

ADDING UP

to

Love

Book One of the Flower Sisters

GINNY B. MOORE

Adding Up to Love

Book One of the Flower Sisters Series

Ginny B. Moore

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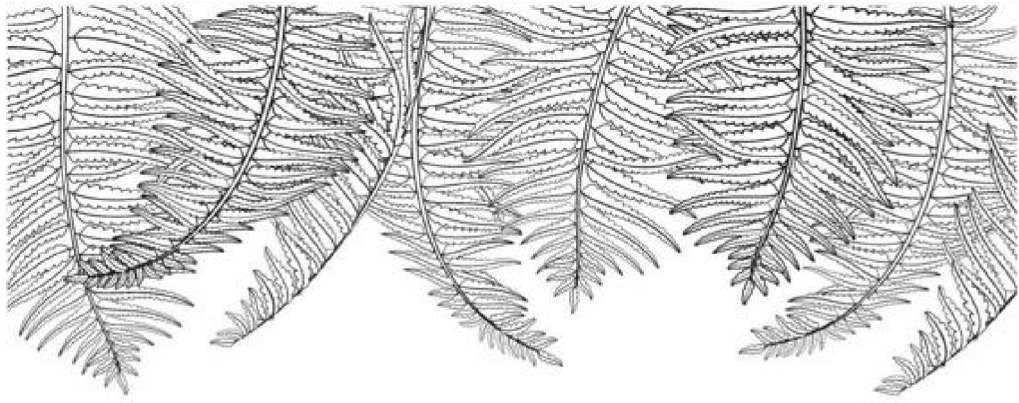
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An excerpt from *Where You Are*

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Chapter 1

Oxfordshire, April 1899

“**F**ERN!”

Fern huffed out a breath, wishing for a third arm so she could cover her ears without putting down her book. Her mother had been screeching louder and louder for the past fifteen minutes, even sending up an unwitting maid and a reluctant footman, before the mounting frustration in the woman’s voice made her feelings obvious to anyone within a mile of their estate. Two decades of experience ignoring her mother’s demands were rendered moot when the Viscountess Redborne wanted to go shopping.

Fern’s eyes darted over the engrossing volume of statistical analysis, hoping to steal a few more minutes with the text. She loved finding the patterns, predicting the future from the configurations, and seeing the beauty inherent in the numbers.

“Fern!”

Fern flinched at the noise and dropped the book to the floor as she got to her feet. “I’m coming!” She pulled on her low boots and a fawn sweater over her forest green muslin dress, then dashed down the stairs to meet her mother and sisters in

the foyer of their home. The ancient walls of Boar's Hill, the ancestral seat of the Redborne viscountcy in Oxfordshire, overflowed with family heirlooms and portraits of past viscounts, screaming of the rich history of their hallowed ancestors. The eyes of long-deceased forebearers seemed to follow Fern in silent judgment as she tromped down the stairs.

The slack jaws and wide eyes of three of the Waverly women met Fern's arrival. She knew that look: she had done *something wrong*. Her life was full of moments where she did something wrong or said something wrong. Fern gave herself a mental once-over. *Wearing appropriate shoes? Yes. Dressed correctly for the weather and social situation? Yes, or close enough for my purposes.*

"Fern," her twin sister Rose whispered, widening her eyes and then patting her own head.

Oh, yes, her hair. She should probably brush it. Being twenty years of age, Fern should have a better grip on managing her appearance, at least according to her mother. Having dispensed with the use of a ladies' maid years ago, a necessity since the employment services refused to send any more to the house, the responsibility for Fern's upkeep was entirely in her hands.

She turned on her heel and dashed upstairs, ran a brush through her fine brown hair enough times until she could sweep it back in a simple knot. She looked in the mirror for anything else her mother may object to, referring to the portrait she had posted next to her vanity.

Frustrated with her mother's incessant disapproval of her appearance, Fern drew a sketch of herself when she appeared presentable: hair smooth and pulled back from her pale cheeks, dress neat and without stains, boots or slippers on her feet. Fern captured a remarkable likeness of her body on paper, but not her face. She never drew faces. While the symmetry of the human body fascinated her, she could never capture the human visage without it seeming inhuman, soulless and cold on the page.

