Simon half expected it was his efforts to push away the fineries of being an earl, keeping company with writing groups and publishers, rather than the ton, that made her so obsessed with putting on displays of wealth.

“I’m tempted to go wearing that vegetable sack right now,” Simon called over his shoulder to his friends. “At least then it will make it clear to my mother what I think of all of this.” He waved a hand at the window and stepped back.

“Humor her,” the Duke pleaded, calmly. “It is your wedding day.”

The Duke's calmness broke through into Simon's frustration.

"Yes, you are right. I want today to be a good day. It is the end of old arguments and the start of the future."

"Just so. Now, fix your cravat. We have to leave at some point," the Duke said with a humored smile, gesturing to the loosened cravat. With Simon having long dismissed the valet before his friends had arrived, there was no one here to fix the cravat for him.

Simon once again took up the silk and returned to the mirror, trying to fix it, but he didn't get very far. A knock at the door interrupted him and Lord Felton hurried to open it. He took two steps toward it before the Duke called out to him.

"Watch out for that chair leg!" It was a second too late. Lord Felton tripped on the leg and fell into the seat, before holding his arms out with flair.

“It was as if I intended to do that.” He was as surprised as they were to see himself sitting down so perfectly. A second impatient knock at the door sent him to his feet. “I’m coming.”

Opening the door, he revealed a face on the other side that Simon caught sight of in the reflection of the mirror.

Ah... I thought she would already be at the church.

Simon’s mother had appeared there, fidgeting with a bracelet that she wore around her wrist, jet black. It was a mourning bracelet worn in the memory of her late husband.

Georgiana was very tall, almost as tall as Simon himself, and seemed to his mind to be getting slimmer these days. Her thin face was becoming rather gaunt, and the dark auburn hair that had once been so full of life was beginning to grey in places. The green eyes he had also inherited from her lacked the exuberance they’d once had.

These days, Simon believed there was a coldness in his mother's countenance that had not been there before.

"Simon." She smiled, though that smile did not reach her eyes. "If you would excuse me, gentlemen, I would like a minute to speak with my son."

"Of course. We'll meet you by the carriage," the Duke called to Simon and headed for the door. When Lord Felton tripped on the door jam, the Duke managed to catch his arm to stop him from falling in time. Simon laughed softly before the door closed and all fell silent.

Just be happy for me, Mother, I pray.

Abandoning his endeavors with the cravat, he turned to face his mother, smiling, wishing she would return it. She did, though it was still not a full smile. Then, it dropped completely away, making the gauntness of her cheeks quite prominent.

“I fear what your father would have said today.” She fiddled with the jet-black bracelet another time.

“I do not want to hear what he would have said, Mother.” Simon walked away and reached for the side of the room. His shoes were pressed against a wall, so he sat into the nearest chair and put them on. “He would have lectured me on how I should be marrying for money, for position, for connection, would he not?”

“Yes.”

“Then clearly, I know what he would have said, so do not need to hear it. Today, we are to be happy Mother.” Yet she didn’t smile at his words. “Are you not happy at all that I am marrying for love?”

“Love? Is it really what it is?” The dubiousness of her question made Simon so angry that he felt his cheeks heat up. He didn’t answer her but let her go on.

I do not want an argument today.

“It is hardly surprising for a gentleman to lust after a beautiful young woman. Many do so, but they make mistresses of seamstresses. They do not *marry* them.” Her frown was deep, furrowing her brow.

“Mother!” Simon cut her off, having had enough. The anger in his voice silenced her, but he did not let that anger continue for long. He breathed deeply, taking his time over putting his shoes on. “Today, there will be no argument. You will be happy for Rosaline and I.”

“But I beg you to think more on this, my son.” She rushed to his side and dropped to her knees. Simon was so startled she would break her posture out of anything less than rigid that he froze on his chair, watching as she kneeled beside him, with her hands clasped together. “You can still back out of this. You can still refuse to marry her.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because it is not the way things should be. You are an earl. You should not marry a seamstress.”

“Does my father’s ghost walk amongst us? Has he borrowed your lips to speak, Mother?” Simon asked in derision, finding his determination to be calm quickly leaving him.

“I speak to you now with full sincerity, in the effort to wake you up from these childish and romantic notions.”

“Do not belittle me so.” Simon’s voice was so dark that Georgiana shuffled back an inch on her knees.

“I will always try to protect you, my son. It is what I wish to do as your mother.” Her eyes seemed wet for a minute, as if she was fighting tears.

“That maybe so, but I do not need protecting from Rosaline.” Simon shook his head. “Mother, please, listen to me.” He reached for her hand and rested it between his palms, staring at her with so much fervor that she didn’t look anywhere else but straight back at him. “Rosaline is the kindest woman I know. I do not need protecting from her. What I need from you today is to be happy for me.”

“It is not her nature that worries me.” Georgiana shook her head. “It is *who* she is. Right down to her core.”

“What does that mean?” Simon asked, feeling his words come slowly in apprehension.

“It means that she is a seamstress.”

“*Was.*”

“To the ton, she will always be.” Georgiana hissed with the words, as if it were a great secret and awful to speak of,

even though they were alone in the room.

“What do I care for what they think?” Simon shrugged.

“You do not know how bad this will be. Clearly, you are determined to stick your head in the sand and think nothing of it.” Georgiana moved to her feet and stepped away, shaking her head back and forth. “You will soon find not all is as easy as you hope it will be. You will see how they condemn you, hate you for making such a connection. You will be cast out of all good society.”

“Mother, do you not think this is overreacting a little bit? This is like seeing a spot of rain and being certain a thunderstorm is about to come.” Simon laughed at the idea, just once as he stood to his feet and returned to the mirror, trying to fix his cravat. “Nothing will go wrong. Rosaline and I will be happy, and I tell you this now.” He paused, waiting until his mother looked at him in the mirror. Once their gazes were connected through the reflection, he went on. “You will

come today and wish us well. You will be happy for us. Or you will not come at all.”

She looked horrified, her green eyes going wide and her thin lips parting. For a second, Simon thought she might have been fighting tears again, but no tears came and as she approached his side by the mirror, all trace of wetness in her eyes was gone.

“Let me. You’re making a mess of it.” She took his shoulder and turned him around, then fiddled with the cravat, adjusting it for him. “There. It is perfect now.” Standing back, Simon glanced at the mirror to see she was right. “It seems you are all set for the wedding.”

“I am. Thank you.” He nodded at her then looked to the door. Part of him longed to run to Rosaline’s side, to be with her now and to forget this argument with his mother, but then out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of the black bracelet on his mother’s arm and the way she fidgeted with it.

I must mend this relationship. It may not be easy, but my mother and I must improve our connection. I refuse to live my life in arguments forever more.

“Please, Mother,” he offered his arm, “say you will come to this wedding and be happy for me?”

“I will.” Slowly, she took his arm, as if hesitant. “Yet please, Simon, take heed of my warning. Your friends will pull away from you after this. Your life...it will not be as it was.”

Chapter 3

Rosaline

“Amen.” The vicar bowed his head between Rosaline and Simon, before lifting his head and smiling upon them. “I now pronounce you husband and wife.”

Rosaline had never known this sort of feeling before. Her heart fluttered in her chest like the wings of a butterfly, and she was doing her very best to stand still and not let her bobbing ruin the moment. Simon chuckled as an applause went up from behind them in the church and he turned to face her. When the congregation called for a kiss, Rosaline lost her battle and bobbed regardless, waiting for him to kiss her.

He bent down, brushing his lips against her own. It may have been chaste, but it excited Rosaline.

The first kiss as husband and wife.

She gripped his hand a little tighter as he moved back from her, smiling widely.

“Was it what you expected?” he whispered, so only he could hear her.

“I had not expected your mother to go to town with all the flowers.” Rosaline’s eyes went wide as she nodded her head at the vast array of flower displays. Each vase was a spectacle in itself, the bouquets broad, flowing like fountains of blooms. “Everything else though was quite perfect.” She squeezed his hand in emphasis. “And you? Was it everything you expected?”

“Well, I may have thought you would dance much more standing here beside me.” He teased her and wound her hand through his arm. She elbowed him pointedly, drawing a laugh from him, before they descended from the altar and began to walk down the aisle.

Their friends and family congratulated them all the way. The Duke and Duchess of Suffolk were the first ones to step forward, followed by Lord and Lady Felton. Rosaline was delighted to see Gretchen was there too, another seamstress that worked for Chloe. Alfred was one of the last to come forward, kissing Rosaline on the cheek and wishing them both well.

“Take care of her, my lord. For my sake as well as her own,” he pleaded with Simon and offered his hand for a shake.

“I vow to you I will, sir.” Simon bowed, showing deference to Alfred. Rosaline giggled when she saw her father’s surprise. An earl bowing to a tailor? Oh! No doubt some in the ton would be shocked, but it simply made Rosaline love Simon all the more.

He shows people respect, not their positions.

Amongst all the well wishes, Rosaline noted there was one that was missing. As she and Simon reached the door, she

glanced back, searching for where the Dowager Countess of Gloucester stood.

Between the smiling faces, the well-pinned hairdos and the hands throwing dried petals in the air to bless the ground, Rosaline caught sight of a tall figure by the altar. It was the Dowager Countess, moving forward. She bowed her head and seemed to say a silent prayer, before turning and following the rest of the congregation, with not even the hint of a smile on her cheeks.

“Now, home,” Simon’s whisper called Rosaline’s attention back to him. He held her hand on his arm tighter. “Our home, from now on.”

“Just for a short while,” Rosaline reminded him. “We are going to the country estate at the weekend, are we not?”

“You can depend on it,” he assured her as they stepped out of the church door. “Now we are wed, I am planning on keeping you to myself for a little while yet.” His seductive

whisper in her ear made a shiver of excitement run up her spine, then they both halted as they reached the door that was flung open.

Beyond the oak church door, it was raining heavily. Thunder rumbled, interrupting the congregations' chatter and calls of congratulations.

“Not quite what we were hoping for, was it?” Simon asked, grinding his teeth a little in a grimace. Rosaline shrugged, unbothered by it.

“Well, we are going to get wet anyway, aren't we?” she asked, and stepped out. She danced in the rain for a moment, so sodden within seconds that people laughed and soon followed her. The children that had come to the wedding jumped up and down in puddles. Amongst them, Rosaline saw the Duchess with her son, making a mess and enjoying themselves. Some ladies covered back, horrified their gowns were becoming dirty and wet. Rosaline's friends were not so bothered though. Chloe and Gretchen hurried out, running in

the rain toward their carriages, merely enjoying the excitement of rushing through the water.

Rosaline reached back and offered Simon her hand. He didn't hesitate but took it. The moment their hands touched Rosaline was reminded of the first night where she had taken his hand to go dancing.

If only I had known then what we were leading to.

“We won't let a little rain get us down, will we?” Rosaline called to him over the sound of the thunder as they ran for the carriage.

“A little?” Simon laughed as they reached the carriage.

“Well, no amount of rain then!” Rosaline hurried into the carriage, with Simon following behind her. They both shook off their excess water before Rosaline peered out of the carriage window, looking to others in the church yard.

Before her eyes, their congregation seemed to be splitting in two. Some were more than happy to take enjoyment in the rain, hurrying to their carriages or jumping in puddles with the children. Others were not so tempted. An increasing group seemed to have stayed by the church door, ladies and gentlemen amongst them.

Rosaline then noticed the way some of the ladies whispered, standing close to one another, their eyes downturned at others round them.

They think ill of this. Do they think running through a little rain beneath them? Or do they think the whole affair so low below them?

“Simon,” Rosaline whispered, leaning against him in the carriage as they took off. “Do you see them?” She pointed at the group that quickly disappeared past the window.

“I do. Ignore them.” He shrugged them off, as if they mattered no more to him than a breath of wind. “Most of those people are the ones we had to invite, on my mother’s say so.” He cast his gaze to the ceiling, as if pleading with the heavens for help. “They might not think too well of an earl marrying a seamstress, so no doubt they are whispering to such an effect. Forget them. It hardly concerns me.”

As he picked up her hand and kissed the back, Rosaline found herself forgetting the group entirely.

* * *

“I hope you have enjoyed the breakfast?” Rosaline asked two ladies that seemed to be in a hurry to take their leave. She was looking between a Lady Ruth McAdams, who had not deigned to smile once yet, and a younger woman on her arm, Lady Christina Worrell.

“Yes, of course,” Lady McAdams said tightly. “The Dowager Countess has always been good at holding such

events. I wonder if they will continue at that quality now.” The insinuation as plain, though she didn’t look at Rosaline as she uttered the words. In fact, she seemed to be making a point of avoiding looking at Rosaline at all.

Slowly, Rosaline gulped, looking between her position with the two ladies by the door of the dining room and the rest of the room. The breakfast was a spectacular one indeed. Everyone had eaten well, and much champagne had been drunk in celebration, yet a fair few of the guests had seemed in a hurry to leave. Conscious of trying to be a good hostess, Rosaline had come to say goodbye to the latest pair rushing off.

“I am sure it will,” Rosaline said, offering a smile and trying not to be quelled by the words. “I hope you have enjoyed the day?”

“Do not ask such a question, Lady Gloucester. You may be disappointed by the answer,” Lady Worrell tutted with the words, turned on her heel and left, with Lady McAdams

hurrying on behind her. “To think he would marry a seamstress...” The words faded away.

The insult was so plain that Rosaline barely took note of the fact it was the first time she had been addressed ‘Lady Gloucester’, now that she was a countess. All she could think of was the not-so subtle jibe.

Stepping away from the door, Rosaline caught sight of Chloe and the Duchess a few steps away. She hastened to their side, deciding she needed the support of her friends, when she overheard their discussion with another of their guests that left her cold and hesitating.

“I beg your pardon, Sir Walter?” the Duchess said, her voice shaking in the middle.

“Well, it may be the champagne talking a little,” he chuckled as he took another sip, “but I declare I have not had such good entertainment for a while. It is as entertaining as visiting the theater, to see an earl degrade himself so in public,

in front of this many guests from the ton. Ha! What a sight it was!”

“I pray it is the champagne that is talking,” Chloe muttered. “For it anyone should be ashamed to utter such words.”

Rosaline backed up, before any of them could notice she had approached at all. She hurried around the table, heading for another part of the room altogether.

This was not the way this was supposed to be. Now we are wed, Simon was so sure such whispers would end.

She headed for him at the far end of the room where he was standing by a tall window. He noticed her approach, his eyes shooting to hers and extricated himself from the guests he was speaking to before coming to her and taking her hand.

“Rosaline, what is it?” he asked, his panic plain.

“I haven’t even told you something is wrong yet.”

Rosaline felt the touch of his hand firm beneath her own.

“You think I do not know you well enough by now to recognize pain?” he asked with a gentle smile. “I can read you like a book, love.” The new name he used for her made the stiffness that had grown in her spine soften a little. “What is it? What has upset you?”

“The comments of some of our guests have been a little...” She searched for the right word but feared being too mean. “Unwelcome.”

“Never have I known anyone with your generous spirit.” He threaded their fingers together. “You could have said the word ‘cruel’ or ‘belittling.’”

“I could...” Yet Rosaline would have been reluctant to call someone out so to their face.

“Pray, ignore them,” Simon pleaded and winked at her. “I only saw two people at that altar today promising to marry, and it was you and I, was it not?”

“That it was.” Rosaline felt the tension leaving her.

“You and I are in this marriage, no one else,” Simon reminded her. “Now, my butler is waving earnestly to get my attention about something. I must see to him, but I’ll be back soon?”

“Of course.” Rosaline loved the way he squeezed her hand one last time in parting before he rounded the dining table. Rosaline moved toward the window seat where she saw someone had been listening into their conversation.

The Dowager Countess was sat quite alone with a cup of tea in her hands, not the champagne that was flowing elsewhere. She took the smallest of sips, peering at Rosaline rather suspiciously as she sat beside her.

She may not be the warmest of people, but she is to be my mother-in-law now. Perhaps we can at least be friends.

“Thank you for the lovely wedding breakfast, my Lady. It was so kind of you to arrange such an affair,” Rosaline gushed warmly, gesturing to the food. She was tempted to go on at length of how she’d never had saffron before, nor meringues, but she decided against it when she saw the Dowager Countess merely nod, and not utter a word. Determined to get the lady speaking, Rosaline chose another topic. “I know we are to go to the country estate for a while, but I hope we will be all together soon. Simon and I have often talked of children, and how we long for a family. I hope my children will know their grandmother well.”

At last, there was the smallest of smiles. Lady Gloucester seemed to try and hide that smile behind her cup.

“I have longed for a grandchild for some time,” she accepted in a small whisper. “I would like that, a close family,

I mean.”

Rosaline was delighted at the words. They may have been hurried and uttered in a deep voice, but it was certainly progress with Lady Gloucester. All of a sudden though, the smile vanished. Lady Gloucester turned to face Rosaline quite firmly and laid her teacup on her lap.

“I confess it is not entirely how I pictured this moment though.”

“How do you mean?” Rosaline soon wished she had not asked as Lady Gloucester frowned even more and tilted her chin down.

Rosaline was reminded of the ladies she had seen gossiping outside of the church, that look of staring straight down one’s nose, as if a person was nothing more than a dead rat at their feet.

“I never pictured the mother of my grandchildren would be a *seamstress*.” She whispered the word as if it were a scandalous thing.

“Well, my lady, it is not the summary of who I am.” Rosaline shifted on the seat, struggling to sit still. “It was my occupation only. It is not the culmination of my mind or my soul...” Yet she trailed off, certain that Lady Gloucester wasn’t really paying any attention to her words.

“Look around you today. What do you see?” Lady Gloucester gestured at the room with her teacup. “I see long-standing friends hurrying out, disgusted at what my son has done.” Rosaline flinched at the use of the word *disgusted*, it seemed so strong. “I see people avoiding you. They avoid me too.” Lady Gloucester shivered. “It seems we are all quite ruined.”

“Ruined? Surely not, my Lady.” Rosaline knew her tone was becoming quite desperate, but she stayed calm, never letting her voice raise in volume. “I have heard from my

friends that the ton are fond of a scandal, it gives them something to talk of, but they soon find something new to talk of. It is merely entertainment for a short while.”

“What friends are these?” Lady Gloucester’s nose seemed to wrinkle as Rosaline gestured toward the Duchess and Chloe.

“Ah, a modiste, daughter of a fallen baron, and a duchess who managed to marry well to raise herself out of the poor state her father fell into. Birds of a feather, perhaps.”

Rosaline blinked, startled at the temptation to cry.

“Lady Gloucester, please...”

“Let there be no misunderstanding between us.” Lady Gloucester held her gaze. The green eyes that were quite like her son’s were much more piercing, almost painful in their stare. “Everything has changed now. Simon has shamed the

earldom by marrying you.” She stood to her feet and walked away before Rosaline could summon any words.

Chapter 4

Simon

One Month Later.

Simon blinked a few times. In his sleepy state it took a minute to remember where he was. Sunlight was streaming through the curtains, the golden light falling on his face. There was a slight warmth to the sun, despite the quick advancement of autumn.

Yawning and stretching, Simon angled his head on the pillow, trying to have a better look beyond the glass. He could see hints of the trees that were between the house and the coastline, but the view that dominated was the ocean beyond. The sea was calm this morning, with gentle white horses rolling in.

Beautiful. Like everyday.

When there was movement beside him, Simon turned his head to see the other beauty in his life. Rosaline was there, still half asleep as she turned toward him, her head falling into the crook of his arm. His smile widened to see her red hair wild across the pillow.

Never did I think I would be so happy.

Simon sighed audibly with contentment. He could remember the years of arguing with his father, insisting that he didn't want to be a part of the world of the ton. In those arguments, his father had said repeatedly how Simon would grow up someday. How he would do as he *had to*. How Simon would marry a wealthy lady with a good dowry and who came from a well-to-do family.

Thank God I proved him wrong.

To marry for love was proving the best choice Simon had ever made. Lifting a hand, he reached for Rosaline's cheek and brushed a lock of her red hair behind her ear, the better to

see her face. Her lips were parted ever so slightly, and her cheeks were pink with warmth.

The mere sight of that blush reminded him of all that they had shared this last month. It wasn't just the joys of the bedchamber, which he certainly loved, but there was so much more.

Here at his coastal estate, they were able to escape the ton. He imagined them living in their own world, able to talk for hours on end without interruption. Just the day before had they spent the day by the ocean. Rosaline with excitement had trailed through the rock pools, looking for wonders she could find. Simon had followed behind her as they had talked at length about the beauty they had seen around them.

"What can London have to compare to this?" Rosaline had asked excitedly when they had found starfish in one of the rock pools.

“Nothing. Especially the ton.” Simon was glad to leave the world of London and the ton behind. The only reminder he’d had of them was the occasional letter from his mother, who was asking with eagerness when they would return.

Not yet.

Simon was enjoying his time too much with Rosaline to even think of planning a return journey, even if he knew it had to be soon. His work with the writing circle and the writers he was supporting would have to be attended to soon enough.

“Now, that’s a frown.” Rosaline’s sudden voice drew Simon’s focus. He turned his head to see Rosaline was awake, with a smile playing on her lips. She lifted a hand and drew it down his temple, softening the lines that had creased there. Instantly, he smiled at that touch.

“You have a habit of making such frowns disappear.” His words were soft in the room.

“What were you thinking of?”

“The writers.” He confessed the truth. “I was thinking of all that will have to be done when I get back to London.”

“Ha! Think of the fun stuff! The exciting moments, not the work,” Rosaline urged. Her excitement made any chance of that frown returning disappear. “Tell me of all the writers you are working with at the moment.”

“You wish to hear it?” His smile grew wider.

“Of course I do!” She inched up, sliding on the bed until she was resting on her elbow. “There’s something about seeing you light up that I love so much.”

“I love you,” Simon said quickly, raising himself to steal a quick kiss. It was a chaste thing, merely the brush of lips together, but it still gave him the same thrill. He matched her

position, both of them leaning on an elbow and facing one another.

“I love you too. Now, tell me,” Rosaline pleaded. “Talk to me of the writers.”

“Have I ever told you of the first writer I discovered?” Simon asked, watching as she shook her head. “It was such an exciting time. I had walked out of my father’s house, insisting that I would live in a small apartment in town instead.”

“How did he take that?”

“Oh, really well,” Simon said wryly. “So well that he sent his footman round to see me every day. In actual fact, he kept asking me when I would return home.” Rosaline smiled at his words. “I was there wondering what I would do with my life when I became lost in my books. They were another world, entirely. The promise of a better world. Maybe even...a fairer world.”

“Fairer? How do you mean?” she asked, her eyebrows raising in interest.

“In created worlds, people have better opportunities than they do in the real one, I am convinced of it. Out of nowhere, an idea presented itself to me.” Simon went on with excitement. “If I could create this world of movement, one where writers were encouraged to share, no matter what their background was, well, that would be truly spectacular.”

“See? You have lit up,” Rosaline said softly and gestured to the smile on his face. He chuckled, amazed how easily Rosaline could make him feel light and free, just by encouraging him to talk of the things that he loved so much in life. “Where did you find your first writer, then?”

“I went to my club. I was thinking of how to create this world, perhaps a group of fellow minds, when I came across a man in the club, down on his luck. The younger son of a baron, he did not have much opportunities to his name and was there drowning his sorrows whilst writing poetry on an

old handkerchief.” Simon could remember the night well. He had sat down beside the poet, his eyes dancing over the handkerchief. “What beautiful verse he wrote, quite thrilling. When I said it deserved recognition he laughed. He said he’d tried, but funnily enough, no one was interested in seeing the work of a younger son of a baron.”

“That seems mad!” Rosaline gushed as she sat up straight on the bed, the bed sheet still wrapped tightly around her.

“It was. I found myself possessed with this desire to help him. I took the handkerchief, wrote up the verse properly, then the next day visited publishers. I purposefully didn’t tell them who the writer was, for I wanted them to be sold on the work alone.” Simon could still remember walking into the third publisher that day. They were the only publisher who had been open to the idea of reading the poetry before hearing the poet’s name. “He had a publishing deal before sunset.”

“Simon, that is wonderful,” Rosaline declared wistfully.
“You changed his life.”

“I helped to change it, that is all.” Simon would always lay the credit at the poet’s door. He was the one, after all, who had the talent. “That was when I set up the writing circle, encouraging others to come. It wasn’t long before the Duke of Suffolk appeared. He has been instrumental in changing many writers’ lives.”

“Indeed! Look at his wife?” Rosaline said with eagerness. “He has introduced her to a world that accepts her and doesn’t judge her for being a woman.” She flopped back down onto the bed dramatically, making her hair dance about her head. Simon chuckled as he drew himself out of the bed.

They only had a week or more here on the coastal estate and he wished to make the most of it. As much as he loved staying in bed with Rosaline, there was more of the area he wanted to show her first. He offered a hand to help her out of bed and she took it, her fingers entwining through his own.

This feeling. If only I had known this was how we would be when we met.

“This is the problem with the ton,” Simon went onto explain. “There seems to be this collective opinion of what people can and can’t do, and what they should and shouldn’t be. Ladies having careers? Madness! For some god knows reason. Younger sons being successful? Oh no, they should go into the army or become vicars. They should not be outstripping their older brothers in terms of income.”

“Your wryness knows no bounds,” Rosaline said and followed him around the room. For now, she laid a dressing gown over her shoulders that distracted Simon.

It was unadorned, quite plain, yet elegant too. He quite adored her in the gown, for it was so much a symbol of her character. Rosaline might now be his countess, but she was not one for excessive fineries. She was not demanding or greedy, as he knew some ladies of the ton would have been.

She is humble. It is one of the reasons I love her so much.

“It baffles me though, I have to say,” Rosaline said, suddenly distracted enough to freeze with the ties of her dressing gown.

“What does? My wryness?” Simon asked playfully, earning a giggle from her.

“I mean the ton’s determination to keep people in their places.” She chewed her lip in thought.

Without having to ask, Simon knew where her thoughts had gone. Once their wedding breakfast had finished, Rosaline had told him not just of what his mother had said, but the actions of some of their guests, hurrying off and muttering how they believed he had made a mistake.

What right do they have to comment on my life?

“People who like to pass judgement are not worth our time of day,” Simon reminded her softly and bent toward her. He kissed her gently on the forehead, a sweet touch that made her sigh with happiness.

“I know, you are right. It is just sometimes I think ladies need to talk more of such things.” Her words caught Simon’s interest and he stepped back, reaching for a wash bowl at the side of the room.

“How do you mean?”

“I mean look at the Duchess of Suffolk, and Chloe too,” Rosaline urged. “They were both ladies from the ton who had fallen on hard times, yet they have been successful. Chloe made her business out of nothing. The Duchess is now a famed writer. They are both *respected*. That respect did not always come easily. It was as if the ton were wary of accepting them for who they really were.”

“No doubt they were. Any lady that breaks the mold is something they have a distaste for.” Simon splashed his face, reviving his body when he realized Rosaline had fallen quiet. Slowly, he lifted his face from the bowl and noticed his wife’s expression. She was saddened, her eyes downturned. “Love, I did not mean you.”

“I know.” She smiled sadly. “Though we would be fools to pretend it was not the case, wouldn’t we?” She accepted with a nod. “I am not one of them, so they do not care for me.” She fidgeted with the ties of the dressing gown, getting them in knots.

“And what does that matter to us?” Simon encouraged, drying his face as he walked back toward her. Swiftly, he took her hands from the dressing gown ties and entwined their fingers together. “I care for you. You know that.”

“I do.” Her smile was full this time. “Oh, we have been morose for far too long this morning, have we not?”

“Indeed. The ton will not change, even if we wish them to.” Simon nodded and walked away, ready to call the bell for his valet and Rosaline’s maid to help them dress.

He had often pictured the ton like some immobile marble statue. Beautiful at first glance perhaps, yet the more he looked, the more ugliness he saw. It would not change, not when put under any pressure. Those long stone noses looked down on anyone that walked by them, and those eyes were half lidded, not deigning to look too long on anyone they thought beneath them.

“I wonder if that is the case,” Rosaline whispered.

“I’m sorry?” Simon asked distractedly.

“I just wonder sometimes by opening discussions, encouraging conversations, if things can be changed?” Rosaline seemed to be speaking more to herself than to him, looking out of the window at the ocean beyond. “Chloe and

the Duchess are hardly the only two women who have broken the mold. Perhaps some ladies are simply nervous of talking of their own dreams, for they fear what others will say.” She sighed deeply, just as Simon rang the bell.

Hmm. Perhaps she is right.

He got no further with the thought. Rosaline shrugged off the conversation, bobbed on her toes and turned to face him.

“Oh, enough seriousness for today. What shall we do? Take another walk to the seaside? The ocean looks beautifully calm today.”

“There is an old castle ruins not far from here. I would love to show it to you.”

“Then I can’t wait to see it.” Rosaline bobbed and kissed him on his cheek one last time. It was the last intimacy they

could share before the valet and the maid arrived. “Do you ever think this place has a happiness you do not want to leave?”

“Every day, Rosaline,” he confessed quietly. “Every day.” Then he could say no more as the valet arrived.

Simon was glad they shared their chamber here and did not have to part. They continued to talk as they dressed on opposite sides of the room, with Rosaline behind a screen. Here, Simon was happier than he had ever been.

If only we didn't have to go back to London and the ton at all.

Chapter 5

Rosaline

“We’re here,” Simon’s words filled Rosaline with more trepidation than she knew she should feel. Leaning toward the carriage window, she could see the autumnal leaves had come and gone by now. Winter was setting in.

The chill in the air was creeping through the window. Those that hovered in the street walked by with frock coats and fur pelisses tied tightly around their bodies, with their chins tucked into the collars. Plenty of working gentlemen went around with hats pulled low over their ears and some maids wore woolen coifs in the effort to keep their temples warm.

The leaves of the few trees that bordered the street were rimmed white in ice, as if they had been sifted with sugar. The town house itself was covered in the same ice, with the windows beginning to freeze around the corners. On the front

stoop of the fine town house, the butler stood, struggling to stand still as the icy stoop slipped beneath his boots.

“Are you all right, love?” Simon asked.

“Completely.” Rosaline lied, but she thought it a good lie. Simon was nervous already about returning to town. She knew it would do little good for her to confess she was too.

He fears the ton enough. I should not fear them as well.

Simon stepped down first and then offered his hand to Rosaline, helping her. She held onto his hand a little longer. Despite the gloves they both wore, she longed for more of his touch. He clearly sensed she wanted it, for his smile grew a little deeper.

“As much as I loved the coastal estate, this is my home too,” he acknowledged. “I will be glad to see the writers circle again.”

“And your mother,” she reminded him, to which he chuckled.

“Of course. Her letters have been so frequent as of late, I am sure she will be glad we have returned.” He shifted their focus toward the front door, and they advanced toward the butler.

Rosaline had heard much of Simon’s relationship with his mother whilst they had been in the country. Granted, a wedge might have been driven between them when Simon argued with his father, but they were both working hard to be as they once were. As Rosaline and Simon had spent so long in the country, Rosaline had to hope that when she saw the Dowager Countess again, she would not be quite as cold as she had been at their wedding.

“Jacobs? How are you?” Simon said, calling to the butler as they approached.

“Lord Gloucester, it is lovely to welcome you home.”
Jacobs bowed deeply. “I trust your journey was well?”

“Very well indeed, though cold, I will not deny that.”

“Have no fear. The fires have already been lit for you.”

“Thank you, Jacobs.” Simon nodded in approval before the butler turned to acknowledge Rosaline’s presence.

“Lady Gloucester.” He bowed, but to Rosaline’s mind there was something in his expression that was not so welcoming. He did not smile the way he had done for her husband, neither did he let his eyes linger on her for long.

“Jacobs, thank you for arranging everything,” Rosaline said, eager to make a good impression. Still, the butler refused to look back to her as he opened the door and allowed them inside.

What is happening here?

An errant thought entered Rosaline's head as she followed Simon into the house. Was it possible that the ton were not the only ones who disapproved of a lady moving so far in station? Could it be that Jacobs disapproved of her?

Once they were in the hall, Rosaline glanced back, and she thought she caught a glimpse of Jacobs looking down at her. His eyes seemed to drift over her gown, as if searching for fault, before looking away.

It's my imagination. That is all. Perhaps I am being oversensitive?

“Simon! You have returned!” The Dowager Countess gushed to welcome them. Rosaline shifted her focus, looking to see Lady Gloucester had appeared on the stairs.

She hastened down the steps, gripping her skirt in one hand and lifting it just an inch to allow her feet to hurry faster. When she reached the bottom step, she went to Simon. He released Rosaline's hand and returned his mother's embrace.

"How are you, Mother?" Simon asked, his tone soft.

"Much better for seeing you," she said, stepping back with a wide smile.

Something comforted Rosaline to see that look of joy. Unlike Simon's father, it was plain that no matter who Simon married or what he did in life, his mother would not make him an outcast.

"How was your journey?" she asked, her eyes on Simon alone. Rosaline hurried to curtsy in greeting, but she quickly realized that Lady Gloucester took no notice of her.

Am I a ghost walking through these corridors?

“Cold, but it was worth it. We had a grand time at the country estate, did we not, love?” Simon asked, looking to Rosaline.

“We did,” she said, stepping into the conversation. “It was such a beautiful house, my Lady. I have never seen anything quite like it before.”

“Yes, that does not surprise me,” Lady Gloucester muttered the words with a smile, yet there seemed to be a condescension there that took Rosaline a minute or two to notice. “Come, you must both be in need of refreshment. I have ordered tea and it will be with us momentarily.”

She led the way into the sitting room nearby. Rosaline may have been trying to ignore her nerves, but her endeavor wasn't achieving much at this moment. After she handed her gloves, pelisse and bonnet to the butler, who still refused to look her in the eye, she followed Lady Gloucester and

attempted to take Simon's hand. He took it briefly but released it once they reached the sitting room.

Out of fear of looking like she needed him too much, she did not attempt to take it again.

"Here, sit," Lady Gloucester purposefully took her son's shoulder and drew him to a chesterfield settee sat on one side of the fire. Sitting down beside him, she left no room for Rosaline who took an armchair on the other side of the fire. "Tell me of your time at the coast," she pleaded, her eyes on Simon alone.

He began with eagerness, telling his mother of all that he had shown Rosaline. At times, Rosaline tried to join in, but she soon noticed that Lady Gloucester barely looked at her as she spoke. In the end, Rosaline left the stories to Simon and sat back in the armchair.

She was glad when the maid interrupted with the tea and placed it on the dumbwaiter table between them.

“Thank you,” Rosaline said to the maid. “May I ask your name?” She was keen to learn her staff’s name and to be a good mistress.

“Eleanor, my Lady.” Eleanor didn’t look at her. If anything, the question only made her hurry out of the room faster, closing the door behind her as swiftly as she could.

Rosaline sat perfectly dumbstruck, staring at the closed door.

Am I to think that no one wants me here? Not just the ton, but the staff too?

“Ah, she has forgotten the milk,” Lady Gloucester said, moving to her feet. “One minute, I will arrange for some to be brought.” She walked out of the room, following the maid.

Rosaline took the opportunity whilst it presented itself and leaned forward to get Simon's attention.

"Husband?" she said softly, noting how much Simon had loved her calling him this over the last few weeks. Even now, the very word made his smile grow.

"Yes, love?"

"Is it in my imagination or do you think the staff are a little..." She struggled to find the right word.

"You do not need to be afraid to say anything to me," he assured her, his eyes on hers alone. "Go on."

"A little reticent to greet me." Rosaline shifted in her seat, struggling to stay still.

"Truly?" Simon's brows quirked together. "I haven't noticed anything." He reached across the table and laid a hand

to her wrist, a soft sign of comfort. “Perhaps it’s just the worry making it worse. Seeing things that aren’t there.”

“Yes, I expect you are right.” Rosaline acknowledged, sitting back again. Trying her best to brush it off, when Lady Gloucester returned, she attempted to speak with her again.

She is my mother-in-law now. She may not have been welcoming at the wedding, but we must find a way to live together.

“How have you been, Lady Gloucester?” Rosaline asked, endeavoring to create a conversation between them.

“Well.” The answer was stilted as Lady Gloucester placed the missing jug of milk down on the tray.

“What have you been doing with your time?” Rosaline’s next question was an attempt to make the lady talk some more.

The wrinkled lines in her face tensed for a moment, as if reluctant to speak at all, then she nodded, ever so slightly.

“Many things.”

Rosaline looked to Simon, silently pleading for his help with wide eyes. He must have read it on her face for he took a hurried sip of his tea.

“Mother, Rosaline has heard much about the friends you like to visit with. You know, the ladies who exchange ideas on the events of the day. Perhaps you could tell her more of it?”

“She has heard of it?” Lady Gloucester seemed more put out at this idea, shifting in her seat and then stiffening, like some statue.

“Yes. I told her,” Simon said quickly.

“Simon. That is private.” Lady Gloucester’s voice was tense.

“And I will keep nothing from my wife, Mother.” His words put an end to the matter. Rosaline noticed the way Lady Gloucester offered a prim smile, as if attempting to be friendly, but struggling with that effort.

“I meet with friends every so often to discuss the events of the day. We call ourselves the Lysistrata Ladies, after the old Greek tale. Surely you have heard of it?” Lady Gloucester’s question left Rosaline uncomfortable.

The reference sounded intelligent, and very educated. Rosaline’s education was limited to her seamstress skills and without knowing what Lady Gloucester was speaking of, she struggled to know what to say. Her lips opened and closed for a minute, before she thought of something to say.

“I’m afraid I don’t know the tale, but I would be glad to learn it.” Her words simply made Lady Gloucester frown all

the more.

Simon cleared his throat, apparently attempting to dispel any awkwardness.

“We have the book, love,” he said with ease. “I am sure you would enjoy the tale.”

“Thank you.” With these words, the conversation seemed to be at an end. Rosaline looked down at her teacup, fearing how unsuccessful she had been in trying to converse with Lady Gloucester.

I will not give up. It may take a while, but I will make this right.

“My Lord?” the butler’s words coupled with a soft knock to the door announced his presence.

“Yes, Jacobs?” Simon called.

“A note has just arrived for you. I believe it is from your writer’s circle.”

“I will come and read it there, in case I need to write a reply.” Simon moved to his feet and left the room, taking the note from Jacobs’ hands before stepping out of the door.

When the door closed behind him with a soft click, Rosaline turned to Lady Gloucester and smiled. When the smile wasn’t returned, she tried to hold back an audible sigh.

“I am glad to see you again, my Lady.” Rosaline made her voice more confident than she felt.

“You are?” Lady Gloucester lowered her cup a little.

“Yes. We did not have time to become properly acquainted before. I look forward to the opportunity now.” Rosaline smiled and reached for the cake stand before her. On

one plate there were small pastry tarts, and on another, such delicate cakes that they were difficult to pick up between her finger and thumb. Rosaline opted for the tart instead.

“It is more fashionable to eat the cakes,” Lady Gloucester declared. The words made Rosaline still with her fingers around the tart, looking up at Lady Gloucester. The Dowager Countess seemed to take delight in catching her out. In fact, Rosaline half wondered if Lady Gloucester had actually asked for the cake stand to be set in such a way to see if she could lay a trap.

“Well, I am not the most fashionable of beings. I do believe we should do what makes us all happy. Don’t you agree, Lady Gloucester?” Rosaline wasn’t sure where her imbued courage came from, but she felt a certainty with her words and placed the jam tart on her plate. Lady Gloucester frowned all the more at this movement. “Would you tell me more about your Lisatta Ladies?”

“Lysistrata.” The Dowager Countess corrected. Abruptly, she placed her teacup down on the dumbwaiter table between them, so firmly in the saucer that the resulting chink echoed around the room. “I cannot do this.”

“Do what, my Lady?”

“Pretend all is at ease when it is not.” Lady Gloucester was most agitated, moving to the edge of her seat. “You may have charmed my son into making the error of his life by marrying you. You may have even convinced him it was the right decision, by stealing him away from the life he knows in London for the last month or so—”

“I thought it was your family’s estate, my Lady.” Rosaline realized a second later that she should not have interrupted. Lady Gloucester sat taller in her seat, with her wrinkled cheeks turning an unnatural shade of red.

“You stole him away,” she corrected Rosaline, as if she was the one who had made a mistake. “Rest assured, the

damage you have done will be undone someday. Somehow.”

“What damage?” Rosaline asked.

“What the ton think of Simon now!”

“But Simon does not care for what they think.” Rosaline kept her voice calm. She was pleading with Lady Gloucester to understand their minds. “Forgive me, my Lady. I want all to be well between us, but I can see you have no wish for that to be the case. If you cannot be happy for your son and I, can you at least accept that we make each other happy?”

At first, the Dowager Countess didn’t answer. She sat very still, staring at Rosaline as an eagle might its prey, judging when to pounce. When the words did come, they were tight, and quickly spoken, in sharp syllables.

“This is my home. This is my life. Simon is my son, and you do not think I know what is best for him? I do. Better than

you.” She lifted the teacup and raised it to her lips. “You are not welcome here.”

Rosaline sat there open mouthed as Lady Gloucester began to sip from her teacup, calmly, as if no harsh words had been passed between them at all.

Chapter 6

Rosaline

“What do you think?” Simon asked Rosaline, leaning forward with evident interest in hearing her answer.

“This is amazing,” she said, quickly spooning another chunk of meat into her mouth. “Hmm.” She made a satisfied sound, watching as Simon chuckled warmly beside her.

“I knew you’d love it.”

“Who knew honeyed capon would be so...? Oh!” She took another bite, delighted by it. Simon merely laughed all the more.

“To have the enjoyment you do in the simple things in life. The world would be a better place for it if we were all the same, I’m convinced of it,” Simon said with eagerness as he tucked into his food too.

“Simple? Pah! You call honeyed capon simple?”
Rosaline laughed, watching as he quirked one of his eyebrows.
“Remind me some time to show you one of the meals I grew
up on.”

“What kind of thing did you eat?” he asked with evident
interest.

“Bread.”

“Bread and butter?”

“Nope. Just the bread, but we liked it.” They laughed
together. Rosaline was delighted how much they could enjoy
each other’s company, even when talking of the simple things.

Sat at the dining table with candles between them,
basking in this orange glow, all seemed well with the world.
Sitting so close to Simon too, with him at the head of the table

and Rosaline nearby, so that their arms brushed every now and then, the excitement was palpable, just to be near one another. It was turning into such a pleasant evening that Rosaline nearly forgot the other person sat at the table.

Opposite Rosaline, Lady Gloucester sat very still, staring between them. Her eyes moved so fast that she had to be thinking many things, but Rosaline didn't concern herself with what they were. She was too busy enjoying Simon's company to possibly think of things that would bring her mood low.

“Wait until dessert,” Simon said with eagerness. “I have asked for a special pudding to be created.”

“What is it?” Rosaline asked.

“That would be spoiling the surprise. Yet there is treacle in it.”

“Treacle? I do not think I have ever had treacle before.”
Rosaline was excited to try it, until she caught sight of Lady Gloucester’s face and the sneer.

“You have never had treacle?” she asked, her voice slow.

“No, my Lady.” Rosaline’s voice lost some of the humor that had been there before.

“Rosaline’s father is a tailor, Mother, remember? The diet was a little different.” Simon spoke carefully, as if trying to persuade his mother to soften her spine. No such softness happened.

“Well, pausing with the praise of the food for a minute,” Lady Gloucester began slowly, “there is something I must speak to you about, Simon.” Her voice was so full of care and wariness that Rosaline’s attention was grasped. She paused with her capon and stared across the table.

“What is wrong, Mother?” Simon asked, just as wary.

“I fear we must act carefully, to *protect* you.” She emphasized this word, as if it mattered to her very much.

“Protect me? From what?” His eyebrows furrowed together.

“From...” Lady Gloucester looked uncomfortable. The cutlery shifted in her hand for a moment, then she reached for the black onyx bracelet she wore at her wrist, fiddling with it before she spoke again. “From the ton.”

“Not now, Mother,” Simon pleaded.

“No, pray, Simon, do not misunderstand me.” Her voice was so soft that Rosaline wanted to hear more. When Simon looked at her, clearly wanting her opinion, Rosaline nodded, longing for Lady Gloucester to go on.

“Continue, Mother,” Simon said.

“The scandal sheets have already begun.” Lady Gloucester whispered with horror. “They are quite *venomous* in their portrayal of certain matters.” With these latter words, she purposefully looked Rosaline’s way. “If we are to stop the spread of anything more like it, perhaps it would be wise if for now your new wife is not paraded round at so many events.”

“What sort of events?” Rosaline asked carefully.

“Assemblies and balls,” Lady Gloucester continued on with speed. “Such writers of scandal sheets like to be at these events, and they will gossip if they can. If they see you there, it might be a temptation for them to write of you. Without you there, they will write of something else instead. I think it wise, for now, just to keep the whispers at bay.”