Straightening the collar of her dress, she confirmed it lacked stains and she was, in fact, wearing boots and stockings. She nodded once at her reflection in approval and bounded down the stairs.

Lady Clara Waverly, Viscountess Redborne, began dressing her five daughters in colors matching their names from the moment they arrived in the world. White for the eldest daughter Lily, yellow for their second, Marigold. Her third daughter Violet waited at the bottom of the stairs in a walking dress the exact shade of the heliotrope blooming in the garden, topped with a purple velvet hat adorned with a long purple feather. Rose's more understated pink wool skirt, fitted pink jacket, and white topper embellished with pink roses did not distract from her beauty but emphasized her narrow waist and gleaming chestnut brown curls.

Blast. Fern had forgotten her hat. She turned to fetch it when she heard her mother release a heaving sigh. Again. "We haven't time, Fern. Mrs. Hastings is waiting to give you the

final fitting before tomorrow night.” Shaking her head, Lady Redborne shooed her girls forward into the waiting carriage.

Chatter about the upcoming party filled the brief but bumpy ride into Oxford proper.

“Your father will be so surprised by this year’s event,” the viscountess remarked, sitting back on the plush velvet cushions.

“This party happens every year for his birthday, Mama,” Fern said. “How would he be surprised?”

“Because he will be sixty,” Rose retorted, as though achieving this milestone was akin to discovering a previously unknown continent. “And we have never hosted a masquerade before!”

“The masquerade was a brilliant idea, Rose!” Violet beamed. “How exciting!”

“We had masquerades often when I was a girl, but they went out of fashion,” Lady Redborne told her daughters. “I am thrilled to bring them back into style.”

“It will be glorious, completely unique, and utterly decadent!” Rose squealed with delight.

“And besides, it will be important to put forward a good face,” Lady Redborne continued, her jaw tightening. “In light of...what happened.”

Three pairs of eyes shot to Violet, whose elfin form crumpled into itself as she stared at her lap. Violet’s broken engagement a month prior represented a black stain on the

family's reputation, unfairly assigned to Violet considering she had been blindsided by her fiancé's unfaithful behavior. How cruel women always bore the brunt of gentlemen's misdeeds.

Lady Redborne cleared her throat. "The party will be a great success for you as well, Vi."

Fern sat silently, counting the fir trees they passed on the way, exhaling slowly through her nose. It added up to twenty-seven every time they made the trip. She was always deeply satisfied when she reached the final tree, as though everything was right in the world. Counting trees was one of several routines she relied upon when her body began to tense, overwhelmed by the chaos of the world around her.

The fine hairs on Fern's arms rose in slowly mounting panic as her mother recited the list of guests who would be in attendance, from everyone of importance in Oxfordshire to social elites who would make the short trip from London. Nothing distressed Fern more than people, except perhaps having to impress those people.

Her mother was *popular*, as Rose explained to her twin on multiple occasions, meaning the viscountess filled her days with social calls, teas, card games, dinners, and balls. She maintained both a country home and a London townhouse, had credits at every trendy shop, and dressed at the height of fashion.

"And, of course, my dear aunt Margaret will arrive from Hampshire tomorrow," Lady Redborne said, casting quick glances at her daughters. Violet's eyes went as wide as saucers

while Rose winced. Fern grinned. Her father once remarked that Fern inherited her bluestocking tendencies from her bookish and eccentric aunt and enjoyed it when the unpredictable woman came to visit.

“Will she be chaperoning us?” Violet asked, the trepidation in her voice barely contained.

“You girls are too old for chaperones,” she replied. “When I was a girl, simply being seen in a man’s presence was enough to be compromised, but it’s different now with you modern girls.”

Violet breathed a sigh of relief while Rose’s eyes sparkled. “So we can visit with gentlemen—”

“In public, or with one of your sisters.” Lady Redborne eyed her daughters, a deep furrow emerging between her brows. “You are clever girls. Do not cause trouble for your father tonight.”

Fern sank further into her seat. Her mother would never have to worry about *her* being alone with a man.

“You know how important your father is, my dears,” Lady Redborne droned on. “And he loves you girls above all else.”