“You are protecting us, Mother?” Simon said, his eyes fixed on Lady Gloucester.

“What else would I be trying to do?” She shrugged. “I know what has been done cannot be undone.” She closed her eyes, practically shuddering at the thought.

Rosaline’s mouth fell open. The realization that Lady Gloucester was shuddering at talking of their marriage horrified her. She looked to Simon who appeared equally put out. One of his hands balled into a fist on the table, then it abruptly loosened. He pinched his brow then returned Rosaline’s look and shook his head. She could read that look well enough. It was his attempt to tell her that they should not make an argument out of this, and just let it go.

Rosaline did not find it so easy to stay silent. She chewed the inside of her mouth to stop herself from saying anything.

“I know, everything’s fixed,” Lady Gloucester said quietly. “Yet we can do a little to protect you from the whispers of the ton.” She addressed Simon alone with these words.

Rosaline watched as Simon was comforted by this. He reached out and laid a hand on his mother's arm.

“We will be fine, Mother.”

Rosaline realized that Simon had not noticed his mother was only talking about protecting *him*.

“Yes, Simon is right.” Rosaline found her voice, abruptly not so eager to stay quiet. “We do not need protecting, do we?”

“Just so.” Simon agreed with a nod, though he did not look quite as convinced as she expected him to be.

“If people say things, then we shall simply have to avoid them and choose better friends,” Rosaline appealed to Simon with the words who smiled.

“Yes. Just so.” He picked up his glass of claret and held it high in the air. “To better friends than the gossipers.”

“To better friends,” Rosaline seconded and chinked her glass with Simon’s. They had to wait a beat for Lady Gloucester to raise her glass too. She didn’t smile but performed the toast, dutifully.

“Moving on. Mother, I would like it if Rosaline could call you by your Christian name.” Simon’s words made his mother choke on her claret. She coughed a few times and Simon reached forward to clap her on the back, to help her clear her airways. When Rosaline saw it was the shock that had caused her to choke, she hid a brief smile behind her own claret glass.

Oh dear, she did not like that.

“M-my Christian name?” Lady Gloucester stammered.

“I like the idea,” Rosaline said, keen for the informality to go both ways. “I am not used to being addressed formally, I will admit, and would like for you to call me by my Christian name too. You can call me Rosaline, my Lady, if it is agreeable to you,” Rosaline pleaded. “After all, we are family now, are we not?”

“Yes. Family.” The words were uttered tightly.

“Then it’s settled. Rosaline, from now on, my mother is Georgiana to you,” Simon said easily and delved back into his food. Rosaline hid another smile behind her glass, noting that at least his mother didn’t give him an argument on this score.

“Well, as we are talking about family, there is another matter I would like to discuss,” Georgiana said and leaned toward her son. “When can we expect an heir?”

This time, Simon was the one to choke, though it was on capon rather than claret. Rosaline leaned forward and clapped him on the back. He was fine a few moments later and thanked

her for it, though he stared at his mother wide eyed, apparently still struggling to answer her.

Rosaline blushed as she continued eating her food. She knew well enough if she and Simon carried on as they did now, surely it could not be long before a child appeared, but it was evidently the words his mother had chosen that had shocked him so.

“Heir? Mother, you said heir?”

“Yes, that is what the son will be,” Georgiana said with a wide smile.

“And what if our first child is a daughter?” Simon’s spine stiffened straight.

“Then a second child will have to be had soon.”

“Mother!” Simon nearly knocked over his wine glass in his alarm. Rosaline hurried to catch it for him, barely managing to grasp it in time before it could make a mess. “Thank you, love. I see you are remarkably calm at this moment.”

“I’m staying quiet,” Rosaline said with mischief, watching as Simon smiled back at her briefly, before returning his focus to his mother.

“On this subject, forgive me, Mother, but I am about to speak quite plainly.” He topped up his claret glass, as if he needed that little more liquor to get through this conversation. “Do you remember the last discussion Father and I had on this topic?”

“I remember it well. It was in this very room.” Georgiana gestured to the dining room where they were sat. “Your father was looking at those paintings.” She gestured a hand to three tall portraits at the head of the room.

Rosaline shifted her focus to the portraits, noting the heavy hands which had painted them. It was evident each painting had been completed at a different point in history. The oldest was the most austere, with the tall gentleman staring at the sitter with something of a glare. The latest portrait on the far side seemed to be the most recent, of a gentleman that was almost similar to Simon in appearance, with the same cheek bones and similar jaw line.

Who is that?

“Your father was looking at his own portrait.” Georgiana gestured to this painting, prompting Rosaline’s eyes to widen in realization.

It is Simon’s father! The late earl.

“Then he looked to his father, and his grandfather, who hang here beside him. The earldom must have an heir, Simon. It must continue on,” Georgiana urged.

“And do you remember what I said to my father? I asked him, why? Why must it continue on?” His question surprised Rosaline so much that she dropped her cutlery to the plate. She hurried to pick it up again, thinking of all that they had shared.

I thought he wanted children.

He must have read the surprise in the way she had dropped the cutlery, for he turned and laid a hand on hers.

“Have no fear, love. I long for children too.” His soft words made her smile. “It is simply that when we have children, they will be had because we want them. We will not have them in order to produce an heir.” These latter words were said with a pointed look at his mother.

Evidently, Georgiana was content enough with this and nodded. Clearly the prospect of an heir at all was something for her to take comfort in.

“The sooner an heir is produced, the better for the earldom’s reputation.” Her words prompted Rosaline and Simon to share a wearied look, but they said nothing. “Let us just hope the child will be a healthy one.”

“Of course,” Simon said with ease. “It is what every parent hopes for.”

“No, I merely mean...” Georgiana paused and looked at Rosaline. Her eyes were narrowed slightly as she looked over Rosaline. That look was so peculiar that Rosaline couldn’t quite decipher it. In the end, she had to ask.

“Go on, my Lady.”

“Georgiana,” Simon corrected her.

“I mean, go on, Georgiana.” Rosaline’s use of her first name must have made her uncomfortable, for she reached for her claret glass very hurriedly indeed.

“All I mean to say is that the toil and hard work one must have gone through in your position, *Rosaline*.” She emphasized Rosaline’s Christian name, showing how much she did not enjoy using it. “I cannot imagine what your body had been through.”

“How do you mean?” Rosaline was lost, and waited patiently for a better explanation.

“For a healthy child, one must have healthy parents. Well rested mothers produce healthy children. A mother that has known such hard work all her life...well, I just do not know what sort of child will arrive.”

Rosaline nearly fell out of her chair in surprise. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Simon was so shocked that he merely sat there, motionless, his jaw so low it might as well be on the floor.

This is beyond the pale!

Rosaline was so outraged at the insinuation that the working classes were not strong and could not bear healthy children, she was tempted to leave the room. She could flounce out after this insult quite easily, yet she found she did not want to.

“Mother, you should apologize for such a comment,” Simon said in a rush, his voice hissing in its anger.

“Do not make her apologize for her opinion, husband, it will not be changed,” Rosaline said slowly, realizing that this was a battle she had to face. Simon couldn’t stand up for her all the time, and Rosaline did not want or need him to.

I can argue with Georgiana myself.

“There are plenty of working classes that are born strong and healthy. I have seen it with my own eyes. In fact, in my experience, there might be more strength there. For as you so rightly say, they have to work hard in their life, do they not?”

Her challenge seemed to work well. Simon tried to fight a snigger and ended up stuffing a potato into his mouth to stop the sound, whilst Georgiana glared back in Rosaline's direction.

“Now, that is enough discussion of children for one night,” Simon took control of the conversation. Rosaline could have said more, in fact, she longed to give Georgiana a true argument on this subject, but she could see what Simon was doing.

He does not want to rock the boat. He wants to do what is best to make this tension disappear.

“What shall we talk of instead?” Simon spoke quickly, appealing to either of them for ideas.

“Tell us of your writing circle, Simon,” Rosaline urged him on. “When do you next meet them?”

“Tomorrow. I shall be going to the club with the Duke of Suffolk where we hope to hear from some new readers.”

“It sounds exciting. What I would give to be able to hear one of those readings,” Rosaline declared with interest.

“A lady cannot go to a gentleman’s club.” Georgiana’s voice was firm.

“I was not intending to. Have no fear. It was merely a nice idea.” Yet Rosaline was not able to draw Georgiana into good conversation again for the rest of the night.

Chapter 7

Simon

“What did you say, Mother?” Simon was working hard to control his temper. After all, he couldn’t lose it in this moment. Jacobs was walking between them all, offering glasses of port. To betray his ire in front of his staff was something even Simon for all of his relaxing of propriety’s rules would not allow.

I don't need the staff whispering of my family's problems.

He knew they had all whispered often when he and his father had fallen out. Not that they had had to listen that hard. The shouting matches had reverberated around the building and would have no doubt been heard in the belly of the kitchen far below the main rooms of the house.

“I have made all the arrangements for the house,” Georgiana said, apparently not noticing the discomfort she had just given Simon and Rosaline. He could see his wife sat

beside him with her mouth open. “Your two chambers have been prepared for your arrival.”

Simon felt Rosaline’s eyes upon him. Those amber orbs were keen, searching for him to say something.

What can I say?

Even if Jacobs was to leave after serving their port, this was a difficult matter to discuss.

In the countryside, he and Rosaline had shared a chamber. He knew many couples had separate chambers, but he and Rosaline had moved to one so naturally, the thought of separate chambers had just felt strange. Now it seemed Georgiana had made a special effort to ensure two separate chambers were prepared for them.

“But in the country estate...” Rosaline began carefully. The butler must have sensed this was a private conversation,

for after he had passed Georgiana her glass of port, he left the room swiftly. “We had just one—”

“Well, you are not in the country anymore.” Georgiana cut Rosaline off.

The anger Simon was feeling for his mother was growing, but his good sense was winning out.

Rosaline and I are wed. There is nothing my mother can do about now. All she needs is time, time to adjust to this new reality.

“Oh, Simon, Jacobs left before putting another log on the fire, would you call him back again?” Georgiana asked.

“No need. I can do it myself.” Simon moved to his feet, aware that his mother didn’t think it right an earl should be putting logs on his own fire. Now across the room from his

mother, he placed the logs in the hearth when he noticed that Rosaline had followed him.

She stood beside the mantelpiece, tapping her slender fingers on the marble.

“All well, love?” he whispered to her, glancing back at Georgiana to check they could talk freely. Clearly, Georgiana could not hear them, and she was much more interested in sipping her port than even attempting to strain her ears.

“I just thought we would be sharing a room again,” Rosaline said in a rush.

“And we will,” Simon stepped toward her with the whisper. “Just because my valet attends to me in one room, it does not mean I have to sleep there, does it?” His mischief made her smile at last.

It was the first full smile Rosaline had worn since the beginning of their dinner, and Simon was comforted to see it. He knew this could not be easy for Rosaline. Putting up with all of his mother's comments was a challenge in itself, but her resilience and patience to not have told Georgiana to just quit speaking yet was also equally impressive.

"I know this is not easy," he said softly to her and laid a hand upon her arm, trailing it down her skin until he found her hand. Their fingers wrapped around one another. "I think my mother needs time."

"Time?" Rosaline said, apparently distracted by the touch he had on her hand. He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed the back, loving the way she seemed to shudder with excitement at his touch.

"With my father, it was easy to argue," he confessed. "He was so maddening in his beliefs that shouting and debating with him was natural. I let that argument divide me from my mother too, but that is no way to live my life, is it?"

“No.” Rosaline smiled rather sadly. “You have your mother, Simon. I want you to be close with her. Believe me, if my mother were still here, I would do anything to know her better.”

The sadness there made Simon ache. It was a tragedy of life that those they loved had to someday part from this world. He did not want to lose his mother, to be haunted forever more by the knowledge that he could have done more to be a better son.

“She may be struggling with things, but I believe it is fear,” he said softly, and glanced to his mother. Georgiana was fussing once again with the mourning bracelet on her wrist.

Why does she fiddle with it so?

He supposed she was thinking of her husband when she fidgeted so much. Perhaps she even felt his presence there with them.

“I do not want to argue with my mother anymore,” he said quietly. “Let us give her time to adjust, and hopefully she will make peace with...”

“With me being here?” Rosaline finished for him. “You do not need to be afraid of saying it. We both know it to be the case.” She nodded and put upon a wider smile. “Well, I am always up for a challenge. Let us see what we can do this evening to persuade her to like me.” She released his hand and crossed the room toward his mother, beginning a conversation with a buoyant tone.

Simon chuckled when he noticed his mother recoil in her seat at Rosaline’s enthusiasm.

It is one of the reasons I adore Rosaline so much. She does not care for reservations, she would rather be herself.

Simon devoted his attention to the fire for a minute, using the poker to stir it to life and make the sparks dance back

and forth. Soon enough, the fire was raging. With the crack of the flames, conversation had faded behind him. Rosaline's endeavor to talk had somewhat failed and she'd moved to a different chair, a little distance from his mother.

Well, perhaps we will have to take slow steps.

* * *

After Rosaline and Georgiana had retired for the night, Simon was restless. Unable to think of sleep yet himself, he ended up back in the dining room looking at a painting he had so far managed to avoid staring straight at.

His father looked out at him from the portrait, the firm glower present, as it had always been. Simon could trace the similarities between his face and his father's. The jaw was the same, the nose too, and a similar shaping to the cheeks. The height was not dissimilar either, but what most struck Simon about the portrait was a reminder of how different he was to his father.

The late Earl of Gloucester had been so conscious of his position and what the expectation was of a man like him, that he had ordered this painting to be an announcement of his wealth and position.

The late Earl was dressed in the latest fashions for when the picture was painted, with a white wig curled close to the temple, and such a high cravat that it practically reached his chin. The white cuffs escaped the embroidered sleeves of his coat, flouncy and loose with lace. The boots were quite a dominating presence in the painting, emphasizing how wide the man stood.

Around him, all the late earl's riches could be seen. He appeared to be standing on a terrace of a house. Behind him in one corner of the portrait was an image of their country estate with the ocean beside it. On the other side, an image of a small country estate they had up in Gloucestershire. Around his body were tables full of things he had loved to collect, amongst them were boxes of coins, grand ornaments and works of art.

It wasn't just a picture of the man. It was a picture of what he thought himself to be.

Simon scoffed, quite audibly in the room, not that there was anyone around to hear it. He had one candle in his hand, the tiny flame kept him company and shone of the oil on the canvas, illuminating it in a bright yellow light. The rest of the room was clouded in shadows.

“What would you think, eh?” Simon asked the portrait, as if his father would leap forward and come alive, stepping out of the frame to give his opinion. “What would you think of the decision I have made? Would you be as poorly behaved as my mother is? Would you be worse? Could you have ever liked Rosaline?”

In truth, he knew the answer. His father never would have countenanced a marriage to Rosaline and probably would have cut Simon off in order to prevent it. Simon knew without a doubt it would not have stopped anything. He would have

married Rosaline anyway and thrown himself into a job in the literature industry.

“I thought my mother would have been a little more generous in her thoughts than you,” Simon muttered in a quiet whisper. Georgiana had always been the more benevolent thinking of his parents. When Simon had been young, he could even recall a time when Georgiana hadn’t fussed so much with being completely ‘proper’.

He had fond memories of Georgiana playing with him on the sandy at the beach by their country estate. She hadn’t cared when she had gotten sand in her hair or on her cheeks. They had played together, throwing sand balls at one another and bursting out in laughter.

Father had not been pleased that evening.

The happy memory of his mother on the beach seemed some time ago now. Yet it was possible that woman could appear again, if she was given half the chance.

“Maybe I should take you down?” Simon asked the portrait, half thinking it might agree with him. His father’s painting was an unwelcome reminder of what he would have thought on all of this, and the high expectations he had. Simon thought it possible if he hid the painting, somewhere in another room or even in the attic, they would be free of his memory.

Yet as Simon stepped back from the painting, falling more into the shadows, another memory crept in. He thought of the way his mother had fiddled with the mourning bracelet on her wrist. Even if the painting was gone, the late Earl’s memory would still be alive. It was as if Georgiana was very much keeping him alive.

Simon turned his back on the painting and left the room. In the hallway though, he found he was not alone. Someone was waiting for him on the stairs. At first, he thought it was Rosaline, and his heart thudded harder with excitement, thinking of their nights together, then the woman walked from

the darkness into the light of his candle, and he saw it was not Rosaline at all, but Georgiana.

“Mother, is all well? This is late for you. I thought you had retired already.”

“I had to speak to you.” Georgiana crossed toward him. “I know you will reprimand me for interfering, but please, I beg you, listen to me on this.”

Sensing the fear that she was in, for it was palpable, in the way she fidgeted and pulled at the black bracelet, Simon didn't put up a fuss, he just let his mother continue on.

“If you had seen all that I have read in the scandal sheets, Simon, you would know how ill people are predisposed to think of you and your wife. Now, I know you say you do not care, but there are things to consider here.” She spoke calmly, with such reason that he listened to her. “People you consider friends may listen to such gossip and turn away from you. It will impact your writers' circle, and your business

affairs and your investments too. I know you are wed and we can't change that, but there are small things we can do to reduce the damage of such gossip."

"You wish to tell me of such ways?" Simon asked, listening to his mother.

Perhaps this is what I must let her do. Listen to her thoughts, adhere to them at times, and soon, she will come round to realizing how wonderful Rosaline is. For now, I must just not rock the boat.

"Yes. May I?"

"Go on, Mother," Simon pleaded. Georgiana nodded before continuing.

"Avoid balls and assemblies for the time being. Small ones, absolutely, do attend, but the larger ones would be wise to avoid."

“Very well, if you wish it,” Simon agreed. It was a small concession he could give and if it made his mother happy, he did not see the harm in it.

“Secondly, observe the fact you and your wife have two bedchambers for a little while. You and I both know how some servants’ tongues like to talk.” She grimaced at the idea. “If we show you and your wife are adhering to respectable customs, such as having separate chambers, then it gives the staff less incentive to talk, does it not?”

Simon was a little more disappointed at this. One of his greatest pleasures was waking up with Rosaline beside him. He supposed for a little while though he could spend less nights with her, if it would help. Soon enough, they could spend all the time they wanted to be together again.

“Very well, Mother. If you wish it, then I will be careful of the staff and use the second bedchamber. Does that make you happy?” he asked, keen to have an answer.

“Yes. Thank you, Simon.”

“Of course, Mother. Now, get some rest. You look quite tired.”

Georgiana smiled, stifling a yawn before she walked up the stairs and went to bed. Simon followed a few minutes' later and hovered by Rosaline's door for a minute.

He longed to go inside. He and Rosaline could quite happily lay together, talking into the early hours of the morning. He loved such hours. He called them their *secret* hours, between the darkness and the light. It had felt like they were the only two people in the world when they had indulged in such things in the countryside.

Laying a hand to the door, Simon thought of going in, but when he heard the butler's footsteps down the corridor, he remembered what he had said to his mother.

If it makes my mother happy, then surely there is no harm in observing this for a short while, is there?

Before the butler could see him outside of Rosaline's door, he left, and headed for his own bedchamber.

Chapter 8

Rosaline

“Well, have a good day.” Rosaline tried to summon a smile as she said goodbye to Simon. He was standing in the doorway with his frock coat on his shoulders and his top hat in his hand, ready to depart for his meeting with the writer’s circle.

Rosaline bit back what she truly wanted to ask. For hours the night before she had stayed up, with her eyes trained on the bedchamber door, waiting for Simon to come to her, but he never did. When she had finally gone to sleep, she had held back a single tear, fearful of why Simon had not come to see her.

She longed to ask now why he had not come as he had said he would, but with the butler standing so close, she was prevented from doing so.

“Thank you,” Simon said with ease and smiled at her. That smile lessened her discomfort. There was something about his smile that seemed to have this effect on her, reassuring her that all was well with the world. “What will you do today?”

“I do not know,” Rosaline said and looked around the entrance hall. In the country estate, she had had much to do, and had enjoyed spending most of her time with Simon, exploring the nearby areas, but life in London was to be different. She would have to find a pastime of her own to interest her. “I do not wish to go back to making clothes. I was never the best at it.”

“You were paid to do it, I imagine you were better than you think you were,” he said, complimenting her skill. As the butler opened the door, turning his back on them to check the carriage had been brought round, Simon clearly took hold of the opportunity and moved toward Rosaline. Kissing her swiftly on the lips, Rosaline instantly responded. She held onto his bicep as he kissed her, chastely, for she didn’t want him to

part just yet. “I’ve been wanting to do that,” he whispered in her ear, with the butler still turned away.

“I’ve been waiting for it,” Rosaline confessed. They shared a quick smile as Simon stepped away.

“Well, if you get bored, feel free to explore the library. I am sure there is much there that could interest you.” Simon’s words reminded Rosaline of their times in the country. So often late in the evening would Simon sit reading a new writer’s work and Rosaline would trail the bookshelves, looking at books she’d never had the fortune to read before.

“Perhaps I will. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye, love.” He kissed her quickly before the butler turned and waved him off.

Rosaline stood in the doorway waving at her husband for a minute or so as the carriage took its leave. Her eyes were so

fixed on her husband that it took her a while to notice the butler was staring at her. Shifting on her feet, Rosaline turned to face him.

Jacobs averted his eyes at once, but not before Rosaline caught the look there.

I was right yesterday; I am sure of it. He looks down on me.

“Well, I hope you and I, Jacobs, will get along well,” Rosaline said, attempting to start a conversation with him. “If you have any questions as to how I would like to run the household—”

“The Dowager Countess has instructed me to follow her orders on the household for now, Lady Gloucester,” he said primly and closed the door.

“She has?” Rosaline tried to keep any annoyance she felt out of her voice, knowing it wouldn’t do well for Jacobs to see how much this offended her.

Simon said I was to run the household, as the new Countess.

She’d had many ideas of how she wanted to change it, especially to a less formal structure where the servants were encouraged to offer ideas on how they wanted their part of the house to be run. She had suggested it to Simon once before, who had been pleased with the prospect, but it seemed that idea was now to stay firmly tucked away.

“Yes, my Lady,” Jacobs said and turned to face her. Under that look, Rosaline shifted, discomfited. “Is there anything I can do for you, my Lady?”

“Could I have some tea brought to the library please?” Rosaline decided the sooner she exited the butler’s company,

the better for her self-esteem. He bowed in agreement and walked off, leaving Rosaline to find the library alone.

Tucked away at the back of the house, as Rosaline stepped inside the chamber, she felt her eyes grow wide in awe. From the floor to the high ceiling, the walls were stacked with rick dark mahogany shelves, each full of tomes and volumes of books. In contrast, the ceiling was made of bright white plaster, molded into flowers and vines that trailed overhead, before reaching toward the one vast window that filled the space with light. Roughly three times Rosaline's height, the glass was lined with a white wooden frame, accentuating the light.

"It is beautiful," Rosaline murmured to herself and wandered round the furniture. For a minute, she allowed herself to indulge in the luxuriousness of the house. Having grown up as a tailor's daughter, she had never thought she would have the opportunity to live in such a house as this.

Trailing her fingers across plush wing-backed armchairs, she marveled at the damask design in the cushions, and then moved to the Windsor chairs placed by the window, admiring the bent wood. Deciding Simon was right and that a little reading would be a good way to spend her day, she reached for one of the nearest shelves and began to pull down some books, when one fell from her hands.

Snatching it from the air, she barely managed to catch it in time before it fell on a desk, pressed in the corner of the room. Moving the book to the side, Rosaline's eyes danced across the desk, finding it was strewn with papers.

What's all this?

At first what she thought was letters turned out to be a series of magazines. Collecting them into a bundle, she retreated to one of the Windsor chairs closest to the window and flicked through the papers. She found *The Gentlemen's Magazine*, *The Sporting Magazine*, and *Ackermann's Repository of Arts, Literature, Commerce, Manufactures*,

Fashion and Politics. Finding a fascination beginning to grow, Rosaline flicked through the pages.

What started as a brief look become something more attentive. She no longer scanned the articles but became absorbed in them, and time began to pass by as she read each article in detail.

What became clear between all the articles was that every single one of them was written by men. What was more, there was a clear skew towards men's way of living. Even in the magazine designed to discuss art and literature, it discussed princely men's art and literary works. The Duchess of Suffolk, despite her writing success was not mentioned at all, neither was the recently successful Miss Austen. Rosaline searched the art section for the name of Maria Cosway, an artist she'd once heard Chloe mention, but she was not to be found.

"There's no women here," Rosaline murmured in surprise. Seeing that no women were mentioned at all in the

magazine written for both men and women, she turned her attention to *The Gentlemen's Magazine* and laid the latest edition flat on her lap.

Before her, a series of articles stretched out, each one designed to celebrate men's success. One talked of the recent political gains of certain MPs, and another of the strides male scientists were making. What struck Rosaline the most was the tone of the articles – it was celebratory. Perhaps at times some of the writers cast a certain amount of envy on the subjects they were writing about, but it was principally written to announce success.

By the time Rosaline had devoured the magazine, plus two other editions, she had emptied the teapot Jacobs had brought for her and made one significant discovery. The only time women had been mentioned at all in the magazine, was when they were in relation to men. They had to either be a successful man's wife or daughter, but they were never once the focus of the article.

“What are you doing?” Georgiana’s voice urged Rosaline to look up from her empty teacup and the magazine. Standing in the doorway, the tall figure of Georgiana cut quite a dour figure. She stared down at Rosaline and the mess she had made with the magazines strewn around her. “You have been in here a long time.”

“Reading,” Rosaline said rather innocently. Seeing that there was someone here at least who could shed light on the matter, Rosaline held up the latest magazine she had been reading. “Georgiana, is there a magazine written for ladies at all? Such as this one written for gentlemen.”

“How do you mean?” Georgiana seemed confused by the idea. Crossing the room, she came to Rosaline and took some of the magazines she’d left on the chair beside her. Georgiana flicked through them. “You are reading *The Gentleman’s Magazine*? Why?”

“Because it’s quite interesting.” Rosaline shrugged, not seeing how it was a great matter. “Is there a magazine of a

similar ilk written for women?”

“There’s *La Belle Assemblée* and *Lady’s Monthly Museum*.”

“Perhaps I should read them,” Rosaline murmured.

“They discuss fashion and accomplished ladies. I am not sure it is what you would like to read.” There was clear judgement in Georgiana’s tone. “It is designed for women who preoccupy themselves with being elegant and respectable.”

Rosaline paused in the papers she was glancing through and tilted her head up to watch her mother-in-law. There was a small smirk of satisfaction on Georgiana’s face, as if she delighted in insinuating Rosaline was not elegant at all.

What does she mean exactly makes an elegant lady?

“Is that the chief purpose of a lady’s life then?” Rosaline asked. “To be elegant and admired for that alone?” Her question left the smile slipping from Georgiana’s face. “I see. I can’t help but wonder what your idea of an elegant lady is, Georgiana. I imagine it is rather different to my own idea. Position does not make an elegant lady in my own view.”

“Oh, but it does. The sphere in which you were born is everything. A pristine reputation and admiration for it are important, Rosaline. You should know that now you are a Countess.” Georgiana tilted her head in Rosaline’s direction.

“I didn’t mean reputations weren’t important, simply that it seems odd they would be the primary reason for a lady’s existence.” Caught up with what she had read, Rosaline stood to her feet and collected the *Ackermann’s* magazine, presenting it to Georgiana. “Look at this one. It’s an interesting read, but the focus is purely men. What of women artists, essayists, and poets? Should they not be mentioned here as well?”

“You wish to find a magazine that mentions women? Very well. I will show you one.” Georgiana’s response was tart as she walked to the door. Confused, Rosaline stood where she was, staring after Georgiana with an open mouth. As she waited for Georgiana to return, she heard harsh footsteps trailed throughout the house, as if Georgiana strode from one room to another with anger in each step.

By the time she returned, Rosaline had cleaned up some of the mess she had made, fearful of upsetting her mother-in-law any further. Georgiana marched into the center of the library with a bundle of papers in her hand and dropped them down onto a table beside Rosaline. The action was so loud, so sudden, that the paper slapped audibly.

“Take a look at these. Tell me what you see there.” Georgiana was tight lipped as she waited for Rosaline to move toward the papers.

Slowly, Rosaline lifted the first one from the top and stared down at the title. To her surprise, she found it was a

scandal sheet.

“This was not the sort of thing I meant, Georgiana—”

“Read it.” She was cut off. Deciding she did not want to anger Georgiana further, she did as her mother-in-law asked. Turning her eyes on the sheet, near the bottom of the first page she found a name that was familiar to her.

They talk of Simon!

Rosaline swallowed nervously as she read the article. Judging by the date, it was written not long after she had met Simon.

‘Scandal brewing for the Earl of Gloucester.

It seems our new Lord Gloucester has not long earned his title before he will bring shame to it. He has recently been seen in the company of a young seamstress from Covent

Garden. The greater shock comes when learning that he has been seen promenading with her in Hyde Park, as if she were some fine lady of the ton. This writer observed it was more like an elegant swan from the park lake, walking with a mallard duck.'

Rosaline snapped her gaze up from the article. The insult was plain. She was not worthy of Simon's notice. She folded up the scandal sheet and laid it back to the table.

"I do not care what they write of me," she said slowly, though she could not speak the words with vigor. "They write to be cruel, nothing more."

"You have not read this one. You should, if you are to understand the censure you have brought on my son's name." With a flustered wave of her hands, Georgiana sifted through the remaining scandal sheets and pulled out one from near the bottom of the pile, before thrusting it into Rosaline's grasp. "Read it."

With a trembling hand, Rosaline took the paper, worried what the Dowager Countess would do to her if she refused.

'A Marriage of Shame.

No doubt the late Earl of Gloucester is turning in his grave today as his son has married the seamstress he has been courting for the last few months. The marriage was a somewhat grand affair, with the bride in question trussed up as if she were a finely born lady.

From guests at the wedding, this writer has heard that it may not be long before the Earl regrets his decision. His bride made quite a spectacle of herself by running out into the rain in her wedding gown.'

Rosaline read no more but returned the paper to the table. She seethed under her breath, trying to calm the sudden erratic breathing. How else was she to conduct herself when it was raining? Besides, it had been an enjoyable day, and she could still remember the way Simon had laughed as she had

danced out in the rain. He had not minded her behavior, therefore, why was it the business of anyone else?

“Who wrote this?” Rosaline asked.

“A writer of many scandal-sheet articles. They call her Theia, after the Greek goddess who sees all. *She* sees all, and she certainly sees the shame you have brought on my family.” Georgiana picked up the papers and thrust them all into Rosaline’s hand. Struggling to catch them, Rosaline stumbled back, clutching them to her chest. “You wish to read of women? Read of yourself. Read of the shame you have brought on Simon.” Georgiana turned and left the room.

Rosaline stared after her, slack jawed, and struggling to speak. With a shudder, Rosaline made a realization of what she had read. She could not understand why the men’s magazines had celebrated each other’s successes, and the only articles written by women had cast each other in shame.

Chapter 9

Rosaline

“This is madness,” Rosaline muttered as she paced across the library. Unable to settle, she sometimes returned to the magazines, picking them up and reading scraps of them, before throwing them down in dismay. Thinking constantly of the exchange with Georgiana, she found herself turning to the window, and looking at the reflection that stared back at her. Marred by the garden beyond, it was a part reflection, one where she could just about see her eyes staring in the lonely room.

*How many other women feel like this in their lives?
Fighting a battle alone.*

Pushing the papers away, Rosaline searched the desk for something blank, with not a single scrap of writing upon it. Finding a blank notebook, one that could clearly be used as a diary, she took it up and wrote her name in the front. She remembered once Simon had said he had many such blank

notebooks, so many he did not have enough ideas to fill them, so she didn't think he'd mind if she borrowed one of them.

Sitting at the desk with an ink well and a quill, Rosaline began to write. At first, it felt like ramblings of ideas, then something slowly began to take shape. She supposed it was a confession from her heart at this time, something she had to get down on paper, in order to make sense of her own whirling thoughts.

'Why must the world we live in put women in their places? This is how I feel at the moment. Because of the nature of my birth, I feel as if I have been made to sit in a certain chair. From that chair, I should not dare move. Yet because I have sought to stretch my legs and move to a new chair, I am considered a shocking thing, appalling, an unnatural woman.'

These days I am mentioned in scandal sheets as if my reputation is that of a Covent Garden courtesan. Unable to even write my name, the writer has labelled me according to the chair I was placed in when I was born, 'Seamstress.' Is

that what I am always to be? Seamstress? Not a woman, but a position.

I cannot help wondering if men are not plagued by the same rigidness of structure.'

Rosaline abruptly broke off and looked up, thinking of this idea. Hurrying to the Windsor chair where all the magazines were scattered, she found the men's magazines and looked at the names celebrated for their achievements.

They talked of artists who were born to merchants, and poets that were younger sons of nobility or even soldiers' sons. A fine soldier who had worked himself up from the lower ranks and achieved great strides in the Napoleonic wars. It mattered so little where he had come from that the article did not even mention his birth nor the positions of his parents.

Rosaline flicked past their names and the engravings of their figures, reprinted in the magazines. Not one of them was

affected by their birth, for they had been allowed to rise above it.

Without thinking much of what she was doing, Rosaline grabbed some of the magazines, knowing there was someone she had to talk to.

There is one man I know who moved position himself without a hindrance. My father.

Before she could leave, she hesitated in the doorway, looking back to the papers that Georgiana had brought in. Uncertain why she did it, Rosaline went back to snatch up two of the scandal sheets, before hurrying out of the door.

Calling to Jacobs, she explained she was going out for the day. He insisted on her taking a carriage, for it was the 'right' thing to do, but it merely made her more insistent on walking.

“But...what will people say, my Lady?” He looked horror stricken and lowered his voice as he spoke to her, glancing back and forth as if fearful of other staff listening to their conversation. “A countess walking alone?”

“I walked alone in town before.”

“You are a Countess now.”

“Perhaps. Yet I still have the same legs, last I looked, and they are able to take me from one place to another with ease.” To her surprise, she saw a flicker of a smile on Jacobs’ face at her challenge and then it vanished. He put up no more objection and helped her into her pelisse, even offering up a bag to carry her papers and magazines.

A short while later, Rosaline was walking through town, heading toward Covent Garden. At one point, she noticed some fine ladies walking in the street, accompanied by a gentleman, who glanced her way. Their noses seemed rather stuck in the air, and their eyes looked down upon her.

Well, I need no great leap of imagination to judge what they think of me!

Rosaline chuckled to herself with the thought and rushed toward her father's shop, tucked away in Covent Garden.

"Father?" she called, stepping in. As the situation had so often been, her excited call was silence by him waving an errant hand, before he turned a warm smile on his customer.

Busying herself around the shop, Rosaline clung to the bag in her grasp, waiting for him to finish. The moment the customer was gone, he moved toward her.

"Rosaline. It is so good to have you back in London." He kissed her on the cheek in greeting. "I have missed you running into this shop and calling my name."

“Ha! I would have thought you would have been glad for the lack of intrusions,” she jested as she bounced on her toes.

“Never.” He laughed, shaking his head. “I’ll always be glad of your excitable company. How was the country? How was your fine estate?” he asked with intrigue.

“Oh, it was beautiful, Father.” She sighed with satisfaction and moved to the counter where he began to cut up some material for the customer that had just left. “Did you get my drawings in my letters?”

“I did.” He whistled in amazement. “Such houses only exit in my dreams. Well, at least I used to think that. Never did I think my daughter would live there.”

“Neither did I.”

“And your husband? How is he? Is all well?” Alfred seemed most particular on having an answer to these

questions, though he busied himself with the material still.

“He is well.” Rosaline’s mind went back to the night before and how Simon had not visited her chamber.

It means nothing, I am sure of it. Surely, he will come to visit me tonight.

“There is something I wish to speak to you about, if I may.” Rosaline moved her bag to the counter, running her fingers across the linen as she thought of what was hidden inside.

“What is it?” Alfred asked, cutting up the material with the scissors audibly slicing the cotton in the air.

“It’s about your history.” Rosaline bobbed, nervous this time, rather than excited.

“My history?” Alfred paused, with his eyebrows shooting up and the busy moustache on his nose quivering a little. “What of it?”

“You started as a laborer, did you not?” Rosaline asked. She could remember somewhere in the back of her mind hearing of it.

“I did. My father was a laborer, and his father was too.” Alfred nodded, placing the scissors down and devoting his attention to Rosaline now. “It was not the life I wanted.”

“How did you do it? Become a tailor, one fine enough to own your own shop in Covent Garden too.” She gestured to the shop around them.

“It was not easy.” Alfred grimaced, as if reliving the memories of it. “Growing up, I saw the pain my father and grandfather went through. I saw the poverty their families had. When I met you mother...” He smiled sadly. “It wasn’t the life I wanted to give her. So, I asked for an apprenticeship at a

tailor's shop. I was fortunate they wanted an apprentice." He returned his focus to cutting his material. "The wedding had to wait until I had become a tailor in my own right, but your mother never complained. By the time we married, I was good at my job. When you came along, I applied for my own shop."

He lifted his hand briefly and patted her cheek, lovingly. Rosaline smiled to hear the tale. It had been so long since she had heard it, that she hadn't remembered the particulars of it.

"When you moved position, did anyone complain?" she asked with intrigue.

"Complain? How do you mean?" He folded up the material, very neatly.

"Well, did anyone think it wrong for you to change your position in society? Tailors earn more than laborers, and I fear they have more respect too," Rosaline mumbled, though she couldn't understand why being a laborer lacked respect.

“It is true.” Alfred cut up a second piece of material, this one longer, but slower this time, as if deep in thought. “Where are you going with this, Rosaline? Tell me the truth.”

Diving a hand into her bag, Rosaline pulled out everything she had brought with her. Pushing the gentleman’s magazines into her father’s hands, she urged him to read some of the articles she had devoted herself to that morning.

“See here. I’ve noticed something.” She gestured to the articles. “They celebrate men’s successes and achievements, but not women’s.”

“Yes, I see that.” Alfred nodded, flicking through the pages. “What of it?”

“This is what is written of the women.” Rosaline pulled out the scandal sheets and laid them flat on the counter. “They talk of me,” she muttered slowly, “but I am not the only one written of here. They concern themselves with scandal, and a woman moving position like me apparently is the greatest sin.

Oh, I still remember what happened with Chloe too, how much the scandal sheets disparaged her.”

Alfred shifted uncomfortably, evidently remembering the story that he himself had given to the scandal sheets at a time when he was driven mad by envy of Chloe’s business, and fear of losing his own.

“I see what you’re saying.” Alfred calmly laid his hand over Rosaline’s, slowing the mad dashing of her hands across the papers. “There is a difference in the writing that exists. Men have it a little easier, perhaps.”

“Not just ‘perhaps’, Father. They do!” Rosaline waved the scandal sheet again. “Why would my marriage hold any interest at all for this writer?” she asked, waving at the latest article that was written about her marriage with Simon. “Shouldn’t she be busying herself with real news? I am not news! The only news that should have been written of that day was happy news.”

“Yes, it should. Calm yourself, dear, please.” Alfred laid a hand on her shoulder.

Rosaline tried to stand still, but struggled, constantly shifting her weight between her feet. As fast as she tried to calm the knots in her stomach, they grew stronger again, more knotted. It was the anger and the frustration, all building together.

“Why has this upset you so?”

“How can it not?” Rosaline was surprised by the stinging in her eyes. Blinking against that feeling, she refused to let herself cry. “It is not the way the world should be.”

Taking the last scandal sheet back from her father, she laid it flat, trying to straighten out some of the creases she had caused with her flustered movements. Thinking back to that moment, the memory of Georgiana’s cruel gaze upon her made her feel very small.

“For the first time, today, I feel as if I understood my mother-in-law,” Rosaline said quietly, not looking at her father, but at the scandal sheet.

“Why is that?”

“Because I saw myself through her eyes. I am this *creature* that’s written of in these scandal sheets.” She thrust a finger at the paper. “I’m not a woman, but a thing set to bring scandal on her family name. No wonder she despises me.”

“Did she say that!?” Alfred spluttered, leaning forward, with his cheeks turning almost as red as the hair of his bushy moustache.

“Not in so many words,” Rosaline swallowed around the lump in her throat. Georgiana might not have used the word ‘despise’, but there were plenty of venomous words used. She didn’t want to elaborate further though, out of fear of upsetting her father.

“Listen to me, dear.” Alfred tried to take the papers from her hands, but Rosaline wouldn’t let him. She gripped onto the scandal sheet tightly. In the end, Alfred took her shoulders and turned Rosaline to face him, urging her to listen. “Maybe time is all you need. I know things seem hopeless now, cruel even, but a lot can change in time. The Dowager Countess will see the real you. She just needs to come round to see things as they really are.”

“Maybe,” Rosaline accepted, but it was not enough. It wasn’t just the matter of Georgiana that was upsetting her so, it was these magazines and the scandal sheets. She could not understand how women could be treated so disparagingly, even by other women.

“Here, let me make us a drink. I have some fine cakes we can have to take your mind off things.”

“Thank you, Father.” Rosaline smiled as her father went into the back of the shop to make the tea. The moment he was

gone, Rosaline turned her focus down to the scandal sheet in front of her.

For the first time, she read the name of the writer there. Georgiana had said they called her *Theia*, after the all-seeing Greek Goddess, but it was not her real name. Her name was written with coldness at the bottom of the page, printed firmly in black and white.

'From your truth-seeking writer, Mrs. Ida Davis.'

“Truth-seeking?” Rosaline scoffed under her breath.
“More like muck seeker.”

As her father returned, Rosaline tried to be happy. She attempted to talk to her father about the shop and about her time in the country too. When they got onto the subject of Simon, she was able to talk at length with excitement, thinking at all times of how he might come to see her that night in the bedchamber, but there was still part of her that lingered on

their previous topic. The fear and anger were nestled there, like a curdling in her stomach.

When she gathered the papers and magazines to leave, she read the scandal sheet article written about herself one last time, before thrusting it inside, crumpling the pages. She couldn't help thinking that *Theia*, Mrs. Ida Davis, would never accept her as part of the ton.

Just like Georgiana.

Chapter 10

Simon

“Jacobs, where is my wife?” Simon stood in the entrance hall, aware that Rosaline’s pelisse was not hung on the hook of the coat stand, where his butler was now placing his frock coat.

“She went out earlier today, my Lord,” Jacobs explained. Glancing up and down the entrance hall, he took a step toward Simon, speaking to him conspiratorially. “I pressed her to take the carriage, but she refused, she insisted on walking.”

“Yes, what of it?” Simon frowned, not understanding what the problem with this matter was.

“Well... My Lord... I mean...” Jacobs seemed to struggle to string two words together. He stepped back, flushing a deep shade of red and straightened his jacket. “Your mother would never go out unescorted walking.” It was an insinuation that no lady should.

Simon kept his thoughts to himself on this matter. He didn't see any good that could come from lecturing his butler on why there was nothing wrong with Rosaline taking a walk by herself.

“Fortunately, my wife is not my mother.” Simon's words made the butler stand further back. “Did she say where she was going?”

“No, my Lord, she did not.”

“Very well. Where is my mother? I will ask her.”

“In the music room, my Lord.”

Simon thanked the butler and walked to the music room. Inside, he found his mother hard at work playing the harp. It was a favorite instrument of hers, and one that she had devoted hours of practice too. A chief memory from Simon's

childhood had been to hear that harp played throughout the house.

He had a particular memory of a lecture from his father. One where his father told him how to walk and talk to be an earl. Behind them, Georgiana had sat playing the harp, the soft and somewhat dreamy music contrasting the harshness of his father's words. When Simon had asked his mother if it really mattered how he walked, his mother had paused playing and said that it did matter.

'What people think of us is very important. Such things as how you walk, or how I play this instrument, are integral to that.'

Simon didn't interrupt his mother's playing but leaned on the doorframe, watching her work. The tune of *Solo Fur Die Harfe* rang out, joyous and rather energetic. His mother leaned into the playing, but there was no smile on her lips.

I wonder if she ever plays for her own enjoyment, or merely with the thought of performing for others.

When she came to the end of the piece, Simon clapped, drawing her attention to his presence. She smiled broadly as he approached in the room.

“Did you like it?” she asked, standing to her feet.

“Very much. Did you enjoy it?” he asked. “I did not see you smile.”

“Of course, I did.” She smiled now, though for a brief second only. Simon thought it may have been forced. “How was your writer’s circle?”

“Excellent. I wished to tell Rosaline all about it, but Jacobs tells me she is not here. Where has she gone today?” Simon waited for his mother to answer, but strangely, Georgiana turned away and returned to her stool by the harp.

Resting the instrument against her shoulder, she slowly played a few notes from *Andante con Variatone*. “Mother?” Simon said, trying to stir a reaction from her.

“I am afraid I do not know where she went.”

Simon stiffened where he stood. The initial irritation he felt he tried his best not to let grow. After all, he knew it would be a while for Georgiana to accept Rosaline completely.

“Did you not ask?” he said, very slowly. “Perhaps she intimated this morning to you where she was going to go?”

“No. I did not ask.” Georgiana shook her head and continued to play. “I did not notice she had gone until Jacobs told me. I understand from Jacobs she quite insisted on walking.” She shook her head, quite scoffing at the idea. “Unescorted too.”

“Mother.” Simon’s tone was deep, one of warning, but Georgiana appeared not to hear him. She merely devoted her attention to her finger strumming across the strings. “What would it matter if she went walking? Rosaline is a woman of the world. She often walked alone before we wed. Do you imagine I would cage her with a footman at her side now?”

“She is a Countess now,” Georgiana hissed with the words.

“You had noticed then that I married her,” Simon’s wry tone didn’t help. Georgiana paused with her playing and looked up at him. “I am trying to ascertain where my wife is, Mother. I want her to go walking, of course I do, to have her freedoms, but do you mean to say she left here alone today and neither you nor Jacobs thought to ask her where she was going?”

“No. We did not.” Once more, she took up the piece and returned to her playing.

“You treat her as if she is not part of this family, Mother.” Simon’s tone made her break off again. This time, she showed no inclination to returning to it. She set the harp in position and tipped her head back, lifting the rather pointed chin high.

“She is not my family.” The cold tone forced Simon to step away. He walked across the room, thinking hard of what his mother had said.

“I married her. She is your daughter-in-law now. No matter what you think, Mother, Rosaline is your family.” He spoke the words clearly, but with his rising ire, he felt the familiar territory of how he used to argue with his father returning.

For so many hours at a time would he and his father argue. In one room they’d stand, shouting at one another, and Simon did not want that with his mother now, not when they were making such a conscious effort to be reconciled.

“Family means love, does it not?” Georgiana’s words were enough to silence Simon. He looked back to his mother, with his jaw slack. “I cannot love a woman who would so willfully ruin you. It is shameful for you to ask that of me.”

“Mother!” Simon’s voice rose in his anger. “Rosaline married me. She loves me. That is not ruining me. It is an act of love, not hate. How can you despise her so for that?”

“Simon, must we have this conversation again?” Georgiana stood to her feet with a sigh.

“No, I do not wish to have it.” Simon accepted and stepped back. Feeling a heat taking over his body in his anger, he shrugged off his tailcoat and flung it onto the nearest chair. Georgiana flinched at the movement.

“You should not treat your tailcoat so, Simon.” Georgiana gestured to it. “An earl should be proper at all times —”

“Surely after all these years you have noticed I am not as a ‘proper’ earl should be?” Simon asked, watching as Georgiana looked away from him, her manner sharp and unwelcome. “Mother, what has happened here?” he asked slowly. “These are the arguments I had with my father. His opinion was the one who insisted so strongly on how I should be, how I should act, what I should say to be a good earl. You were never so vigorous in your opinion as he was. What has changed now?”

She didn’t answer for a minute but fiddled with the mourning bracelet at her wrist. She devoted her attention to it, clearly thinking only of that and not what Simon had said at all.

“Mother?” His sharp tone urged her to flick her head toward him. “Please,” he softened his voice. “I will not spend eternity with you arguing or shouting with you on this matter. Just tell me why you are so keen to voice an opinion on this now?”

“Because...” She paused, apparently taking the time to swallow deeply. “Because he is not here to do it.”

Simon stepped back, moving his hands to his hips as he stared at his mother.

His father could have walked between them then. The ghost of the late Earl might as well have marched into the room, stood there and glared at Simon himself.

‘What a disgrace you have brought to this family, Simon.’

He could imagine his father’s ghost uttering such words, with the darkly set frown.

“Just because he is not here does not mean you have to give his opinion for him,” Simon muttered. “Give your own opinion, not his.”

“Then I will freely give it.” She turned to face him fully.
“By marrying that woman—”

“That woman!?! Mother, she has a name,” Simon muttered harshly.

“You have brought shame upon your reputation,” she continued on as if he hadn’t spoken at all. “Do you not care what people will say of the earldom now? What they will say of you?”

“Of course, I do not care.” Simon shook his head. “I do not care for what people say, I care for my wife, and at this moment I wish to know where she is. Lo and behold, no one in this house can tell me because apparently you care no more for her than if she was an ant beneath your feet.” The words came in a rush, so fast that Simon barely thought of them before they passed his lips. Something in what he said must have connected with his mother, for Georgiana turned away and covered her face with her hands.

“I cannot understand you, Simon,” she whispered a minute later. “You do not know what it is truly like to be cast out of the ton. Yes, your arguments with your father divided you from him, but he never spoke ill of you to others, never disparaged you, because he feared what people would think of you.”

“Do not treat him with such benevolence.” Simon was tempted to laugh at the idea. “He feared what the ton would think of *him* to know he had an estranged son.”

“He was protecting you!” The words were sudden and loud. Georgiana turned on her heel and faced him with tears in her eyes and red cheeks. That volume and the look of those tears silenced Simon. He fell still, watching, and waiting for her to go on. “He was trying to protect you from the cruelty of the ton, how foul they can really be. Believe me, Simon, you are about to experience it for yourself. Do you imagine publishers and all these fine connections you have in the writing circle will trust your judgement now?”

Her words made him turn away, disgusted by the intimation.

“It is a professional world. My opinion is still valid on what I read.”

“Is it?” She shook her head. “I think you will find they think ill of you. Certain publishers will distance themselves from you. What member of the ton will accept your good word and recommendation on something you have read, when your judgement on a wife is this *poor*?”

“Mother!” Simon’s word silenced her. She stepped back, those tears coming again. She pressed the heels of her hands to her cheeks, trying to dry those tears.

It cannot be. I will not believe it.

The thoughts came madly through Simon’s mind.

I am respected for my work with the writers. Surely, they will not think ill of me just because I married a woman who used to be a seamstress.

Yet he had nothing to say to his mother, no reasoned argument to make. The fact remained that it was possible. It was perfectly probable now that one or two people he knew might turn their backs on him.

Had they not already experienced it at the wedding? He thought of what Rosaline had told him of some of their guests being so eager to leave and offering snide comments as they left.

“You know it to be true,” Georgiana muttered, stammering between her tears. “Otherwise, you would tell me now that it is not.”

Simon did not have the words. He parted his lips to argue with her but feared it would merely end in another shouting match.

“I’ve had enough of arguing with you,” he murmured, his voice very quiet indeed. Stepping forward, he delved in a pocket to find a handkerchief and offered it to his mother. She took it and thanked him for it, drying her tears. They dried rather quickly, then Georgiana stood straight.

“You are not arguing because deep down, you know it to be the truth.” The words made him fall silent.

Simon struggled to know what to think, or to say, when there was a sound at the door of a floorboard creaking.

“Is everything well?” Rosaline’s voice disturbed the two of them. Simon looked to her as Georgiana turned her back on his wife, pressing the handkerchief to her cheeks and hiding her tears. “Simon?” Rosaline asked, her worry plain.

Her red hair was wild from the wind, her cheeks pink from the walk, and her eyes darted about the room. With her arrival came some comfort to Simon.

She always has this affect. She is the one I should be with.

“Everything’s fine,” he lied and stepped away from his mother. He moved toward his wife and took her hand. “I hear you went out today. Where did you go? Did you have fun?”

“I went to see my father,” she explained with a smile. “There was something I had to speak to him about. How was the writer’s circle?”

“There’s much to tell you of it.” He kissed her hand and looked back to his mother. Still, Georgiana had her back to them. From what he could see, she had no intention to turn round and face them at all. “Mother, our discussion for now is at an end. I hope we have no need to return to it in the future.”

Georgiana flinched with the words, but she said nothing.

Rosaline pulled on Simon's hand, getting his attention, before she mouthed a few words, "*What argument?*" He shook his head, pretending it wasn't important.

"Mother, will you join us for dinner this evening?" Simon asked.

"I'm afraid I have a sudden headache." Georgiana's words came calmly, though judging from how she still wouldn't deign to look on them, and the way she fiddled with the bracelet on her wrist, she was anything but calm inside. "I might retire to my room and eat alone tonight."

"Very well then." Having no wish to stay here any longer, holding onto Rosaline's hand, Simon led her away. They turned from the room and hurried out through the corridor. He walked fast, with Rosaline doing her best to keep up at his side.

"Simon? What has happened?" Rosaline whispered in a panic.

“It is nothing to concern yourself with,” he assured her, bringing a smile in the hope it would comfort her. “My mother is simply being stubborn. In time, these arguments will end, I am sure of it.” Yet he noticed that Rosaline did not smile as he did when he uttered these words.

Chapter 11

Rosaline

“Today will be different.” Rosaline spoke to herself as she walked out of her bedchamber. Simon had not come to her that night again. Feeling hurt by his absence, Rosaline was determined to change things.

It will be the first day since we have returned to London where things feel as they did by the sea, I will make sure of it.

Hurrying down the stairs, she made her way to the breakfast room to see that Simon was already up. She longed to ask him why he had not come to her chamber, but when she found that Georgiana was sat at the table too, she had to hold her tongue.

“Rosaline, how are you today?” Simon asked, smiling broadly as she approached.

“Well, but I am longing for a walk.” She moved to his side and kissed him on the cheek. Georgiana looked down at the show of affection, audibly slicing her bread so that the knife scraped on the plate. Rosaline ignored her action, determined not to be sad today. Taking her place at the table, she addressed Simon alone. “You recall all the lovely walks we had by the sea?”

“I do.” Simon nodded. “Yet I regret there is no sea here to walk by.”

“Yes, but there is the Thames?”

“It is not the prettiest of sights in places,” Simon laughed with the words, “but there is Hyde Park? Let me guess, you are hoping for another walk today?”

“I am.” Rosaline nodded. “Just you and me. What do you say?” She was pleased to see Simon smiling before he answered.

“I would love that. Let us go this morning.”

“To Hyde Park? Promenading?” Georgiana asked, sitting tall in her seat.

“What of it?” Simon shrugged. “It is a pleasant place for a walk. There is a wood and a lake too.” He turned to Rosaline and brushed his leg against her own under the table. She trembled with excitement, remembering all their nights together. “It will remind us of our early walks too, when we first met.”

“I would like that.”

“But...” Georgiana sat forward, with sudden panic in her expression. “Many people from the ton will be there today. They will see you together.”

“And?” Simon seemed unaffected by it. Rosaline knew well enough what Georgiana was doing, but she was trying her

best to ignore it.

*I wish today to be a happy day. No more regrets or fears.
Simon and I will be happy.*

“Well, enjoy your walk,” Georgiana said tightly and moved to her feet, showing she was done with breakfast. “Yet do not be surprised of some of the treatment you may receive when you are there.”

“Treatment?” Rosaline asked. “As far as I can see, people like to look down their noses, nothing more.”

“That may be all they do for now,” Georgiana warned, “but it will become worse. Mark my words.” Her gaze lingered on her son with this last statement.

Rosaline watched Simon, noticing there was something strange in his reaction. A muscle seemed to tick in his jaw, as if he was seriously considering what she had to say. Rosaline

waited for Georgiana to leave the room and the door to close behind her, before Rosaline leaned toward Simon and took his hand.

“Let us not worry about that. We will be going for a walk to enjoy each other’s company.”

“Yes. Yes, you are right,” he said, as if coming to himself. “Ignore me, I am simply a little out of sorts. How about we leave this next hour?”

“Sounds wonderful.”

An hour later, they passed through the door and out into the street. Rosaline had her pelisse over her shoulders and Simon had his frock coat. With her arm through his, everything felt as it had been in the countryside. There were no servants to look down on them, and no Georgiana to cast judgement.

As they walked toward Hyde Park, Rosaline listened attentively to all that Simon had to say about the writers he had heard the day before. He talked of poets in particular, and a few essayists. Rosaline engaged with it all, fascinated to hear of these subjects. As they entered the park, she shifted the conversation toward the magazines she had found.

“I hope you do not mind, but I found your stack of magazines in your library. I confess, I read them quite thoroughly.”

“Why would I mind? It is your house too, Rosaline. Everything in there is yours,” he reminded her, tapping her hand as it rested on his arm.

“You will not mind then that I took a notebook to write in too?” she asked softly.

“Of course, not. I have so many, and we can always buy more.” He shrugged. “What did you make of the magazines?”

“It was interesting that you ask that, for they prompted many thoughts.” Rosaline looked ahead at the park.

Now that spring was upon them, flowers were growing in the borders. Newly sprung daffodils and tulips were reading the heads, offering splashes of color against the green lawns. Many people walked by these flowers, but they did not admire them as Rosaline did. She noticed some ladies seemed more concerned with admiring others’ gowns than the nature around them. It was as if the focus was a competition of status, rather than the world they stood in.

“Rosaline?” Simon elbowed her playfully. “You seem somewhat distracted. I could distract you more if you like.” He took her hand from his arm and kissed it, urging her to giggle at the attention as it sent a thrill through her.

“I’ll always be glad of that kind of distraction. My apologies, I was admiring the flowers.” She shifted her focus to him as they walked between the borders. “When I read your magazines, I noticed there is a particular difference between

those written for men and women. Women's magazines either discuss fashion or they are scandal sheets. Odd things, don't you think?"

"How so?" Simon asked, looking at her with keen interest.

"I mean one tells ladies how to dress if they wish to be accepted by the ton, and the other points out which ladies have failed in attempting to be accepted." She grimaced with the words. "They seem to be saying something, do you not think?"

"I had never thought of it that way before." Simon looked ahead, an expression on his face that betrayed he was interested. "And the gentlemen's magazines? What did you make of them?"

"Well, their subject matter was much broader!" she gushed. "They were enjoyable reads, and then I noticed how they celebrate men's successes. They do not talk of women's

successes, but neither is there a magazine dedicated for such a topic.”

“I suppose not.” Simon shook his head. “Do you really think people would be interested in reading it?”

“Simon!” She elbowed him. He oomph-ed at the movement before he laughed.

“Yes, I now realize how that sounded. I didn’t mean to disparage the idea,” he whispered, leaning toward her.

“Good, or I may need to elbow you again,” she said playfully and took his arm. They walked closely to one another, with the affection plain for anyone else to see.

“I merely mean that it interests you, and whilst I can see it interesting some ladies, I am not certain how wide the readership would be.” He seemed worried by the idea as he led

them down the pathway and across a small bridge, heading into the center of the park.

“Truly? Do you think so?” Rosaline considered this idea. Perhaps it was possible that not everyone wanted to read of such things as she did. She needed to learn more, to know what other women would like to read. “Perhaps I should ask more ladies what they think. *Ackermann’s* magazine interested me a lot. He celebrated great literature and art, essayists too, but the Duchess of Suffolk was not mentioned, Maria Cosway wasn’t, and neither was Mary Wollstonecraft.”

“I see you have been doing some good reading in my library whilst we were in the country,” Simon chuckled. “You read Wollstonecraft?”

“I found her fascinating.” Rosaline couldn’t laugh though. She was a little wrongfooted by the way Simon chuckled at her, as if he thought her efforts to read such things were rather charming, but merely that, almost sweet. It was not

the reaction she had expected. "I think ladies might enjoy a magazine of the same ilk but written for them."

"Perhaps." Simon didn't look convinced though. He stopped walking and turned to face her. "Yet wouldn't it create more of a divide?"

"What do you mean?" Rosaline was sensing some tension now. The smile had vanished from Simon's face as he looked at her.

"The ton already has expectations of how women should be. Take my mother, for instance." He shook his head, as if despairing of Georgiana's behavior. "Imagine if people like that had an entire magazine to disparage so and lament? It gives them more to attack."

"I hadn't thought of it like that." Rosaline chewed her lip as Simon led her on. They passed deeper into the park, both silent, before Rosaline spoke again. "But surely that is more reason for such a magazine to exist. Writers could show those

who hold such opinions it is not the only way to think. It opens their eyes to another world of women.”

“Ha! And my mother’s eyes will be opened, will they?”

Simon laughed again. This time, that sound hurt.

“Simon, please, do not laugh at me,” Rosaline pleaded.

“I am not laughing at you,” Simon assured her. “I am merely laughing at the idea.” He stopped them walking again and turned to face her. “Rosaline, I have fought this world for years. I fought my father before he died, and he is not the only one to hold such rigid opinions of the world. They cannot be changed. One must simply contend with them. The best way to be is to ignore them and live our own lives, for ourselves.”

“I see.” Rosaline was not sure she agreed. There was a tension between them now, and they lowered their arms from one another, no longer touching. Rosaline wasn’t sure who let go first, was it her? Or was it Simon? The thought that he

might have let go first hurt her. “Perhaps we shouldn’t talk more of this now. It seems to be upsetting us.”

“Maybe you’re right.” Simon saw someone behind her, for his eyes lit up and he put a smile in place. “Ah, Lord Eldridge, how are you today?” He stepped around Rosaline and went to greet the gentleman. Rosaline followed, before she noticed the way Lord Eldridge and the young man at his side looked at her.

“Lord Gloucester.” The elder man bowed, followed by the younger, who Rosaline presumed was his son. “I see you have returned to London.”

“I have. Allow me to introduce my wife.” Simon gestured to Rosaline who curtsied.

“Pleasure.” Yet Lord Eldridge’s tone betrayed he didn’t feel pleasure at all. He barely bowed, and his son didn’t even bother bowing at all. “If you would excuse us, we have

somewhere we need to be.” With these dismissive words, the two gentlemen walked off.

Rosaline felt numb as she watched them go. It was rude, beyond the pale even in its plain rudeness, for the son to refuse a bow was a refusal to acknowledge her presence at all.

“Did he just—” Rosaline pointed after the two men.

“He did.” Simon looked tense. Turning his back on the men, he walked on through the park, and didn’t wait for Rosaline. She had to hurry after him, trying to catch him up. “How mad are people becoming? That was cruel, cruel indeed,” he muttered in anger.

“Think nothing of it, Simon, please.” Rosaline tried to take his arm, but he didn’t let her at first. He fidgeted so much, striding ahead, that Rosaline gave up trying to take his arm. She latched her hands together instead in front of her. “Some people do not see how their actions hurt others, I suppose.”

“It is frustrating. More than I can say.” He still walked on, making Rosaline practically have to run to keep up with him. “Never did I think my mother would be right.”

“Right? She is not right,” Rosaline pleaded. “Simon, please—”

“Rosaline, Lord Eldridge used to be part of the writing circle,” he explained in a rush, his expression so anxious that his temple had creased. “He did not come to our meeting this week and the Duke of Suffolk tells me he has been missing from the last few. Is this why? Because we have married?”

“You cannot think like this.” Rosaline tried to take his arm again. “Simon, if you intend to run throughout this park, then I’ll have to run at your heels. I’m up for it if you are, I just thought I’d point it out.” Her jesting tone worked to lessen the tension. Simon softened and slowed his walk.

“I’m sorry. I have allowed myself to be worked up.” He offered his arm to her, and she took it, comforted the moment

they were touching again. “I fear after what just happened... what if my mother was right to some degree? What if the writing circle and some of my acquaintances no longer trust my judgment?”

Rosaline swallowed, nervously. She felt small, so small that she did not deserve to be standing beside Simon, nor in this park where ladies and gentlemen of the ton walked back and forth. With her gaze downturned, she struggled to look Simon in the eye at all.

He is questioning whether picking me was good judgement...oh my Lord!

“I could never regret our marriage, Rosaline, trust me in that,” his words brought her a wave of relief, “but what if my mother’s warning was a fair one after all?”

“Or like her, maybe they just need time.” Rosaline shrugged and lifted her gaze to meet his at last. “That is what you said, is it not? She needs time to grow used to how things

are now. It will come, we need only wait, perhaps it is the same for the ton too.”

“Maybe.”

“Wait...” Rosaline paused, noticing how Simon’s brow was still furrowed, and his eyes kept blinking, as if he was holding back some truth from her. “Do you fear now your mother will never accept me?”

“I do not know.” With these words, Simon released her arm and walked on. Rosaline tried to catch up with him, but the tension between them had returned. “Maybe my mother will not change her opinion, and maybe the ton are the same.” Then he fell silent.

“Simon please, let us talk about this,” she pleaded.

“I need time to think, Rosaline. Let us talk of this later.”

“But I wish to talk now—”

“Later!” His voice was far too loud for her comfort. Rosaline stopped walking, holding herself back as Simon walked ahead. She could feel her heart breaking as the frustration Simon felt fractured the bond and happy moment they had been sharing before. That happiness disintegrated, like soil slipping through her fingers.

How did this conversation become such an awful argument?

Chapter 12

Rosaline

There was only one place Rosaline could think of to find comfort after her argument with Simon. Finding herself parted from her husband in Hyde Park, she didn't return with him to the house, but headed to Covent Garden instead. Walking through Chloe's shop door, the bell tinkled overhead, and three faces she knew well turned to look at her.

"Rosaline?" Chloe said, looking up from where she was pinning the Duchess of Suffolk into a dress. Gretchen peered around the Duchess too, from where she was carrying material ready to be pinned out.

Rosaline didn't answer her own name straight away. She could still feel the stinging in her eyes and the lump in her throat, a warning of what was to come, impending tears.

"I know that look," the Duchess said, striding forward in her pinned gown. The movement was so sudden that Chloe

and Gretchen were taken forward with her, attached to the material wrapped around her waist. “Tears are on the brink.”

“How can you tell?” Rosaline asked, but the moment she had started to speak, her fight with the tears was lost. Her breath hitched, and they began to fall.

“Chloe?” the Duchess gestured to the door of the shop.

“I’m already on it!” Chloe assured. She tossed pins to the nearest table and reached for the door, closing it hurriedly and turning over a sign to say the shop was closed. “My shop will always be a refuge for tears.”

“Th-thank you,” Rosaline said, stammering through her tears.

“What has happened?” Gretchen, the young seamstress who worked for Chloe, asked in a sweet voice. Still carrying the other end of the material that was tied to the Duchess,

Chloe tried to take it out of her hands then snipped a clean line through the silk, releasing the tether the two women had together.

“Simon and I...we argued,” Rosaline murmured quietly.

“Your first argument, was it?” the Duchess asked softly. “I remember that. It feels like the end of the world is nigh.” Her words took on that poetic tone Rosaline had come to recognize in her writing. “Come, sit, rest, talk with us. Tell us what has happened.”

“And, trust us, that arguments are not the end of everything,” Chloe assured, hurrying on behind them as Rosaline was steered toward the counter, behind which were a few chairs. “If that were the case, Leo and I might have parted long ago!”

“You argue?” Rosaline asked, peering over her shoulder as the Duchess urged her down into one of the chairs. A second later, Gretchen appeared with a rather lacy

handkerchief for Rosaline to use, and Chloe sat down at Rosaline's side with a rather dramatic sigh.

“Indeed, we do! The walls themselves would shake. I kid of course.” She laughed at her own jest. “But yes, we argue. All couples do argue, Rosaline. It is bound to happen.”

Rosaline wasn't sure if Chloe and her husband had an argument like the one that she had just shared with Simon. It ran deep and cut to the very heart of their marriage.

“You should have heard Benjamin and I argue last week about what toys to buy Nathan,” the Duchess said with a laugh. “You would not think it possible for two people to argue about the state of a wooden horse.”

“I would not,” Chloe agreed, shaking her head.

“How did you argue about that?” Gretchen asked, wrinkling her nose.

“I’m not entirely sure.” The Duchess shrugged with the words. When she could see it didn’t bring Rosaline any comfort, she reached forward and patted Rosaline’s hand that clutched to the handkerchief. “They’re not so much arguments as spats or quarrels. That is the way of married couples. You are together all the time and you’re bound to get under each other’s feet. It would be impossible for one person to agree with another all the time. They’d have to be a complete copy of one another.”

“True indeed,” Chloe said heartily. “Now, how about some tea? It may be one of the few ways we know to stave off tears, but it certainly works.”

Rosaline’s breath was too stuttered to utter that she did not want tea. She continued to cry, dabbing at her cheeks as tea was made by Chloe and Gretchen. When it turned up a few minutes later, Rosaline was forced to release the handkerchief to hold onto the cup and saucer. She found it worked a little after all, for she had to think of not dropping the cup and saucer in her stuttered breaths and it slowed her tears.

“Now, why don’t you tell us what happened, Rosaline?” Chloe asked, leaning toward her as she lifted her own teacup to her lips. “And I promise we’ll be able to help lighten the load for you.”

“I am not sure that can be done,” Rosaline murmured softly. Once she felt she had control of her tears, she began. “In the country, we were so happy. There wasn’t a cross word between us, then we come back to his mother, and oh...” She sniffed another time. “She has made it abundantly clear how little she thinks of me.”

“Such things will change in time, surely,” Gretchen said, offering up a biscuit to go with the tea, but Rosaline politely refused.

“That’s what Simon first said, but even he is beginning to change his mind on that score. Now, I am not convinced of it either. She has kept a collection of all the scandal sheets that have been written about Simon and I.” At these words,

Rosaline watched the behavior of the women around her change. The Duchess stiffened, Chloe sat forward so far that she nearly fell off her chair, and Gretchen dropped some tea in her lap.

“All of them?” the Duchess asked quietly.

“The woman has stamina,” Chloe muttered. “Well, it’s that or obsession.”

Rosaline found herself agreeing with a nod.

“What do these scandal sheets say?” Gretchen asked.

Rosaline went into the details of what she had been forced to read. She talked of *Theia*, the scandal sheet writer, and her real name Mrs. Ida Davis. She revealed how many articles there had been and how well-thumbed they had been by the Dowager Countess.

“They’re horrible articles,” Rosaline whispered, looking down into her teacup. “She never calls me by my name, only ‘Seamstress.’ She declares quite confidently that I have ruined my husband.” She felt the threat of tears again and had to breathe deeply to try to stop them.

“How absurd!” Chloe said, jumping to her feet. “The irony that a scandal sheet writer cannot see that she is the one causing pain, rather than a loving wife. Pah! It seems scandal sheet writers are blind as well as dumb.”

“Chloe,” the Duchess was clearly trying to calm her ire, but it did little. Chloe had begun to pace.

“I know what it is like,” Chloe reminded them all. She moved to Rosaline’s side and laid a hand to Chloe’s shoulder. “I know exactly what it is like to have the ton turn to look at you, but not to see who you really are. They see a creation, a fiction. In this instance, they see what *Theia* says.”

“Quite so.” Rosaline agreed.

“Do people really believe all that they read?” Gretchen asked with her brow furrowed.

“I wish I could say they did not.” The Duchess’ sigh was deep.

Rosaline only felt more miserable for hearing her friends’ words. It was cruel to think of Theia having so much control of her life, but this lady did. She had orchestrated her last few months around writing articles of Rosaline, when she was quite certain the two of them had never met.

“How can a woman make an enemy of me when we have never met?” Rosaline asked, not really expecting an answer as she tried to stop an escaped tear from falling in her tea.

“I met Mrs. Davis once.” The Duchess’ words had them all turning toward her, and Chloe even stopped pacing.

“You have?” Chloe asked. “Do not keep us in suspense, Maeve, please, go on. What was she like?”

“She was...” The Duchess paused and chewed her lip, clearly dwelling for a moment on this idea. “Well, in truth, I’d say she was dissatisfied with her lot in life. Very high and mighty in manner, but happy? Certainly not.”

“Oh, the irony.” Chloe returned to her pacing. “One woman who is unhappy with what hand she has been dealt seeks to improve her own standing by putting down another woman. What good can come from that?” Her question reminded Rosaline so much of what she had written in her journal that she sat taller, longing to speak to her friends about it.

“I take it these articles are what you and your husband argued about?” the Duchess asked gently.

“Yes.” Rosaline nodded. “I think we should try to change the way the world is, and Simon wishes for us to hide and do nothing. The way he spoke, it sounded as if he...as if he re...” She trailed off, deciding she wished to keep the thought to herself for the time being.

It sounded as if he regretted marrying me.

“Anyway, I have been reading these political magazines that Simon keeps. I was interested in the lack of any such magazine that celebrates women’s accomplishments. Even the fashion magazines hardly mention women designers by name, Chloe, have you not noticed that?” Rosaline asked, appealing to her friend who nodded slowly. “The literature and arts magazines do not speak of Miss Austen, Mrs. Wollstonecraft, or you, your Grace.” She gestured toward the Duchess. “It is as if women are missing from the pages of these magazines. They do not exist there. I thought it was perhaps time we had something that did talk of such women’s successes.”

“If only.” The Duchess moved to her feet and took Rosaline’s teacup with her. She moved to the counter where the teapot had been placed to fill it up. “I would gladly buy such a magazine at every opportunity.”

“You would?” Rosaline asked with interest, turning in her chair to keep watching the Duchess.

“Without a doubt.” She nodded.

“As would I.” Chloe agreed and gestured to Gretchen. “And I do not doubt you would.”

“My reading is not great.” Gretchen shifted uncomfortably in her chair. “I am trying though.”

“You do better than try! You are quite excelling at it.” Chloe’s praise of her friend made Rosaline sit taller once again with a smile.

“See? Why can’t women do that more?” she asked, gesturing to Chloe.

“Do what?” Chloe asked, picking up a biscuit from the silver tray.

“Praise each other’s successes, rather than as Theia and others like her put them down.” Rosaline shifted in her seat, unable to sit still. “It makes me restless, anxious, even, to see how some women are so intent on it.”

“I reckon it is not born out of a natural cruelty, but something else,” the Duchess mused, pausing with pouring the tea and looking up. She stared through the shop, as if staring into the distance in thought.

“How do you mean?” Rosaline encouraged her on.

“The world of the ton is a competitive place; we have all seen that.” She sighed, clearly disappointed by the nature of it.

“The more I experience it, the more I think of it as some born element of the animal kingdom. Just as tigers fight for food and to be king of their areas, the ladies and gentlemen of the ton compete to be noticed by others, to be respected more by their peers.”

“It explains some of the dresses I make,” Chloe said and rolled her eyes. “One young lady came in the other day and insisted on so many ruffles in her petticoat, she would have struggled to walk. When I asked why she wanted so many ruffles, she said her friend had nearly as many.”

“She wanted to outdo her friend,” Gretchen agreed, with her lips parted in wonder. “It was an odd thing.”

“Just so!” Chloe gestured to Gretchen, the young seamstress who worked with her and who Rosaline had gotten to know well over the last few months. “I think you could be right, Maeve. Sometimes ladies put each other down in the effort for notice and praise to be drawn more to themselves.”

The thought that this could be what Theia was doing disgusted Rosaline. Theia had become her enemy in words. It didn't matter they'd never met, but Theia, like a tiger in the jungle, had sensed a weakness, and she had pounced upon it. She intended to draw admiration by pointing out the folly of another woman.

“I am sure it is to do with women changing position in society,” Rosaline spoke her thoughts aloud. “When a man changes position, it does not draw nearly as much notice. Yet it seems a woman's position is fixed in stone. God forbid they should move.”

“Just so!” Chloe and the Duchess agreed heartily.

Taken up by hearing their sentiments, Rosaline rose to her feet. She didn't think of Simon's warnings for a minute, she thought of her friends only, and the plight of such women like them. Surely, Simon's wish not to change society came from a place of just thinking it could not be changed.

Maybe, it could be changed.

“If you saw such political statements and opinions, in a magazine such as the one we were talking of before, would you wish to read it?” Rosaline asked, looking between her three friends. “Would it be something you would take up happily?”

“I’d pay more money than they asked for it too,” Chloe said with wit. “Well, it would depend on the quality of the writing.” They laughed at her jest, softening the air of the room.

Rosaline looked down at the handkerchief in her hands, now her tears had stopped, and fiddled with the lace. An idea was forming. Perhaps the notes she had written in her diary didn’t have to remain there. Perhaps they could be written for the entire ton to see and read.

Maybe then, Simon would agree with me that things could change. If he could only see how other women long to

read such a thing themselves, then perhaps he would agree with me that such things are for the best.

Rosaline found herself standing taller. Despite Simon's suggestion they should hide from the ton, Rosaline found she could not. She did not want to hide. She was part of the competition now, and she wasn't going to be squashed by Theia, even if it meant fighting for her position to stay by Simon's side.

Chapter 13

Simon

Simon stood outside of his house for some time. The more he paced the more he couldn't believe what had happened in the park. As he had stormed off, he had been convinced that Rosaline was behind him. The more he thought about it, the more absurd he realized such a thought was.

Why should Rosaline have followed me after I had been so sharp?

He did not blame her for walking off in the slightest, yet he wished he knew now where she was. This isolation from each other was making him lonely, to the point that he couldn't face going back into the house without her.

Moving to sit on the front step, he sat down on a damp patch on the step, though he didn't take notice of it. He kept fidgeting, looking up and down the road and waiting impatiently for Rosaline's return.

She is taking a long time.

The guilt began to rise from their argument. He had been so shocked at what she had talked of that the ire had risen before he had really been prepared for it. He owed her an apology, he knew that without a doubt, and he had no intention to let their argument continue on.

“I love her,” he whispered to himself, “and we are happy together. I will not let the ton come between us.” With this thought in mind, he stood to his feet and walked off down the street. He didn’t return to Hyde Park but stopped at a florist at the end of the road.

Stepping inside, Simon perused all the flower stands. In the time that he had courted Rosaline, he had gifted her many flowers. He had always been careful to ask the shop owner about the language of flowers, to give Rosaline a gift that truly meant something.

In the past, he'd gifted her flowers to convey his admiration, and eventually, his love. Now, he wished to give her something that would truly show how sorry he was for the argument that had happened between them.

"Good day," Simon said as he approached the shop owner. "Could you help me select some flowers please?"

"Of course, my Lord. It is good to see you here again after so long." The elderly man hurried forward from behind his counter, with his spectacles slipping down his nose. "What message are we hoping to send today?"

"Love, and principally...an apology," Simon practically whispered the words.

"I have just the thing. This way, my Lord." The shop owner walked away and began to collect some flowers. Slowly, a bundle took shape.

Delicate white myrtle flowers to symbolize love and marriage were placed in the shop owner's hand first, then primroses flowers, with soft pink petals, to speak of constancy. Lastly, white tulips were placed into the bundle.

“This flower represents an apology, my Lord. With their beauty, who could fail to smile?” The shop owner wrapped the bundle in tissue paper, then proffered it to Simon.

“Thank you. I pray you are right.” Simon tried to hold onto his own smile. He had made Rosaline happy many times in the past with such flowers as these, and he prayed it would work today. He wanted to show how sorry he was for not only getting angry at all, but allowing such a thing to happen at Hyde Park, in a public place. To think that he might have embarrassed her shamed him greatly.

Simon paid for the flowers and thanked the stall owner another time before crossing the street and heading home. When he reached the front door, he found the door was open.

Is she home?

Simon hurried inside, only to find it was not Rosaline standing there, it was Georgiana. She seemed to be talking under hushed breaths with the butler, before she saw Simon and hid some sort of paper that had been clutched in her hand behind her back.

“Simon, you are home.” She smiled at his approach.
“What beautiful flowers. Are they for m—”

“They are for my wife,” Simon said, before Georgiana could make a mistake. He looked between the position of the butler next to his mother, and the obvious stance they had taken to gossip together. That look seemed to be enough to send the butler away.

Jacobs bowed to the two of them and stepped back.

“I must attend to a staff meeting. If you would excuse me.” He left through the nearest door, forcing silence to fall on the hallway as Simon continued to stare at his mother.

“What is wrong, Simon? You look quite angry indeed. Grip the flowers any harder and you may break those stems.” Her words urged him to relax his grip on the flowers, not wanting to spoil them before he could give them to Rosaline.

“When we first returned home, Rosaline said she felt the staff hadn’t warmed to her. I brushed it off at the time. After all, why would a butler think ill of my wife?” Simon stepped toward his mother, raising his eyebrows. “Now I’m beginning to wonder if she was right and saw things I did not see. Tell me, Mother, how often do you like to gossip with our staff?”

“It is talking. Not gossip.” She walked away from him, heading for the door that led to the sitting room. As she turned, whatever scrap of paper she had been hiding behind her she twisted to now hold in front of her, masking it from him still though he managed to just catch sight of it.

“If that is the case, then you will not be afraid to tell me what it is you said to Jacobs, will you?” His words had his mother freezing in the doorway of the sitting room.

“We were discussing the menu for this evening.” Georgiana stood tall with an impassive face. “That is all.”

Simon didn’t believe it for one minute. His mother’s ability to lie in this regard was poor indeed.

Hanging the flowers down at his side, he approached his mother and gestured to the paper in her hand. She tried to hide it behind her back, but when he frowned, she proffered it forward, for him to see. Taking it from her grasp, he turned the paper round until he realized what it was.

A scandal sheet.

He didn't even bother looking for his name in the articles. He knew well enough that his name had be there alongside Rosaline's own, or at least the term 'seamstress.'

"Aren't you going to read it?" Georgiana asked, her lips parted wide in amazement as he folded the scandal sheet up.

"Why would I do that?" Simon shook his head and left the scandal sheet on a hall table, turning his back on his mother. "I wish to be happy, Mother, not miserable because I'm forced to read what the ton thinks of me." As he pushed the scandal sheet away, an idea formed to him.

He built on thoughts he'd had earlier as he had argued with Rosaline. Yes, they couldn't change how an entire society thought, but he could certainly live his life away from them. Yes, at times it might be a little isolating, and perhaps he'd lose some of those gentlemen he used to call friends, but at least those who remained he'd know were true friends.

“You cannot stick your head in the sand about this, Simon. Sooner or later, you have to acknowledge what marrying her has done to you.” With these words, Georgiana turned on her heel and disappeared into the sitting room, closing the door behind her.

Simon didn't move but lifted his hand to pinch his brow, wishing he could forget the encounter he'd just had. Every meeting with his mother at the moment was bringing tension and animosity. He didn't want any of it. More than anything did he wish he could return to the country with Rosaline. There they could live as they had lived before, happy, enamored with one another, and away from any matter at all that had ever brought them trouble.

“Simon?” Rosaline's voice had Simon lowering his hand and jerking his head up. “Simon, you look in pain.” She had appeared at the open door. The sounds of her footsteps showed she had only just arrived. She closed the door behind her and approached him through the room. “Is all well?” she asked with concern.

Hearing the pain in her voice for him made Simon push all thoughts of his mother away. He hurried toward her, meeting in the middle of the hall. With his free hand, he took one of her own and drew her to him, then he placed his lips to hers.

It was a chaste kiss, sweet and tender, one that he held for a while, hoping to judge if Rosaline would retreat from him after their argument earlier that day. She didn't retreat. She returned that kiss with just as much tenderness.

When he lifted his head from hers, he could see the surprise in her face, with the amber eyes wide.

"I thought you might still be angry at me," she whispered.

"No, I couldn't be." He lifted his other hand and offered her the flowers. "I only feel guilty for what I said and did. I should not have walked away from you like that, and I should never have let the thoughts that were plaguing my mind cause

an argument between us. I am truly sorry.” As he offered the flowers forward, he breathed a sigh of relief to see her smile.

She ran her fingers over the petals and pressed her face closer to the blooms, inhaling their sweet scent.

“They’re beautiful, Simon,” she said, her voice soft. “Quite stunning. What do they all mean?” Simon was pleased to see she had remembered he always bought her flowers with meanings.

He went through each flower, explaining their meaning. When he was done, she laid a hand to the white tulip.

“The flower to make an apology,” she murmured, admiring it with her fingers brushing the soft petal. “Who would know there would be a flower for such a meaning?”

“I imagine many a foolish man have wanted to make an apology to the woman they love in their life. I will hardly be

the first gentleman to go in that shop and plead for the florist's help." His words brought a soft giggle to Rosaline's lips.

"Perhaps not." She agreed with a nod.

"Where did you go after our walk?" Simon asked. Now she was here, he didn't particularly want to part from her again that evening.

He was already planning on them spending the entire time together. They could retreat to the library and be in their own company, without his mother. After dinner and a late drink, he intended to visit her in her chamber too. He'd had enough of playing to his mother's rules in what was his own house. If he wanted to visit his wife, then he would, without restraint or hesitation.

"I went to Chloe's shop," Rosaline explained. "Chloe is always a comfort to me. Gretchen was there too, and the Duchess of Suffolk. They were very sweet, very kind. The Duchess reminded me that this may be our first argument as

husband and wife, and that is never an easy thing, but it is not the argument which is important. It is the way we make things better again.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” Simon reached for one of her hands and took it off the petals, lifting it toward his lips and kissing the back. The smile that appeared on his wife’s lips filled him with joy.

This is one of the reasons I love her so much. She is pure of heart.

It was something he had noticed about Rosaline from an early point in their acquaintance. She did not put on a facade as so many did in the ton. She never pretended to be someone she wasn’t just to earn someone’s good opinion, for she was always herself, and she was never afraid to talk openly with him. He supposed that some wives might have wished to keep their retreat for the day a secret, but not Rosaline. She was open and honest about everything.

Simon was about to tell Rosaline of his plan of how they could retreat from the ton, live their lives on their own terms, when she spoke first.

“There was something else my friends helped me see, and I wished to speak to you about it.” She stepped toward him a little. “Having heard what other women think of what I read in your political magazines I have had an idea.”

“What idea?” Simon held his breath, rather hoping she would have the same idea that he’d had.

“I wish to write something.” Rosaline smiled with the words, her eyes finding his. “A political piece, a manifesto, if you will. It will be something that points out the strange discrepancy between ladies and gentlemen in the ton, and how maybe, someday, things could change in our society.”

“A political piece?” Simon repeated, shocked at what he was hearing. He hadn’t thought of Rosaline ever being political before. He knew she had an interest in it, and they

had talked of such things in the past, but her writing about it was another matter.

“Yes, I will talk of how we should be celebrating women’s accomplishments and achievements, not poring over the latest scandal sheet to learn of women’s degradations. It will be an uplifting piece.” Rosaline was growing excited, clearly think it a wonderful idea as she bobbed on her toes. “Is it not a good thing? It will be a chance to talk openly as I feel.”

Simon felt a darkness approaching, as if a shadow had fallen over the two of them. The idea of his wife writing a political thing would not go down well. The ton already thought ill of her, and would no doubt cast her out of all society for good if they saw what she had done. He could already picture Georgiana’s reaction too. She would fly into a rage, shocked to see his wife breaking the bounds of society so.

“Rosaline... I’m sorry, but I have to ask, do you really think this is a good idea?” Simon was aware of Rosaline

stepping back from him as he asked the question. “My proposition to you was going to be that we could retreat from the ton. We can live our lives away from them, as we wish to be, and merely ignore their catty and unfriendly ways. Is that not the better way to live? To turn our backs on their hatred and not to be drawn into the fight?”

“What is wrong with the fight?” Rosaline asked. “Simon, if we have the chance to change things for the better, shouldn’t we take it rather than run and hide from it?”

Simon lost his temper and took a greater step back from her.

I thought we were done with our argument. It turns out, I was wrong.

Chapter 14

Rosaline

“Simon?” Rosaline pleaded with her husband, wanting him to respond, but he did not. He looked to the closed door of the sitting room beside him, with anxiousness in his movement, then he strode across the hall, heading for another room entirely. “Simon?” Rosaline hurried after him, holding tightly onto the flowers in her grasp.

They passed through two more corridors before they appeared in the library.

“Why will you not talk to me?” Rosaline pleaded.

“Because this house talks enough about you and I, as it is, do we really want to add fuel to that fire?” Simon asked quite loudly as he closed the door behind her. Rosaline flinched at the suddenness of that sound.

“You agree then. The staff... they do gossip.” Rosaline had already known the butler looked down at her but having the confirmation from Simon made her gut twist in knots. It was as if she couldn’t escape the opinions of others. It wasn’t just the ton, but society as a whole who wished to think ill of her.

“Yes! Of course, they do. People gossip, it is what they do. It entertains them,” Simon spoke in a rush and walked round her, facing her once again.

Rosaline still clung onto the flowers, not wanting to release them. Despite Simon’s evident anger, surely the gift of the flowers was a sign he still loved her, and she found herself reluctant to release that sign.

“I will not argue anymore in front of others.” Simon motioned to the door with the words. “But let us be plain on this matter, Rosaline.”

“What of it?”

“Your wish to be political, to write things...” He stopped, as if struggling for words.

“Things?” She nearly laughed at the word. “I wish to write a political statement, what is so wrong with that? You said earlier today that no one would be interested in reading a magazine that celebrates women’s achievements.”

“Now wait, that is not what I said.” Simon held up his hands, pleadingly, his tone still sharp. “That is misunderstanding me on purpose.”

“It was what you intimated.”

“I merely said that I feared there would not be enough of an audience for such a thing. How does that argument lead you to this resolution to write a political statement!?” he asked wildly.

“Is it so wrong to wish to make your thoughts known in the world, Simon?” she said, watching as Simon backed up from her. “Truly, is it so wrong?”