As the unwanted, unexpected, and unprecedented fifth daughter of one of Oxfordshire’s few remaining prominent members of the peerage, Fern was, like her garden namesake, relatively unnoticed in the presence of her sisters. London society had given them the moniker of The Flower Sisters, the talk of the town when they walked the streets of Oxford, even

more so when they traveled to London for the season. The girls were known for their beauty, social graces, and sparkling wit. Lord and Lady Redborne raised their children with unabashed adoration and pride.

Rose, at the moment of her birth, became the shining light of the family. With her gleaming chestnut brown curls that seemed to glow from within, to her bright emerald green eyes and sparkling smile, Rose brought a certain ebullient bliss to the Waverly home.

Fern was a dull reflection of her twin, as though someone looked at Rose's image in a dusty mirror, dimmer and duller around the edges. She rarely brushed her lank brown hair, pulling it aside in a haphazard knot to reveal her face, less heart-shaped and more pointed at the chin, her lashes pale and often indistinguishable from her pallid, freckled face. Where Rose's smile made her eyes sparkle, Fern's lips rarely parted with joy. Her eyes were her lone remarkable feature, hazel sparkling like pieces of amber embedded in moss.

Unfortunately, sparkling eyes that never emerged from the pages of a book did not constitute a social grace.

The ladies descended from the carriage in front of a smart clothing shop on High Street, not yet open to the general public. For the Flower Sisters, daughters of Oxford's most powerful aristocrat, the shopkeepers kept special hours. Fern's feet had not yet reached the pavement when her mother and sisters darted into the cramped but tidy store.

Fern sighed. She hated visiting the modiste. The process of selecting fabric was heavenly, feeling each bolt of cloth, letting it run through her fingers like flowing water. But after those initial moments, it became unbearable. Standing partially dressed in front of a stranger, letting said stranger touch her body, wrap fabric around her, pin her, while she held perfectly still. *Dreadful*. Inevitably her mother would override her choice of fabric, moving away from soft cottons and linens to stiffer fabric that would “flatter her silhouette.” Whatever that meant.

She sat in a tufted chair, picking at the coarse fabric and waiting for her turn in the torture chamber. She began tapping her slim fingers on her thighs, the routine smoothing the rough edges of her nerves. The seemingly random tapping was anything but. She exhaled slowly through her nose as the familiar motions of Mozart’s *Rondo ala turca*, her favorite piece, slid from her fingers. As children, all five girls learned to play the piano, but only Fern fell in love with the instrument. She was fascinated by the patterns of the notes, how mere dots on a page could create chords, that when paired with dynamics actually created emotions that left her near weeping.

Rose burst through the curtains wearing her newest custom creation. Cascading layers of peachy pink spilled from the high waist, delicate embroidery sparkling across the bodice and along the hemline. Her cheeks flushed to nearly an identical color and pure joy glimmered in her eyes. “Oh Mama, it’s perfect!” she gushed.

Her mother and Violet gasped in unison before stumbling over each other in praise. “Simply delightful!” “A beauty of the highest caliber!” “You will be the star of the night!”

Fern knew her twin was happy. Rose’s emotions were the only ones Fern could consistently understand. She simply could not comprehend why a mere dress would make her sister react so strongly.

Dresses made it hard to climb trees so she could watch the stars. Dresses kept her from running up the stairs as quickly as she wished while carrying large stacks of books. Dresses tangled in her legs when she was trying to find a comfortable position on the settee in the library. Dresses were for ladies.

Which Fern most decidedly was not. At least, not according to her mother and her disappointed sighs.

Fern forced a smile, making sure the corner of her eyes wrinkled. She had observed the qualities of Rose’s smile, then tried to copy them. Crinkly-eyed smiles seemed to please her mother.

“Well,” Lady Redborne said, clapping her hands once and causing Fern to jump. “Fern, it’s your turn, then we shall try Violet.” Fern flinched as she walked to the raised dais at the center of the room as though she were stepping up to the gallows. By the time she was down to her chemise, Fern’s stomach was roiling. When the loose fabric was dropped over her head, her teeth clenched. As the seamstress began pinning and tucking, Fern’s entire body twitched and squirmed in response, her head pounding.

“Fern, please.” Her mother’s brows furrowed as she examined her youngest daughter. “Hold still.”

“I’m trying,” she ground out, clenching her fists.

“Mrs. Hastings cannot possibly get a good fit if you won’t hold still.”