“That is not what this is, Rosaline. This is not making your thoughts known, it is arguing your corner.” He waved a hand at her, dismissively. She backed up from him and bumped into a chair, wanting to be a little away from him.

I love him, now why do I wish to be away from him?

She supposed it was down to the anger and frustration of feeling that Simon did not understand her. Of all people in the world, surely her husband should understand her better than anyone else.

“So what if I do wish to argue my corner?” she asked, lowering the bunch of flowers down at her side so her grasp became quite limp on them. “What is so wrong with that?”

“Because the fight is not worth anything!” Simon stopped pacing and gestured with his hands. “What good could come from arguing with the ton and their general opinion of you?”

“What good can come of it? Do you seriously ask me that?” Rosaline asked, her eyes wide. “What good could come from changing their opinion so that they accepted our marriage without question?”

“Those who matter to us would have accepted it.” Simon shrugged, quite helpless. “They care enough about us that they would have accepted it without question.”

“Like your mother?” Rosaline’s words made the volume of his words lower a little.

“She is a different matter.”

“No, she is not.” Rosaline shook her head. “She is one of many who think exactly the same way.” With the flowers still limp in one hand, Rosaline stepped toward Simon. “What is so wrong to wish to right a statement on what has occurred? Not just for myself, but for other women too.”

“Other women?” Simon’s eyebrows shot up. “When did you become a flagbearer for a political view?”

“This moment,” Rosaline’s voice grew a little to match his. “Would it matter if that is what I wish to be?”

Simon walked away from her, pinching his brow in frustration, and turning in a circle across the room. Rosaline found herself following him, desperate for him to see what she meant by this.

“I have seen time and time again how women can be treated by this world. Look at the Duchess of Suffolk? She has written for years now. In your honest opinion, as a connoisseur of literature, does she get the praise she deserves?” With

Rosaline's question, she cut in front of Simon, desperate to catch his eye. He looked up at her, then backed in the other direction, always keeping a distance between them.

“She has a fine skill, and does deserve more praise than she gets, yes.” Simon nodded, without hesitation. “Being a duchess has opened doors for her though.”

“And you do not see the irony in that?” Rosaline asked, waving at Simon with the flowers. “She had to be elevated to a position extremely high up in the ton to be given opportunities a much lesser man would have had.”

“I never said it was fair. It is just the way.” Simon turned in his back on her again. “We cannot change it.”

“I choose not to believe that.” Once more, Rosaline hurried round him and cut off his path, forcing him to look at her. This time though, he did not back away. “What of my friend Chloe too? You remember how she suffered at the hands of the scandal sheets?”

“They wanted to think ill of her already.” Simon’s words came as fast as her own, his face growing heated and increasingly pink. “Her father had fallen from the financial position he was born into. Such scandal sheet writers love dancing over the misfortune of others.”

“Exactly, and you do not see the problem with that?” Rosaline asked, holding her arms out wide.

“Of course, I see the problem with it.” Simon held her gaze. “If I could recreate the world as I wished to tomorrow, like an artist with a paintbrush, then I no doubt would paint it as fairly as you could, with men and women sat side by side, and the poor sat beside the wealthy. You know well enough my opinion on this. How often have I told you about my arguments with my father and how ill I thought of him for the way he looked down on anyone who was not a high gentleman of the ton?”

“I remember, I remember it well,” Rosaline agreed with him, but her words barely seemed to register. Simon was in full flow now, and he just kept on going.

“So, yes, I would happily paint the world anew. Yet I am not so great a fool as to think I could change it just by trying to do so.” His words made Rosaline step back now.

Once more, she lifted the flowers between them and held them to her chest. She looked down at those flowers, wondering if Simon still meant the love that was spoken of in their message.

“Are you calling me a fool for wishing to try to change it?” Rosaline asked.

“That is not what I said.” Simon’s voice was abruptly lower in volume.

“It is what you said, Simon. It is exactly what you said.”

“That is not what I meant; you know that.” He moved toward her, but she backed up, feeling belittled by him. “Please, Rosaline, I beg of you, please listen to me.” He crossed toward her again, and this time, she didn’t escape. He placed a hand to her shoulder, the touch warm. More than anything did Rosaline want to lean into that touch, to forget about the woes of the world and to just be with him, but the argument still simmered in her gut, as if boiling water lurked in her stomach. “You and I are already ostracized by the ton.”

“I know that,” Rosaline muttered.

“Please, listen, he begged again. Rosaline nodded, showing she would stay quiet this time. “We are ostracized as it is. The fact you are a commoner and were a seamstress gives them enough ammunition to target at our door.”

Hearing Simon use the very words that upset her so made Rosaline hang her head. She nearly ended up burying

her face in the flowers, not wanting to look at him in that moment.

“Do we really wish to do anything to make their attacks on us worse?” Simon asked with feeling. “Say you could get a publication interested in publishing a political piece by you. That would make us even more of a target. You wouldn’t be changing things for the better, Rosaline, it would only make it worse.”

She knew he was being reasonable, that he was attempting to protect them, but her heart fought back.

“I want to fight to be seen as equal to you,” Rosaline whispered the words. “We married because we fell in love, and I want to fight to prove that is enough, that I should not be belittled because of it.”

“They will never see it that way.” Simon’s hand left her shoulder. “It will always be as it is, that an earl married a commoner.” He turned away from her.

Rosaline's breath hitched, sensing what he meant with those words. They were so plainly spoken that Rosaline could read what he truly meant.

He does regret marrying me after all. Love wasn't enough to defy the evil that has befallen. He'd rather live without me and all the ton's bad opinion too.

Rosaline turned her back as well, her fingers now falling limp around the flowers. She didn't want Simon to see that he had brought her to the brink of tears.

"We cannot change things, Rosaline," he muttered again, with neither one of them looking at once another.

"Not even in the scandal sheets?" Rosaline asked. "Mrs. Ida Davis has written many things about me. Your mother keeps them all."

“Good lord, Rosaline, do you intend to make an enemy out of these writers? So much so you’d remember their names?” He crossed the room, increasing the distance between them. “You will not be the only woman this Mrs. Ida Davis goes after. There will be other women too. Face it, Rosaline, we cannot change the world we live in. We simply must make do with the hand we’ve been dealt.”

Rosaline at last found the courage to raise her head and seek out Simon’s gaze. She held back the tears, stopping them from falling.

“The Duchess and Chloe fought the tide of the ton, did they not? They have fought for their positions.”

“And as you so rightly pointed out,” Simon said slowly. “The ton did not make it easy for them, did they? The ton made their lives miserable. Is that what you want? To be that miserable?”

“Do I look remotely happy in this moment?” Rosaline pointed out. Simon shook his head and backed away. “Simon, please, we just need to talk about this more.”

“No, we do not.” Simon retreated from her, heading for the door. “I need a break from this argument, Rosaline.”

“A break? Is that not what you did earlier today?” she asked, following him to the door. “You walked off in Hyde Park, running away from this discussion.”

“Discussion? It is an argument! Call a spade or spade, Rosaline.”

She gripped her flowers with both hands now, recognizing something different in the words. The Duchess had called her arguments with the Duke quarrels or spats. This was no mere quarrel, but a full-blown argument.

“I need a break.” Simon held up his hands as if in surrender then reached for the door, flung it open and passed through it, leaving her behind.

“Simon, please?” Rosaline called after him. She stepped into the hallway before she fell still. Simon marched away, with the heels of his hessian boots on the marble floor clicking loudly.

At the end of the corridor, Rosaline caught sight of Jacobs the butler, talking with a young maid. The way both staff members turned to look at Simon then at Rosaline had her freezing. As the maid looked down at Rosaline, as if surveying her with suspicion, all Rosaline wanted to do was escape.

Hurrying back into the library, she closed the door, moving so fast that some of the petals from the flowers dropped and landed on the floor, disappearing off to distant corners of the room as if caught by the wind.

Leaning on the door, Rosaline felt the tears come. She supposed they would keep coming today, for there was no real way to stop them.

Sinking down the door, she sat on the floor with her knees bundled toward her chest and the flowers pressed between her knees and her arms. They seemed wilted to her mind now, not so beautiful as before, and the white tulip lacked some life.

Rosaline cried for a few minutes before she stood to her feet and laid the flowers down on the nearest table. She supposed that Simon might regret those flowers now. They certainly didn't hold as much meaning as they had done when Rosaline had returned to the house.

Turning her back on the flowers, Rosaline looked across the library, trying to dry her tears with the backs of her hands when she caught sight of something pinned to the writing bureau in the corner of the room. Crossing toward it, she saw a folded-up piece of paper. On top of it, there was a smaller

scrap of paper, on which a note had been written by Georgiana.

'Rosaline, for your interest. It is Theia's latest words of you.'

Rosaline hurried to unfold the scandal sheet, where she found Theia's article a couple of pages in. She and Simon were no longer one of the leading stories, but it seemed that Theia could not let the matter go.

'One has to wonder how much the Earl of Gloucester is enjoying his new wife after all. They have been back in London for a week now, and it is plain to see he is in no hurry to reintroduce her to the events of the ton as the new Countess of Gloucester.'

Having only been seen in Hyde Park, it's plain the seamstress is being kept at home, rather like the odd family relation everyone is ashamed of. One cannot help wondering if

the Earl of Gloucester regrets his decision to marry so quickly to a seamstress.'

Rosaline didn't read the rest of the article. She screwed it up and threw it back down to the writing bureau, fearing that her marriage really was falling apart as the way Theia described.

Chapter 15

Rosaline

The sounds of the cutlery scraping the plates was audible and unfriendly in the dining room. Rosaline kept looking up periodically at Simon at the head of the table, but he didn't return that look, not once that she could see. Rosaline soon lost interest in her food, and rather than eating at all, she merely made an appearance of it, poking at her food every now and then.

“Well, this is a quiet dinner compared to normal.” Georgiana's words made Rosaline wince at the awkwardness of it all. Beside her, she could hear Simon sigh.

“Mother...” His tone was low, a clear warning, but Georgiana took no heed of it.

“I'm just saying it is quite abnormal.”

Rosaline looked up from her plate and peered through the candlelight to see her mother-in-law looking between the two of them. In the tall candles that sat between them on the tables, Georgiana's face glistened orange. There was something in her eyes too that suggested she was a little happier, a spark or a twinkle.

“Am I to take it there has been an argument?” she asked, picking up her glass of claret. Rosaline half wondered if Georgiana was hiding her smile behind the glass.

I cannot believe it has come to this.

Rosaline could feel tears threatening again, but she would not let them fall. She just kept blinking, determined to keep them at bay.

A few days before, it had felt as if she and Simon were madly in love, so caught up in one another's presence that just being together brought smiles. Now, that seemed like a great distance away. There was a coldness in that room. One that

made Rosaline brush her fingers across her arms every now and then, trying to find some warmth.

“Leave my wife and myself to our problems, Mother. They are no business of yours.”

To Rosaline’s surprise, Simon’s words made Georgiana fall quiet. Rosaline watched as Georgiana returned to her food, but she could not concentrate on it. Georgiana kept looking up at her son, an expression of pure concern in her features.

She is worried for him.

Rosaline was pleased to see that Georgiana was no longer crowing over their discord, but concerned for her son.

“I think I am done.” Simon pushed his plate away and moved to his feet.

“I am too.” Rosaline crossed her cutlery over the plate, despite the fullness of food that was there.

As Simon stood, Rosaline found she longed for it to not end like this. She may not have many memories of her mother and father, but she could never remember them going to bed on an argument, and she found she didn’t wish to either.

“Simon?” She followed him to the doorway of the dining room where he hesitated, looking back at her. “Can we talk? Please?” she begged in a whisper. He looked away from her though, back at his mother.

That look felt as if it put a crack through Rosaline’s heart. It was as if he wasn’t putting her first in that moment but thinking of his mother’s opinion only.

“I need to think about some things, Rosaline. Leave me be for now.” As he turned his back and closed the dining room door on her, Rosaline’s breath hitched.

She was now quite certain that Simon regretted marrying her. Perhaps he no longer thought of how happy they had been in the country, nor of the nights they had made love and stayed awake into the early hours of the morning talking together. She was no longer the thing that mattered most.

What has become of us?

Rosaline turned round, catching sight of Georgiana. To her surprise, the woman had her glass raised to her lips but had quite frozen, looking at Rosaline with wide eyes.

“I thought you would have something to say, Georgiana,” Rosaline confessed, finding it hard to keep some of the bitterness out of her voice.

“Not tonight.” Georgiana put her glass down on the table and reached for the black bracelet she wore at her wrist, fiddling with it. “I have nothing to say at all.”

Rosaline didn't know whether to be relieved or worried. Georgiana *always* had something to say and the quiet was a testament to how much things had changed in the house.

"If you would excuse me, I think I will retire for the night." Rosaline walked toward the door. Georgiana sat forward, as if ready to say something to stop her from parting, but the words did not pass her lips in time and Rosaline left hurriedly.

When she reached the hall, she didn't bother seeking out a candle to light her way. She traipsed in the darkness through the house, feeling the higher up the stairs she walked, the more she lost her battle with tears. They came by the time she reached the landing, and she was grateful for the darkness then. It meant no one knew of the tears but herself.

Hurrying to her chamber, she locked herself inside and leaned on the door, letting the tears coming freely then. Those tears came not just because of the argument, but because she missed Simon. She missed their happy moments together, the

way they had felt free together, to talk openly. That freedom now felt curbed. How could she talk to Simon openly again of what she longed for if when she had talked before of what she wished to do he had looked down on it so much?

“Perhaps he does not see why I do it,” Rosaline whispered as she moved off from the door and walked across the room.

Caught up in a sudden energy, Rosaline lit a candle and placed it on her writing bureau in the corner of the room. Once a faint yellow light surrounded her, she sought out the notebook she had taken as a diary and a quill. With a blade she sharpened the quill into a point and placed it in an inkwell, preparing to write down her thoughts.

To her surprise, it was not a diary entry that came, but a political piece that poured from her. Thinking of all that she had discussed with her friends that day, and Georgiana’s words when she had presented Theia’s scandal sheets, Rosaline wrote with fury.

By the time the words had escaped her, the candle had burnt down far, and the moon had risen in the sky. Seeing it was not quite right, she changed for bed alone without calling for a maid, took a break from the work, then returned to it. She worked at length until the night hours were ticking by and they soon became the early hours of the morning.

Every now and then she would lift her head from the paper and look to the door, hoping that Simon would come to visit her so they could make up from their argument, but the door remained firmly closed. It was plain that Simon was too frustrated to even consider making up from their argument yet.

As she worked, Rosaline muttered words aloud, talking to herself and assuring her own mind that this was the right thing to do.

“I do not intend to hide forever, fearful of what people think of me. Why would I do that? Why would I ever want Simon to hide because of me? It does not make sense!” She

turned the page, flipping it wildly in her anger. “He will not hide because of me. I will fight, fight so that we can be together openly, and he need never be ashamed of me.” Her breath hitched as she uttered these words.

Lifting a handkerchief that she had discarded at the side of the bureau, she dabbed her eyes to stop more tears from falling, then she returned to her writing. The more it took shape, the happier she became with it, and she longed to discover a way she could publish it.

When the piece was done, Rosaline sat back, with her legs curled under her on the chair and a sad sort of smile on her lips.

“I wish Simon could see I’m doing this for him as well as myself.” With these words, she reached forward, about to extinguish the candle when she decided to read what she had written one last time.

The Women’s Manifesto.

Take a look at your newspaper today, I urge you. In fact, I plead with you to not only look at the front page, but to flick through the pages, and count how many articles you read that talk of men. Secondly, count up how many praise their achievements.

Hardly a day passes where we are not talking of a gentleman's success. Be it on the battlefield in the Napoleonic wars, or the walls of Somerset Gallery with fantastic pieces of art, we are quite rightly celebrating successes.

Now, I plead with you, search your same paper again for news of a woman. I warrant there are no such stories, none at all, and if there are any, they are far outweighed by the number that celebrate men.

If you wish to search for an article written about a lady, then you will have to turn to one format in particular, the Scandal Sheets. There you will no doubt read of women, but of their successes? Surely not. Unless we are now judging

success and accomplishment to be the man you wed, a shallow achievement indeed, then these are not the sheets to find any praise whatsoever. The writers of these scandal sheets will sooner tear down a woman, leaving her in the gutter with her gown torn and all to see her unclothed and rebuked.

Once you have read of all the horrid things we say of each other in these scandal sheets, consider this, how did we create this world? How did we form a world where men are praised for their achievements and women are forgotten? Why is it accepted that a man can change his place in society as if he skated on ice, moving from one to another with ease, yet a woman's feet are locked in stone, and she must not dare move.

We hear of women making strides in great literature, but often their first publications are not named or are even published under names of men. Sometimes lady artists have their artwork on the walls of Somerset Gallery, only for them to be dismissed as something that is temporary, a point of interest because the artist is a woman, before they will be quite forgotten again.

I am sure as many women sit reading this, they do so with this paper clutched between their fingers and their heads bowed, for reading such a statement as this would no doubt be scandalous. Perhaps a concerned brother or fearful husband worries what will be thought of us if we entertain such conversations as this and begin to point out the folly of the discrepancy between man and woman? That is not to say all gentlemen wish to keep women with their feet locked into stone, unable to move, it is more that they fear what the world will think of them too if they permit their female relation to move from the circle into which they were born.

If I were a great commander on a battlefield, I would call up women to quit these circles. Let us abandon the positions we are told we were born into and therefore should supposedly stay in. Take up your weapons, whether it is your art, your writing, your designs, your conversation, any skill you may have, and let that skill be as good as a musket firing. Stride forth and carve a path of your own in the world.

Sadly, I am no great commander, for of course, I am a woman. I cannot give a great speech atop a white steed at the

head of a battlefield, with my armor in place and my pistol at my side. Yet I can write. I can talk to you openly of these woes that divide us and seek to heal those rifts. Rather than a great commander leading a battlefield, here with these words I can talk to you as if I was sat beside you in your sitting room, desperate to hear your own thoughts on the world.

I do not doubt these words may shock some, but I ask you to consider this before you ignore what I have said. Had you ever had an opinion on anything that was discarded because you were a woman? Have you even felt you could not give your opinion because your husband or your father was at your side and would not doubt disapprove of it? No matter the kindness you have been shown by the men you love in your life, sometimes, we are all treated to the same expectations of not defying the rules, of not defying the ton.

As one good friend described to me recently, the ton is a competition. Each lady and gentleman compete to be not only noticed but praised. Perhaps so many of us ladies do not shout up and celebrate our successes, for we fear those successes

are what make us the other, no longer part of the crowd and part of the ton.

I dream of a new world, one where we no longer consider what the ton thinks. We start celebrating the individual woman, and not condescend how she differs to the ton's idea of the perfect woman.

Should I ever be so fortunate as to find a publisher who longs to hear more, I would use this opportunity to tell you of all the women I have met in my life. I would tell you of their successes, and how they have risen above all challenges.

Perhaps it is a dream that must remain a dream, but not if we talk about it. Should one lady feel enough passion to discuss it with another, then the dialogue could be opened. Let us not be afraid to discuss success anymore.

I beg you, reader, talk freely, talk of women's success and your friends' accomplishments. Do not make your fellow woman into a foe. No matter what position they occupy in life,

be them a maid paid less a day than some ladies can imagine, the woman forgotten sitting in your local church pew, or the fine lady married to a wealthy gentleman who always stands behind him, we all deserve praise for the challenges we face. It is because we share something in common. We are fighting a war of always being cast in the shadows.

Rosaline sat back from reading her piece. She could not smile, but she was happy with it. In one article, it said all that she wished to say to women out there.

With one blow to the candle beside her, she blew out the flame and cast the room into darkness.

Chapter 16

Rosaline

Rosaline hovered by the door of the house with her pelisse in her hand, her eyes constantly turning to the door of the dining room. She had been restless ever since she had woken that morning, not only thinking of what she had written in her notebook but thinking of Simon too.

I wish to see him.

More than anything did she wish to cross to the dining room, fling open the door and embrace him. She would apologize for their differing opinions and say how much she despaired of this discord between them. They could be as they had been before, in love, inseparable. Yet something held her back.

Each time she considered moving toward the dining room, she recalled how Simon had retreated from her the night

before. He had asked for time to think of what had passed between them, and she didn't wish to disrespect that.

“I see you ate alone in your chamber this morning.” Georgiana's voice broke Rosaline out of her reverie. She looked round, fidgeting with the pelisse in her grasp that was hiding the notebook tucked under her arm, to see Georgiana standing a short distance away. “Jacobs tells me you have not yet been into the dining room and that you had a tray sent up to you.” She gestured to the closed door. “My son is awake and awaits our company.”

“He awaits your company,” Rosaline murmured in realization. She knew after last night Simon would not wish to see her. He had ample opportunity to come to see her at night, but he had not done so.

Her words made Georgiana's eyebrows raise in surprise.

“You intend to leave the house today then?” Georgiana crossed toward her, gesturing to the door. For a change,

Rosaline noticed that her mother-in-law didn't draw attention to the fact she intended to go unescorted. There was something about the press of her lips together that suggested some concern.

"I do. I will return later." Reaching for the bonnet behind her on the coat stand, Rosaline hurried to put it on whilst still hiding the notebook. She didn't want to draw attention to it, in case Georgiana asked why she carried it with her.

Simon might then suspect what I have done.

Rosaline didn't know what to do with the statement she had written the night before, but she knew she could not sit back and do nothing. Unsure who else to turn to, she intended to return to Chloe at the shop and ask for her advice.

"If my son asks where you have gone, what shall I say?" Georgiana's question pulled her to a stop with her hand on the door. Rosaline looked round, feeling startled Georgiana cared enough to even ask where she was going.

“Tell him I did not have the stomach for breakfast. I have gone for a walk to clear my head. Have a good day, Georgiana.” Rosaline curtsied and left through the door.

As she descended the steps, she grew aware that Georgiana had moved to the open door and watched her. Rosaline walked down the street and glanced back every so often to see Georgiana didn't move from the doorway. She stood there, watching, the only movement in her body was the way she fidgeted with the bracelet at her wrist.

Once Rosaline could no longer be seen, she increased the pace of her walk. She crossed through the main streets of London and headed toward Covent Garden. If anyone looked at her with curious eyes today, she did not notice. Had there been anyone with scandal sheets in their grasp pointing her way, she did not realize they were there, for she kept her head downturned and the lip of her bonnet forward, masking her face from passersby.

When she reached the shop in Covent Garden, she found Chloe and Gretchen were not alone. Their patron was back again, the Duchess, who stood in the center of the shop looking between pairs of goat-leather gloves.

“Rosaline?” Chloe called as Rosaline stepped through the door of the shop with the brass bell tinkling over her head. “I am fortunate! Two visits from a newlywed in two days. I would have thought you far too busy to visit us.” Chloe’s wit might have made the others smile, but Rosaline couldn’t manage it.

As Chloe crossed toward her, Chloe’s own smile vanished. “Ah... I see your argument with your husband has not ended then.”

“No, it has not.” Rosaline shook her head. Slowly, she took out the notebook from under her arm, clutching to it with both hands, unsure how to refer to it.

“This is unusual. Rosaline, my dear, you look quite lost for words.” The Duchess tossed down the gloves she had been looking at and came toward her. “Come, rest yourself. Something tells me we’ll need another pot of tea.”

“Shall I put something stronger in it?” Gretchen teased from the doorway to the back room.

“Do not tempt us,” Chloe smile before hurrying her away. “Now, Rosaline, what has happened?”

The three of them ended up leaning on the counter, with Rosaline pressing the notebook between her hands and the wooden top. Her eyes danced over the leather cover, thinking of all that she had written in those pages the night before.

“Lost for words indeed,” Chloe murmured after a minute. “This is no ordinary argument, is it?”

“No.” Rosaline shook her head. Fortunately, today, tears seemed far away. She supposed it was because she had cried enough the day before. Today, she was but a husk, with dry eyes that betrayed cracked skin around the corners.

“What’s in here?” the Duchess asked, gesturing to the notebook in an effort to distract her.

“This is what I wished to talk about.” Rosaline pushed the notebook forward on the counter. Opening the cover, she pressed it toward her friends. “I know it’s mad, believe me, I do. To write such a thing... All I can say was that my head was in turmoil, and I had to put something down on paper.”

“I know that feeling,” the Duchess said with a smile. Being a writer, she often had a quill in her hand, Rosaline had seen it on more than once occasion when she had worked for the Duchess.

“I wish to know what you think of it, if you would read it.” Rosaline turned to the right page and motioned for them to

read. "Please?"

"Of course, we'll read it," the Duchess assured her.

"You'll have to wait to turn the pages for me, Maeve," Chloe said, smiling. "I'm not so quick a reader as you."

The two stood there together, reading the piece as Rosaline stepped back from the counter. Her usual excited energy that resulted in her bobbing on her toes was subdued today. She put energy into walking instead, circling the shop and doing her best to admire what was there. Some beautiful things jumped out at her, and she found more than one thing she thought would be a nice gift for Simon.

There was a new handkerchief she could embroider his initials into, and there were new swatches of silk from which she could make some fine cravats. Rosaline ran her hands over the material wondering if Simon would like such a gift or not.

*Can he surpass the anger that was between us yesterday,
or will that anger always be there now?*

When Gretchen reappeared, she passed forward a cup of tea, distracting Rosaline from thoughts of gifts.

“Thank you, Gretchen,” Rosaline said and took the cup.

“Well!” the Duchess abruptly declared, closing the book. “That was something and a half.”

“I am not done yet.” Chloe elbowed her and took the book back again. “We can’t all be writers, used to the written word, you know.” She opened the book again, hurrying to finish.

“Do be quick, Chloe,” the Duchess pleaded playfully. “For I wish to talk of it at length.” She crossed the counter and turned to Rosaline’s side, with her lips parted ready to speak.

“I am done.” Chloe declared and put the book down again. “What a piece indeed! Gretchen, you must read it now.”

“It will take me longer,” Gretchen pointed out, still nervous of her reading ability as she poured out another cup of tea.

“That hardly matters,” Chloe comforted her. “Here, I’ll finish the tea, you read.” As Gretchen crossed toward the notebook, Rosaline watched the young woman’s face, noting the way her lips began to tilt up as she read, forming an intrigued smile.

“Rosaline, this has to see the world,” the Duchess declared with eagerness, pulling so much on Rosaline’s arm that she nearly dropped the teacup.

“Do you really think so?” Rosaline asked.

“Yes!” Both the Duchess and Chloe said together with enthusiasm.

“It spoke so much to me,” Chloe said, gushing and tilting her head to the ceiling. “I could have sworn I had turned back the hands of my pocket watch and returned to the time when the ton despised me so, for they did. The number of ladies that refused to give me business because my name had been dredged through the mud of the scandal sheets was awful. It became apparent my designs didn’t matter, nor did the quality of the dresses. All that mattered was my name. If my name wasn’t good enough, then they did not want a dress by me.”

“How true.” The Duchess nodded. “It reminded me too of the difficulty I faced in getting published. Oh, what I had to do to make it happen!”

“What did you do?” Rosaline asked, her brows knitting together in wonder. She had heard hints before between Chloe and the Duchess that rules had been bent a little, but she’d never known what they were. “I thought your husband assisted

in getting you published.” The Duke was part of the same writer’s circle as Simon was, and together they had championed the Duchess’ work.

“He did, but that was not my first piece published.” The Duchess took Rosaline’s arm, as if they had been confidantes for years. “I have the greatest of secrets to tell you, Rosaline, and you must promise not to share it.”

“I do, of course I do,” Rosaline declared keenly.

“And you, Gretchen,” Chloe called to Gretchen who looked up from the book where she was reading avidly and nodded.

“In order to get published, my first piece was written under a man’s name.” The Duchess’ explanation made Rosaline’s lips fall apart. “Yes, I can see your surprise.”

“You had to do that!?”

“There was no other way at first.” The Duchess nodded. “It was all down to Chloe, who managed to affect my transformation quite spectacularly.”

“Why thank you,” Chloe dramatically bowed. “Yes, she quite transformed herself into the appearance of a man and attended the Duke’s writing circle. A short while later, her first piece was published under a man’s name.”

“It is as you said, Rosaline, in your statement.” The Duchess released her and moved back to the notebook in Gretchen’s hands, where she was still reading. “This writing talks of the challenges we face to get noticed, and to even be accepted as people of skill rather than women who should sit prettily in corners and hold our tongues.”

“I rather suspect my mother-in-law would like me more if I did the latter,” Rosaline said, moving her weight between her feet and thinking of the exchange she’d had with Georgiana that morning.

“What of it?” Chloe asked with a shrug. “Rosaline, you have an opinion and thoughts on the world. Those are things that you should never be ashamed of. What is more, people want to read them.” She pointed to Gretchen who now had something of a tear in her eye. “Oh, Gretchen, do I need to give you one of these new lace handkerchiefs?”

“I am well,” Gretchen said, sniffing and stopping those tears from falling. “It is just so powerful. Oh, my, to read this in a newspaper or a magazine? Think of the response it would get!”

“You are right, Gretchen.” The Duchess took the notebook from her hands and began to read sections again. “It should be read, and it should be published.”

“You think so?” Rosaline bobbed on her toes, something of her old excitement returning. “People will really wish to read it?”

“Of course!” Chloe gushed. “Yet...there may be some reason to hesitate here.” She placed her arm around Rosaline and turned her to face the Duchess. “Perhaps we can learn a little from the lessons of the past.”

“How do you mean?” the Duchess asked before Rosaline could.

“I mean Rosaline is already spoken of in scandal sheets. Her name attached to something of this ilk is unlikely to gain traction, just as you, Maeve, could not publish first in your own name, what if we were to keep Rosaline’s identity hidden from the piece?” Her question left them all silent for a minute in thought.

“Would they publish something anonymous?” Rosaline asked, her bobbing falling still.

“I have some contacts with publishers now,” the Duchess said, her smile growing. “At my recommendation, I can certainly get print houses, magazines, and newspapers to pay

attention. Yet we should give you a name too, a title that people can lock onto. It will mean that if you are invited back to write a second piece, people will recognize you as the same writer.”

“A name? What kind of name?” Rosaline asked, quite lost for ideas.

“I have it...” The Duchess clicked her fingers as an idea struck her. “The Gentlewoman Writer. What do you think? It speaks of your position, so anyone knows right away that you speak from experience being a part of the ton.”

Rosaline wasn't sure. She had not always been part of a ton and began to wring her hands together.

“I like it,” Chloe said with a firm nod.

“Me too.” Gretchen agreed wholeheartedly.

“So, Rosaline, what do you think?” the Duchess asked, stepping toward Rosaline with the book. “Do you wish to take the chance on seeing this published?” She passed the book back into Rosaline’s grasp.

Rosaline stood still, and she considered her options. She could say no and keep the writing to herself, but then it would feel as if she had given up, as if she agreed that to be accepted in the ton, she had to stay silent in a corner and not offer an opinion at all.

That is not who I am. I wish to fight to be seen as equal to my husband.

Rosaline smiled a little, realizing too the freedom that writing anonymously could give her. Now, Simon didn’t need to be afraid, for her name would never be attached to any piece of writing.

“Your Grace, yes please,” Rosaline said with eagerness. “I would love to see if we could get this published.”

Chapter 17

Simon

“Rosaline?” Simon called for her. The last two days she had been wandering out of the house at intervals, and they had kept their distance from each other.

Simon was not so great a fool as to deny he was responsible for that distance. He had asked Rosaline to give him time to think of their argument, and she had certainly done that, but all that thinking had accomplished was making him more miserable. He despised the divide that was between him and Rosaline. It burned in his gut, as if there was a dampened fire there.

This ends now.

“Rosaline?” he called again, opening the sitting room door to see she had just arrived home. She was taking off her pelisse and in her hands was a small notebook. She didn’t wait

for Jacobs to appear to put the pelisse back for her but did it herself.

“Good day, Simon,” she said quietly, not meeting his gaze.

“No more of this now.”

“I beg your pardon?” she asked as he crossed toward her.

“No more of this distance between us, this cordiality and you avoiding my gaze.” Behind him, he could hear a floorboard creaking. He could guess well enough who the source of that sound was. His mother was in the sitting room, and she was no doubt creeping toward the door to hear them talking together.

Wishing to be alone with Rosaline, Simon reached for her hand and offered it to her. Those amber eyes widened in surprise as she looked between his face and the offered hand.

“Please,” he whispered quietly. She didn’t hesitate then, placing her hand in his. The moment there was that touch there, Simon was comforted by it. Briefly, they were as they had been before, without any distance or animosity between them.

Glancing back to the sitting room door, to make sure Georgiana didn’t approach, he drew Rosaline away down a corridor. He didn’t stop for some distance, and they made it through two more corridors before reaching the library. Pulling her through the door, Simon didn’t release her hand, even as he closed the door behind the two of them.

“You wish to speak to me?” Rosaline asked, standing in front of him with her eyebrows raised.

“Is it so mad I should wish to speak to my wife?” he asked, but his attempt at a jest was clearly a poor one, for she looked down, avoiding his gaze. “I know I have not covered myself in glory these last couple of days,” he whispered to her.

“You wished for time to think of our argument. I understand that.” Rosaline nodded slowly. Her usual excitableness and the energy he loved so much about her was subdued now. He wished he could make her as she was before, but that seemed an impossibility, even as he rubbed his thumb across the back of her hand, trying to establish an intimacy between them. “I cannot pretend I have enjoyed going to bed at night knowing that we are so distanced now,” she said quietly, “but I understand if you needed time, Simon. I do.”

“You are patient indeed.” Simon felt comforted at her words. It felt as if things were shifting between them.

Perhaps she has had time to reflect on what I said and has now understood where I was coming from when I wished for us to retreat from the ton.

“May I ask where you’ve been the last couple of days?” Simon asked, longing to know all that he had missed about his wife these last couple of days.

“Walking, mostly,” she murmured, still avoiding his gaze. “I also went to see Chloe at the shop yesterday. The Duchess of Suffolk was there too. We talked for a while. What have you done these last couple of days?”

“I visited the writing circle last night.” He swallowed, not having the heart to tell Rosaline of what else had happened at that circle. Lord Eldridge had left the writing circle now, though he had given no explanation as to the reason why, there had been a general feeling at the meeting last night that it was because he no longer trusted Simon to lead their party. When a second member did not turn up last night, Simon and the Duke of Suffolk had begun to fear that it could be a trend about to begin.

Perhaps they all intend to leave my side now.

“How was the writing circle?” Rosaline asked conversationally.

“It was fine,” Simon lied. “I confess though, I have not been able to concentrate on my work as of late. What has happened between us...it brings me no happiness.”

“I am the same,” Rosaline said, at last lifting her eyes to meet his. Simon sighed with relief and raised her hand to his lips, kissing the back. When a gasp of air escaped her lips, he was thrilled at the sound. It reminded him of all the stolen touches that had passed between them since they had been wed, all the loving moments behind closed doors.

This is how we should always be.

“I am sorry for our argument,” Simon spoke softly.

“As am I.” She smiled a little at last, and he matched that smile.

“I know I cannot have sounded fair in what I said. When I get angry, my words come out in a jumble. Being so fond of

the written word, you'd think I'd be better at forming words, but I confess, I am not." He shook his head. "What I said came from the right place. I am only trying to protect us both."

"I know. As am I." She smiled wider now. "I guess we are both coming about it in a different way, that is all."

"Yes, yes, I am sure you right." He shifted the way he held her hand, so that their fingers entwined together. He could sense the shift between them now. There was a chance they can mend things, and be as they were before, if they could just forget this argument. "I am not sure much good would come from repeating the words of our argument now, would you agree?"

"I would." Rosaline nodded. "Perhaps it is better we leave things as they are and forget the discussion. For now." The way she added the latter words 'for now' made him nervous, but he didn't wish to press her to go on. There had been enough distance between them already.

“Yes, let us forget it.” He offered a smile to her. “Tonight, you will join my mother and I for dinner, will you not?” he pleaded with her.

“Yes.” She nodded. “If you would excuse me, I need to return to my room and dress for dinner.”

“Of course.” He was about to step back when he thought better of it. Shifting forward, he moved his lips to Rosaline’s temple and kissed her there. It was a sweet moment, as she held herself still, not moving away from him, and he dwelled on all the times they had been just this close.

This is how I wish us to be again.

Rosaline promised to return soon as she stepped back from the kiss and left the room. The moment she was gone, with the door ajar behind her, Simon rubbed his hands across his face, feeling the stress emanating from his body.

I have hope again now.

There had been a point the day before where he had still been too angry to let things go, yet time had made that thought seem quite mad. What good came from holding onto his anger? It only kept him at a distance from the woman he loved so much.

“Is all well again?” The sudden voice had Simon jerking his head round, looking the open door.

Georgiana had appeared, poking her head through that gap.

“Dear God, Mother! My heart cannot take that kind of surprise.” He stepped back and rubbed his chest, having jumped sharply at her appearance. “What did you ask?”

Georgiana slipped into the room, checked the hallway was empty behind her, then closed the door, approaching

Simon very quickly.

“Mother?” Simon said warily, noticing there was an eagerness in her step.

“Is all well between you again?” she asked, gesturing to the door she had just closed. “You and your wife, you have made up, have you not?”

Simon felt his brow furrow together, so far that his temple wrinkled. Folding his arms across his chest, he stared at his mother.

“I would have thought you quite elated to see my wife and I still arguing,” he said slowly, aware there was a bitterness in his voice.

Georgiana didn't deny his words, nor did she answer right away. She walked around him, as if distracting herself

with that walk, and across the library. Stopping by the window, she peered out to the street beyond.

“I could hardly blame you for thinking such a thing,” she spoke softly. “Simon, what I have always wanted more than anything else is your happiness.”

“Truly?” Simon scoffed, nearly laughing at his mother’s words. “Well, your recent behavior could have well and truly fooled me.”

“I have not been so bad.” When she looked back to him, fidgeting with the bracelet on her wrist, Simon’s eyes dropped toward the black gems. Sensing his look, she released the bracelet.

“Mother, I do not think you still need to wear that bracelet.” He gestured to it. “It has been a while now since my father has passed and it pains you to look at it.”

“I was married to him, Simon. That kind of love does not go away easily.”

“I know. Believe me, I know.” Simon glanced at the closed door, thinking of the wife he adored that was now in a different part of the house altogether. He longed to visit her tonight, to remind her of the love they shared together, but he couldn’t help feeling that they were still remedying things. He might have to wait a little longer yet before he could return to showing her his love in such a way.

“I was wondering if I may ask you something, Simon.”

“Yes, Mother.” He urged her on, moving to the nearest chair. Sitting down, he sighed, feeling somewhat tired after talking with Rosaline again. He’d been pent up with so much excited energy to see her that day, his body was released from it with a sigh.

“I was wondering if you and your wife had considered more the possibility of an heir.” Georgiana spoke the words

quite formally, as if they were discussing the matter of what to buy at a market.

“I beg your pardon?” Simon spluttered, shocked she could talk so plainly of it. “What passes between my wife and I in that department is our business, Mother. I thought I made that plain.”

“Yes, I know you did.” She stepped forward. “Yet you remember how your father spoke of it. The emergence of an heir is necessary, is it not? Otherwise, when you pass someday, what will happen to the earldom?”

“It would go to some cousin, I expect.” Simon shrugged, hardly caring. “Let it be a burden on the next person as much as it has burdened me.”

“A burden!?! How can you speak so?” Georgiana flung herself down into the chair beside Simon, reaching for his arm. She clawed at him with talon-like fingers. “It has afforded you

your quality of living, your good life, are you not happy for that? Grateful?"

"I am. I could not be more grateful for it." Simon tried to prize her fingers from his arm. "Yet I am also sensible of the divisions it has put on my life." He released his arm at last from her. "The very nature of our family's position in society is what caused the rift between my father and I, and it is that same position now which has put a strain between my wife and I. Do you think I could be thankful for that part of being an earl? No, Mother. It would be impossible to think the earldom a complete blessing."

"It is a blessing, it is!" Georgiana said with feeling. "And you should provide an heir."

Desperate to escape this conversation, Simon stood to his feet, but his mother followed him.

"Would it not be wonderful?" Georgiana asked. "To have a child in this house again, someone running round with pure

joy in their heart? It has been many years since this house has been home to such things.” Her words brought him up short. Simon hovered by the door before turning and looking back at his mother.

“Wait...do you ask about an heir because you wish there to be an heir, or do you ask because you wish for a grandchild?” His question made her silent. She looked down, her hands fidgeting together. “Mother, why didn’t you just say you wanted a grandchild?”

“I still worry for the child.” Her hands were quite frantic as she spoke. Gesturing to the ceiling, as if she motioned directly toward where Rosaline was in her chamber, her voice grew sharp. “Who knows how a seamstress would cope bearing a child of this line—”

“Mother!” Simon snapped, but his mother continued on, as if he hadn’t spoken at all.

“Is it so wrong to long for a grandchild though?” she asked softly. “Children bring happiness, Simon. They really do.” She smiled. It was such a full and genuine smile that Simon was wrongfooted, recalling a time when he was young, and his mother had constantly been with him.

He thought of the two of them down at the beach in their coastal estate, and how she would run after him when he went into the sea. They were constantly laughing together, always happy.

She wants that happiness again.

“Mother, please, listen to me on this matter.” He stepped toward her. “I am truly glad you long for there to be a child in this house. In truth, I long for that too, but the way to see that child someday will not happen by pestering me to produce an heir.”

Simon turned away, reaching for the door another time.

“And your wife?” Georgiana asked. “Has your relationship been mended enough for a child to arrive?”

He knew what she was asking, in her less than subtle way. More than anything did Simon wish to visit his wife again at night, just as they had spent so many nights together in the country, but he could not do it now. Not when they needed to mend the argument between them completely.

“That is my business, Mother. I will not talk of the bedchamber with you, and you can hardly blame me for that.” He realized his words were defensive as he left the room, but he didn’t blame himself for it.

I pray Rosaline and I will be as we were before long.

Chapter 18

Rosaline

“I must go.” Simon stood to his feet at the head of the table.

“So soon?” Rosaline asked, not wanting him to leave just yet. They were sat at breakfast, and she knew what he did not, that any minute a magazine was to arrive holding her article. She longed for him to be there in that moment, to see what he would think of the article he did not know her name was attached to.

“I must. The writing circle is to begin early today, and it is a big meeting.” Simon placed his napkin on the table, before turning to face Rosaline.

She smiled at him, glad things seemed to be well between them again. He returned that smile and bent toward her, kissing her on the head. It was a momentary thing, it could not last any longer for Georgiana was in the room, sat opposite

Rosaline and frowning at the pair of them. Yet despite its briefness, that kiss meant everything to Rosaline.

“We shall talk more later,” Simon promised her.

“Enjoy your day.” They had a last goodbye before Simon left the room, leaving Rosaline and Georgiana alone in the breakfast room.

Not wanting to see another disapproving look from Georgiana, Rosaline kept her focus on her breakfast plate, eating hurriedly. Yet when the next words passed between them, she was shocked to hear no harsh tone in Georgiana’s voice.

“I am glad to see things are mended a little.” Georgiana’s words nearly made Rosaline choke on a chunk of bread. She gulped her tea to wash it down then eyed Georgiana carefully. The older woman seemed equally startled by the words that had passed her own lips. She hurried with her cutlery to butter another slice of bread, busying herself.

“You are?” Rosaline asked, her voice a little squeaky after nearly choking.

“Yes, I am. This house...” Georgiana paused, her gaze remaining on the bread as her tone turned quite solemn. “It was home to many a shouting and unhappy voice for a long time. I did not like those times.” She flicked the bracelet on her wrist before returning to her task of buttering. “My husband and Simon argued so often. I would not want this house to become that again.”

Rosaline smiled rather sadly. For the first time, she felt she had a window into the heart of the older woman sat opposite her. It was a private confession that Georgiana made, one she was clearly uncomfortable for having shared.

“I would not want this house to return to that time either,” Rosaline assured her, with her voice quiet. “Things will be well now, I am sure of it.” She lifted her head high, feeling more and more confident. Soon enough, she and Simon

would have quite forgotten their argument completely. She would have her outlet for her political writings under an anonymous name, and Simon need not worry what making a statement themselves could do.

A tap to the door signaled they were no longer alone.

“Ah, Jacobs, what is it?” Georgiana asked, lifting her gaze from her bread.

“Some publications have arrived, my Lady.” At Jacobs’ words, Rosaline tried not to look too excited. He walked into the room, carrying two different publications in his hands. “Here is the scandal sheet.” He passed a scandal sheet into Georgiana’s grasp. “Then there is this too. *Ackermann’s Repository of Arts, Literature, Commerce, Manufactures, Fashion and Politics*. It seems the ladies in the street cannot stop speaking of it this morning.”

“Thank you, Jacobs.” She dismissed him with a smile.

Rosaline held her breath as she watched Georgiana, wanting her to open the magazine first, but she did not.

Rosaline had scarcely been able to believe it when the Duchess had spoken of how she had managed to get hold of one of the editors for the *Ackermann's* magazine. What was more of a surprise was the way the editor had been consumed with the idea of the article. He had quite insisted on having it replace another piece in the newest edition of the magazine, to get it published before the end of the week.

“Hmm.” Georgiana’s tone was deep as she looked over the scandal sheet. Rosaline forced herself to take a sip from her tea, feeling her mouth was abruptly quite dry.

“Does it mention us again?” she asked slowly, nervous of the answer.

“It does, though it is a very brief mention. See here?” Georgiana passed the scandal sheet across the table. Rosaline took it gingerly, tempted to ignore the thing entirely, but she

felt she could not. Georgiana had been good enough to open up that morning, and Rosaline didn't think she could spurn that kindness now by refusing to read the very thing that upset Georgiana so much on a regular basis.

Slumping down in her chair, Rosaline turned the scandal sheet over, finding another article by Theia graced the pages. At least this time, they were not the complete focus of the article.

'Continued absences.

Much can be talked of recently for those who have been missing from the events of the ton. The scandals of Lord and Lady Winters have certainly kept us amused, and it cannot be missed that they have not attended the events of the ton for the last month. One must wonder if they have anything else to hide after the discovery of their latest scandal.

Yet they are not the only ones that intrigue by their absence. It seems Lord Gloucester and his seamstress of a wife

continue to remain away. They have not been to assemblies and nor have they attended balls. It is said that the short appearances they have made in Hyde Park too were brief, and the couple may have even been seen arguing together.'

Rosaline broke off, not wanting to read anymore. Her hatred for Theia grew, disliking the woman who jumped on other people's misery so. Unable to sit still, she fidgeted constantly as she appealed to Georgiana.

"Is it true that we are avoiding events at the moment?" Rosaline asked quietly. "Or are we not being invited."

"It is both," Georgiana said simply as she flicked through the pages of *Ackermann's* magazine. "We do not receive the number of invitations we used to get now, but I may also have advised Simon it would not be for the best to attend."

"I beg your pardon?" Rosaline asked, feeling numb as she stared at her mother-in-law. Georgiana smiled a little, as if

in triumph. Any relief Rosaline had felt thinking she was making strides with Georgiana that morning vanished.

She is pleased with my misery.

“I thought it best that you should not be paraded around too many events,” Georgiana spoke clearly, apparently not ashamed at all. “I gave the advice in the hope to protect my son from what could be said.”

“Did you think we would be treated cruelly at such events, or did you think I would shame you by not acting as the lady you think I should be?” Rosaline asked. Georgiana said nothing, but she shrugged a little, evidently happy with what she had done. Rosaline’s lips parted in horror, but she said nothing more. She was beginning to think there was no point at all in trying with Georgiana. As soon as she thought things were changing, she was reminded of what Georgiana truly thought of her.

I am the mud beneath her son's shoes. She cannot stand the fact he has brought me into her house.

“Oh, this is interesting.” Georgiana froze. She sat forward in her chair, her eyes darting over what she was reading.

“What is?” Rosaline asked distractedly. When Georgiana didn't answer, far too caught up in what she was reading to be able to speak, Rosaline leaned forward. She caught sight of what was written in the magazine and recognized her own article.

Rosaline's smile broadened, before she hid it behind her teacup. It was imperative that if all was to work, no one should discover she was the writer, especially not Georgiana, who might well wish to throw Rosaline out of the house by breaking the bounds of what a lady should do in such an open manner.

Waiting patiently, sipping her tea, Rosaline held her tongue for Georgiana to speak next. At times, Georgiana frowned a little as she read, then a small smile would take up residence on her features. By the time she had finished, Rosaline had no knowledge of what Georgiana truly thought of the piece, for her expression was one that would confuse any onlooker.

“Well, you would enjoy reading this, I am sure.” Georgiana passed the article across the table. “Tell me what you think of this.”

Rosaline bent her head forward to read, rather hoping it would hide the blush that was creeping up her cheeks. She read it, taking her time as if it was the first time that she had read it, then she sat up, unable to stop her smile.

“How fascinating,” she said softly. “I find it intriguing indeed. What do you make of it, Georgiana?”

“I...do not know.”

“I’m sorry?” Rosaline murmured, watching Georgiana closely.

The older woman shifted for a minute, then pulled forward another slice of bread to butter it. She seemed caught up with her thoughts, her eyes dancing around the room, restlessly.

“Perhaps the writer is right, to some degree,” Georgiana whispered.

“You think so?” Rosaline tried to keep the surprise off her face.

“Well, I know of no publication where a woman writes of another woman, and it is not in a scandal sheet.” Georgiana shook her head with the words. “It is the only place ladies are discussed. Yet I disagree in some regard as to what is said of women.”

“How so?” Rosaline encouraged her on, intrigued to hear the woman’s thoughts.

“Some women are praised in scandal sheets. I have seen them talk of a woman’s beauty and her accomplishments, of their good marriages too...” Then she faltered, the smile slipping from her face. “That is not what the writer meant though, was it?”

“You are right.” Rosaline pointed down at the article. “I think she is pointing out that a woman should be praised for other things besides beauty and who they marry. Would you not agree?”

Georgiana took a bite of her buttered bread, apparently buying time before she answered. She avoided Rosaline’s gaze, looking down at her plate at all times.

“Well, Georgiana? Would you not agree?” Rosaline urged her on, before the lady could take a second bite.

“I do not know what to make of the article.” Georgiana placed down her bread, her pallor paling a little. “In truth, I do not know what to think. May I read it again?”

“Of course.” Rosaline happily handed the magazine across the table, back to her mother-in-law. As Georgiana read repeatedly, she lost interest in her food, devoting her entire attention to what was written in the article.

Rosaline was careful to top up her tea and use it to hide her smile once again. This was a good sign indeed. Georgiana was the first person other than her friends who had read the article, and if a woman who was usually so fixed in her opinion of what a young lady should be should find herself so shaken by it, then the article did the very job Rosaline wished it to do.

It makes us wonder if the world we have created for ourselves is the one we wish to continue living in or not.

Georgiana stood to her feet abruptly, with the magazine still in her clutches.

“Is all well, Georgiana?” Rosaline asked, gesturing down to the uneaten bread in front of her. “You have not finished your breakfast.”

“I find I am quite done. If you do not mind, I will take this with me today.” She waved the magazine in front of her. “I have a meeting with my Lysistrata Ladies. I would like to know what they make of it.” With these final words, she hurried from the room.

Rosaline sat back, no longer needing to hide her smile, and tipped her head to the sky, speaking her thoughts aloud.

“This is a good start indeed.”

Chapter 19

Simon

“Please, let no more happen today,” Simon muttered to himself as he moved the chairs around in the club. Today was to be an important day for the writer’s circle. They had some writers attending that were to read from their work, and some publishers that had been specially invited to listen.

Walking away from the chairs he had arranged in a circle, Simon moved to the edge of the basement in the club and reached toward a mahogany sideboard. On top of the sideboard there was a silver tray, with a stack of notes and letters returned to accept or reject attendance. Simon sifted through them, checking the names of all that were to attend. One publisher’s rejection had gutted him. Unable to resist, he turned the letter over to read the rejection once again.

‘Dear Lord Gloucester,

Thank you for the honor of your invitation. I know I have attended the writing circle many times in the past, and it has produced some wonderful new voices in our literary world, but it is with great regret I must sever my partnership with the circle.

I am sure you understand that a publishing house such as my own can only be connected with the best of names. When scandal and whispers follow the leader of the writing circle, it is not a connection I can encourage any longer.

I wish you best for your meeting.

Yours etcetera,

Mr. Roger Anfield.'

Simon folded up the rejection so that it became a very small thing, one that would be easy to throw away and forget. He supposed he should have been thankful that Mr. Anfield

had written his rejection so kindly, or even bothered to write at all. Mr. Anfield had always been an editor with a higher demand of position and class compared to other editors, but now to refuse to come altogether had shocked Simon to the core.

Does he really think this is no longer a place of learning and great writing just because I have married a woman talked of in scandal sheets? This is absurd!

Simon tossed the rejection down to the silver tray along with some others. He knew he needed to forget about such things. Last night, he and Rosaline had sat at dinner together enjoying one another's company again. They had talked as they talked in the past, freely, without hesitation. He wasn't going to spoil such a thing by raising with her such rejections as this one.

"Simon? Simon, have you seen this? It's *Ackermann's* latest magazine. Tell me you have seen it." The familiar voice of the Duke of Gloucester had Simon turning.

He was always the early arrival, and clearly, today was no different. The Duke bounded down the stairs into the basement, his figure in shadow for a second, then lit fully by the candles that had been placed around the club room.

“What has you so excited?” Simon asked with a laugh.

“This!” The Duke waved the folded paper in his clutches in the air. “It is about time we had something published like this, it truly is. We must discuss it today in our group.”

“Very well, but what is it we are to discuss?” Simon was about to take the magazine from his friend’s hand when the door opened at the top of the stairs and more people arrived.

“We’ll discuss it later,” the Duke said in a rush and stuffed the paper under his arm.

Simon put upon a smile and greeted his writers. First, the young up-and-coming writers arrived, then some of the more experienced men followed, some with their own books in their hands, others with notebooks, intending to scribble ideas down. Lastly, publishers and editors arrived. Simon sighed with relief to see how many still came, apparently not cowered by what was written of Simon in the scandal sheets, unlike some others.

“I am very excited for today, my Lord,” an elder editor declared as he crossed down the stairs to Simon and bowed. “I have brought my new production editor with me. This is Mr. Warrington. Take a bow, Warrington. This is Lord Gloucester.” The young man beside him hurried to bow, his lips parted.

“The gentleman mentioned in the—oomph!” Before he could finish his statement, the elder editor beside him elbowed him in the rib.

“Forgive him, Lord Gloucester,” he said in a rush. “The young man is yet to gain some manners.”

“Ow.” Mr. Warrington kept rubbing the sore spot on his ribs.

“I am glad you could come, sir,” Simon said in greeting and gestured to the chairs. “Please, sit, we shall begin momentarily.” As the two hurried off, Simon sighed, turning his face away in the effort to hide his expression from the crowd. In the end, he didn’t manage to hide it from one of them.

“I know that look,” the Duke murmured, moving to his side and leaning on the wall of the basement. “It’s a look of despair.”

“Am I so easy to read?” Simon asked.

“No. It is just that I have seen you despair at the ton and your late father often enough to recognize that look.” The Duke gestured to his face. “Come on, my friend, tell me what happened.”

“It cannot have escaped your notice that...” He trailed off, looking round at the group. Seeing some of the young men were looking his way, Simon stepped closer toward his friend and dropped his voice. “We are losing members of this group.”

“Yes, I had noticed.” The Duke grimaced. “I take it that accounts for a missing editor today.”

“It does.” Simon nodded. “And just now, one of the younger fellows was actually about to talk of me being mentioned in the scandal sheets. What has become of this world, my friend?” he asked, his arms open wide, wanting an explanation. “Why is a man’s merit judged in such a way, rather than on his actions.”

“Because the ton is a cruel place indeed. You need to read this article I found in *Ackermann’s* magazine this morning. It speaks of such things, quite openly. I think you will like it.” The Duke patted the magazine under his arm.

Simon flicked his eyes toward it, curious as to what was in that article.

“What does it say?” Simon reached for the paper. The Duke took it out from his arm, proffering it forward.

“It talks of such odd behaviors of the ton and expectations too, but how they are placed on women of the ton.” The words intrigued Simon. He was about to unfold the magazine and find the article, when voices cried up from behind him.

“Quite absurd, quite absurd indeed.” Mr. Warrington appeared to be arguing with a writer in the circle. “How can you be fond of what this mystery writer says?”

“Because she seeks to talk openly of something that people are afraid to talk of. It is about time someone did talk of it.” The writer, Mr. Lumley, sat back with his arms folded.

“Here, here!” two other writers piped up in agreement with him.

“What’s this about?” Simon asked.

“If I’m not mistaken, they are discussing this.” The Duke took the magazine back and held it in the air. “It looks as if an argument is about to break out.”

Simon knew when he was needed. Clapping his hands together, he drew the attention of the room and stepped into the circle of chairs.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen, please. I understand something has been published today which has caused quite a stir. As people long to talk of it, might I suggest we do so in a calm manner first, before we proceed with the readings.” He pointedly looked between Mr. Warrington and Mr. Lumley.

“Yes indeed!” the elder editor from earlier called out. “It is a fascinating thing to read. It should be discussed.”

“Who would like to go first?” Simon asked, looking between the group. Unsurprisingly, the Duke of Suffolk returned to his feet within seconds. “Your Grace, please, go on.”

“Thank you, Simon.” The Duke held out the magazine. “I heard a moment ago Mr. Warrington here disparaging the article. I would like to know what there is to disparage in it.” He unfolded the magazine, revealing the article.

Simon angled his head around his friend, trying to get a glimpse of the text on the paper.

“The writer is quite right, in many ways.” The Duke held the attention of the room as he spoke. “They have observed rightly how often ladies are expected to keep their place in society. As proof, I’d ask you all to look around this room.” He turned in a circle, encouraging them all to do just that. “We

each have the opportunity to be here not because our positions have bought us a seat at the table, but because we wished to be here. Simon, how many writers have we seen walk through here from all backgrounds? Poor as well as affluent?”

“Many indeed.” Simon nodded, caught up in the excitement of the moment. “Just last month we secured a deal for a gentleman who used to be a tutor. The work was so entrancing that the publisher in question would not leave without securing a deal with him. It had not mattered where the writer was born.”

“Exactly!” the Duke gestured toward him, with equal enthusiasm. “Now I ask, how many ladies have been given the same opportunity?”

Simon was forced to shake his head, falling still.

“No ladies have walked into this room.”

“Just so.” The Duke nodded, with something of a triumphant smile. “Do not look so ashamed, Simon. This is a microcosm for our lives, is it not?” He gestured to the others in the room. “Have any of you seen ladies been encouraged to pursue talents of their own in this fashion? Are they permitted to meet in groups such as this to offer opportunities to one another?”

“No. They never are,” one writer called up from the crowd. Sitting forward, with his face revealed in the candlelight, Simon recognized him at once. He was a poet and brother to a Viscount, a regular visitor to their meetings. “The article this morning made me think of my own sister. She has always been fond of our garden. She has a great passion for the flowers there, but whenever she tries to get into the garden, to do some gardening herself, our father would say how it was not becoming of a young lady.” He scoffed at the idea. “He would infinitely rather have her sat silent and miserable indoors.”

“What a sad thing to do,” Simon observed, shaking his head. “Why was she prevented from gardening?”

“Because it is not the done thing.” Mr. Warrington spoke up. Simon felt a tension grow in his body as he turned his gaze on the young editor. “Ladies have their sphere of existence, and we have our own. What is so wrong in that?”

“Tell me, Mr. Warrington, why should those spheres not overlap?” the Duke asked. Clearly being asked such a question by a duke made Mr. Warrington a little uncomfortable, as he shifted in his chair so much it creaked beneath him.

“They should overlap,” Simon answered when Mr. Warrington would not.

“What of the other part of the article?” another writer asked, waving his own copy of the magazine. “What do you make of this part, where they discuss the scandal sheets?”

“Well, it’s quite right, is it not?” the poet said, leaning over his friend and gesturing to the article. “The only time we

seem to permit an article to be about a woman is when they are discussed in the scandal sheets.”

A furor followed this comment. Some men agreed, others lambasted it as pure conjecture. Quite wrongfooted, Simon stepped back and looked around the group, wondering how it had escalated to this moment.

Rosaline...

She entered his mind quite suddenly, for he thought of how she had suffered at the hands of the scandal sheets. They had treated her so cruelly, time and time again, and for what purpose? Only to disparage her.

“Please, gentlemen, please!” Simon called, clapping his hands together again. The loud voices grew silent, and the atmosphere became something tense. “This is an interesting topic it would be good to expand on. Now, what does this article say of the scandal sheets?”

The Duke waved the magazine in front of Simon.

“It draws attention to the fact that the great magazines and newspapers of our age celebrate a man’s accomplishments.” The Duke offered a wry smile. “They do not talk of women. In fact, the only place women are talked of is in the scandal sheets.”

Simon took the newspaper from the Duke’s grasp, so abruptly reminded of the conversation he’d had with Rosaline before that he tensed up, a knot forming in his stomach.

“It is absurd,” Mr. Warrington said again. “Quite absurd.”

“What is?” the elder editor asked at his side. “I brought you to entertain a discussion, not to dismiss other’s thoughts.”

“I am simply pointing out that this article isn’t trying to open a dialogue for women. It’s purely an attack on society,”

he gestured toward the magazine that Simon now had in his grasp, though he hadn't managed to read it yet. Every time his eyes looked down at it, another conversation struck up about the article that caught his interest.

“That is nonsense!” two writers argued with Mr. Warrington, not afraid to hold back.

“It's not an attack.” The Duke shook his head fervently with the words. “The writer is even calling up fellow female readers to take note, to open a discussion of their own.”

“It's an attack on men.” Mr. Warrington folded his arms across his body with the words.

“To say such a thing shows you have not read the article properly.” The Duke stepped forward, growing so angry that Simon actually took his friend's shoulder, pulling him back again. “It addresses women, more than men. It's calling up women to celebrate one another, rather than compete to be noticed by putting one another down.”

“Clearly, your Grace, you and I read different things in that article.” Mr. Warrington’s words created an odd air in the room. To have someone speak so openly in disagreement with a Duke was one thing, but the callous way in which Mr. Warrington did it was unsettling.

“Forgive me for bringing him, your Grace, Lord Gloucester.” The elder editor nodded at the Duke and Simon each in turn. “I mistakenly thought he’d be useful for this discussion.”

“Well, at least he offers an antagonist’s point of view,” Simon said with a smile. “We all need that to have a discussion, do we not?” There was a general chuckle around him, and the tension in the room began to dissipate. “Might I suggest we move onto some of the readings for today? This article has clearly stirred up some passion. We can calm ourselves before returning to the discussion later.”

There were nods of agreement. Simon held the magazine firmly in his clutches before turning round, facing all the writers each in turn and calling up the first reading. With the writer in place in the middle of the room and beginning his reading, Simon retreated to a corner of the basement.

It is so odd...everything they said, it is as if I have heard it all before.

Simon couldn't resist reading the article. He quite forgot to listen to what the writer was reading of his own writing, and unfolded the magazine instead, his eyes quickly scanning the article. The more Simon took in what he read, the more he didn't want to believe it. Yet the proof was before his eyes, an article in black and white, written by 'The Gentlewoman Writer.'

I know this voice.

Simon sank slowly down into a chair, feeling his hands begin to shake as he bent forward over the article, reading it a

second time. It was quite plain to him exactly who had written this article. Not only was it all the arguments he'd heard Rosaline utter as of late, but some of the wording was exactly the same.

One paragraph in particular resonated with Simon.

'Once you have read of all the horrid things we say of each other in these scandal sheets, consider this, how did we create this world? How did we form a world where men are praised for their achievements and women are forgotten? Why is it accepted that a man can change his place in society as if he skated on ice, moving from one to another with ease, yet a woman's feet are locked in stone, and she must not dare move.'

He had to agree with it, there was no way he could argue with the sentiment, yet what upset him so much about it was that he could read Rosaline's voice quite clearly in it. These were her words and her voice.

Hanging his head and covering his face with one of his hands, he recalled how she had wanted to write such a political piece. He had pleaded with her not to, that it was better for them to hide than to challenge the ton. Not only had she ignored him, not even considering his point of view and how he wished to protect her from the ton, but she had also gone behind his back to accomplish this.

As he read the article a third time, Simon began to feel as if he did not matter to his wife. She had quite ignored him in her attempt to make this political statement known.

If anyone were to ever discover other than Simon that she was the writer, then they would be lambasted forever more, so hated by the ton that the basement in which he sat could soon be empty. Who would come to see him then when his wife made such statements as this in public?

Ah, Rosaline. What have you done?

Chapter 20

Simon

“Have you had a good day, my Lord?” The butler seemed to realize before he had even finished the question that he would not be receiving an affirmative answer. As he took Simon’s top hat and frock coat, he nodded in understanding and hurried to place the items on the coat stand.

“Clearly, the day is written on my face, is it not?” Simon muttered, trying to restrain his anger, though it was a fight he was losing.

Ever since he had discovered Rosaline’s article that morning, he had been a mess. He had completed the meeting with the writer’s circle, but not before the debate about the anonymous article had grown worse. Simon had kept quiet, seeming as he was the only one who knew the identity of the Gentlewoman Writer. He had observed at a distance how Rosaline’s words had divided the room and caused not just

arguments, but rifts between men who had called themselves friends before they entered that room.

He knew he had been too angry to return home, so had decided to stay away. He had spent some hours in the club, had a drink or two in the effort to calm his nerves, and then walked back, refusing to take his carriage. The walk was not a straight one, and in his effort to discover more, he had hovered in Covent Garden, listening to the ladies and gentlemen that passed him, waving their own copies of *Ackermann's* magazine.

The words he'd heard had only made that anger worse. In the end, he had decided to return home as the sun came down, knowing nothing would quell the panic and the fury now.

“Is there anything I can get you, my Lord?” Jacobs asked with kindness. “A glass of brandy for some relief?”

“Thank you, no.” Simon knew he needed no more to drink. “Where is my wife?”

“She is in the library, my Lord.”

“Good, thank you, and my mother?” Simon knew he had to talk to Rosaline about this, and there wasn’t a chance he was going to talk to her when his mother was around.

“She is at a meeting of her Lysistrata Ladies and will return later tonight,” Jacobs explained. “Shall I have tea brought to you and Lady Gloucester, my Lord?”

“Not tonight, no, but I thank you for it. Jacobs, I think it best you retire for the night.” Simon knew it was unusual. He was fond of his late evenings and Jacobs was always happy to stay up with him, offering drinks when needed. The butler’s dark eyebrows curved upwards in surprise before he nodded, bowed, and stepped away.

“Good night, my Lord.”

“Good night.” Simon waited until the butler had vanished, standing perfectly still in the hallway. Beside him, on a marble hall table was a single candle. He turned toward it, placing his hand on the brass stand with sharp movements.

For what will now pass between Rosaline and I, we do not need the staff gossiping of it.

He waited until he heard a door in the distant recesses of the house closing, signaling that Jacobs had found the servant’s staircase, then Simon took off, grasping the candle in his hand. Walking with jerky movements, the heels of his hessian boots struck the floor so loudly that they echoed around the cavernous hall. Moving through the darkness, the dim glow of the candle barely illuminated his body, so as he found the door to the library it was more by feeling than sight. Reaching the door, he flung it open, without hesitation, practically stumbling into the library in his determination to see his wife.

“Simon? You’re back.” Rosaline’s voice was sweet and buoyant, the tone he had loved so much for so long, but in that moment, the sweetness of the tone only angered him more.

She is ignorant of what she has done.

“Simon?” she said, her excitement fading.

Simon took stock of the view before him as he stood in the doorway, one hand shaking as it clung to the door handle and the other doing its best to hold the candle still. Rosaline was sat in an armchair by the fire, with her legs curled under her. On her lap were some of the political magazines he owned, including the latest edition of *Ackermann’s* publication. He thought he spied a few of the familiar scandal sheets too, though he ignored that. She stared at him with her amber eyes wide, leaning forward off the chair, evidently sensing his strange manner.

“Simon?” she said again, her voice softer this time.
“What is wrong? Has something happened?”

“You ask me that now?” Simon couldn’t hold back his scoff. Turning round sharply, he closed the door and deposited the candle on the nearest table. Along with the others she had lit in the room, it created an ambient apricot glow, though it didn’t reach the corners of the room. Shadows existed there, and darkness. Simon couldn’t help feeling it was rather apt, for he felt as if there was a darkness between him and Rosaline now.

I hate this feeling, I despise being angry at her, yet I cannot hold it back.

“Simon?” she whispered his name this time, shifting the magazines off her lap and moving to stand. “What has happened?”

He didn’t say anything as he walked forward, his movements so sharp and jerky that she stood straight in alarm.

He merely reached into the pocket of his tailcoat, pulled out a rolled-up version of *Ackermann's* magazine and thrust it high in the air.

The room was silent for a second. No sound passed between them, and only the occasional crack of the fire that had been set to ward off the autumnal chill of the evening could be heard between them.

Rosaline's eyes darted between the magazine in his hand and his face. Simon could feel his breathing grow heavier as he waited for her to say something.

"Why are you so mad?" she asked eventually, reaching out to take the magazine, but he did not let her. He took it back, unrolled it, and pulled the pages open until he found her article.

"I cannot believe you would ask me such a question, Rosaline. No, surely you can see what you have done with this article of yours, and do not deny that you wrote it." His tone

was firm, implacable even. He could remember using such a tone with his father before. Never did he think he would speak to Rosaline in such a way, but for some reason, it came from him now.

“I wasn’t going to deny it,” Rosaline said, her tone sad, though she lifted her head high. There was a courage in her stance he had not seen there before. “I wished to write it. What I say there had to be said.”

“Did it? Good lord! How differently you see the world to me.” Simon turned and dropped the magazine to the nearest table, but the movement had so much enthusiasm that it was more of a firm slap than he had intended. The sound echoed throughout the room, though neither of them jumped. “Have you not seen what you have done with writing this article?”

“Done? Yes, I think I do, a little.” She stepped forward, her voice no longer quiet. “I wished to start a discussion, Simon. To encourage women to talk. I think I may have accomplished that.”

“To talk? Yes, certainly!” Simon turned in a circle, hurrying to take off his tailcoat and thrust it on the nearest chair in his anger. “They are talking at great length. In my writer’s circle, at the club, in Hyde Park, and in Covent Garden. Wherever I went today they were discussing this article.”

“I fail to see how that is a bad thing, though your tone surely says that it is,” Rosaline said, folding her arms.

“Do not be snide.” Simon turned sharply to face her. “This is serious.”

“I am being serious.” She held his gaze. “Why is it so wrong that people are talking of what I wrote?”

“Because it is dividing the world, Rosaline. It is splitting it into two!” He marched toward the windows in the room, waving a hand toward it, as if gesturing to the people beyond. “I was out there today. I watched friends arguing, family too in

Covent Garden, over what people read today. They don't know what to make of it. It is causing arguments.”

“I would say that is a good thing,” Rosaline said quietly.

“You see good in an argument?” Simon gestured between the two of them. “Am I the only one standing here who feels this agony at arguing with you? I have no such enjoyment for an argument.”

“You are not the only one in pain.” Rosaline softened her voice.

The words seemed to take some of the anger out of him. Simon turned away and covered his face for a minute as he paced, trying to block out the view of Rosaline.

He still loved her. She was still Rosaline, the sweet tempered, genuine and honest woman he had fallen for all those months ago, but this was different. Holding onto that

love was difficult when she had thrown their future into so much uncertainty and seemed to have no knowledge of what it was that she had done.

“What is in the article...what I said, does it upset you so much?” she whispered, her voice quiet. Simon abruptly stopped walking and lowered his hands, turning back to look at her.

“I cannot disagree with the article.” He shook his head in emphasis and walked back toward her. “Do I wish the world was a fairer place as you desire it to be? Yes, Rosaline, I do. That is something I cannot fault. The difference is that I am not so naïve to think the world can be changed by a few words printed on a bit of paper.” His latter sentence had come out firmer and more venomous than he had intended. Rosaline retreated from him, her auburn brows pinching together.

“You think words can’t change this world?” she asked quietly.

“This much? No! I know they cannot.” His voice was growing loud again. “This is a world that cannot be changed easily. Even if we wish to change it as a plasterer molds plaster, it cannot be done. I did not want to go to war for the sake of our marriage, Rosaline.”

“What does that mean?” she asked, stepping forward. She reached for a chair that stood between them, gripping the back of a chair.

“It is why you did it, is it not? You wanted the scandal sheets to stop talking about us.” He gestured a mad wave down at the scandal sheets discarded on a nearby table.

“I did, but I did it for other reasons too.” She stood taller. “This isn’t just about us, Simon. It’s about my friends too. I didn’t do this just for myself, but many women. For Chloe, for the Duchess of Suffolk, for any woman who has ever felt as if their attempts to live life to their own design was looked down on.”

Simon was barely listening now. He knew he should be paying attention, but all he could think of was what would happen when people discovered just who had written this article.

“Do you not see what you have done?” he asked madly, facing her and marching back away once again, increasing the distance between them. “When people discover you wrote this article, they will despise us both.”

“They will not.” Rosaline insisted, shaking her head, though her voice lacked conviction.

“They will.” Simon’s voice was stronger. “You will have no kindness from society, and I will lose my writing circle, the one thing I strive and work so hard for. Our lives will disappear like dust between our fingers, just because you wanted your voice to be heard.”

“I do not think it is so wrong to want to be heard,” she murmured, her voice surprisingly strong despite its quietness.

“I said nothing wrong.”

“Rosaline, you are not hearing me!” Simon snapped, turning round in a circle, for his body was that agitated, before facing her again. “I do not disagree with what you said, but the fact you had to say it at all. I was content to live a quiet life with you.”

“And I wished to change the world.” She jutted her chin high, revealing in the dull candlelight that her eyes were rather wet. The sight of those unshed tears made the pain writhe in Simon’s chest all the more. He hated arguing with her like this, but the anger would not dissipate.

“We cannot change it!” Simon’s voice grew louder. “We have to live with it. The world is a greater power than us, and I have seen many a man try to change it and lose himself in the battle against it. I do not want the two of us to end up losing that battle too. No, I was content to be quiet. To be happy together and ignore the ton. Why could you not just do that, Rosaline?”

“Because...” She hung her head forward. “Maybe I’m not happy to let the world continue as it is, without fighting against it.”

“Then we’ll both end up hurt by it.” He walked past her, heading for the door, unable to continue this argument for much longer. “When someone realizes you wrote that article, be prepared for the fallout, Rosaline. They’ll despise you for it, and your name will be in the scandal sheets every day thereafter.”

“Simon, please, don’t go.” Rosaline followed him to the door, trying to block it off, but she wasn’t quick enough. Simon reached the door and placed his hand upon it, hesitating before opening. “Please?” she whispered; her voice softer this time. “I didn’t write this article to hurt you.”

“No? Did you not?” Simon glanced back to her. “Then why else would you not tell me what you had done?” He held her gaze, watching as she struggled to answer him, her lips

opening before they closed in a firm flat line. “I thought you trusted me, Rosaline. I guess I was wrong.”

He couldn't shift this feeling of betrayal. Unable to look at her anymore, he left the room, closing the door so harshly behind him that the sound echoed through the corridor.

Chapter 21

Rosaline

When a slow knock came at the bedchamber door, Rosaline felt as if she had cried all tears that were possible. The argument with Simon kept replaying in her mind. The guilt would bloom worse, making her feel as if she had betrayed her husband, written the article partly to spite him, then she would think of her anger too – the sadness that Simon could not see that she had done this for him.

He thinks I did it purely for myself. I did it for many reasons.

When the knock came a second time, Rosaline jumped to her feet and hurried to the door, flinging it wide in the hope she would see Simon on the other side. Yet it was not the face that greeted her there.

“Oh, Georgiana.” Rosaline immediately turned away her face and lifted her handkerchief, trying to dry away some of her tears. “You have come to my room?” Rosaline spluttered in surprise between her gasping breaths.

“I heard something of your argument this evening.” Georgiana wrung her hands together as she spoke, looking very uncomfortable.

The thought that Georgiana could now know that she was the writer of the article gutted Rosaline. She stood straight, waiting for her mother-in-law to go on.

“I did not hear much of what was said,” Georgiana explained in a rush. “But I heard the anger between you, accusations of betrayal, and I saw from the shadows what Simon did as he retreated to his chamber.”

“What did he do?” Rosaline asked, afraid to hear the answer.

“He did this.” Georgiana reached for her own wedding ring on her finger. She took it off, twizzled it in her hand, returned it to her finger, then took it off again.

The thought that Simon had taken off the wedding ring gutted Rosaline. She turned away and reached for the nearest chair, capitulating into it with her shoulders shuddering as she tried to fight more tears.

It has come to it then. Simon regrets marrying me.

When a hand touched Rosaline’s shoulder, she jumped in surprise. Looking up, she realized Georgiana was trying to offer some amount of comfort, though her expression was difficult to read in the faint candlelight.

“This house has been home to arguments for too long,” Georgiana said as she released Rosaline’s shoulder and stepped back, putting distance between them. “Simon’s name has been damaged enough as it is of late, I would hate for a rift with his wife to damage his name further.”

Rosaline hung her head forward, realizing what Georgiana was saying. She did not know Rosaline was the writer of the article, or she would have said as much, but Georgiana was out to protect her son, no matter what, and she clearly saw Rosaline as the very thing that could hurt him.

Perhaps she is right.

Rosaline slumped in her chair, thinking of the anger in Simon's face as he had berated her that evening then walked away.

He will not forgive me for this, will he?

"Is there a chance the argument can be mended, or not?" Georgiana asked, her voice unsettlingly clam.

"I think not." Rosaline accepted the truth, shaking her head miserably.

“Then we must be practical.” Georgiana took a nearby chair and turned it to face Rosaline, before sitting slowly down. Now, her face was visible in the orange glow of the candles. It was tight, with a muscle ticking in her jaw. “Servants talk, Rosaline. We cannot have them spreading gossip of arguments to other households. If you and Simon cannot end the argument, then you must part for now.”

“Part?” Rosaline repeated the word with her horror. She shook her head at first and pulled her knees up onto the chair, finding she wanted to curl into a ball and disappear. She couldn’t stand the thought of being away from Simon. How could she leave the man she loved?

He wants me gone, does he not?

She realized the truth, that though she loved Simon, he might not love her anymore. How long had it been since he had visited her at night? How angry had he been, unable to see

why she had written this article? There had been no love in his manner, no affection.

“I will think about it,” Rosaline whispered, half saying it just to get rid of Georgiana. Slowly the woman stood to her feet.

“Think fast,” Georgiana spoke quietly. “We cannot afford for a rift between you to spread in rumors. It will destroy him.” With these words, Georgiana left the room.

All night, Rosaline cried. She thought of what Georgiana had said, and she kept coming back to the final words. Rosaline knew in her heart she loved Simon, despite their argument, but he may not love her anymore, and she was too devoted to him to see him hurt by what she had done.

In the early hours of the morning, when the sun began to peek over the rooftops, she quit her bed and left the room. She had made a decision in her sleepless hours, that was to be guided by Simon’s own decision.

When she reached his chamber, she knocked lightly. It took some moments for Simon to answer it. He opened the door and leaned on the frame, with his eyes wide in clear surprise.

He was only wearing his shirt and trousers. Rosaline gulped, remembering how many nights they had spent together, locked in sweet intimacy. That intimacy seemed far away now, impossible to find again.

“There was something I wished to talk to you about.” Her words seemed to calm him. He nodded and opened the door wider, allowing him inside.

For a minute or two, they were both silent. Rosaline moved to the bed and sat on the end, but Simon made it plain he was not going to be persuaded by such movements. He stood at the far end of the room, so there was a chasm between them. Rosaline could have wept at that distance, had she not shed all tears that were possible in the night.

“I have thought of this all night,” Rosaline said quietly, “and I know you cannot accept what I did.” She paused, but he made no denial. That silence persuaded her to go on. “Maybe you cannot forgive me for it either.” She swallowed, terrified to ask her next question for she feared his answer. “Do you still want me in this house? Or...should I part from it?” She held her breath.

Slowly, Simon turned away. He fidgeted, as if struggling with his thoughts, thrusting a hand in his hair, scratching the back of his neck, and even shifting the way his shirt sat on his shoulders.

“Perhaps that would be for the best.” His words made Rosaline feel as if she had been punched in the gut. She had prayed he would reject the idea, but here he was, willingly letting her go.

I have no choice now. I must part.

Slowly, Rosaline stood off the bed, feeling the threat of more tears stinging her eyes.

“You really wish for me to go?” she asked, her voice quiet.

“Wish? Well, I would not phrase it in that way.” He refused to look at her as he spoke. “I need time to think, Rosaline. I need to think of what you have done. I need to think of our argument.”

“But we can do that together.” Rosaline crossed toward him. She stood by his side, about to reach for his arm, but she hesitated, and her fingers fell limp at her side. “Please, Simon. We do not have to be apart.”

“I can’t stop thinking of that article.” He closed his eyes and tipped his head back. “You went behind my back. You didn’t even trust me enough to talk to me of it first. If we were truly a married couple, open and honest, why wouldn’t you

have told me?” When he opened his eyes, staring at her and waiting for an answer, she had no answer to give.

“It was not about that, Simon.”

“Yet it should have been, and it was not.” He stepped back from her. Each time he did such an action it made her pain worse. “We can put it to the staff that you have gone to take care of your father for a while. We can say he is sick. It will give us both time to think about things.” He retreated to the window and stared out at the street.

Rosaline wished to stay beside him. She longed to argue for their marriage, that she didn’t want to give up now, but she could tell she was being dismissed.

“I’ll have the carriage prepared later today.” Simon’s words broke her last ounce of resilience.

Unable to say anything, she ran for the door and left.

* * *

Rosaline sat at the back of Chloe's shop, clinging to the latest edition of *Ackermann's* magazine in her grasp. It had been four days since she had left Simon's house, and for most of those days, she had come to find distraction here at this shop.

On the first day, Chloe, the Duchess and Gretchen had all heard of what had happened with Simon. They had offered sympathy and apologies. Rosaline was touched by their friendship and their kindness, but she couldn't help thinking that she was still quite alone at times.

It is because I miss him so much.

"Well, that was interesting," Chloe declared, returning to the back of the shop where she pulled a curtain across and blocked out the view of the shop. "Some ladies will never be satisfied with a dress."

“Whyever not?” Rosaline asked, distracted enough to lift her gaze from the magazine.

“Oh, they moan the hem has too much lace or not enough lace. Or their friend now has a finer gown, and they must have the same too. I actually had a complaint the other day that the beads in one gown weren’t shiny enough. Ha! I had to point out to the lady that is how the pearls are formed.” Chloe laughed at the absurdity of it all and moved around Rosaline, reaching for a fire where she placed a kettle of water to warm through. “Sometimes, ladies baffle me, Rosaline. Their sense of competition outweighs anything else.”

Chloe’s words made Rosaline think of Theia and all the articles the woman had written of her in the scandal sheets. Rosaline slumped in her chair and crinkled the magazine for she held onto it so tightly.

“You know no good comes from this, do you not?” Chloe prized the magazine out of Rosaline’s hands.

“Out of what?” Rosaline asked, reluctant to let the magazine go.

“Out of looking over this article repeatedly,” Chloe explained gently, placing the magazine on a shelf as she collected a teapot to make some tea.

“How can I not look at it?” Rosaline’s words were quiet, lacking any of her usual enthusiasm. “It is the very thing that has divided me from Simon. I can’t help feeling...” Her breath hitched and she paused, thinking deeply. “Maybe I never should have written it at all.”

“Absurd!” Chloe cried and thrust the lid on the teapot so much that it chinked loudly. “I should be more careful. If I break another teapot, Gretchen will laugh at me. I have a habit of doing it as of late. It seems Leo’s clumsy ways are rubbing off on me.”

Rosaline attempted to smile, sensing Chloe was trying to distract her from her woes, though it wasn’t working very

well.

“I see you are in no mood to smile, are you?” Chloe asked, turning to face her with a plate of biscuits. “Maybe a biscuit would help?”

“I do not think it will.”

“They have chocolate on them?” Chloe’s words made Rosaline smile a little.

“Does chocolate solve everything?” Rosaline asked, taking one of the biscuits.

“Sadly, no, but it makes pain a little easier. So, take two rather than one.” Chloe thrust the whole plate into Rosaline’s hand, before she returned to her place by the fire, watching the water as it began to boil. “Tell me something, Rosaline. Did you wish to write the article?”

“Of course, I did,” Rosaline said slowly.

“Then you did the right thing.” Chloe nodded with her words, clearly firm in her decision. “Do you think I would have not started this shop had Leo told me not to do it? Pah! Never.”

“He wouldn’t have been able to stop you,” Rosaline pointed out, to which Chloe agreed.

“That is true. I would have fought tooth and nail for this place, because it was what I thought was the right thing for me to do. Maeve is just the same.” Chloe paused long enough to pour the water in her teapot. “She didn’t accept it when men told her she could not write. She broke into the world, because she wished to. Never has the Duke thought ill of her for it. On the contrary, he admires her for it. If your husband cannot see now why you did what you did, then maybe he will in time.”

“I am not sure it is that simple.” Rosaline kept thinking back to how Simon had accused her of betraying him. She

couldn't help feeling there was something in this. Yes, she wouldn't undo what she had done, but she had kept secrets from the man she was supposed to trust most in this world.

“Something I do know though is this.” Chloe turned and presented a teacup to Rosaline. “Whilst hiding at the back of my shop may help, it is not a way to survive heartbreak.”

“It does the job for now,” Rosaline murmured, lifting the teacup to her lips.

“The Rosaline I know is not this morose, nor this deflated.” Chloe sat down beside Rosaline. “She's excited about the world, buoyant.”

“I can't be buoyant now.” All Rosaline wished to talk about was how much she missed Simon and wished to be home with him again, but it was not to be. She could not talk of such things.

“Then find something to be buoyant about.” Chloe jumped to her feet and reached for the magazine she had deposited on the shelf, then held it out in front of Rosaline. “When you wrote this, you came alive. You want something to be excited about, something to think of beside heartbreak, then you have it. *Right here.*”

“It was one article, Chloe. That was all.” Rosaline took a nibble of her chocolate biscuit.

“Who says it just has to be one article, eh?” Chloe words caught Rosaline’s interest. Slowly, she lifted a hand and took the magazine from her friend.

* * *

Simon

“Not now, Mother, please.” Simon was staring at his uneaten dinner, aware that his mother kept inching the plate toward him.

Two weeks had passed since Rosaline had left and, in that time, Simon had merely become miserable. Unable to eat or sleep much, he was becoming a shell of the man he had been before. It was evident not just in the mirror that stared back at him every morning, but his mother's reactions to him too.

"You must eat." She nudged the plate toward him again. "I knew she would do this to you. I knew it." The way Georgiana crowed over Rosaline being gone disgusted him. Simon turned his focus on the empty chair to his right.

He thought of the nights where Rosaline had sat there smiling at him, laughing with him. He missed those nights. They were carefree and happy. They also seemed like a long time ago now.

"I will not hear you belittling her again. I've had enough of it." Simon's words were sharp. He couldn't help feeling as if he deserved them as much as Georgiana did.

I belittled Rosaline, did I not?

In the time that had passed, his fury had faded. Now, he had this profound sense of confusion and loss. Yes, he was confused and worried about their future, especially if anyone discovered what Rosaline had written, but the sense of loss was just as great.

I miss her so much.

“How is your writing circle?” Georgiana asked, clearly trying to distract him from the way he stared at the empty chair beside him.

“They are still debating the words of that anonymous writer in *Ackermann’s* magazine,” Simon explained. “It seems that article two weeks ago has stirred things up.” More than once had he placed himself in the shadows of the club room, nervous that someone from the group would look at him and somehow know his wife was the writer.

“You have not heard then?” Georgiana asked, leaning forward.

“Heard what?” Simon was distracted, lifting his eyes to see his mother’s face.

“The writer wrote again.”

Simon’s body froze, not sure what to think. A spike of anger shot in his stomach, fury that Rosaline would write again, but then the curiosity burned deeper. He wanted to know what she said.

“My Lysistrata Ladies have been most fascinated reading it today. It says some interesting things.” There was a smile on Georgiana’s face, one that quite transformed her features. Simon couldn’t help thinking that Georgiana’s smile would not be so present had she known who the writer really was. “Wait here, I will get it for you.”

Simon waited as his mother retreated from the room and returned a couple of minutes later with the magazine in her hand.

“Here, read this. Perhaps it will distract you from thoughts of your wife.”

Ah, unlikely.

Chapter 22

Simon

“There’s another one!” Georgiana’s voice echoed through the house. Simon sat up in his library, knowing exactly what Georgiana was talking of, even without having to ask. He was sat in the same chair he had last seen Rosaline occupying. Each time he had fidgeted and shifted in it, he thought of her.

“It’s here! It’s here,” Georgiana called, then appeared in the doorway. Her face was flushed with excitement, in a way that Simon could not remember seeing for years. “Oh, how interesting this article is. You must read it, Simon. You must. For I long to talk of it!” She thrust *Ackermann’s* latest magazine into his hands then stepped back, clasping her hands together, waiting impatiently for him to read it.

Simon tried not to look as excited as he was to read it. In the last few weeks, more than half a dozen articles had appeared by the ‘anonymous’ writer in *Ackermann’s* magazine.

Clearly, the publisher recognized that the pieces got people talking, and they wanted more of it. Sometimes, two articles in one magazine were published.