“I won’t be holding still when I’m wearing the dress, so shouldn’t she make it with that in mind?” Fern snapped back, her flailing arm knocking into Mrs. Hasting’s hand and scattering a dozen pins over the floor.

Mrs. Hastings gasped, Rose and Violet winced, and Lady Redborne’s cheeks turned crimson. Fern bit her lips until she began to lose feeling around her mouth. Her clenched fists twitched at her side, her breathing ragged in her chest. She forced her gaze to the woman paralyzed at her side. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, so low with shame she was not sure the seamstress heard her.

“Fern,” Rose murmured, stepping onto the dais. Her voice soothed Fern’s soul like a balm. Rose was often the only one who could reach Fern when she lost control. Rose taught her sister to read the faces of others, how to put the positions of the eyes, nose, and mouth together in a formula to equal an emotion. “You’ll need to have the dress ready for the ball. Mama will be so happy to see you looking lovely.”

Fern dropped her chin to her chest. She couldn’t disappoint her mother, yet again. Lady Redborne possessed a nearly infinite well of patience, but when dealing with her youngest daughter it seemed to run dry, and with increasing frequency.

She never raised her voice, or expressed her disdain in explicit words, but a mere sigh or look communicated volumes.

“Perhaps,” Fern said, her voice trembling as she focused on releasing her clenched hands, “I should not attend the party tomorrow. I wouldn’t want to embarrass you.” She hazarded a glance towards her mother. The woman’s delicate face focused on her lap, her cheeks flushed. Violet stared at her slippers as though memorizing the embroidery on her toes. Mrs. Hastings hunched over the pile of discarded pins, sweeping them up with little huffs of annoyance.

“This is not up for discussion, Fern,” Rose said gently. “Papa would be so disappointed if you were not there.”

“He never notices me.” That wasn’t entirely true. Lord Redborne and his youngest daughter shared an intense bond, unique among the sisters. At the age of three, she started taking books from her father’s library. Her mother was certain her daughter was merely mimicking her father’s actions, but Lord Redborne disagreed. When she was seven, she began reading the ledgers for her father’s estates. Once her father found her writing the figures from memory on her chalk slate.

Perhaps she’s brilliant, her father said to her mother one evening, as they watched Fern writing furiously in one of her ubiquitous notebooks. Her governess had taken to buying them in bulk whenever they went into town.

She’s writing nonsense, her mother said, her voice heavy and brows furrowed. Her father knew it was not nonsense, but a collection of words she had found while reading advanced

tomes in the library. He had asked Fern about the words and why she had written them. She said she liked the way the words felt on her tongue.

But the connection between father and daughter did not exist beyond the walls of the library. It was as though having the world of numbers and words to connect them, they could discard social pretensions. The library was a conduit between them, a buffer allowing them to interact at the level Fern could manage. Not completely vulnerable, but somehow more comfortable for the distance.

“You know that isn’t true.” Rose took the pins from Mrs. Hastings and nodded at the seamstress, wordlessly encouraging her to continue the fitting, although the woman was so tense she seemed like she was prepared to dodge an attack at any moment.

Mrs. Hastings wasn’t entirely unjustified. Fern was a fiery child, obstinate, and intransigent. She never seemed to build up to her tantrums the way her sisters did, she simply went from deadly calm to explosive in the blink of an eye. No one saw her signs, felt her begin to tremble, saw her fingers tap increasingly quickly. They only saw her combust.

“You will have a lovely new dress,” Rose continued, her voice low and reassuring, almost chantlike. “And you will celebrate Papa’s birthday, and I will be by your side all night.” Rose smiled, her brilliant emerald eyes glimmering with affection.

The rest of the fitting passed uneventfully. Fern and Mrs. Hastings survived the encounter with minimal damage, Violet glowed in her new amethyst silk concoction, and the quartet of women burst back onto the street an hour later in modest spirits.

Violet and her mother strolled ahead, heads close as they discussed the tasks they would need to accomplish before tomorrow's event. Rose linked her arm with Fern's and stroked her hand.

"She doesn't love me like she does you and Violet." Fern made the declaration flatly, as though stating a fact about the weather. "I don't blame her."