It seems Rosaline is becoming something of a legend.

Simon found he opened the article with just as much enthusiasm as his mother clearly had, though he suspected it was for a different reason. More than once over the last few weeks had he turned up at Alfred Baker's shop, trying to see Rosaline, but each time he had been given some excuse as to why he could not see her. Either Rosaline was out seeing her friends, or she was indisposed. Not being able to see Rosaline made Simon feel very isolated and alone.

“Read it, read it,” Georgiana urged. “Oh, we must speak of it!”

Simon was eager to abide by his mother's wishes, for it was the closest he could get to Rosaline at this moment.

'Time to Celebrate.

Anyone who has read my works before will have seen how much I talk of the lack of celebrating women's achievements. Here today, I intend to remedy this. We shall start by celebrating women in literature and open a discussion of them. I urge anyone who has not yet read works by these great women to talk of them now, read them, and encourage others to do the same, for you might be surprised of what you read.

Who out there among you has heard of Mrs. Ann Radcliff? I would not be surprised if some of you have read her works, but did not know her name, for her early books, including 'The Mysteries of Udolpho' were published anonymously. Mrs. Radcliffe only achieved true fame with the publication of her third novel 'The Romance of the Forest.' Now, for some sensitive readers, her tales may be too dark, but for others who wish for an escape and an explore in the sublime, I urge you to try it. After all, who says a lady cannot explore the darkness as well as the light?

Simon smiled as he read. Rosaline went on at length, not just about Mrs. Radcliffe, but other writers too, including the Duchess of Suffolk, Miss Austen, and Miss Mary Russell Mitford. It was a fantastic article, for each writer that was listed, Rosaline also drew attention to what made them different and to possible reasons why they were not celebrated as much as men. She finished the article by urging her readers to send in other suggestions of women who should be celebrated.

“Well? What do you make of it?” Georgiana asked, barely able to stand still.

Simon had to stop himself from laughing at his other. There was something of the child about her in the way she fidgeted, excitedly wanting to speak of it.

“What do *you* make of it, Mother?” he asked, turning the question on her. “There was a time I would have thought you would not encourage an article such as this.”

“I see no wrong in it.” She hurriedly took the magazine back from him. “The Gentlewoman Writer, as she is becoming to be known, is simply talking of things that others are nervous to talk about.” She fidgeted with the corners of the magazine.

Intrigued by the words, Simon sat forward, eager to hear more.

“What exactly do you and your Lysistrata Ladies talk of, Mother?” he asked, longing to know more. “Is it such things as this?”

“Well, we can’t talk of them in front of our husbands, can we? What would they think?” She stopped fidgeting with the magazine and laid a hand on the bracelet at her wrist instead. “Your father would never have approved if I talked of such things.”

“Does it interest you though? Surely that is the more pertinent question. My father is dead, after all. He cannot give his opinion now.” Simon found himself longing to take the

bracelet off his mother's wrist. If she wanted to read works by the women authors that Rosaline spoke of, then Georgiana should feel free to do so. She should not feel ashamed because of the memory of her husband.

"I'd be interested to read some of these works," Georgiana said slowly. "Have you read any of these books by Mrs. Radcliffe? Do you think that I could..." She wavered, as a lonely finger tapped her mourning bracelet.

Simon sighed and stood to his feet before searching his shelves. Amongst the gothic section he found the book he was seeking, took it from the shelf and passed it to his mother.

"*The Romance of the Forest* by Mrs. Radcliffe. Read it," he urged her. "It's a fascinating tale, dark too, I warrant you, but a true adventure."

Georgiana gingerly took the book at first, as if afraid it might bite her, then she smiled down at the cover.

Simon burned to tell his mother just who was encouraging her to read such things, yet he feared Georgiana would reject the book outright if she knew Rosaline was behind all this.

“Enjoy it,” he pleaded with her.

“Thank you.” Georgiana retreated from the room, already turning the cover to read the opening pages.

The moment she was gone, the smile Simon had forced onto his cheeks vanished. He slumped back down into his armchair and read Rosaline’s article another time. He was building up a store of them in his library, one he hoped to show to Rosaline someday. He had even considered having her first one framed, then rejected the idea. There was no point in framing it if she was not here to see it.

“Ah, Rosaline, I’m so sorry,” he whispered aloud and pinched his brow.

In the last few weeks, he had seen just how much the world had needed Rosaline's works. What he had first judged as her writing causing a division between the people, turned out to be wrong. It joined other groups together, groups that crossed classes.

The other day as he had gone to Alfred Baker's shop to try and see Rosaline, he had overheard ladies with their maids talking of the article, all speaking passionately and warmly of it. They were connected now, for they had something they all believed in.

Even the writer's circle was not as divided as he had first thought it would be. Each time they had a meeting, someone would walk in brandishing the latest article and asking what others thought of it. Debates sparked, but good debates, rather than the first one they'd had which had been full of malice.

"I need to see her." Simon lowered the magazine to the cover of his bureau, adding it to the pile of Rosaline's other works.

Giving into temptation, he opened a small draw, in which he had hidden the few notes that had passed between him and Rosaline in her absence. Glancing over his shoulder, he checked his mother had not returned to the room, for she did not know he had these notes, before he retrieved them.

The first letter was Rosaline's rather brief reply in response to his note to ask if she was settled at her father's shop. It was polite, formal, with little feeling in it.

The second letter was Rosaline's response to his gift of flowers. He had sent the flowers, full of white tulips to apologize for his anger. He had begged to see her soon, and the reply she had sent had crushed him.

My dearest Simon, for dearest is how you always are to me,

I do not think it wise we see one another yet. I still remember your anger from that night. I know you wish to see

me, but the pain I caused you now hurts me too.

I hope you know it was never my intention to hurt you.

Those words made him break off and blink away the stinging of tears that shocked him so much. He made sure he had control of himself before he returned his focus to the rest of the letter.

If I come to see you now, I fear I know what will happen. I will come back to face your mother's wrath and dislike. It drains my energy, Simon. Knowing the adversity that I would meet in her and the admonishment I would no doubt earn from you too after writing more articles, I am frightened.

Forgive me, but I must continue with what I am doing. I must continue to write. I have seen the way women come into Chloe's shop and talk of it. It excites them. It offers up a different future. If I abandoned my endeavors, I feel as if I would be letting them all down.

I cannot do that. Not now.

*I still love you, I hope you know that, even if it is love
from afar.*

Rosaline.

Simon breathed deeply as he lowered the letter. He'd had enough of this distance between them. He couldn't be mad at her for continuing to write, not when he too was seeing the way it not only changed the world, but his mother as well. If someone whose heart seemed fixed like stone could change, then why couldn't other people change too? There was hope for change now, a hope Simon had not had before.

With desperation, Simon knew he had to try something else to see Rosaline. Reaching into a different drawer of his bureau, he pulled out an invitation they had received. It was from the Duke and Duchess of Suffolk to attend a ball at their London townhouse.

Taking up a quill and some fresh ink, Simon sat at his bureau and wrote a letter to Rosaline.

My darling wife,

This distance between us pains me more than I can say. Having received your latest reply, I can hardly blame you for refusing to let me see you. When I think of the argument that passed between us, and all the lecturing you have suffered in this house, it hurts. I wish I could take it all away, but I cannot.

If we cannot see each other in private, then I pray, let us at least attend an event together. Your friend, the Duchess of Suffolk, and my friend the Duke, have invited us to a ball at their house this Saturday. I have no wish to go without you. Were I to go alone, I'd be longing for your company all evening.

Please, come with me, Rosaline. Let us enjoy one another's company one more time. We can forget our woes,

forget the arguments, and be as we once were. We can be happy.

I have often thought recently of the first dance that we shared together. I have thought of the excitement between us, the happiness, and the way you were so open and honest, unafraid to speak of how you saw the world.

I miss you, Rosaline, more than I can say. Please, come to the ball with me?

Your devoted husband,

Simon.

Chapter 23

Rosaline

The stars were out above the houses as night drew in. Rosaline stood outside of her father's shop, waiting for the carriage to arrive as she peered at those stars. She had often looked at them as of late, thinking how strange it was that the stars were still the same when she felt as if so much had changed in her life.

As the sound of a carriage approached, she lowered her eyes, looking to the coach. The horses pulled up beside her and the footmen stepped down, ready to help her up, but he was too slow. The carriage door had opened fast, and there was someone else standing before Rosaline, holding his hand out toward her.

Simon.

He looked tired compared to when she had seen him last, with bags under his eyes. He looked a little thinner too.

“Rosaline.” His voice was deep as he offered his hand to her. Slowly, Rosaline took his fingers in her own. That same spark passed between them that always had done at every touch. She could see he felt it too, from the way he breathed so deeply. “Too long,” he murmured to her, “it has been too long.”

“It has,” she whispered, feeling it was strange to see him again after so long apart.

They both glanced at the footman, glad he was retreating to his place beside the driver, before they stepped into the carriage. Over their heads, a lantern swung back and forth, making orange light dance across their faces. As Rosaline sat down beside Simon, she removed her hand from his, adjusting her pelisse to make sure her gown was covered. Chloe had gifted her a special gown for the night, a new one, that she hoped would make Rosaline feel more confident in the ballroom.

As the carriage set off, Rosaline was acutely aware of the way she and Simon kept staring at one another. Where it had always been so easy to talk together before, things now seemed awkward. She longed to tell him how much she had missed him and how she feared if she came back what life she would be returning to, yet she said none of it. Instead, she concentrated on the warm feeling of being so close to him again.

“How is your father?” Simon asked as the carriage got nearer to the Duke’s house.

“He is well, and your mother?” Rosaline asked woodenly.

“She’s surprisingly well.” Simon’s words startled Rosaline. She was about to ask what he meant when the carriage pulled up outside of the house.

Simon stepped down first and offered his hand to Rosaline. She took it and stepped down, only to find he did not

release her gloved hand as she had expected him to. He looped her hand through his arm and rested it there.

“Tonight, let us be as we were. Please,” he begged her in a whisper.

“Do you think we can ever be as we were again?” Rosaline asked, genuinely longing to know his answer. He didn’t have time to speak though, as they were being called to from the front door.

“Ah, you are both here at last.” The Duke of Suffolk beckoned them both forward. “Come, please, we have been waiting for you both to start the dancing.”

“Us?” Rosaline said in surprise as she was drawn forward by Simon.

“Of course. Who better to help start our dancing!” the Duke ushered them in, waving his arms, apparently unaware

of his wife who appeared at his side and was pulling on his arm, urging him to lower his voice.

Rosaline half wondered if the Duchess had kept secret all that she had learned of the argument between Rosaline and Simon. It would explain the Duke's behavior, and how he seemed none the wiser to it.

"Does he not know?" Rosaline whispered to Simon as they stepped into the house.

"He does. I told him of everything that passed between us." Simon's words shocked Rosaline. She looked between Simon and the Duke, wondering what the Duke was up to. "I didn't tell him of your writing, of course. I told him merely that an argument had driven us...well, to be how we are now. He's my friend. He probably knows that the happiest moments of my life have been when I was dancing with you."

His words made Rosaline's hand curl tighter around Simon's arm.

“They were my happiest too.” As she smiled at him, he smiled back. For a minute, it was as if there had never been any animosity between them at all. Rosaline was only thinking of their happy moments, their dancing, their smiles and the way they laughed together.

When the Duke offered his hand to his wife to begin the dancing at the ball, he sent a pointed look at Simon. Without hesitation, Simon followed the Duke, drawing Rosaline toward the dancefloor.

As they went, Rosaline’s eyes danced around the ballroom. It was dressed grandly for the occasion in autumnal boughs, but what her eyes lingered on the most were the people. There seemed to be one lady in particular, a rather small woman, whose eyes watched Rosaline like a hawk stalking its prey. Rosaline soon looked away though, distracted by the touch of Simon’s hand on her own.

As the dance began, Rosaline heard the three-time of a waltz. With gentle touches, Simon took her in his arms, and they began to dance together, their palms connected.

For the first few beats, they said nothing between them. They danced and they stared at one another. Each time Simon's hand inched a little more across her waist, Rosaline felt her breath hitch. It wasn't just the excitement of his touch, but the memory of what they had been, and the longing for those feelings again.

Rosaline was so distracted by Simon that she went wrong in the dance and managed to slip on the hem of her gown. Simon caught her before she could fall anywhere though and placed her firmly on her feet, his smile ever present.

"I suppose people will write now in the scandal sheets of how a seamstress does not know how to dance," she winced with the words, fearing she had embarrassed him.

“Let them write. I do not care what they say,” Simon said with feeling. “The only thing I care about is that you are here again, Rosaline.” His words changed something in her. She felt her hand take hold of his firmer and they danced closer together.

“Tell me how you have been, truly,” Rosaline pleaded. With these words, the last walls between them came down.

Simon spoke at length of how he had not slept well, nor ate well, for the argument had repeated nightly in his head. He talked too of how her presence was missed in the house. The lady’s maid longed to see her and even Jacobs had mentioned to Simon more than once that the house seemed a little emptier without her in it.

“Tell me too, how have you been?” Simon asked, drawing her under his arm.

“It is difficult to explain.” Rosaline turned round before returning to him, dancing so close that his head was bowed

toward hers. "I have been sad, yet I have also been enjoying the challenge of my writing." To her surprise, she saw him smile a little.

"I hear the name of The Gentlewoman Writer is on most people's lips." Then that smile faded. "Let us pray she stays anonymous." She nodded in agreement, not wanting to upset him again. "You said you have been sad too."

"I have." Her fingers curled through his own as they danced. "I missed you."

"I missed you too," he whispered the words. "More than I can say."

The dance came to an end, far too quickly for Rosaline's liking. She stepped back from him, curtsying as she should do, but before she could retreat, he took her hand and led her back to the middle of the floor.

“Dance with me again?” he pleaded, his hand firm in her own. “Please?”

“How could I refuse?” Her words made that smile of his grow once again.

This time their song was a cotillion. They danced freer, sometimes beside one another, sometimes apart. Whenever the choreography took them away from one another, they stared across the dancers, looking back at each other.

As they danced, they laughed too. Simon sometimes drew attention to the other dancers, or his own mistakes as he danced, and they laughed with freedom together. Things became so easy that Rosaline longed to ask him if he still loved her.

After all, they had talked of missing one another, but neither of them had spoken of love. Rosaline knew she would have happily professed she still loved him, again and again, but she feared his response. He was still the one who had

thought it best she left the house. In all his notes and letters to her too, he had not said he loved her, only that he wished to see her.

As their dance came to an end, they were both breathless, smiling ridiculously at one another.

“How about a drink?” he asked, drawing her away from the floor.

“Yes, I am quite parched after that. You have worn me out already,” Rosaline said, following behind him, with her hand firmly in his own.

“I hope not. I am already planning for it not to be our last dance of the night.” He looked back at her and winked. She giggled at that wink, feeling briefly as if they were as they had been.

Yet...does he still love me?

She tried to ignore this niggling thought as they reached the drinks table. Simon poured out champagne for the both of them, then raised their glasses together.

“Here’s to...” he hesitated, not quite completing the toast.

“To what?” Rosaline encouraged him on.

“To seeing you again,” he whispered. As he took a sip, he held her gaze over the rim of his glass. Rosaline took quite a big gulp, finding she needed it.

I do not think I want this night to end!

“Well, what do we have here?” A voice Rosaline did not recognize interrupted them. “How fascinating, it is the very lady I have wanted to meet for so long.”

Rosaline could see the confusion on Simon's face as much as her own. They had both lowered their glasses and were frowning with equal fervor as they turned their gazes on the lady beside them.

It was the remarkably small woman Rosaline had seen watching her before. With rather sharp and petite features, quite elfin like, when she was young, she must have been a beauty. Yet now in her later years, she still had elegance, but she bore it ill, for she raised her chin unnaturally high and half lidded her eyes, as if looking down on Rosaline who was a little taller than her.

“Allow me to introduce myself.” The lady curtsied with the words. “My name is Mrs. Ida Davis.”

Rosaline dropped her champagne glass in surprise. It was fortunate Simon was there, for he caught it in a kerfuffle, and a little champagne foam was all that spilled onto the floor between them at their feet.

“Mrs. Davis?” Rosaline’s mouth was dry as she tried to speak.

“I see you know my name.” Mrs. David seemed quite delighted by this fact as she stepped forward, eager to meet Rosaline.

It is the writer known as Theia, the one who talks of me in scandal sheets.

“All too well.” Simon answered before Rosaline could think of what to say. “Come, Rosaline, let us find better company.” He took her hand, intending to steer her away.

“I’m not afraid of her,” Rosaline said, holding her ground. She could see she had surprised Simon, who froze to the spot, still juggling two champagne glasses in one hand. “It is interesting to meet you, Mrs. Davis. I have naturally read your work.” She turned her focus on the scandal sheet writer who smirked. “I am keen to know why you write so much of someone you have not met before.”

“We always have something to say, us writers,” she chuckled, shrugging as if it did not matter.

“Scandal sheet writers certainly do,” Simon muttered under his breath, awkward in manner and fidgeting uncomfortably.

“I am keen to know, Mrs. Davis,” Rosaline pinned her gaze on the writer. “Why do you enjoy writing of me so much? It shocks me you have anything left to say. I can only think the cruelty of it pleases you.” She could feel now Simon trying to draw her away again, but she would not be moved. She stood her ground, refusing to go anywhere.

“I merely enjoy a little gossip.” Mrs. Davis laughed again, as if they were talking of something like the theater, rather than a woman’s reputation. “I would be keen to know more of you know, *Lady* Gloucester.” The way she emphasized Rosaline’s new title showed her disgust of it.

Simon's tug on Rosaline's hand this time worked. She had no wish to stay and indulge Mrs. David any longer.

"I will not be the meat for your feast, Mrs. Davis. Good night." She curtsied to the woman and left quickly, following Simon through the crowds.

As they walked away, their hands gripped tightly to one another.

"I just wish to keep you safe, Rosaline," Simon whispered to her.

"Maybe it is not something that is possible," Rosaline accepted in a murmur. "That woman looked eager to me." When they reached an alcove in the corner of the room, hidden in the shadows from the other guests, they stood together, hand in hand. "I do not wish her to spoil this evening. I have enjoyed it too much for that."

“Then we shall not let her spoil it.” Simon held her gaze. “This is the happiest I have been since you left the house. I do not want it to end here.”

“Neither do I,” Rosaline confessed. The fear still lingered in her gut. She feared going back to face his mother, and she feared he would stop her writing. She never wanted to have an argument like the one they’d had before either.

Better to be lonely than argue like that again.

“Then we shall not let it end here.” Simon stood taller. “Maybe I cannot persuade you to come back to the house yet, but please, I cannot stand how we are apart. Come to dinner this Friday. See my mother and me. Sit with us, eat with us, talk with us.”

“Your mother will be there?” Rosaline shifted her weight between her feet, remembering the way Georgiana had urged her to leave the house. “I am not sure this is a wise idea.”

“I am no longer thinking of what is wise or unwise, I am thinking of what makes us happy, and that is to be together. Please, Rosaline, say you will come for dinner?” He looked so hopeful, his face unblinking and his lips parted, that Rosaline found her answer falling from her.

“Yes. I will come.”

* * *

As Rosaline stepped into the dining room, she could hear Simon and Georgiana talking about her in hushed tones. The moment the words reached her ears, Rosaline began to question whether she’d made the right decision to come for dinner at all.

“You made a vow to me, Mother,” Simon was pleading with Georgiana. “You are to behave tonight.”

“I merely made my opinion known before. What was so wrong in that?” Georgiana asked, with an apparent tone of innocence in her voice.

“I do not have time to explain at length to you now what is so wrong with that,” Simon said with an exasperated sigh.

“Ahem.” Rosaline cleared her throat, announcing her presence. Both Simon and Georgiana snapped their heads toward her.

Briefly, Rosaline’s gaze was taken by Georgiana, watching as the older woman in the candlelight fiddled with the bracelet at her wrist and lifted her chin high, clearly taking pains to look down at Rosaline, even at this distance across the room.

“Rosaline.” As Simon said her name and crossed the room toward her though, Rosaline’s gaze was taken by him. He was eager to see her, it was plain not just in the quickness of his walk, but the way he took her hand when he reached her side. “How are you tonight?”

“I am well,” Rosaline lied. She didn’t think she could explain very easily how much she had fretted over coming to dinner tonight. Of course, her heart had wanted to come, but her head was beginning to think her heart a fool.

Why did I wish to come to see Georgiana’s disapproving glare once again?

“Come, sit with me,” Simon pleaded, entwining their fingers together as he drew her to the table. That touch was enough for a few seconds to make her forget about Georgiana and that glare. She only thought of Simon. “It has been too long since you were here.”

“We saw each other a few days ago,” she reminded him, but judging by the way he looked at her as they took their seats, it was not enough. “I know,” she said softly. “I have missed you too.” At her words, he held her hand a little tighter under the table, hidden from Georgiana’s view.

Rosaline waited for Georgiana to make her view known. She expected some words of disapproval, but surprisingly the woman said nothing. She took her seat opposite Rosaline and kept her focus on her dinner plate.

“Tell me what you have been up to,” Simon asked as he leaned forward, serving Rosaline’s plate before his own. Rosaline smiled as she lapsed into conversation with her husband. Within minutes, they were talking as they had always done, with ease and fast smiles. Soon enough, they were leaning toward one another across the table, laughing together.

“I am sure you are quite wrong,” Rosaline said through her laughter. “Your writing circle admires you; I know it to be true, or you would not have so many people in attendance.”

“There are less and less people in attendance these days,” he acknowledged. Their conversation had moved on from what she did with her days to Simon, and how much he was working with the writers’ group. “I wish you could have been there this week. You should have seen the censure some

of these men have for women writers.” He shuddered. “It puts me out of sorts.”

“I do not doubt it.” Rosaline smiled contentedly as she watched Simon, seeing he was uttering the truth.

“If you would excuse me, I have a headache.” Georgiana spoke suddenly and stood to her feet. “I will retire for the night.” Rosaline was about to urge Georgiana to stay, but Simon spoke before she could.

“Very well, good night, Mother. I hope you have a good rest.” He nodded his head at her, in acknowledgment of the goodbye, and she left quickly, with the door shutting softly behind her.

“I am surprised,” Rosaline declared, looking between the door and Simon. “You usually ask her to stay.”

“Maybe I’m keen for habits to change,” Simon said slowly. “I do not want my mother to drive us apart forever, Rosaline.” He deepened his voice with the words. “Have we not enjoyed each other’s company this evening?”

“Very much,” Rosaline admitted, sharing a smile with him. Now, with no one else in the room, he took her hand without hesitation over the table and brought it to his lips, turning it over to kiss the inside of her wrist. Rosaline felt a breathy gasp escape her lips at that touch.

“This is as we should be, Rosaline,” he whispered to her. “Just the two of us.”

“I wish we could be.” Rosaline knew it could not always be that way though. They lived in the real world. They couldn’t hide from people like Georgiana forever.

“There is one thing more which I wished to discuss with you alone.” He cast a wary glance at the door, clearly checking it wasn’t about to open. “I read your latest article today.”

“Oh? What did you think?” Rosaline stiffened with her nerves. She had written at great length of the awfulness of scandal sheets, and how women sought merely to degrade one another by deigning to write such things. She had even gone so far as to name Mrs. Ida Davis and question why she felt such a need to put women in society down with her writing.

“I think...” Simon looked wary. When he shifted so much in his seat that the chair creaked, Rosaline retracted her hand from his, sensing the disapproval that was about to come.

“You are mad.”

“No, I am not mad,” he assured her, leaning forward with his tone calm. “But I am wary. It is like playing with the wooden logs in a fire. It is an accident waiting to happen. Are you sure this is a wise cause of action? To challenge Mrs. Davis openly?”

Rosaline lifted her wine glass and took a big gulp, finding she needed the courage of the liquor in that moment.

“I’m tired of letting Mrs. Davis frighten me into silence, Simon. I do not want to hide anymore.” For a brief second, Rosaline thought Simon might admire her for her view, for he smiled, but then the smile vanished and he sighed.

No, he is deeply worried.

Chapter 24

Simon

“For the life of me, Simon, I cannot understand you.”

The Duke’s words were making Simon uneasy as he sat in the basement of the club, attempting to look over some of the writers’ latest works.

“Understand me? Why?” Simon asked distractedly.

Every time he attempted to read the words in front of him, he found his mind wandering. There was only one person he wanted to think of at this moment, *Rosaline*.

“Because I saw you and Rosaline together the other night at my ball.” The Duke’s words caught Simon’s interest enough that he looked up from the papers in front of him. “Do you know what I saw?” the Duke asked, with a small smile playing on his features.

“A frustrated man trying to remedy his relationship with his wife and failing at it?” Simon asked, confessing his fears.

The ball and the dinner with Rosaline had given him hope, but the dinner had not ended on as good a note as he had wished for. Rosaline had made it quite plain that she intended to challenge women like Mrs. Davis.

I fear what women like Mrs. Davis are capable of in retaliation.

“No, far from it.” The Duke spoke with sudden fervor as he sat forward in his seat, nearly knocking over a candle beside him for he was so animated. “I saw two people that appeared very much in love. I saw the way your wife looked at you, my friend. There was love there. The kind of love you don’t see very often. The devoted kind.”

Simon wished to believe it. He still loved Rosaline, very much, despite the divides between them, but he couldn’t help fearing that Rosaline would not forgive him for his outbursts of anger in the past.

“I wish it were true,” he murmured. “We had dinner the other night. It was pleasant, enjoyable. I wanted nothing more than to have her stay, but she left quite early in the evening. She made it quite apparent she had no intention of rebuilding what is between us.” He breathed deeply, feeling as if there was a sudden tightness across his chest at the thought of it.

“Then it is fear holding her back, that is all. You want my opinion?” the Duke asked, standing to his feet. “It will not be long before your wife is at home again.”

“I wish I could believe you.” Simon sighed with the words. The Duke was the only one he had confessed his whole heart to – how broken he had been since Rosaline had gone. It was moments like this, where they spoke alone in the basement, that he felt at liberty to discuss things he wouldn’t talk about normally.

I wish you would come home, Rosaline.

“You must simply show her that she can come home again.”

“How do I do that?” Simon muttered so quietly that only his own ears heard the words. He had thought he had been doing that already, but plainly, it wasn’t working.

“Ho, who’s this?” The Duke’s sudden words and a gesture toward the staircase made Simon look round, moving to the edge of his seat. Two gentlemen were descending the stairs, talking amongst themselves.

“This is the place, Marvin, I’m sure of it!” the first man declared. Young and energetic, he practically bounded into the basement, with his long limbs bending with the movement. “The writers’ circle. How much I have heard of this place.”

Simon exchanged an uncertain look with the Duke, both of them wary. Despite the young man’s excitement, the older man looked plainly wary, with his hooked nose curling and his bald head wrinkling.

“Good day, gentlemen.” Simon stood to his feet and attempted to shake off his melancholy, moving to greet the men. “Have you come for a meeting with the writers’ circle? If so, I am afraid I am the bearer of bad news. Our meeting finished a short while ago.”

“Oh, damn, Marvin, did you hear that?” the young man asked, gesturing to the elder. “We have missed it.”

“I heard, Warren.” The older man grunted as he walked around the room, examining it in detail. “Odd place to discuss literature, isn’t it?” His eyes descended on a table where many writers had left behind samples of their work. The Duke went to close the notebooks and rearrange some of the loose papers, clearly feeling protective over the work.

“A great place for it,” the Duke said with enthusiasm. “Down here, there are no distractions from the real world.”

“We shall have to come back for another meeting,” Warren said, moving toward Simon. “Allow me to introduce myself. Mr. Warren Lewis. Solicitor by trade, but the most vigorous of admirers of the written word.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Lewis. I am the Earl of Gloucester.” Simon’s introduction prompted Mr. Lewis to bow deeply.

“Ah! Marvin, did you hear that? We have here the organizer of the circle. This could not be a more fortunate meeting.” Mr. Lewis clapped his hands together, plainly excited. “I have longed to pick your brains for some time now, my Lord.”

“My brains? Whatever for?” Simon asked, laughing at the idea.

“We are particularly interested in one new writer in London, a woman who goes merely by the name of ‘The Gentlewoman Writer.’” At Mr. Lewis’ words, Simon felt

himself turn cold. The laugh that had been on his lips before faded and no sound escaped him at all. “Surely you have heard of her, my Lord? She has made quite a splash in the *Ackermann’s* magazine, has she not?”

“She has,” the Duke answered, clearly trying to cover up the fact that Simon had yet to say a word in answer. “We have often discussed her pieces here.”

“Then you will have observed the inflammatory nature of her articles,” Marvin said sharply, attempting to read some of the pieces on the table before him again. This time, the Duke closed the notebooks even harder, making it clear he thought Marvin’s actions were an intrusion.

“Inflammatory? No, they are not that.” Simon felt protective, stepping forward as he spoke. “They are progressive, yes indeed. Provocative, certainly, but surely the best works out there lead us to ask question and have debates we were afraid to have before.” Even as Simon uttered the words, he felt a tension in his stomach. These were his genuine

thoughts on Rosaline's works, but he had never once said such things to her.

It is good to question everything we blindly accepted before. I have not told her that. Not once.

“Then you have no hints as to the woman's identity?” Mr. Lewis asked, walking around Simon in the clear intent of trying to catch his gaze once again.

“I...” Simon felt his words fail him again.

No. Say no you fool!

He was suddenly reminded of all the warnings he had even given to Rosaline, that if she made enemies of the wrong people, it could come back to hurt her. Was this what was happening now? Were these men a sign of someone trying to hunt out her identity in order to make a point?

“No, we do not know,” the Duke answered quickly. “It has been a subject of debate, but we do not know, do we, Simon?” He crossed to Simon’s side and elbowed him into speaking.

“That’s right, we do not know.” Simon glanced at the Duke, noticing the way his friend had urged him into speaking.

Wait a moment...does the Duke suspect I know who the writer really is?

“What a shame,” Mr. Lewis bemoaned, rather dramatically shaking his head. “If you permit, we will return to your next meeting and make enquiries there?”

“I’d rather you did not.” Simon spoke simply and quickly. “This group is for appreciation of the written word; it’s not about hunting out those who have made the effort to be anonymous. Now, please, take your leave. Both of you.”

The two men stood straight and glanced at once another.

“We did not expect such hostility, my Lord,” Mr. Lewis said, placing his hand to his chest in surprise. “Would you really be so defensive over such a question as to who this Gentlewoman Writer is?”

“I do not believe in seeking out someone who wishes to stay hidden. Now, please. Leave.” Simon gestured to the door, so firmly that the two gentlemen did not object again. They merely looked at one another then hurried to the staircase, with their heads hung forward. When the door at the top of the stairs closed, Simon sighed with relief.

This does not bode well.

“If, as I suspect, you do know the identity of this woman, Simon. I suggest you give her a warning now,” the Duke said as he collected some of the notebooks. “If men are hunting her, it cannot be good.”

* * *

Rosaline

“What is all this noise?” Rosaline said as she hurried to the back door of her father’s shop. It was turning quite late, with the sun falling in the sky. Her father had gone out for the night, leaving her alone in the rooms above the shop, where she was then disturbed by this heavy and incessant knocking at the door. “Who’s there?” she called to the closed door.

“Rosaline, it’s me!” Simon called through. The agitated tone made Rosaline reach for the door and fling it wide.

“Simon? Whatever is the matter?” In the faint sunlight that was left in the sky, she could see the redness of his cheeks, as if he had been running. He stepped into the building hurriedly and closed the door behind him. “Simon?”

“We must speak. Now.” He took her hand and drew her toward the stairs.

“I see you are insistent,” she pointed out. “I hope you have not come here to argue with me again. I had rather hoped we were done with our arguments.”

“No, I have not come here to argue. Believe me, love, I’m hopeful those arguments are done for good. I come for an entirely different reason.” When they reached the sitting room, he released her hand and brushed his palm into his hair, in plain stress. With one candle lit in the room, Rosaline could see his expression was stern, with his brows pinned together.

“What has happened?” she asked, feeling her fears begin to grow.

“Two men came to the club today. They were intent on discovering who the Gentlewoman Writer was.” He lowered his hand from his head. “Rosaline, I fear their intentions were not good.”

“You think they intended to cause mischief?” Rosaline asked, moving back to the chair she had vacated. Beside her there was a sheet of parchment where she had begun to write her latest article. She glanced toward it now, rather nervously.

“Maybe mischief, maybe vengeance.” Simon pulled out another chair and turned it to face her, sitting hurriedly and leaning toward her. “You mentioned Mrs. Davis by name in your last article. Is it so mad to think she would want revenge for being maligned so openly?”

Rosaline couldn't deny the possibility. She sat perfectly still, her statue-like manner revealing her true fears.

“You think it possible too.” Simon sighed and sat back in the chair. “Ah, Rosaline. What will become of us now?”

“I beg your pardon?” Rosaline flinched, sitting tall in the chair. “What does that mean?”

“It means I am afraid.” He spoke solemnly, holding her gaze. “I’m afraid what people will say and do if they discover you are the one writing these articles. Please, Rosaline, I beg of you.” He leaned toward her, with his hands outstretched. “Think of the danger you put yourself in with these articles. Maybe you should consider stopping.”

Rosaline’s mouth felt suddenly dry. She struggled to swallow, before she stood to her feet so abruptly that Simon was forced to sit back again.

“You think I could stop?” Rosaline asked, her voice quiet because of her shock. “Simon...do you not see why I have done all of this?”

“Of course, I do,” he assured her, standing up too. “To start a dialogue that had to be had.”

“That is not the only reason.” Rosaline shook her head as she backed up from him. For the first time, she began to think that maybe in all the arguments that she’d had with Simon,

he'd been so caught up in his fear that he had not been able to see her real motivation. "There is another reason. I cannot believe you could not see it, Simon. I did it for you and I." She held his gaze, watching as his lips parted. "I did it so that if I could stop people talking of us, we could be free to be together. We could be happy, free of judgement and others' opinions the way we were at the coast. That is why I did all of this. It was for you!"

Her words were full of fervor, as she watched Simon stand very still, with his hands limp at his side.

"It was all for us, Simon. I was trying to rescue our marriage. To take it away from the scrutiny of women like your mother and Mrs. Davis. I was fighting for our marriage when you were too afraid to fight. You submitted to what the ton thought, did you not? If you ask me to stop now..." She faltered, feeling her breath hitch. "Then maybe you do not really know me at all. You never saw my real intentions."

“Rosaline, please.” Simon moved toward her, but Rosaline backed up. She felt quite queasy and was certain it had something to do with this shock. She had always thought Simon had understood her. “Let us talk about this.”

“I cannot talk now.” She held a hand to her mouth. “Simon, I feel quite sick. Please, leave.”

“I cannot leave now. Please, tell me what is wrong?” He stepped toward her, clearly worried for her in the way he brushed her hair back from her face. She would have loved to have sunk into his touch, but the way he had asked her to stop writing still burned.

I did it all for him, and that does not matter to him.

“Please, go, Simon.” She gestured to the door.

“Rosaline—”

“Go!” She barely finished the word before she ran for a door that led to her chamber. Inside, she found her chamber pot and lifted it to her face, barely in time for when the sickness came.

Rosaline wasn't sure how long she was in there, nursing her woes and this sickness, but by the time she came out, Simon was gone.

* * *

“Are you sure you should go out tonight, dear?” Alfred was concerned as he wrapped the woolen pelisse around Rosaline's shoulders. “You heard what the doctor said. Until he can be certain of what this sickness is, you should rest and care for yourself.”

“I will not be long.” Rosaline forced a smile, attempting to comfort her father. “It is a short journey in the carriage and then I will return home.” She pressed the folded papers into her reticule. “The nausea has passed for now, anyway. Perhaps some fresh air will do me good.”

It had been two days since Simon had come to see her and Rosaline had felt intermittently sick in that time. He'd sent notes to the house, even flowers, begging to see her, but Rosaline hadn't yet felt energized enough to respond to him. Instead, she had poured what little energy she'd had into writing her latest article. This piece talked of how rare it was to find love in a marriage in the ton. Indirectly, she talked of her love for Simon.

"Return home soon, dear." Alfred kissed her on the cheek and helped her up into the small box carriage she had hired for the night. Rosaline waved through the window once before she closed the curtain, letting the space fall into darkness.

Tonight, she was delivering the article to the print house at the request of the editor from *Ackermann's* magazine. It would be printed in the next couple of days. Once the article was out there, she would go to see Simon again and ask if he had read the article. She hoped it would go some way to

explaining how much she loved him, and how much the ton was the cause of the strain between them.

When they reached the print house and the carriage came to a stop, Rosaline stepped down, pulling the hood of her pelisse up around her head. Creeping over the cobbles in the road, she reached for a candlelit doorway, beyond which sat the print house. She knocked twice on the door, but as it opened, she was not met with the burly face of the usual man in charge of printing, but a face she had seen just once before.

Mrs. Ida Davis was standing in the doorway. As her eyes found Rosaline's, a smile began to creep across her face, wicked and large.

“At last,” she sighed with satisfaction. “How long I have been longing to know the identity of the Gentlewoman Writer, and here you are.” As she gestured before her, Rosaline backed up, her fear taking over, but it was too late. Mrs. Davis had seen her face. “Rest assured, Lady Gloucester, the ton will learn of your identity now.”

It was clear Mrs. Davis was after vengeance following the article Rosaline wrote about her. Fearing what would come of this meeting, Rosaline turned and ran back to the carriage, as fast as her feet would carry her.

Chapter 25

Simon

“Is there a reason you have not left this room?” Georgiana’s voice urged Simon to turn in his armchair in the library to see her standing in the doorway. “Jacobs tells me you have been here all night.”

“I have.” Simon leaned forward and blew out the candles that had kept him company, no longer needing them now that the sun was rising beyond the windows.

“Why are you isolating yourself in here, Simon?”

“Because...” He struggled to speak, scratching the back of his neck and letting his thoughts run wild. “Because I have not stopped thinking of something that Rosaline said to me, and how right she was.” Knowing he needed to utter the words aloud, he gestured to the chair opposite him, in need of an audience. “Please, Mother, would you sit with me a while?”

Georgiana said nothing, but she took the seat and waited patiently for him to begin.

“I mistakenly thought I was not my father.” Simon scoffed at the mere idea. “For so long I fought him, not wanting to be anything like him. Yet clearly, over the years, all his words of fearing what the ton thought, they sunk in.” He tapped his forehead, angrily. “Your words sank in too. All your warnings and your fears. I abided by them.”

He watched as Georgiana shifted in her seat, apparently uncomfortable.

“Afraid of what the ton would think of the wife I loved, I bid her not to use her voice. *I* drove her out of our home.”

“And you seek to blame me for it?” Georgiana asked, already on the offensive.

“No.” He shook his head. “You were merely part of the environment I was persuaded by.” He waved a hand, dismissively. “My father had a hand in my life after all. Despite our arguments, I still wanted the ton to *approve*. What a fool I am.” He leaned forward, resting his head in his hands, angry at himself. “The other day, Rosaline explained to me that something she has been doing...she has done it all to fight for our marriage. She pointed out that I was too fearful to stand up to the ton myself.” He could see on Georgiana’s face she was confused, but he was wary of enlightening her just yet.

I cannot betray Rosaline’s secret now. Someday soon, I will tell my mother of Rosaline’s writing.

“The long and short of it is, Mother, when she was willing to fight to stay together, I was too fearful of what the ton would think by us holding our heads high. So, what did I do? I held my head low. I hid.” Simon felt the shame grow.

When he looked at Georgiana, he found her lips parted as she stared at him, as if in wonder.

“You love her, do you not?” Georgiana whispered quietly.

“Can you really still ask me that now?” He gestured to his situation.

“I know,” she murmured. “I have seen the misery you have suffered since she has been gone.” She fidgeted, adjusting the skirt of her gown with vigor. “I may not be the greatest admirer of your wife, but I will say this. She made you happy. Happier than you were before her, and happier than you have been these last few weeks. Whatever has been said between you, an apology can make up for a lot. If it can be remedied, Simon...remedy what is between you. For both of your sakes.”

Simon smiled to hear his mother's encouragement. Standing to his feet, he walked past his mother and tapped her

on the shoulder, a soft sign of comfort. His mother smiled at him, before he left the room.

As he strode toward the doorway, still wearing the same clothes he had worn before, he pulled on his frock coat and his top hat, determined to leave to find Rosaline at once. He had not stopped thinking of what had passed between them the other day, nor how right Rosaline had been. Her writing wasn't just for her and her friends, but for the two of them, and he had been too caught up in his own thoughts to see it.

Once his top hat was in place, he reached for the door and flung it wide, only to find the step was not empty.

“Ah!” the man on the step cried out and nearly fell over.

“Woah!” Simon grabbed the man's wrist to stop him from falling. “My apologies. I was in such a rush I nearly knocked you over.”

“It was my fault, my Lord. It was imperative I saw you this morning and am afraid I have quite sprinted to your door with my endeavor.” The rather burly and thickly set man breathed heavily as he stood tall and righted himself on the step. “Forgive me, I am a stranger to you, but I have news, my Lord, news that concerns your wife.” He looked over his shoulder and dropped his voice. “I work at the print house for the *Ackermann’s* magazine.”

“Oh?” Simon was startled, leaning forward at this news.

“Your wife came to see us last night to drop of her latest article. I presume you know of her writings.” He spoke quickly and didn’t wait for Simon’s answer before he went on, clearly keen to reveal what he had to say. “Yet there was someone lying in waiting to meet her. Mrs. Davis, the scandal sheet writer, barged her way into our print house last night. She must have heard from one of her connections where *Ackermann’s* magazine is printed. She waited for your wife to appear. Well, you can imagine what happened next at their meeting. Mrs. Davis has threatened to reveal your wife’s identity, my Lord.”

Simon only hesitated for a second. It was enough to feel his heart racing before he leapt past the man and out down the street.

“Thank you for telling me!” he called back, before he raced round the building to get his horse. Before he went to see Rosaline, there was now another he had to see first.

* * *

“I’m here to see Mrs. Ida Davis.” Simon stood blocking the doorway, aware that the butler before him seemed to shrink inside the house, rather startled by his sudden appearance and the bold way in which he strode into the house.

“Sir, do you have an appointment to see her? Does she know you are to visit?” the butler asked in panic, backing up in the hall.

“No, but she will take my visit, I am sure of it.” Simon disliked pulling rank. It was one of the things he and his father

had argued about in the past, but he saw the opportunity now. “I am the Earl of Gloucester.” He watched as the butler hurried to bow. “Now, please be so good as to take me to your mistress.”

“Of course, my Lord. Please, wait here whilst I announce you.” The butler bowed a second time and urged Simon to wait in the hall whilst he went to see his mistress. The butler returned a few minutes’ later and encouraged Simon to follow him through the hallway. On the walls, Simon saw lots of art and marble busts placed on plinths in the corridor. It was either an announcement of wealth or a pretense to having good taste. Simon couldn’t decide which it was.

When he was shown into a small parlor, Simon had to try and calm his heavy breaths. It would not do well in this moment for him to lose his temper.

“Ah, Lord Gloucester. What a pleasure to see you again.” Mrs. Davis moved to her feet and curtsied, bearing on her face a rather cruel smirk. “I take it your appearance here

has something to do with the meeting I had with your wife last night.” She chuckled as she returned to her seat and gestured to another chair. “Please, sit. I am sure this will be an entertaining conversation. At least let us relax whilst we enjoy it.”

Her delight at the moment angered him further. All the way to her house, Simon had debated begging with her not to reveal Rosaline’s identity, but now he was here, he had another idea altogether.

“You have made an error,” Simon said, trying to keep his voice calm as he remained standing, refusing to take that seat. “What you saw last night was my wife delivering an article that *I* had written.”

The smile slipped from Mrs. Davis’ face. She sat straighter and pushed away the scandal sheet she had been reading.

“You wrote it?” She didn’t sound entirely convinced. “The pseudonym for the writer claims to be a woman, my Lord.”

“As I spoke much of women’s situations, I thought readers would be more open to what I had to say that way.” Simon figured it was his best attempt to appeal to this woman. As Rosaline had pointed out in her articles, women like Mrs. Davis took pleasure in putting other women down. How would she react when she thought the writer to be a man instead?

“Hmm.” Mrs. Davis sat forward a little, her eyes narrowing. “Then tell me this, what was in the article you were to deliver last night?”

“It said...” Simon thought quickly on his feet. “It talks of the ton’s opinion of forced marriages.”

“You are a quick liar, my Lord, I will give you that, but it was not quick enough. You hesitated.” She gestured to him. “It has revealed your lie. Your wife is the writer, is she not?”

Simon turned in a quick circle, trying to think on his feet. What other way could he persuade this woman not to reveal the truth?

“I am the writer.” He decided to stick to his guns, turning back to face her. “I beg you, please, do not reveal my true identity. Those articles have power partly because they are anonymous. It allows others to hear a voice that is not prejudiced by position or name. We read the thoughts, and the words. We do not care who the writer really is.”

Something in Mrs. Davis’ face shifted a little as he uttered these words. The smile faded and she tilted her head to the side, watching him as a hawk might watch its prey.

“Why would you go to such lengths to protect your wife, my Lord? You would be willing to ruin your own name to protect hers by claiming you are the writer, would you not?”

It is how I should have always been.

“Yes,” he said, without hesitation on this occasion. “Society has been harsh to her. I do not want to see more cruelty.”

“Society is harsh on us all.” Mrs. Davis shook her head with this statement, yet the words still caught his interest.

“Us all?” He queried. “I would have thought as a scandal sheet writer, you are quite separated from the gossip of the ton.”

“Well, perhaps that is not always the case.” She gestured again for him to take a seat. This time, Simon took it, noting the air had shifted in the room between them a little. “Your wife has been subjected to nothing less than what the rest of us have suffered. We all face it, especially if we are not born into the ton.” The rather quick way in which the lady spoke told Simon of her wariness of speaking.

Oh...she was not always part of the ton herself?

“We are all judged, and all thought ill of. The only way to survive it is to compete with the rest.” Her words were solemn.

“If you read my articles in *Ackermann's* magazine, then you will have read that there is another way to be,” Simon said softly. “Women and gentlemen do not have to compete to be noticed, and they certainly do not have to win that competition by putting each other down. If you name either one of us as the writer of those articles, that is all you will be seeking to do: put us down, is it not?”

Mrs. Davis said nothing. She kept staring straight at Simon, as if considering his words.

“Please, do not do this,” Simon begged of her. “Do not cast the two of us out of the ton. That is what no doubt would happen if you named either of us as the writer.”

“My name was drawn through the mud,” she reminded him, holding up the copy of the magazine in which her name was mentioned by Rosaline.

“And how many more times did you mention my wife and I by name in your sullied scandal sheets?” He reminded her, watching as the magazine fell limp in her hands. “If you were once new to the ton too, then you know how it feels, to be degraded by them.”

She didn't deny it, and the silence that stretched between them for a beat gave him reassurance that he was on the right path. It wasn't so much that Mrs. Davis was an intentionally cruel woman, but a desperate one. In order to seek her own acceptance in the world, she had become a scandal sheet writer and put other women down, in order to elevate her own position.

“I beg of you,” he said, his voice firm in the room. “By naming my wife, you would destroy her.”

Mrs. Davis did not look pleased at the idea. Her gaze sank down to her lap, where she fidgeted with her fingers for a minute, clasping and releasing them.

“If you do publish such a story, I would tell the world I wrote the articles, and not my wife,” Simon continued with his earlier words. “Nothing would prevent me from doing so.”

“It’s rare to hear of a gentleman willing to sacrifice his reputation for the sake of his wife’s,” Mrs. Davis noted, her eyes lifting to meet Simon’s again.

What else would I do?

Mrs. Davis began to smile, her lips widening for a few seconds.

“I am curious, my Lord. What do you yourself make of the ton?”

“Me?” Simon asked warily, aware that anything he said could someday be put into print.

“There are whispers that you argued with your father when he was alive, and now you have married a seamstress—”

“Her occupation does not define her person.” Simon cut off the woman with sudden sharpness. “I married Rosaline. The woman I love. If you want something to put in your scandal sheet, then let it be that. I married because I fell in love.”

“Well, my Lord, I thank you for your honesty.” Mrs. Davis continued to smile. “Rest assured, that will not appear in any of my articles.”

“What of the identity of the Gentlewoman Writer?” Simon asked, shifting to the edge of his seat so much that he was in danger of falling off. “Please, tell me this, Mrs. Davis. Will you publish your article? Or will you keep our secret hidden?”

Chapter 26

Rosaline

Please, no more sickness.

It was Rosaline's prevailing thought as she blinked, waking up from her slumber. That morning, the nausea had come again with the rising sun, and Alfred had sent for the doctor's return. He'd spent most of the morning with her and had still been talking to Alfred in hushed tones, when Rosaline had at last found some peace in sleep.

It was a pleasant sleep. In her dreams, she had been back at the coast with Simon. Lazily, they had slumbered in bed together, wrapped up in one another's arms. She longed to have such moments again.

As she woke, and her eyes adjusted to the light in the room, she could have sworn she was still dreaming, for she was not alone. Simon was there. Sat beside her on the bed, the sunlight from the window basked his face in a pleasant glow.

“Simon?” she murmured, then her eyes fully widened, realizing it was no dream after all. “Is it really you?”

“I’m here, my love, I’m here,” he whispered to her. “I hear from your doctor you have been quite sick.” Rosaline pulled a face at these words. “Ah, worse than *quite* sick then?”

“It is the understatement of the century!” She sat up in bed with the words, startled when Simon reached forward, plumping the pillows to help her. “Thank you.” As she sat back, limp from her tiredness, she stared at Simon, rather baffled by the smile on his face. “You’re smiling,” she murmured, pointing at him.

“I am. I have much to tell you.” He reached forward as he spoke and brushed the loose hair that fell around her cheek away. “First, tell me this. How are you feeling now?”

“A little better.” Rosaline was comforted to be in Simon’s presence again. She could remember their argument

and the disappointment she had felt that Simon had not understood she was fighting for *him*, for the sake of their marriage, but time apart had made that anger dissipate. Now, she was just glad to be beside him again. “I’m beginning to think the doctor is not skilled at his job though. He still has no idea as to its cause.”

“Perhaps he has a few ideas.” Simon glanced to the closed door of the chamber. “He left a while ago with your father.”

“You spoke to him?” Rosaline muttered.

“I did.” Simon nodded. “I practically ran into this house in eagerness to speak to you, and your father had to grab me to stop me from disturbing you in your sleep. I nearly fell down the stairs! He’s got quite a strong grasp on him; I’ll tell you that.”

Rosaline smiled at the idea of her father holding Simon back.

“I am glad to see you,” she confessed.

“And I you.” He shifted toward her, kissing her softly on the forehead. Rosaline felt one of her hands reaching up to Simon, curling around the lapel of his jacket to hold him close.

This is how we should always be.

“You said you had things to tell me?” Rosaline asked as he sat back again.

“I do. First of all, it is about the incident you had last night.” Simon seemed to begin with trepidation, his words coming slowly. Rosaline froze, remembering how she had come face to face with Mrs. Davis.

“You know of it?” Her voice came out in a squeak.

“I do.” He nodded. “I spoke to Mrs. Davis just now.”

“You spoke to her?” Rosaline sat forward with animation. “What did you say? What did she say?”

“Calm yourself, Rosaline,” he said with a smile and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder, urging her back again. “You must rest, the doctor said as much.”

“How can I rest now!?” she spluttered. “Oh, Simon, I’m so sorry.” She hung herself forward. “You were right. After all of it, you were right. When I found myself face to face with Mrs. Davis, I realized what risks I had really been taking. All of these articles to argue that the world should not judge us so quickly, and what has it resulted in? A likely condemnation of my character. Mrs. Davis will publish who I am, and our names will be dragged through the dirt. Simon, I’m so sorry.” She reached out toward him, and he took her hands.

“You have nothing to apologize for.”

“But...you were right!”

“No, I was wrong. You were the one who was right.” He bent toward her a little more, his voice full of sincerity. “You took a risk, yes, but just because something is a risk is no reason not to take it.” He lifted one hand from hers and gently brushed his fingers across her chin, urging her to look up at him. “You were fighting for us. I was so worried for you, that I was blinded to the fact that you had courage where I did not.”

“Do not speak like this, Simon,” she pleaded with him.

“No, I must. For it needs to be said.” He held her hand tightly at he spoke. “You were right to fight. I was scared. I hope you will forgive me for it someday, for I am sorrier than I can say. I am not just sorry for doubting you, for doubting that the world can be changed with words, but for arguing with you. For being quick to ire when it was my fear driving that anger. I should have never argued with you.”

“My father tells me all couples argue,” Rosaline said softly.

“Then let us argue as other couples do. We’ll argue about what to have dinner for one night, or where to spend our summers, in London or at the coast,” he jested with her, making her smile grow. “Let us never argue as we have done recently again. I am so sorry, Rosaline. I am sorry I let us be divided. Can you forgive me?”

She was already leaning toward him.

“Yes, I’ll forgive you anything.” She fell into his arms as he embraced her. They hugged so tightly that Rosaline could not breathe deeply, but she didn’t care. She happily took a few short breaths if it meant holding onto Simon so closely, with her fingers straining around his shoulders and his arms locked around her waist. “I still wish I could turn back the clock though,” she whispered in his ear.

“What for?” he asked, parting from her enough so they could look one another in the eye.

“Mrs. Davis will publish who I am,” she said miserably.
“What will happen to us then?”

“This is the news I have to tell you.” The appearance of his smile surprised her. “When a messenger informed me of your meeting, I went to see Mrs. Davis. I told her that I wrote the articles.”

“You did what!?” Rosaline spluttered. “Simon! She would just destroy your reputation then.” The fact he was willing to do this for her had her manner becoming frantic. She moved to her knees, grasping onto his arms. “You can’t do that.”

“If it meant protecting you, then I would do it every day without hesitation,” he assured her, his voice deep. “Yet, it has not come to that.”

“What do you mean?” Rosaline asked, her voice falling quiet.

“It seems Mrs. Davis is no stranger to the censure of the ton herself. Maybe that swayed her in the end, though my willingness to take the fall also seemed to sit heavy with her.” He mused on this point for a moment, shaking his head as if in shock. “Either way, she has decided not to print what she knows. She will not tell a soul of the fact she met you last night at the print house.”

Rosaline blinked and sat back, not quite believing it. Mrs. Davis had printed her name so readily in the scandal sheets, it seemed unbelievable the woman would change her mind now.

“I do not understand. She changed her mind?” Rosaline whispered.

“It took some begging,” Simon said, “but after meeting with her, I believe Mrs. Davis is not a wicked-intentioned woman. I think, like myself, she lived in fear of the ton. The only problem is, to protect herself she lashed out.”

“Like a cornered animal?”

“Just so.” His hand took her own, playing with it. “So, as you see, love, we are quite safe. Mrs. Davis has no intention to publish, and you can continue writing, without your name known.”

“You would be happy for me to continue?” Rosaline asked, finding herself quite breathless as she waited for his answer.

“I have loved your articles,” he assured her with fervency. “I have every single one of them in my library. I was going to ask you if maybe we could frame the first one. Make it something to remember, what do you think?” His support left her speechless. Uncertain how to put the warmth she felt in that moment into words, she leaned forward and embraced him again. He chuckled softly as he embraced her back. “It feels so good to have you in my arms.”

“I know what you mean.” As she leaned into him, she could hear his breathing quicken as he bent toward her, kissing her on the forehead.

“I love you. You know that, don’t you?” His whispered words made tears spring to her eyes. She closed her eyes, warding them off. They were words she had wanted to hear for so long, wanting to know that their arguments had not broken them completely.

“I love you too,” she confessed. At her words, he reached down and tipped her chin upwards, placing the softest of kisses to her lips. It was chaste, but the sweetness of it made Rosaline curl her hands around his lapels once again, wanting him close. When they parted, they were both smiling at one another.

“There is one more thing I must tell you,” he said, that smile still in place as he nodded his head at the door. “Before the physician left, he told your father and I what he believes the cause of your illness to be.”

“Oh? What is it?” she asked, confused as to why talking of sickness made Simon appear so happy.

“Rosaline,” he whispered to her, his voice light, “you’re with child.”

I’m pregnant?

For a second, she couldn’t process the idea. She sat very still, thinking of all the symptoms that she’d had.

“Ch-child?” she stammered in surprise, then realized how right it must be. It had been a long time since she had bled, but she had been so caught up in thinking of Simon that she had not even thought to count back to when she had last bled. “Oh, my goodness,” she said, louder this time. “I’m carrying our child?” she asked, excitedly.

“It would seem so.” Simon’s smile matched her own. “I see you are as happy as I am at this news?”

“How can I not be?” She nearly fell out of the bed in how she bounced on the mattress, so excited that Simon chuckled and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her into another embrace. “We shall have a child, Simon. A child!”

“Just so, and I want our family to be at home for this,” he said softly. “I want us to be a happy family. Open and honest, supportive, and I want you home. So, I ask you this, love. Would you come home with me today?”

Rosaline felt no doubts in her mind. She and Simon had been apart for too long, and today, everything had changed between them. They had both apologized to one another for the past, and with a promise to look to the future, there was hope.

I love him. Why would I stay apart from him any longer?

“When do we head home?” she asked, watching as her answer made him lean toward her for another kiss.

Chapter 27

Rosaline

“I’m fine, Simon. Truly. Go to your meeting and I will see you later,” Rosaline tried to urge him away for what had to be the third time that morning.

“Are you certain?” He was still apprehensive. She had been back two days, and, in that time, he’d barely left her side, thinking of the baby and wanting to be there with her in her time of sickness.

“I am. Now go! You can tell me all about the writing circle when you return.” She shooed him away. He kissed both her hands before he left, then darted out the door, nearly knocking someone down in his haste.

“Oops, sorry, Mother. I’ll be back later!” he called to Georgiana before heading off.

Rosaline sat forward on the settee where she was resting with her hand on her stomach, thinking of the child that she carried there. In the time she had been home, Georgiana had not seen her much. In fact, Rosaline rather suspected the woman was avoiding her, but it seemed that time was now at an end.

Standing in the doorway, Georgiana was restless, holding onto multiple copies of *Ackermann's* magazine.

“Georgiana? Is all well?” Rosaline asked, calling to her. Georgiana looked up from the magazines and then walked in, holding the copies tightly in her hands.

“The day you returned; Simon told me the truth.” She gestured to the magazines. “That you wrote these.”

Rosaline held her breath, preparing for an onslaught of anger. This surely broke all of Georgiana's rules and would no doubt incur an argument between them. It was an argument that Rosaline did not wish to have.

“Georgiana, if you wish to reprimand me for it, I know what you will say—”

“I wasn’t going to reprimand you.” Georgiana shook her head so sharply that Rosaline stopped speaking, with her mouth hung open. “Yes, you’re surprised, I can see it.”

The older woman began to fidget even more, looking thoroughly uncomfortable. She kept shifting the magazines in her hands before she picked up a nearby footstool and placed it in front of Rosaline, sitting there and resting the magazines in her lap.

“I have talked at length of these articles with the Lysistrata Ladies,” Georgian whispered, as if it were a great secret.

“You have?” Rosaline murmured. “May I ask what you all thought of them?”

“There are differing opinions.” Georgiana shifted through the articles with sudden energy. “This one, for instance. Your first one. It felt as if it spoke to ladies’ hearts. We talked of it for hours, whilst others in the group said these opinions should be kept to ourselves. We could talk of it together, but not in front of the men in our lives. Oh, I cannot tell you how mad this made me!”

“Truly?” Rosaline spluttered.

“I have shocked you again.” Georgiana gestured to her face.

“Well, perhaps it is a good job I am already sitting down.” She motioned to Georgiana and the magazines. “Please, go on. Why did this make you so mad?”

“Because it reminded me of a time long ago.” Georgiana huffed and kept her focus on the magazines as she looked through them. “Before I married, I used to have such

conversations with ladies around me. We talked at length of every subject we wished to, then... I married.” Her movements grew still. “My husband made it quite plain to me that a man had his position in the world and a woman had her own. It was not my place to speak of things I knew little of.”

Rosaline sat taller in her seat, ready to argue this point, but Georgiana held up a hand, urging her not to.

“I know well enough what you will say. I have read of your opinion, in these.” Georgiana gesticulated with the magazines. “When you live with an opinion like that for so long, you do whatever for the easier life. Sometimes, you come to see the truth in it too. Hearing one opinion and no one else’s...well, it has a talent for persuading you into a firm belief.” As she sat taller, Rosaline noticed there was something missing from the woman’s arm. Where the mourning bracelet always used to sit on her wrist, her arm was now bare.

She has taken it off!

“Recently, I have felt a little freedom,” Georgiana spoke without looking at Rosaline, as if afraid to do so. “I have spoken to the Lysistrata Ladies freely about these articles, and many of us have taken these conversations outside of our meetings too. We discuss these attitudes with men in our lives. I have felt bold and listened to. It’s not something I have felt in a long time, and in truth, I had forgotten what it felt like. It is not that I wish to forget my husband. It is more that I feel changed, knowing his thoughts are not my own. I have the freedom to decide on my own beliefs.” At last, she let her eyes rest on Rosaline. “I have you to thank for that feeling. I see that now. I did not know it was you, but now I know you wrote these—” she held up the magazines “—I must thank you for it.”

The smile that appeared on Georgiana’s face was so genuine that Rosaline couldn’t help matching it.

“I am glad I could be of service in some small way,” Rosaline said softly. “I hope you do not mind that I intend to continue writing?”

“I am glad.” Georgiana sat tall at these words. “But you will of course rest for the child too, will you not?” She gestured to Rosaline’s condition, clearly concerned.

“Of course, I will. I suspect you are rather excited by a child, Georgiana, are you not?” Rosaline said, feeling a sort of easiness develop between her and Georgiana now.

“I am.” Georgiana released the magazines and clasped her hands together. “I adore children. They bring such happiness into the world. I do believe the time when Simon was young was the best time of my life. To have a child in this house again, oh, I am so excited for it.”

As Rosaline shifted in her chair, trying to get comfortable, Georgiana’s smile vanished into a look of concern. “Is all well? Is there anything you need?”

“I am quite well, I assure you.” Rosaline brushed off the concern. “The doctor will come to see me again later today. He is to give me a tonic. Hopefully it shall help with the nausea.”

“Any cravings yet?” Georgian asked. “I had the oddest ones when I was with Simon. Coddled eggs. I had them every day.”

“Really?” Rosaline laughed at the idea.

“Sometimes twice a day! We can get the strangest longings when we’re pregnant,” Georgiana giggled with the words.

“Well, I do have a longing for licorice. Strange, for I usually despise it.”

“Ha! Then you truly are having cravings.”

The two of them laughed together. Rosaline fell quiet a second later, feeling as if she was talking to a different woman to the one that she had first met months ago, and had disliked her for so long.

“Georgiana, may I propose something?” Rosaline asked.

“Of course.” Georgiana nodded, encouraging her on.

“I know you and I have not had the best start together. I also know that I can never change where I was born, the part of me for which you have the most reproach, but despite all this, I think we have the capacity to be friends. Maybe someday, we could be good friends. As many mothers and daughters-in-law could be.” Rosaline sat forward. “What do you say to us starting again?”

“I rather like that,” Georgiana agreed. “As long as that means we forgive and forget the harsh words exchanged between us from the past.”

“Yes. I think we can do that. We can talk as if none of it ever happened, and think of the future, rather than the past.” Rosaline laid a hand to her stomach as she said the words, thinking of her child.

“Yes, let’s,” Georgiana said with eagerness. “On that subject, I must speak to you about your latest article...ah, here it is.” She rifled through the magazines and began a spirited debate about the last of Rosaline’s articles.

As they talked, Rosaline rather thought Georgiana came alive. There was an energy to her that had not been there before. They talked at length of what was in the article, and Georgiana offered up her own opinions. Rosaline even told her mother-in-law of the article she had written but had not yet been delivered to the print house, of the difficulty of marrying for love in the ton. Already, the woman spoke of her excitement to read it and take it to the Lysistrata Ladies. When Rosaline suggested that maybe someday, she could visit the group too, Georgiana quite welcomed the idea.

If this is who Georgiana really is, then the future of this family could be very bright indeed.

* * *

Simon

Eight Months Later.

“Don’t you think you should rest, love?” Simon asked anxiously, moving to stand by Rosaline’s shoulder.

“I am well. Do not worry about me.” She sat back in her chair and looked up at him with a tired smile, patting his hand that he had rested on her shoulder. It did little to assuage his nerves.

Simon was on edge. Something was different about Rosaline today. There was a tiredness to her and something fraught in her movements, something she kept denying. He smiled regardless of his thoughts at the wife he loved so much and glanced across the room at his mother.

Georgiana was reading the latest draft of the article Rosaline had been working on, but she was clearly as

distracted as Simon was now, looking across the room. It was plain for him to see that she shared the same worries he had.

“Nothing is upsetting you?” Simon asked again, looking down at Rosaline.

“I slept ill, that is all. I will be quite well soon.” Rosaline shrugged as if it was no great matter and returned her attention to redrafting another version of her article at the writing bureau.

Simon stepped away from his wife, kissing her one last time on the cheek before he crossed the library and moved to his mother. Sitting down beside Georgiana, the two of them leaned together, whispering so Rosaline could not hear them. It was discreet and quiet, so Rosaline was not offended. Simon rather suspected she didn't even notice them whispering, for she was so caught up in her writing.

“Something more is wrong, I am sure of it,” Simon muttered.

“Be prepared, my son.” Georgiana had a small smile on her lips. “I seem to remember a similar day where I acted much as Rosaline is acting today.” That smile began to grow.

“What happened?”

“It was the day you arrived in this world.” Georgiana’s words had Simon sitting taller and looking across the room. Before he could muster any words or questions, Rosaline abruptly sat forward and clutched at her rounded stomach.

“Ah!” she cried before her body stiffened.

“Simon, fetch the doctor, at once.” Georgiana brushed him to his feet.

Simon hurried as fast as he could, running through the house and reaching for Jacobs in the hallway, who he sent himself to fetch for the doctor. By the time he returned to the

library, Rosaline was on her knees, breathing heavily, refusing to get up.

“Rosaline, you know what this is. The child is coming. You must stand,” Georgiana pleaded, holding her hand.

“I cannot.” Rosaline shook her head repeatedly.

Simon didn’t waste time asking for her permission or encouraging her to stand. He moved toward Rosaline and lifted her from the floor, cradling her in his arms.

“Oomph, Rosaline, you are getting heavier,” he said playfully, hoping to break the tension that was abruptly in her brow.

“You are not helping!” she snapped as he carried her out of the room, with a flapping Georgiana behind them. “The baby is coming, is it not?”

“All will be well, love. You’ll see.”

He carried her swiftly through the house and to her room, where he placed her on the bed. She refused to lay down, but moved back to her knees, clearly suffering some sort of pain. Simon shifted his lips to her forehead and kissed her there. It broke some of the franticness of her movements, for she sank a little into the mattress and held still.

“I love you,” he whispered. She barely mouthed the words in return before Georgiana was beside them, with the housekeeper and two maids in tow.

“Simon, it is time for you to go.” Georgiana pointed to the door. “When the doctor arrives, send him up at once.”

“But I—” Simon didn’t have chance to say anymore. He took Rosaline’s hand, but it was quickly prized from his own and he was pushed toward the door. Rosaline reached out, trying to take his hand again, but it was too late, her flailing

hand was lost behind the maid's heads as Simon was thrust out of the door.

“Now, Simon, go!” Georgiana closed the door on him.

For a minute, Simon didn't move. He stood there woodenly, staring at the closed door with his hands braced against the frame.

Rosaline...please be well.

He'd heard enough horror stories of childbirth these last few months for the tales to torture him in his sleep. He just prayed this would not be another one of those stories, that all would be well.

A short while later, the bell rang, and Simon found movement possible again. He sprinted across the landing and down the stairs, where he let the doctor in himself, with Jacobs shortly behind him. The doctor was shown to the bedchamber,

but many of the questions Simon had for him remained unanswered. The only words the doctor gave were quite clear.

“We must wait now. These things take time.”

Simon was soon ushered into his drawing room, where Jacobs tried to pry him first with tea to keep him calm, then he attempted brandy. Simon drank almost none of it. He sat on the edge of his seat, with his knee bobbing up and down, and intermittently jumping to his feet to pace the room. Occasionally he heard sounds from upstairs over the coming hours. He heard maids running back and forth, who were sent to fetch things, then shouting.

It is Rosaline.

The sound of the pain had Simon wanting to run from the room, go straight to her side, but he knew he would not be allowed in. It was the curse of the husband's position that they had to stay apart from this situation.

“I should be with her,” Simon muttered to himself. “I should be there.”

The sun soon disappeared from the windows, and the night crept in. When Jacobs moved around the room and lit candles, Simon barely took notice. He kept glancing to the door, waiting for news.

It came eventually. Georgiana appeared in the door, holding a single candle between her hands.

“Mother?” Simon shakily stood to his feet, trying his best to decipher his mother’s expression in the dim light. “Is everything all right? Rosaline? Is she well?”

“Go see her, my dear.” Georgiana stepped forward. The closer she moved the more Simon could see her expression. In that apricot light, he could see her smile. It took up the whole of her cheeks. “Go see her, and...your daughter.”

Simon felt a lurch in his stomach. One of unrestrained excitement.

He ran past his mother, hurrying through the house and leaping up the stairs so fast that he took them two, sometimes even three, at a time. On the landing, he nearly knocked over one of the maids in his excitement. When he reached the door, he bundled into the room, only to be stalled by the doctor who held up his hand, urging Simon to calm himself.

“They are resting, my Lord,” the doctor said solemnly and gestured to the bed.

Simon’s eyes flicked to the bed. The room was lit by many candles, so many that it seemed surrounded in a halo of yellow light. Propped up against the cushions was Rosaline, exhausted, with her auburn hair stuck to her neck in places from sweat and her body struggling to hold itself straight.

Never had Simon seen such a smile on her face now. She was peaceful, smiling down at something in her arms.

Something she was unable to take her eyes off.

Simon stumbled forward. The closer he got to the bed, Rosaline tore her eyes away from the bundle and looked to him.

“Simon,” she urged him forward with his name, beckoning him with a flick of her head. “Come meet our daughter.”

Simon sat down beside her, feeling as if he was holding his breath with anticipation. In Rosaline’s arms, he at last looked at the face of their daughter. She was so small, startlingly so, with her face red and her hands curling around the edge of her blanket and one of Rosaline’s fingers.

“Is she not beautiful?” Rosaline said, giggling as tears appeared in her eyes.

“You’re crying,” Simon murmured, wrapping his arm around his wife.

“Happy tears, Simon. Very happy tears indeed. Here, you hold her.” She shifted the girl into his arms.

Simon could understand exactly what she had meant by happy tears, for he felt the same temptation to cry himself as he held onto his daughter, so small and fragile in his arms. He lifted the girl high and kissed her on the head, listening to the small sounds the child made before he lowered her back down again.

“I could not be happier,” Simon whispered, releasing the breath he had been holding as Rosaline leaned her head on him.

“Nor I, Simon, nor I.”

He shifted to kiss her on her forehead, as her eyes began to close, sleepily. Simon moved so he had one arm around Rosaline, cradling her into his side, and one arm around their daughter, holding her tighter. For the first time, Simon felt as if he had found the place he truly belonged, with the family he loved so much in his arms.

Epilogue

Rosaline

One week later.

“You are beautiful, yes you are,” Rosaline cooed down at the baby in front of her, laid out in the cot. She giggled at her own strange sounds, then bent forward and pulled funny faces. Already, her daughter’s cheeks began to pull and twitch, showing it would not be long before she was able to smile. “I can’t wait to see you smile. I truly cannot wait!” She bent down and kissed her daughter on the cheek, then made a sound against her skin, giggling when the baby wriggled with a kind of delight.

Standing straight, Rosaline lifted her daughter high into the air and cradled her head, protecting her. It may have only been a week since Helena had come into the world, but Rosaline was aware how much the world had shifted in just that one week. Helena was the focus of everything now, and she was delighted for it.

They had taken some time to decide on the right name for their daughter when Helena was an option Rosaline had suggested deep into the night. It was her mother's name – a way perhaps to commemorate her spirit. Simon had loved it at once and agreed heartily.

“If you have your namesake's goodness, love, then you will be a wonderful person,” she whispered to her daughter as she carried her out of the nursery and across the landing. “If you have your father's stubbornness, then you'll be a fierce competitor in a debate.” Rosaline laughed at her own words. “And if you have my determination, then you'll be a force to be reckoned with. I cannot wait to see who you will grow up to be, Helena. I truly can't.”

The baby made a sound in her arms, as if in agreement. Rosaline kissed her daughter on her forehead, admiring the way the auburn hair that was peeking through her skin was beginning to curl already. In a few months, Helena would no doubt have a head full of soft auburn curls.

Rosaline descended the stairs where she found the door being opened eagerly by Jacobs.

“My Lord? Welcome home.” At Jacobs’ words, Rosaline looked up, thrilled to see that Simon had indeed returned to the house. He bounded into the house, his step bearing the same excited movement that had been there ever since Helena was born.

“Thank you, Jacobs.” He hurried to pass his top hat and frock coat to Jacobs before his eyes found Rosaline and his smile grew. “Ah! I see the little one crying all night has desisted crying at last.”

“Oh, and was that why you left the house so eagerly this morning?” Rosaline teased Simon as she walked to the sitting room, with him hurrying behind her. “You were escaping our daughter!”

“Far from it.” He laughed and eagerly took Helena out of her arms, keeping her safe. Rosaline allowed herself a deep smile as she watched the way Simon held their daughter. He was always so careful, as if he was afraid of injuring her with the slightest of touches. “I was overtaken by the excitement of an idea. In my eagerness to put it in place, I left hurriedly to see it done.”

“What idea is this?” Rosaline tried to stifle a yawn as she sat down. In truth, the wakeful nights were taking their toll. She looked forward to the day Helena would sleep through the night and she could rest more.

“This idea.” Simon stood tall in the middle of the room, holding their daughter close. “You have been a great success for months now with your writing. Having talked about it at length with the writers’ circle and seeing my mother talk of it with her Lysistrata ladies too, I am in no doubt that there is a strong readership for such materials. In fact, I believe there to be a great demand for it.”

“I could have sworn I told you this at some point,” Rosaline teased him with a playful smile.

“Yes, feel free to say, ‘I told you so’ at any point,” he agreed with a chuckle. When Helena made a sound, evidently wanting attention, he made faces at her and kissed her cheek. Satisfied, she went back to resting in his arms. “So, this is my idea. What if you did not have to publish your articles in *Ackermann’s* magazine anymore?”

“I wanted to keep writing,” Rosaline said, sitting straight in surprise.

“No, Rosaline, you misunderstand.” Simon’s smile began to grow. “What if you had an entire magazine devoted to such works?”

She blinked, not sure she understood. She stared at Simon for a minute or two, but he was plainly in earnest, for he didn’t look away from her once.

“Go on,” she urged softly. Simon moved to sit beside her, with Helena laying peacefully in his arms and her eyes beginning to close.

“I have made arrangements for us to begin a magazine,” Simon said excitedly. “It will be written purely by women, holding all the sorts of articles that we lack. It can celebrate women’s achievements; talk of any subject matter you wish to. No matter will be off limits. We can find writers like you. I am sure the Duchess of Suffolk might even be interested in lending a word or two.” He barely breathed he talked so fast. “And you can lead it, Rosaline. What do you say?”

“I...” She stared at him, struggling to organize her thoughts. It seemed a long way away from the Simon who had once told her he was not sure the written word could change much. It seemed his own mind had changed. Here he was, offering to begin a new periodical entirely, so that women like her might have a chance to write and write about what they wish to.

“Do you not like the idea?”

“Quite the opposite, Simon. I love it. I am simply stunned into silence.”

“Well, there is a first time for everything,” he said playfully. She laughed and reached forward, kissing him on the lips. When they parted, they both smiled at each other.

“I think it the kindest gift you have ever given me. Well... the second kindest.” With her words, their eyes both drifted down to Helena who had fallen asleep in her father’s arms. Rosaline did not think she could ever want for more than she had in that moment.

The End?

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The Duke's Ghost Bride

Preview

Prologue

A young man stood in the thin light of the moon, looking up at the towering walls of an old castle. The man's clothes were beautifully tailored and of fine fabric, betraying his wealth and status.

He was Nelson Monteclyff, the Marquess of Camden. Such a man rarely found himself alone, especially in a place like this, but the road before him was empty and he could hear not a sound in the darkness.

The castle was medieval and ancient, but still held together well in the cold light of the moon. Nelson took a deep breath, his eyes tracing the parapets and settling at last on the heavy gate. He didn't know what lay within the castle walls, but he knew he had to see for himself.

It was moments before he stepped forward, however, that he felt a hand touch his shoulder eerily in the black night,

and knew with a cold jolt of fear that he was not, after all,
alone.

* * *

Seven days earlier

Ill nights and arguments between family members are best forgotten, and yet it was just such unpleasantness that pestered Nelson all night and into the morning. He could not sleep, and now found himself at his writing desk, disconsolately drumming his fingers on the oaken surface.

He was a young man, not yet four and twenty, with a high aristocratic forehead and auburn hair falling in soft curls about his face. In the golden morning light, he cut quite a figure, disheveled but romantic, his strong form folded up into a spindle chair; his dark eyes searching emptily out the tall

casement at his side. Those eyes were as stormy as a Turner painting, flickering over the memory of the night before and his argument with his father, the duke.

There was a knock at the door—the third that morning alone—and Nelson let out a quiet sigh before bidding the servant outside to enter. First had come the chamber maid to lay a fire in the hearth, then the boy his father kept for small tasks stumbled in with a clump of a heather in a jar, and this newest servant was the slim footman in his fine livery, standing stiffly as though insulted by his errand. They had all been sent for the same reason, whatever their excuses.

“My Lord,” the footman bowed and stood at attention in the doorway, not even deigning to enter. “His Grace, the Most Noble Duke of Richmond, requests your presence at breakfast.”

If he hadn't been so frustrated at the previous nights' events, Nelson would have been amused at the footman's formality. The chamber maid had simply bobbed into a quick curtsy and told him, "Your father wants you, m'Lord."

He turned briefly in his chair, but did not stand. "Please give him my regrets," he answered quietly. "I am indisposed this morning, and do not think breaking fast with my father will restore my good humour."

The footman was clearly taken aback by his refusal, but hid his surprise and was gone as softly as the others.

Alone again, Nelson went back over the last night's conversation in his mind. As always, his father was pressing him about the latest in a long line of eligible women who fit

not only his father's idea of a suitable match, but would also bring to his position what the Duke declared, "unmatched beauty and elegance."

Nelson could not, of course, deny that Lady Julie was a picture of elegance, although her beauty was of the pale, simpering sort that was easily forgotten. It was too perfect; too practiced, and when he was in her presence he felt as if he was in a Renaissance painting, staring at her marble skin and distant expression to determine whether or not there was anything at all real about her. Certainly, she would look lovely on his arm, and he could hardly imagine her saying a cross word to him were they to build a future together, but what fun was love if there was no danger of crossness; no wit and cleverness with which to spar?

He had tried to explain all this to his father, but the duke was a man of logic and precision. To him, Nelson's prospects were a mathematical equation into which one could put proper facts and deduce a proper answer. It was simple in his mind: an eligible woman and an eligible man made for an honorable marriage worthy of the peerage.

They had argued, and both had said things they did not mean. Nelson winced to remember it now.

There was another knock at the door, and this time Nelson got up and walked to it himself, pulling it open a little too briskly, prepared to shoot a withering gaze at whichever unfortunate servant had been sent up this time to request his presence in the breakfasting room. But it wasn't an unfortunate servant. It was Henry, the old and distinguished butler who had known Nelson since he was a young boy.

Withering glances had no effect whatsoever on Henry, who stepped into the room before Nelson could deny him entrance and stood looking at him as if he were every bit the little boy who had snuck frogs into the dining room all those years ago.

“Lord Camden,” he said, the formal address in no way masking the familiarity in his tone. “Your father is eager to see you this morning. He is in the breakfast room as we speak.”

“My father saw quite enough of me last night,” Nelson turned, fidgeting with the quill he still had in his hand.

“Perhaps so,” Henry said quietly. Nelson wondered what, if anything, he had heard last night during their argument. It wouldn’t have mattered if he’d heard every word. Henry was unfailingly discreet. “Still, he desires your presence.”

“It is unfair of him to send you,” Nelson said, fighting to keep the peevishness out of his voice. “He knows I respect you above all, and cannot find it in myself to deny you any favor.”

Henry pursed his lips ever so slightly. “You do not respect me above all, my Lord. You do not respect me above your father,” he paused a moment, and Nelson recognized the tell-tale signs of a slip in Henry’s usually perfect etiquette. The slip, when it came, was almost imperceptible. It was a brief moment of gentleness. “Master Nelson,” he said, using Nelson’s childhood pet name. “Your father cares for you very much. He only wants what is good for you, and only thinks about your future. If you have had words, he will surely want to make amends.”

“We have walked this ground before,” Nelson said coldly. “His amends mean nothing if he is to throw me at the next eligible lady he comes upon.”

“You are a lucky man, to be blessed with a title, wits, and a father willing to make the most of them,” Henry answered. “You should be glad that your father worries so much about your future.”

“You are forgetting yourself,” Nelson retorted, a blush coming into his cheeks. He paused a moment, watching Henry’s face ice over briefly as the butler returned to his place of propriety. Nelson shook his head. “I did not mean that.” He sat down heavily at the foot of his bed and leaned his head into his hands. “It is only that I do not see the situation as you do. There is a difference between worry and constant hounding. You have heard him these last weeks. If he is not openly

hounding me to marry Lady Julie, he is dropping hints at every turn; trying to weave her name into every conversation.”

“I did notice that he managed to make a connection between her Ladyship and the races at Tattersall’s two nights past, a remarkable feat considering Lady Julie has neither a horse in the event, nor any interest in the races,” Henry intoned.

Nelson smiled despite himself. “See? You have witnessed it as well.”

“What I have witnessed is a man who has recognized in Lady Julie the qualities necessary to support and advance the Montecliff household, my Lord,” Henry said, choosing his words carefully. “She is fine woman and will make an

excellent duchess one day, when you inherit your father's lands."

"I do not doubt all this," Nelson waved his hand dismissively. "But I have no desire to be trapped into a marriage of convenience. I want to marry for love and love alone."

This had shocked Henry a bit, Nelson could see. It would be a feat indeed for the proper butler to suffer any conversation from a marquess on matters of the heart, but the old man bore the matter as best he might and dealt his final blow.

"Doubtless your father can come to understand your sentiments in time," he said. "But not if you stay locked away

in your room and refuse to engage him in conversation on the subject.”

Nelson felt a smile tugging at his mouth again. “He is not such an ogre after all,” he said.

The butler could not bring himself to acknowledge such an improper comment about His Grace the Duke, and settled only for extending his hand towards the door and asking whether or not the Marquess would require a housecoat for his descent to the breakfast room.

Nelson put on the blue one left draped over the edge of a chair and walked downstairs at last, Henry following at a respectful distance.

The breakfast room was as it always was, quiet, full of light from a few tall windows, furnished with an absurdly long table at the end of which sat his father and a place setting for himself. A footman stood in the corner, eager to jump in and help distribute small cakes and soft-boiled eggs when the duke gave the word.

“So, you have come at last,” Simon Montecliff stood stiffly at the end of the table. He was not as tall as Nelson, but always seemed to take up more space. He had a presence about him that men respected, a stature that went beyond his size. His eyes were dark like Nelson’s, but his hair was soft and white, curling ever so slightly around his ears. He waved at the chair beside himself. “I see Henry was the ticket after all.”

“You do not play fair.” Nelson sat down, pulling up to the table and nodding to the footman when the man came over with a pot of tea and a cloth. “You could have breakfasted without me. There are plenty of hours in the day to rehash last night’s conversation.”

The duke raised his eyebrows over his glass. “Are there? I would expect you to disappear for a day’s worth of riding to avoid the topic.”

Nelson smiled down at his meal. “Perhaps.”

“Perhaps? Almost certainly.” The duke’s deep voice softened. “I know you well, my son. I should not have pestered you last night. It seems to me as though all your future were laid out before me in a simple map, easy to

decipher, and yet you are choosing all the turns and paths that make no sense to me and follow no logic.”

Nelson began to protest, but his father held up a hand to stop him.

“Hear me out, my son.” He smiled. “I can see that I have pushed you too hard, and it is not what I want for our partnership. Our times together should not be fraught with arguments. But Nelson, even if you do not desire to marry Lady Julie—a fine match if ever I saw one—I would entreat you to take an active part in the business so that you might be a proper duke when the time comes. You have done your travelling, attended your seasons, and been about the ton. If you are not to choose a wife to marry, then I must ask you to at least give a thought to what legacy we will leave behind.”

Nelson swallowed hard and set down his silver spoon.

“Father, I am gladdened to hear you say such a thing. It is the first hint you’ve given that there is a path forward without your persistence in the matter of my marriage.”

“And the business?”

“I have wanted to learn more for some time. Previously you were too consumed with work to teach me what I need to know.”

The duke looked worried. “Even now I fear I am often too consumed with work. But surely I can connect you with the agent to learn the details, and for everything else you can accompany me as you used to do when you were a young boy.”

“I would like to be of use to you in other ways,” Nelson said. Even as he spoke, he feared he was asking for a responsibility for which he was not yet prepared. “Perhaps you could delegate some of your more tedious tasks to my oversight.”

“Perhaps,” his father mused.

Just then, the door at the end of the room opened abruptly, admitting Henry with a tray of correspondence. It was early for such a missive, but Henry walked crisply to the duke and laid it before him nonetheless.

“On urgent business from Scotland, Your Grace.”

The duke picked up the letter, breaking the seal at once and reading it as Henry stepped back out of the room. His

face, usually so calm and restrained, opened in astonishment as he read. Nelson waited quietly, knowing better than to interject when his father was absorbed in something. At long last, the duke laid the letter aside and turned to his son.

“It is indeed from Scotland.” He looked around as though searching for words. “You know that a small part of my paternal family live there, far away from the civilised English world we know and love.”

“I know this,” Nelson said slowly, searching his memory, “but I can hardly recall their names or titles.”

“They are distant relations at best,” his father responded quickly.

“May I?” Nelson motioned for the letter.

His father shook himself as though waking from a dream. “You may, of course. But I may as well tell you the contents. My cousin Robert, who I am sad to say I’ve rather lost touch with over the years, has died of a wasting sickness. It is a mystery indeed what brought such a thing on. After all, he must have known about his death for some time and yet he told no one.”

“Perhaps he thought he would recover.”

“And yet he did not. I do not remember him being a very hopeful man, although I can well imagine him to ignore the facts in service of his own desires.” The duke handed the letter to Nelson, explaining the contents even as he did so. “He died without family or heir, and therefore the entirety of his estate transfers to me.”

Nelson raised his eyebrows. “Had he much estate to transfer?” It was not uncommon for such “gifts” to be places sunk deep in debt, leeching off the countryside rather than giving back and supporting country folk as it ought.

“I’m not sure.” The duke motioned at the letter. “You will see there that his fortune lies tied up in a castle in Scotland. I am his only living relative. We will not know for certain the spoke of the inheritance until I go to see the castle and the people he has employed there.”

“Did you know this cousin Robert well?” Nelson asked.

His father shook his head. “We knew each other when we were lads, and I remember a particularly pleasant visit when I was but ten years of age. Robert was five years older

and far superior in my eyes, but I only remember a little of our meeting. I believe I went with him to Scotland to hunt with his father, but I was too young to enjoy the festivities much and don't recall what the home was like in the least. It is possible we did not even stay at the castle—it is not uncommon for such trips to occur at a country cottage or on location in the highlands.”

“And now it is all yours,” Nelson said, taking a sip of his tea. “It will be interesting to see what you discover about the place.”

The duke looked up suddenly, a new light in his eyes. “What I discover?” he asked. “What an interesting thought.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, as we mentioned before, I am quite overwrought with work and social duties at present. I could not possibly go to a castle in Scotland for any reason whatsoever. I suppose I ought to send an emissary.” He looked significantly at Nelson.

The Marquess set his cup down in astonishment. “I?”

“Yes, you.”

Nelson prepared to protest, but as he thought about it, a warmth of interest stirred in his mind. “I suppose you can’t leave your position at present,” he said slowly. “Perhaps this is the sort of responsibility I could begin to take on your behalf. Perhaps I could go in your stead.”

“My thoughts exactly,” his father said. “You will ride as soon as you are able. Pack for a significant journey. I do not

know much about the highlands, but I know enough to say this will be an unexpected adventure for you, and in such situations you cannot guess what the future may hold.”

Chapter 1

Travelling across country had always been something Nelson enjoyed as a boy—the painful rattling of a chaise and four hardly registered in younger bones—and he expected to enjoy his adventure even more now that he would have the freedom of a lone mount and the ability to stop as he chose in the surrounding villages along his way.

He packed simply, having given Henry orders to send the remaining trunks of clothes and books he would want for an extended stay in a slower carriage after him. He expected his things to arrive a good two weeks after he did, as the roads were deeply cut with ruts from the spring rains and had not yet been pounded down evenly by passing wagons. As it was, he packed only a few changes of clothes, some writing utensils, and two books for evening enjoyment into saddle bags that were buckled securely over his horse's flanks.