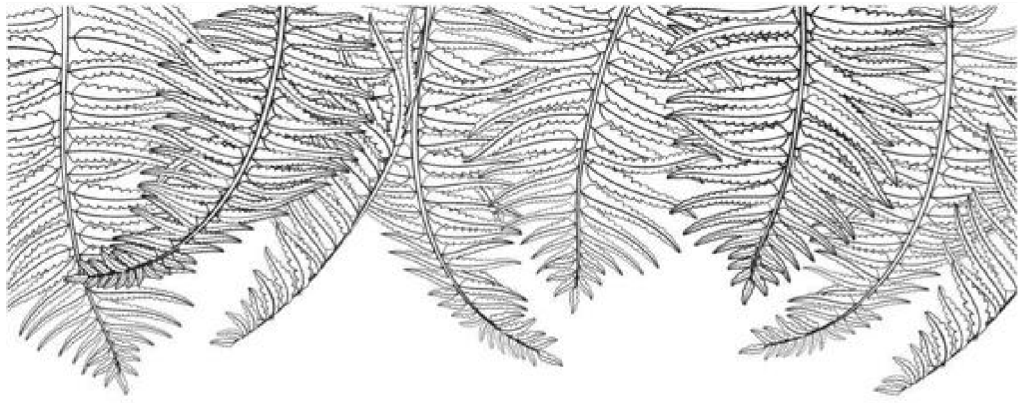
This was not the first time Fern had made this pronouncement, and Rose stood prepared with an answer. "That is untrue, and you know it. You're too hard on yourself."

"I'm too difficult," Fern replied. "Don't pretend I'm not. I'm not stupid."

Rose laughed. Her laughter was like bubbles in a glass, delicate and beautiful as they alighted to the surface and burst into the air. "You are anything but stupid." They passed two storefronts before she spoke again. "You must believe you are worthy of love before you can expect it from someone else."

Rose squeezed Fern's arm. The girls stopped in front of a brightly painted shop, its windows overflowing with feathers and ribbons—hats were next on the agenda. "Shall we?" she asked with a beaming smile.

Fern released her breath in a rush before setting her face in resignation. "I do not believe I have a choice."



Chapter 2

“THIS PARTY IS A celebration of your father, and all he has done for Oxfordshire as a viscount,” Lady Redborne intoned for what must have been the hundredth time that day, not even counting the number of reminders the girls received in the preceding weeks. She sipped her tea and looked at her daughters from the head of the breakfast table like a queen considering her subjects. “Tonight will be a chance to remind our guests of how important he has become.”

Fern stared out the window and tried to lose herself in the familiar sights of her mother’s beloved garden, the twists and turns of rose bushes, hydrangeas, and creeping ivy.

“Do you have a gift for your father, Fern?”

She jumped at her mother’s words, then nodded, lifting her chin with a smile. “I do, he’ll love it.”

Her heart warmed as she remembered the bundle under her bed. She had found a mid-19th-century history of Oxford University in one of the many town bookshops and wrapped it meticulously in some of her sketches of the campus.

When she was fourteen, Fern traveled with her father from their estate to Oxford so he could meet with their property manager. Lord Redborne had promised his daughter a trip to a bookstore in exchange for what he hoped to be a bit of time introducing her to other people and perhaps coaxing a smile from the reticent child. Lord Redborne had called in some favors and, as it was beneficial to be a viscount in Oxfordshire, walked an astounded Fern into the Bodleian Libraries. The arched wooden roofs resembling an overturned ship soared over ancient study carrels. Stacks of books reached towards the rafters, lending the air a scent of worn leather, dust, and paper. She was enchanted. It took all of Lord Redborne's effort to pry her from the building before the doors locked for the night. As they left, Fern gripped her father's hand, a rare physical connection.

"I want to study here, Papa."

Lord Redborne gave his daughter a placating smile before taking her for a flavored ice.

Her dream was an impossibility. Women were not welcome among the intellectual elite, and the university relegated the few female students who had enrolled in the past ten years to studying above bakeries or during off hours, and only in subjects such as classics and art. Mathematics and sciences, the subjects that best captured Fern's attention, remained the domain of men alone.

Fern had already read her father's book, committing a detailed map of the Bodleian to memory. It was rare for

women who were not students to be allowed inside, so this text was as close as she might get to setting foot on the premises, to be enveloped in a universe of words and knowledge and genius.