“That’s it, Augustus,” he said, smoothing his hand down the noble steed’s jet-black mane. “A bit of a heavier load than usual, but we will take our time and rest as you require.”

He preferred travelling this way. It would have been more protected to stay within a coach, where only coachman and horses were exposed to the elements, but he was bringing his own mount and would not suffer for any changing of the horses along the way. It was better that he was up close and personal with his animal and could determine the stamina of the creature as they rode.

The duke had hardly anything to say as they parted. He was a man of few words. Even so, Nelson could see that his father was proud of him. The duke slipped the letter telling of

the inheritance into Nelson's satchel and bid him show it at the castle gate as evidence of their rightful ownership.

“Write when you have arrived,” he said. “To tell us you are safe. It may take some time before the post reaches us.”

After a momentary pause he added gently, “I am proud of you, my son. This increase in responsibilities will not be easy, I know, but it will surely be worthwhile.”

“I will send you word when I have arrived, but it may take more time to determine the scope of what Cousin Robert left behind,” Nelson said, nodding. “When I have a better idea of the place, I shall give a more detailed report.”

“I trust you, son,” his father said in a rare show of tenderness.

And with those words, Nelson set off on his journey.

It was summertime, and the air was cool at the start of his travels. He had ridden often to and from London, and again to various seaside locales, but he had never travelled to Scotland before, and found the road through northern England to be diverting in its rolling landscape and deep green hills.

The first two nights he stopped at local inns, eating a simple stew provided and paying a bit of coin to bunk out of the elements. He could see at both these stops that, though he did not introduce himself as the Marquess of Camden, or in any way go into his father's powerful connections, the locals were able to deduce his wealth and circumstance from the cut of his clothes and his manner of talking. He was treated with deference, behaviour he was well used to, but found nevertheless to be rather distant and cool.

It was on the third day that he was officially through the lowlands and had entered the highlands at last. It was here that his travels took a turn. The terrain was unfamiliar for both him and Augustus, and they slowed considerably navigating the undulating road and rocky byways. Nelson found himself wondering how a wagon could traverse such ground at all, much less a chaise and four. The few people he encountered made him guess that a chaise and four was not often found in such parts. Civilisation, as his father called it, was considerably lacking—or at least different.

The first Scottish inn he stopped in seemed to see his fine garments as an insult rather than a sign deserving of respect.

“I suppose you’ll be having us clean your horse for you, as well as serve you dinner,” the innkeeper’s wife said sharply, her red hair flaming around an equally ruddy complexion.

Nelson, who had indeed given Augustus over to stable hands the last few days of the journey, stammered quickly that he had no such intention and led the horse back to the stable to tend to the animal’s care himself. When the black steed was fed and bedded, Nelson returned to the inn in a damp drizzle, seating himself by the fire and raising a hand to order some dinner.

No one came, so at last he was forced to move from the jostling crowd of locals to the bar, where the same red-haired lady begrudgingly took his coin and slid a tureen of meat and potatoes back across the table in response.

“You’ll be bunking with the others in the loft,” she said curtly, not even looking up from the tankard of ale she was filling. “I hope you weren’t thinking you’d have a room to yourself; we aren’t as fine as all that, you ken.”

Nelson took the food, which was dubious at best, and said nothing in response. The woman’s hostility would not be better by attempting to assuage her assumptions. He ate quickly and took his things up to the loft for the night. He slept fitfully, surrounded by the snoring and coughing of seven other men in bunks around the dim room, and woke before the dawn to bathe his face in the icy water and dress. He chose a simple linen shirt to try to fit in, but even his plain riding coat was edged with gold thread and lined with fine fabric. He knew he stood out.

The rest of his journey progressed slowly and in a similar fashion. It was hot at times, but in general the remaining days were haunted by drizzle and rain, weather that Nelson enjoyed well enough when indoors with a book, but grew to detest as he and August plodded on through the highlands, soaked to the bone. Even uncomfortable, however, he preferred this adventure to the monotony he had at home, trying always to sort things out with his father and feel useful in a glittering world that didn't seem to need him.

He thought of how tedious it had been to always be on guard for his father's marriage schemes; to constantly parade himself before the lords and ladies of the land as a man of good prospects and a marriageable age, even to sit at his father's table and pretend to care about things like societal meetings and the peerage.

Here before him was an entirely different and exciting adventure, full of expectation and the unknown. The rain and hard riding could certainly have been a point against the journey, but to Nelson it only reminded him that he was finally free of a world that dictated his every move. He was able to make his own decisions, and the prospect of the adventure ahead was exhilarating.

It was on the sixth day that he realized he was close enough to the castle to avoid another stay at the inn where he watered and fed Augustus. The stable boy there told him it was a few more hours ride.

“It’s not far, true, but it will be late when you arrive,” the boy shrugged. “These aren’t roads to be traversed in the dark.”

“Do you have a room for me at the inn?” Nelson asked, wiping the pervasive mist from his brow.

“There’s a shared bunk room on the side,” the boy said, patting Augustus’ flank kindly. “And a fine pot of porridge, I’m sure.”

Nelson kept his distaste from showing on his face. He didn’t feel much like another night at an inn, and was too eager for the adventure ahead to dally.

“I think I shall press on,” he said, though the boy did not require a list of his goings on. “I will go slowly to keep my horse safe, but I would like to rest at my destination tonight.”

In the end, it was nearly midnight when he at last crested a hill and saw before him the hulking shape of a castle

clinging to a hill ahead of him. The moon was out, but so were the clouds, which blew across the moon at intervals. In the changing light, the medieval structure had an eerie look about it, and as Nelson drew nearer, the chill he was already feeling from the cool drizzle grew.

At last, he was at the gate, attached to the grey stone walls on either side by rusted iron hinges. The town he had ridden through to reach the castle had been sleeping, with only a light burning at the centre of the square and not a solitary person walking around or talking in their home. The same silence lay as a thick blanket over the castle's parapets, and Nelson couldn't help wishing he'd come with a coachman after all, so it didn't feel so much like he was the last man on earth.

“I’m sure they’re just asleep,” he said, slipping off Augustus’ back patting the tired horse gently on the neck. His voice sounded unnatural in the silence. The gate stood before him, open and easy to enter, but something held him back. It was nothing tangible, but rather a shiver up his spine as he’d used to feel when reading ghost stories as a child. He’d always tried to pretend such things did not bother him—he didn’t believe in ghosts, after all—but here in the eerie moonlight, all things fantastic and supernatural felt possible. It was as though he could feel a ghost breathing icily down his neck—

Someone, or something, tapped him quite suddenly on the shoulder. Nelson spun around, his heart in his throat, and gave a soft cry despite himself. The figure behind him, however, was as solid and natural as any person he had ever seen. It was a small man, dressed in a guard’s uniform, with a rather pudgy nose and an overgrown beard.

“Who are you?” he asked a little sharply, glad that the waning moonlight would hide his blush of embarrassment over his fearful cry from before.

The man was standing an arm’s length away, and Nelson could see now that he must have tapped on Nelson’s shoulder with the long cane he held in his right hand. He frowned under bushy brows. “It is you who must tell me who you are,” he corrected Nelson. “I live in this town; I am the night watchman. I have every right to be here, while you are the newcomer who just rode along our cobblestones, quite noisily I must point out, in the dead of night.”

“I am the Marquess of Camden,” Nelson said, introducing himself formally without thinking. “I have come to visit, or, that is to say—I am staying here for a time. Is there anyone who lives in the castle? It seems quite deserted.”

The round little man frowned again, his eyebrows gathering even closer together on his forehead. “Staying here?” Some thought seemed to dawn on him. “Hold. Are you the new owner of the castle? The man from down south who is to take over after the passing of Lord Edgewood?”

Nelson nodded. “I am. Or, at least, my father is at present. I am here at his behest.”

“Alone? Without a coachman?” the watchman looked him over curiously. “I can see you’re fine enough to be the one, but it is unexpected that you come into town carrying so little.”

“My things are following. I shall expect them to take a few weeks.”

“Yes, I imagine.” The man seemed quite comfortable now. Nelson imagined he was even enjoying himself. It was unlikely that the night watchman in such a sleepy town was accustomed to conversation of any sort on the job. “Well, then. You’ve been expected, although not quite so soon. We don’t know of many marquesses in these parts, but certainly none that would come on their own mount without any servants in tow.” He nodded towards the castle. “But you’ll find staff in there to suit your needs, and as the gate is open you shall go inside, I suppose.” He sounded almost sad to lose his chance for conversation.

Nelson frowned, realizing for the first time that the open gate—a convenience for his arrival—was in fact a dangerous oversight on the part of the staff. It was not good to leave doors open for anyone to pass by.

“Thank you,” he said simply, tipping his hat and walking into the courtyard. The night watchman turned and walked back towards the town.

The courtyard was spacious and sparsely filled. There was a well at the centre, and beyond that a wagon and carriage parked side by side near what looked to be the stables. Nelson went in that direction, walking into the musty interior to offload his saddle and settle Augustus for the night. Not a soul was there, only a team of horses rustling in individual stalls.

He walked back into the courtyard with his bags in hand and walked through the front doors of the castle, which were also unlocked. The doors were grand and tall, heavy to pull open and heavy to shut again. Nelson almost left them unlocked out of habit, but seeing no staff to close the door

after him he slid the heavy bar into place, locking the doors soundly behind him. The bar echoed in the cavernous front hall where he found himself.

He took a few steps forward into the blackness, wishing at once that he had sought about for a candle or torch before the door was closed behind him. Just as he was thinking of edging back the way he'd come, he heard a sound from his right, muffled by what seemed to be a hallway or door that separated them. It was the steady clicking of shoes shuffling along in the darkness, undeniably coming his way. The shoes echoed as the door had, and Nelson felt the familiar dread seeping into his bones again.

Suddenly, a soft orange light glowed ahead of him and to the right, comforting in colour and familiarity. It flickered along the wall, and after a moment of confusion Nelson

realized he was glimpsing it between open casements cut in the stone. The carrier had to be traversing the hall just on the other side of the cavernous room in which Nelson was waiting.

He picked up his bags and walked quickly along the floor. When he emerged from the open door where the light was, he found himself in a narrow hall. Just ahead of him, a woman was walking away, holding a candle, dressed all in white.

“Pardon me?” Whether from nerves or simply the overly quiet nature of the castle, Nelson’s voice rang too loudly in the hall.

The woman gave a cry, whirling about so quickly she nearly put out the candle in her hand. Her eyes were wide and dark in her white face, and Nelson realized too late that he had

given her a greater fright than the watchman had given him only a short time before.

He held up his hands, backing away so as not to seem threatening. “It’s only me,” he said nonsensically, knowing she would have no idea who he was. He corrected, noting now that the woman was in late middle age, her hair already showing strains of white beneath a white wimple, and she clutched a thick woollen shawl about shaking shoulders. “My name is Nelson Montecliff, Lord Camden as I am known. I have come on business of my father—“

“Lord Camden!” the woman cried, understanding flooding her frightened face. “You gave me a moment of real alarm, I will admit.” She gave a nervous laugh, looking down at her nightclothes in shy embarrassment. “And you’ve caught

me quite unawares. I had not expected you this soon.” She looked around her and added significantly, “Or at this hour.”

“I wanted to press through and avoid another overnight stay,” he said, feeling silly now for having imagined there would be staff awake around the clock as at his father’s sprawling mansion.

“How did you gain entry?” she edged closer, emboldened now by the knowledge that he was not a random intruder.

“The door was open.” He tried to take a sober tone. “Such a thing is unsafe, and I would not appreciate its repetition in the future.”

The woman nodded. “I am the housekeeper here, Marta. The door was likely left unlocked by the house boy, Troy. It’s his responsibility, but it’s been so long since we’ve had anyone of note around here—doubtless he forgot.” She looked chagrined. “He’ll receive a scolding in the morning, and it shan’t happen again.”

Suddenly Nelson felt overwhelmingly tired.

“May I rest somewhere for the night?” he asked.

“Somewhere?” The housekeeper smiled. “Of course you may, my Lord. But not just anywhere. I’ll take you up to the master’s bedchamber at once. We will have you settled in it tonight. I can lay a fire if you like.”

“A fire is not necessary,” Nelson said quickly. The warmth would be welcome, yes, but a fire took time to start and tend, and all he wanted was a horizontal surface upon which to fall asleep.

They walked upstairs through more corridors and chambers than Nelson could count, and when Marta at last opened the door to a great dark room and lit a few tapers within with her candle, he was unsure he could find his way back to the great room in the morning. She seemed to read his mind.

“I’ll let you sleep your fill in the morning, but when you wake you may ring the bell for a house boy to come and fetch you breakfast.” She gave a little bow. “We can talk about the castle management in the morning.”

He bid her goodnight and lay down at last, weak with exhaustion. The castle walls in his chamber were so high he couldn't see the top with only the dim light of a single candle. He fell asleep, unable to shake the feeling that the casements in the wall were great gaping eyes watching him slip into slumber.

* * *

The next morning dawned without rain, and the beautiful golden sunrays slipped into the narrow windows and woke Nelson where he lay in the great central bed. He climbed out of bed and walked to the wash table. There was a fresh bowl of water there and he splashed the chilly liquid on his face and arms before looking about the room with fresh eyes.

The ceiling was indeed as towering as he had suspected the night before, but there were windows all around that the

darkness had concealed, and the chamber had none of the markings of dark heaviness he had expected. He dressed in the only clean trousers and shirt he had left and fashioned a crisp overcoat overtop just in time for the timid knock that signalled the servant sent to fetch him to breakfast.

The servant girl, who introduced herself shyly as “Mary,” bobbed in front of him down the hallway and led him to a great sombre chamber with a long oaken table and great shields hung upon the wall. At the end of the room there was a stone fireplace. It was a far cry from the well-lit breakfast chamber at the duke’s mansion, but Nelson could tell that it was not only for breakfast, but for every meal eaten in the castle. For that purpose, it had to be grand, even when such luxury seemed to clash with the casual dining.

Marta popped in when Nelson had only just finished his meal of porridge and ham hock with apple preserves. She brought with her a line of servants, including Mary, and bid him to inspect the staff.

“We have a daily meeting to go over the events of the day before and prepare for the next day’s duties,” she said crisply, eyeing a lanky lad of about Nelson’s own age who was standing with his head down. “Troy here was a part of that morning meeting and knows that he did badly by leaving the door open.”

Nelson cleared his throat, wanting to wield his father’s firm hand without getting off on the wrong foot.

“I am glad to meet you all,” he said carefully, “and I am delighted to hear the castle will be more secure in the future.”

He walked down the line of servants, six in all, and greeted each in turn.

“This is Helen,” Marta explained. “She is our primary cook, although Mary helps. We don’t have a large staff here, so everyone throws in where they are able.”

“Do you have family in the village, Helen?” Nelson asked, noting that the older woman looked terrified at the prospect of taking his hand.

She nodded and mumbled something about a daughter and two sons.

“How blessed you are,” Nelson answered warmly. “I would love to meet them one day.”

“One of them is just there, M’Lord,” she said, nodding toward a middle-aged man with a jet-black beard at the end of the row. “It’s Simon, if you please.”

“Ah!” Nelson turned to Simon with a smile. “You are one of the sons, I see.”

“I am, sir.” He nodded his head deferentially, but there was a twinkle in his eye. “My brother is a blacksmith and my sister a baker, but unfortunately I’m only good for livery and carrying the odd thing about the house.”

Nelson noted his strong build. “I imagine you’d be able to carry more than the odd thing,” he said. “And I’m glad to meet someone who knows horses. My own mount, Augustus, will need looking after.”

“I already saw to him this morning,” Simon said. “He’s a beautiful creature.”

“He is, and he’s been through a rather trying journey. Let me know if you require anything at all to tend to his needs.”

“I will.” Simon stepped back a little, leaving room for Nelson to move on to Mary, the young girl who had helped him downstairs that morning. She was small and wide-eyed, not a year over sixteen, and made of solid stock. According to Marta, who had to do all the speaking on behalf of the shy girl, Mary fetched and carried and helped with the laying of fires and stripping of linens where needed.

Troy and Rory were the next and last servants in line. There was no butler, as far as Nelson could see, but these two

served as footmen and coachmen both as necessary, doing all that required a masculine touch. Rory was as quiet as Mary, but Troy answered Nelson's questions sullenly. Nelson imagined the scolding the young man had received earlier still stung.

“You all have families in the village?” Nelson asked Troy, trying to make inroads with the lad.

“We do,” the boy said. “But you needn't worry. There are always two of us at the castle at all times, to make certain that the place is watched.”

“Good,” Nelson said, happy for something to praise. “Tell me,” he widened his question to the group as a whole. “Did you know Cousin Robert well? What sort of man was he?”

The group exchanged glances, and Marta spoke first.

“He was an odd sort of fellow,” she said, choosing her words carefully. “A kind enough master who paid us on time to be certain, but he liked to stay to himself. He never married or had a family of his own, as you well know.”

Nelson looked about him at the bleak surroundings. The place seemed built to intimidate, and unlike the light-filled chamber he’d slept in the night before, the rooms downstairs had no warmth or feeling of home. It didn’t seem like the sort of place in which a person lived, only a place of work or even battle.

“The furnishings are sparse,” he said carefully.

“Master liked it that way,” Rory interjected. “He didn’t like people from the village to come either, and he wasn’t one for talking with the staff.”

“That’s not how I want to run things,” Nelson explained. “I will take the day to explore the castle, and then perhaps tomorrow we can work together to make the place more welcoming.”

Marta gave a quick nod to the staff, who bowed and curtsied respectively and disappeared as quickly as they had come.

“It is a good plan, My Lord,” she said. “But I think you’ll find the castle vaster than you had anticipated. Still, we will do what you wish to change things for the better as you direct.”

“Thank you, Marta,” Nelson said kindly. She left, and he set off to explore the stony halls of the castle.

Chapter 2

Last night, the castle had seemed like a vast and impenetrable fortress, and Nelson found, as he walked about, that it seemed even bigger on the inside. There was an abundance of rooms, and after setting out with a simple mission of discovery in mind Nelson found himself adjusting his expectations significantly.

“I shall have to come back and go room to room,” he murmured to himself. “Otherwise, I shall have no way to easily document Cousin Robert’s belongings and the extent of the inheritance.”

Each room was decorated with a mixture of Spartan simplicity and heavy gothic furniture. There were few pieces and few paintings, but those that did exist were dark and ornate.

The best part of the tour by far was when Nelson went down a narrow staircase at one end of the castle and through a heavy oaken door that opened into a library. He was astounded by how vast the room was. In this one area there was no simplicity whatsoever. Bookcases rose to the vaulted ceilings on every wall, so high that there were ladders on tracks to help reach some of the uppermost books. The selection also seemed diverse, although Nelson could not possibly read every title. As he walked along the dusty shelves he saw poetry, epics, biological textbooks, and philosophical writings.

It was evident that, though Cousin Robert had kept to himself and seemed odd to the villagers, he and Nelson shared at least one thing in common. They were both readers.

Strange or not, I may have liked the man, he thought to himself. We are both misfits in our own way.

In the centre of the room there was a small podium upon which sat a great heavy book all alone. He walked to it, expecting to see a family bible. It was common for great houses like this to keep a large bible in the cover of which would be recorded the genealogical tree. It wasn't a bible, but it was a family history. There was thick dust on the cover as Nelson opened it. It had not been touched in some time and was clearly not as well-loved as some of the other titles.

Inside was a list of all the peerage connected with the family, and a vast genealogical tree that he saw included his father's name and, yes, scrawled in a corner near the bottom there was his own title.

He noticed with mild surprise that a few centuries ago, the castle did not belong to his own family, but was in fact under the possession of a different surname and title completely. The last entry there was the name of a woman. Vanessa. No surname, just a first title, written in soft feminine script. Nelson let his fingers linger on the name for a moment. He was interested in how a woman might be connected to the leadership of a castle, and how the place might have passed from her care all those years past.

He left the library in search of Marta, to ask about the book, but quickly got lost. At one point he seemed to be in a large hall, but saw with alarm that it was not the one he'd come into the night before. He felt thoroughly lost and, calling out Marta's name, grew embarrassed. It was not a very good sign that the new master of the castle could so easily lose his way.

He turned from the hallway and went down another unfamiliar passage. At the end of this passage he found a heavy door. On either side of the door were great woven tapestries in the old style, beautiful in scarlet and gold thread, showing on the one side a festive wedding scene, and on the other what looked to be the aftermath of a great battle.

“I must have stepped into another wing of the castle,” he said quietly. He tried to open the door but it did not move. Looking down the doorframe he saw that it was closed with a handle at the base that connected with the floor via an iron bar and, pulling stiffly against the old metal, he loosened the latch and stepped inside.

Behind the door was a huge bedchamber that had clearly not been touched in ages. It was larger even than the chamber he had woken up in that very morning, but even as it lay

draped in great white clothes, he could see the feminine touch all about the room. The furniture here was not heavy and dark as the furniture in other areas of the castle. It was curved and delicate, white and gold and floral.

Nelson walked across the room carefully, as though he was on some sort of sacred ground. He felt he was trespassing. At the casement, he threw open the window and let the cool breeze and light into the room fully. As he did so, he saw a portrait of a young woman on the wall. She was quite beautiful, wearing a simple dress with only a single ruby pendant about her neck for ornament. Her hair was dark; her skin quite white. He walked over and peered at the name scrolled in gold beneath: Vanessa. Of course. It was the chambers of the last woman to have held a place here in the castle before his family had taken over. She was younger than he had imagined when he saw her name in the book.

He peered more closely at the picture, so caught up in its examination that he did not hear Marta walk in until she was a few steps away clearing her throat.

“My Lord,” she said as he turned in surprise. “I’ve been looking all over. I had hardly expected you to be in this room of all places. We haven’t opened this chamber in years.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Sir Robert asked us to keep it shut,” she said.

“Who is this woman?” Nelson inquired, turning back to the picture. “I saw her name in the genealogy tree downstairs, and now to stumble upon this room...it has a mystery about it that I would like to unravel.”

“Not a mystery,” Marta said sadly. “But a long story.”

“I have time.” Nelson turned and tugged at the covering over a low sofa near at hand and the two sat carefully amid all the dust and memories.

“It started before your ancestors had even a thought of this castle or the Highlands around,” Marta said carefully. “It’s a well-known story in the village, although not perhaps to the English who come to stay.” Her voice took on an eerie tone. “I say story, but I think by now the events have the ring of legend.”

Nelson leaned forward with interest. “Do tell.”

“Those were terrible times,” she said. “Legend has it that the family who lived here before your line took over had only one living daughter.” She nodded towards the picture.

“Vanessa. The family had other branches of cousins who lived in the area, but they were of a lesser rank. Their descendants still live in the village and surrounding country.”

“They didn’t hold on to the castle after Vanessa’s passing?” Nelson asked.

“They couldn’t have done so during her life either,” Marta said quickly. “They were distant relatives only; not the sort to have it as an inheritance, or even to be worthy of the necessary title to inhabit such a place. Vanessa lived like a princess here. You can see in this room alone, the opulence and elegance she experienced. It was said far and wide that she

was the Queen of the Highlands, a damsel who kept the castle full of warmth and life.”

“Warmth and life,” Nelson said dryly. “Not how I would describe the current climate.”

“Perhaps,” Marta said with pursed lips. “The happiness did not endure. There was a great conflict, you may well remember from the history books, and the young man Vanessa had been in line to marry—a betrothed of wealth and status as well as kindness and a handsome face—went away to fight. Her parents died while he was away. I don’t remember what from.”

“What a tragedy. How did they die?” Nelson asked.

“I suspect disease. In those days epidemics were rampant.” Marta sighed. “Legend has it the man Vanessa loved died in battle, or so they say. He never returned, and news of his definitive death never came. Everyone pressed her to marry, for she was still young and beautiful, but she believed her beloved would return. She refused to even entertain the advances of another man, and as the days passed her wealth slipped away. She had no firm connection to allow for continued growth, nor a marriage from which a promised heir could be born, and so one by one the servants had to leave. At last, she dismissed the final handful, living alone in the great castle as it fell into ruin about her. Word is she stayed here until her last breath.”

Nelson felt an uncanny chill crawl up his spine.

“Where is she buried?”

“No one knows.” Marta looked slowly around the room.

“Her body was never found. Legend says she is still here, walking the halls in search of her betrothed. Her spirit could not find peace, after all, on earth. Some say she will have no peace until her beloved comes home to find her.”

Silence drew across the room like a blanket. Nelson felt drawn to Vanessa’s story—both touched by the sadness she had endured, and chilled by the thought of the spirits Marta spoke of. He did not believe in ghosts or anything of the like, but sitting in this damp, abandoned room so full of Vanessa’s memories, she didn’t feel so very far away. She didn’t feel gone at all.

“You speak of legend,” he said, trying to smile and keep his voice light. “What do you yourself believe? Are you one

for superstition?”

Marta looked at him a moment and then gave a quick laugh. “No, M’Lord,” she said brightly. “I like the story, of course, and it suits the town to think the place haunted, but no one knows for certain and I myself have walked these halls with nary a glimpse of a white lady weeping for her lost love.” She rolled her eyes dismissively. “But the old nags from the village would say no one knows for certain.”

Nelson nodded. “Thank you for telling me. It is a fine story, if only that.”

The two stood, brushing off the dust, and walked out of the room. Nelson shut and barred the door behind himself. He wasn’t sure why he did it. *It’s not as though anyone else will be in this wing of the castle*, he thought. But somehow he still

felt the delicate little woman in the painting deserved her
privacy, even after all these years.

Chapter 3

The first day of his arrival had been one of information gathering and exploration. On the second, Nelson decided to get about the work of making the castle liveable. He knew that his father would be expecting a report on the condition of the place, but he was not yet certain what to say. He had a feeling his attempts to revive the old place would not fit into the duke's ideas of his proper duties there, but the castle walls seemed to cry out for care and rehabilitation. Despite himself, Nelson was already beginning to feel a sort of responsibility for the place.

He woke early, while the servants were still just starting the day's duties, and took a brief ride through the countryside with Augustus. Braced by the early morning air, he found his way back into Cousin Robert's study and rung for Marta to bring his breakfast there. A bit of toast in one hand and a

financial ledger in the other, he set to work untangling the matters of castle business at hand. It seemed that there was not much left behind except the castle, and therefore no business dealings to sort out. Cousin Robert had left the place much as Vanessa had, reportedly—with a minimal staff, the resources drained, and no real connection to the surrounding village and lands. Nelson intended to remedy that.

He dipped a quill into the inkstand and scrawled a quick note to his father.

I am safely arrived. The castle is much as you suspected, large and not well-tended. I shall send news of the financials and remaining investments soon. For now, there is work that demands my attention and further correspondence will have to be postponed.

He deposited the sealed letter into Troy's hands, along with a few others he'd written to local vendors, and sought out Marta in the lower servant's quarters.

"I have a mind to do some work today," he said brightly. "I've drawn up plans for improvements of the castle and would like to go over them with you."

She set down the cloth she was mending and stood quickly, giving a little curtsy of greeting. "Why, of course. What have you in mind?"

"Firstly, I would like the entire place cleaned thoroughly. I have ordered an abundance of candles so that the castle might be lighted after dark, but I don't imagine the order will be completed today. It is rather vast."

Marta raised her brows. “We have a small staff. Cleaning will take some time.”

“I do not wish to over-tax you,” Nelson assured her.

“And I intend to help. There are some pieces of furniture and some piles of cast-off things that I would like to relocate to the stables and even the village if we could. I have sent word with Troy to request a carpenter from the village come for a consultation. We can work with him to design more suitable and modern tables and chairs, I am certain.”

Marta gave a little gasp. “I believe I mistook you, M’Lord,” she said. “You say you intend to help?”

“Yes,” he assured her kindly. “I will help with the cleaning and the moving of the furniture, especially. It is unfair of me to saddle you all with such physical work without

throwing in my lot with you as well. I admit I am new to this work, but I shall roll up my sleeves and look to you for guidance.”

Poor Marta looked very near to fainting. “Guidance. My Lord, you are a marquess.”

“I am aware.”

“And you wish for me to teach you to clean.”

“I do.”

She shook her head meekly. “If you insist.”

“There is another thing,” he said, pulling out his list so she could peruse the projects he’d compiled. “I believe the fireplace in the main hall has fallen out of repair.”

“Indeed, it has not been lighted for years.”

“How did my cousin live like that? He must have been very chilled in the colder months when he was taking his meals.”

Marta shook her head. “No, My Lord. He never ate in the great hall. I suppose it was lonely, all by himself. He only took his meals in his bedchamber.” She pursed her lips, as though she disapproved of this way of living and was revealed to finally imply as much.

“I see.” Nelson pointed at the fireplace on his list. “We are going to be running a much different sort of house, Marta. We will need a fireplace so that we can host people, and to keep the castle warm and inviting even in the winter months.”

“These are ambitious tasks,” Marta began, her eyebrows drawing together in consternation.

A lesser housekeeper might have balked, but to her credit Marta squared her shoulders and rang for the rest of the staff. When they assembled, she sent Mary and Helen with Ronin to begin a systematic cleaning of the main rooms. Simon and Troy, who had just returned from delivering the messages in town, joined with Nelson to begin moving furniture, and Marta skittered to and fro, cleaning out candelabras and the great chandelier in the main hall in preparation for the candles.

Simon and Troy both seemed taken aback that the master was working alongside them, but they settled into a gentle camaraderie as they worked, and by the end of the day a good section of the lower rooms had been opened up to the fresh air and rid of outdated furniture and ornament.

“It will be a task indeed to determine what we should hang on the walls and furnish the rooms with,” Nelson mused to Marta. “I shall think on it, but for now I believe everyone is tired. Tell them to eat and rest and I will see to it their wages are doubled this period to account for the extra work.”

He slipped down to the kitchen, bone weary, and took a bit of cold meat and bread from Helen for his supper, begging off a full meal so he could eat and read in his room before an early night. On his way to his bedchamber, however, he passed

the drafty hall where he knew Vanessa's bedchamber was located. He paused a moment. Despite all the work the day had seen accomplished, they had not come near to touching that room. It was a part of the castle and would need to be cleaned eventually, and yet Nelson felt there was sacrilege in touching it. He turned, almost without thinking, as though drawn toward that heavy door and the tapestries at the end of the hall. Pausing outside a moment, he felt the old eerie chill creeping over him.

“Don't be foolish,” he scolded himself, ripping open the door and pulling the hinge loose in a single movement.

He stepped inside. The room was much as he had left it: a beautiful bedchamber with better preserved furniture and adornment than in any other part of the castle. There was one marked difference, however.

Sitting upon the bed, her back to him, was the white-clad figure of a woman with long dark hair falling loosely to her waist.

He couldn't move. He couldn't even breathe. He said nothing, just stood there staring at her back and wondering if ghosts always looked so solid; so human. He wanted her desperately to turn around, and yet he was terrified at what he might see.

He took a step closer, his feet silent on the stone. She must not have heard the door. *Did ghosts hear?* It was a foolish thought. She could not be a ghost. And yet the door had been barred from the outside. He had unbarred it himself.

As he drew nearer, he could see the fabric she was wearing and make out the line of her body beneath the dress. She was very slim, and the fabric seemed quite ornate in its pure white quality. There were tiny beads of something shimmering amongst the folds. He realized with an eerie thrill that it was a wedding dress.

Legend says she is still here, walking the halls in search of her betrothed. What a terrible time for Marta's words to come back to him, sending chills over his body.

There was only one thing for it. He had to be brave enough to call out to her; to say something and face the facts as they would come. If she faded away as an apparition, so be it. He would deal with such happenings when they occurred. It did him no good to stand there deliberating.

“My Lady,” he spoke softly, but his voice was still sudden in the still room and the form on the bed reacted immediately, standing and turning in one fluid movement.

She was not quite like the portrait. Her cheekbones were higher; her features more delicate, and the painter had done her an injustice by painting her eyes as dark when they were in fact a deep blue—but she cut a very similar picture there in her long wedding dress, her skin almost translucent it was so fair; her hair loose and dark around her pale shoulders. And there, nestled against her chest, was the brilliant red ruby pendant that she had worn in the portrait hanging just behind her on the wall. She looked startled. *I’ve never seen someone so beautiful*, he thought, *or so fragile*. She looked so pale and slight, in fact, that it almost seemed he could see through her, although he knew that was foolishness.

“Who are you?” he asked, taking a step forward.

She said nothing, frozen for a moment like a fox in the path of hunting dogs. Then she bolted, fleeing backwards towards the open window behind her. Her movements were graceful to the extreme—almost otherworldly, he thought fearfully—and when she reached the window she swung a leg over the ledge and disappeared over the edge and out of sight. For a moment he stood as though stuck to the stone floor, then he ran to the edge and looked over.

The chamber was on the second floor of the castle, just above the overgrown gardens below, but as he looked down into the fading light, he could make out no sign of the woman or of anything beyond the deep green overgrowth and the forest beyond. He suddenly didn't want to be alone in that

room with the great vast chamber to his back and no one to stand guard.

He reared back, breathing heavily, and stumbled back into the hall, bolting the door behind himself.

“This can’t be real,” he said to himself in the hallway. “It is my imagination, surely.”

But even as he spoke, Nelson knew it was not true. He was not prone to flings of fancy. Something strange and inexplicable had indeed happened here. He had been promised an adventure wherein he would grow in responsibility and show his father that he was ready to take over more duties back at home. He had expected to meet new people, to perhaps learn the running of a home and an estate, and to make mistakes along the way.

What he most certainly had not expected was to find a ghost lingering in the halls of an ancient castle. He had not expected a shade haunting the bedchamber of a tragically departed woman. He shivered in the dark hall, his candle flickering eerily on the stone walls around him.

He considered himself to be rather steady and stout-hearted, but the sight of the woman in the bedchamber had shaken him more than he cared to know. Though the flame of his candle made a small arc of warm safety, he shivered to think what was lurking in the shadows just outside that pool of dim light.

Chapter 4

Baron Harrington's manor, some twelve hours previous

Elaine walked the floor of her bedchamber, pacing the distance between the window at one end of the room and the delicate writing desk at the other in a fevered state. She had known this day would come, certainly, but now that it stared her in the face she hardly knew what to do with herself. It was all too terrible to face.

“What is the matter?” Her cousin, Trina, was sitting on the bed, tracking Elaine’s journey from side to side with some anxiety.

“How can you even ask me that?” Elaine retorted, tears rising unbidden into her throat. “You know well enough what plagues me.”

“But you have known about this marriage for months and months,” Trina said passively. She was as gentle and agreeable as Elaine was contrary and opinionated. “I know it was not your desire; I know the match doesn’t suit you, but surely you’ve waged war against this future long enough. The day has come, my dear. Wouldn’t you rather relinquish your anger and see what happiness might be found?”

“Relinquish—?” Elaine lost her words in her fury and her fear. *Why is it that I can never say what I mean when I most need the words?* “How can I give up when I feel so strongly that this is the wrong thing? My father will not listen to me. Even you, who knows my feelings regarding Sir Norbert, are suggesting I succumb to my fate.”

“I’m suggesting that it is your wedding morning, and further fighting will only bring you misery.” Trina dropped her eyes into her lap and fidgeted with the tating on her skirt. “He is not such a bad man, Sir Norbert. He is well-respected in the community—”

“He is ancient,” Elaine cried, whirling back into her pacing. “He is an old man, the age of my father, who spends his days in business, preparing, no doubt, for the day when he is too senile to manage his property alone. That day is coming, Trina, sooner than you or anyone else would like to think. I shrink at the thought of a life with him. I shrink at the thought of his touch. Can you not imagine how I feel?”

Trina’s lip trembled, and Elaine softened at once, as she always did with her cousin. Trina was too sweet-natured to be angry with for long. She only wanted Elaine’s best interest,

and Elaine knew it. She walked to the bed and sank down beside Trina, taking a gentler, pleading tone.

“They are leading me to the slaughter, Trina. They are sacrificing their only daughter for the sake of wealth and prestige and some ridiculous idea that I ought to remain a part of the peerage.”

“Your father is a baron, after all,” Trina began, then trailed off. “Perhaps he is being harsh, but Elaine—it is not as though you are in love with somebody else. You have no other prospects, and whenever your father has presented a candidate, you find something amiss. Do you remember Elizabeth Winters last year? Her father married her off to someone in the southern country, and she was so set on young Andrew Leighton from the village. At least you have no Andrew Leighton of your own to disappoint.”

Elaine sighed softly. “True, there is no one.”

“You are going to have to marry eventually, and with your father’s position as it is, you knew it was possible to be in a marriage of convenience.” Trina pinched her brows together in an expression of sympathy that would have seemed endearing to Elaine under any other circumstance.

As it was, Elaine simply felt abandoned.

Elaine shook her head, furious at the tears that kept creeping behind her eyes. She felt they were betraying her fear when she would rather lean into her anger. She didn’t want to feel vulnerable, and that’s how Sir Norbert made her feel; in every way, vulnerable.

“He will ruin my youth,” she said softly.

She stood up and walked to the tall mirror at one end of the room. The maid had already come in to dress her for the ceremony, and she stared at her reflection dully, as though looking at someone else. The white linen gown was trimmed in small sparkling beads and, despite herself, she could see that her parents had chosen a fine cut that accentuated her narrow shoulders and slim waist. Her dark hair was pinned into a modest pile of curls atop her head, and these too were studded with tiny beads and flowers that sparkled against her pale skin. *A splendid costume to wear to a public execution*, she thought wryly.

The tears were in her eyes again, and this time they ran down her cheeks and dropped gently against her chest. Trina crept up behind her and snuck her arms around Elaine’s waist,

leaning her head on her cousin's back and hugging her
comfortingly.

The door opened behind them, and Elaine saw her
mother reflected in the mirror. She wiped her tears quickly and
went to sit on the chair in the corner, turning away from the
woman who had agreed to this madness.

“My daughter,” her mother said quietly, coming in and
sitting on the stool beside Elaine. “What is the matter? This is
no way to look on your wedding day.”

Elaine turned her tear-streaked face to her mother, but
said nothing. She had voiced her protestations to her parents
over and again. If her mother thought her confusion was
merely the drama of a young girl, she was mistaken.

“She dreads the marriage,” Trina began tentatively.

Elaine’s mother put a hand on Elaine’s and began in the reasoned, logical tone she’d taken in all these conversations.

“If you wish me to say I’m sorry we could not find a match of which you would approve, perhaps you are right,” she said, her eyes gentle. “But Elaine, you must know that your father and I are older and wiser than you. We know what the world holds for a girl who thinks too highly of romance. It is unlikely that you will find a love match, and even if you did, it is unlikely that such a match would be suitable.”

Elaine still could not speak. Her throat felt paralyzed with choking up.

“Your father feels this is best,” her mother continued. “I admit I would have been happy to wait a little while longer if

it meant your happiness, but I support your father in this decision.”

That is all she had done, Elaine thought bitterly. *All she'd ever done*. She had not spoken in defence of Elaine or asked the baron to reconsider. She had only nodded along with his decision and put Elaine through the paces of buying a wedding dress, preparing to live in Sir Norbert's sprawling mansion, and scolded her about her attitude when discussing the matter in public.

All the time Elaine was thinking, her mother kept talking, patting her hand again and again.

“You know all this,” she said, her eyebrows raised as though trying to convince Elaine that she ought to finish her French lessons in time for dinner. “You have grown up

watching young women do their duty for their family—you know that none of them have a choice, and you should see that your father and I also have no choice in the matter.”

Elaine stood, pulling her hand away.

“I am sorry, Mother,” she said softly. “But I do not think I can hear any more about the propriety and correctness of this marriage right now. I know that you and father feel you have no choice in the matter, but, while I will allow I have no control over my future, I will at least beg control over my own emotions.” She stopped to draw a shaky breath. *Don't let her see you cry*, she thought. *Keep your voice steady*. “I will feel about this life sentence any way I choose. Did you come here to convince me of something, or have you some other purpose?”

Her mother stood, a pained expression on her face. “I came to say that the group has assembled at the church, and we are only waiting on you, my dear.”

Elaine turned to the mirror, wiping her tears with a fresh handkerchief. “Of course.” A thought had entered her head, subtle but persistent, and she realized she needed a moment alone. “I will be down in a moment. You and Trina may go ahead—I ought to straighten my appearance before we begin.”

She laughed inwardly at the words. No drying of tears and tidying of her attire would take that haunted look out of her eyes.

Her mother and Trina hesitated a moment, during which point Elaine saw them exchange a look of veiled understanding, and then agreed.

“Don’t be long,” her mother said in parting. “The guests are growing restless.”

Trina cast one last gaze of sympathy in Elaine’s direction, and then slipped dutifully out of the room.

Elaine waited until the door had closed behind them and then sat back on her bedspread. An idea had begun forming in her frantic mind while speaking with her mother, but it seemed too impetuous even for Elaine. *Still, is there anything more insane than my parents’ current plan for my life?* Every time she thought of a life saddled with Sir Norbert, all alternatives, no matter how reckless, seemed sane somehow.

She paused only a moment after this thought clarified in her mind, and then stood and walked to her window. She was

on the upper floor of the manor, but there was a clematis beside the window she had climbed often as a child, and it was no trouble to swing herself out onto the trellis and shimmy down to the ground.

There was no time to change out of her wedding dress, as ridiculous as it was to climb a wall in such a fine garment, and when she landed on the ground, she took off towards the forest with the shimmering fabric flying behind her in the breeze.

What is possessing me, she thought as she ran, this is madness. A baron's daughter of fine reputation, running away from her wedding under the noses of the guests! If I'm caught, I will be notorious.

It was a short run from the edge of her father's property to the forest, but she felt as though a thousand eyes were on her until she was safely hidden in the trees. Then she stopped, hid behind a large oak, and peered back at the house. There was no shouting, no search party. She breathed a sigh of relief at the realization that she had not been watched after all.

She had made her escape.

She turned away from her home and went deeper into the forest, following the trails she knew well from her childhood. She and Trina had played games here as children until their parents had mutually agreed that it was unladylike, and she felt the tension leave her body as her feet found the paths she'd known so well.

She passed a low dell filled with lush ferns and realized her direction. She was moving towards the castle whose owner had recently died—Sir Robert, she thought his name was. She had never met him, few in the village had, but he was the cause of much gossip, as rich recluses often are. Furthermore, the castle had a connection to her own father's family and he kept abreast of its business out of sentimentality.

“The place would be a beast to run, so I suppose it's a blessing our ancestors lost it all those years ago,” he would say. Elaine had never really believed his was happy to be without the castle. A beast or not, it was a beautiful structure. She'd seen it before, but from a distance.

It was a long walk from her home, but she could think of nowhere else to go. She could not go back, and she could not spend the night in the highlands where wild beasts could tear

her apart, or scoundrels and bandits could beset her. This Sir Robert had passed away. He kept a small staff, that much she remembered, but even if a few of them still remained at the castle—which was unlikely—she hoped there weren't enough loyal servants to watch every room in the castle.

She could surely slip into some side hall or abandoned parapet, sneak down to steal food every once in a while, and hide there until she could think what to do. It was a bold plan, and its primary attraction to Elaine was that she knew her father would never think of it. *He would never guess that his little Elaine would have the courage to smuggle herself into a castle, she thought. Nor would he imagine I have the ingenuity to stay out of sight so close to home, practically under his nose.*

She thought again of her father's words, likening the castle to a lost relic or family heirloom.

“You can still see the historic architecture and furnishings that my ancestors used, or so they say,” he had explained to Elaine when she was but a child. “A great history we have, and you ought to know it.”

That history had done nothing to keep from me the miserable fate my parents had chosen for me, Elaine thought bitterly, but at least the castle would provide her one service. It was not as though she was even stealing from the memory of poor Sir Robert—the castle would be all but vacated, and even if it wasn't, surely a corner of reprieve was owed to me after all my ancestors went through?

With thoughts like these, rapid-fire and hardly sensical, Elaine made her way to the other side of the forest and stood looking up at the great stone walls with anticipation. She took a deep, shuddering breath, and stepped forward. All that remained was to find a way to get inside without being seen.

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About Fanny Finch

Fanny Finch was born in United Kingdom but moved to Denver, Colorado when she was very young. She attended Washington University where she studied for several years and she now lives with her husband and their bulldog.

Upon leaving university, Fanny found a job as a proof reader for a small press. There, she honed her skills and also met and worked with author Abby Ayles, who helped her polish her books to perfection.

But she is also an author in her own right and is working hard to become recognized as such as she starts to publish her own novels through her website. Her genre is in the Historical Regency Romance category and if you like your reading material to be emotionally clean then you will be undoubtedly thrilled by the characters and scenarios Fanny develops.

When she has time to relax, Fanny enjoys listening to opera music and taking long walks in the outdoors. She writes

almost every day as well and hopes to produce many more great books in the future. You can contact Fanny Finch through her website, or download a free copy of her books at: fannyfinch.com

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