Fern felt about Oxford the way fish must feel about water. It was simply wrong for her not to be immersed in it. But “proper ladies” (as her mother was wont to remind her) did not bury their heads in books or indulge in their bluestocking fantasies. Attending poetry lectures or art exhibitions was a fine pastime, but to earn a degree? How utterly plebeian.

“I need to run into town again this morning,” Rose said. “I was so excited about my new reticule that I completely forgot to buy a ribbon for my hat.”

“But Rose, I need you to help me with the flowers,” her mother lamented. “No one has an eye for arranging like you.”

“I’ll go back,” Fern spat out, surprising the others and herself. “You showed me the ribbon you wanted to buy yesterday, so I don’t mind picking it up. And perhaps I can visit the bookstore for a few minutes while I am there?” she added, her voice raising in question. Thinking of her father’s book made her itch for something new to read, a distraction from the party preparations.

Lady Redborne’s nose twitched as though she were smelling something pungent. “You can never stay in a bookstore for a few minutes. I always have to get you and you cause such a scene.”

Fern suppressed the desire to snarl. It had been one time, *one time!* And it was patently unfair to pull her away from reading Dante's *Inferno* when she had finally gotten to the damnation part. When her mother had arrived to remove her from the premises, Fern flatly refused, and not politely, judging from the shocked expressions on the bookseller's and other patrons' faces.

"It will be brief, I swear it, Mama," Fern pleaded. "And besides, I would like to pick up something else for Papa for his birthday. He is so good to me, after all." Her mother was likely to drag her into helping prepare for the party, and if she was lucky Rommel, one of the senior footmen well-accustomed to Fern's idiosyncrasies, would accompany her.

Fern softened her face—she and Rose had practiced in a mirror, memorizing how it felt to put on a pleasant expression. "Mama, I will bring Rommel. He will let me know when it has been exactly thirty minutes, and then I will return. *Without* making a scene."

Lady Redborne sighed once more. *It can't be healthy for her lungs to do that all the time*, Fern thought. "You may go," her mother said severely. "But you must be home by luncheon, no later."

Fern jumped to her feet. "Thank you, Mama!" Fern's grin split her pale face in two, and stayed bright long after she had departed in the carriage and made the bumpy return into town. The trip seemed almost interminable as her excitement built. When the carriage finally rolled to a stop on Catte Street, she

burst out the door onto the cobblestones, the intoxicating feeling of freedom rushing through her veins like a potent drug.

“Thirty minutes, Miss Fern,” Rommel reminded her, his voice taking a mock-stern tone. “I am going to the bakery but will wait for you here.”

“Of course,” she said with a mischievous smile. Rommel had stopped just down the street from the university campus, knowing how much she enjoyed walking around the hallowed institution of learning. “And thank you.”

He tipped his hat before striding in the opposite direction. She walked with purpose down Catte Street until she could see the soaring dome of the Bodleian Libraries looming over the surrounding medieval buildings, soaking up history with each step. Walking up to the gargantuan wooden doors, she swept inside on a wave of students clearly too concerned with their own academic pursuits to notice the young woman in their midst.

Envisioning the diagrams she had committed to memory, Fern knew the exact path to her destination, despite having never set foot on its premises. *Up the main stairs, down the hallway to the left. Two rights, and there!* She stepped into a cavernous, if dusty and somewhat dank, room. Arched stone ceilings soared over scratched wooden tables as though guarding the knowledge in the shelves and shelves of books stretching in every direction. On a Saturday morning, it did not surprise her to find the mathematics library deserted.

Greedily she ran her fingers over the titles. The names of classical mathematicians danced before her eyes. Euclid. Pythagoras. Euler. Leibniz. She envisioned her own name among these volumes. *Someday*. The selections nearly overcame her as she pulled out titles by Cardano and Hypatia before picking modern selections by De Morgan and Cayley.

The pile on the library table had grown to teetering heights when a title on a high shelf caught her eye. A dusty copy of Descartes' *Meditations* was tucked between several volumes of Newton. Her eyebrow quirked, bothered by this flagrant misclassification of material, but her heart thumped in anticipation. She had heard of the *Meditations* but had never read them, her father having declared metaphysical philosophy "deeply unsettling."

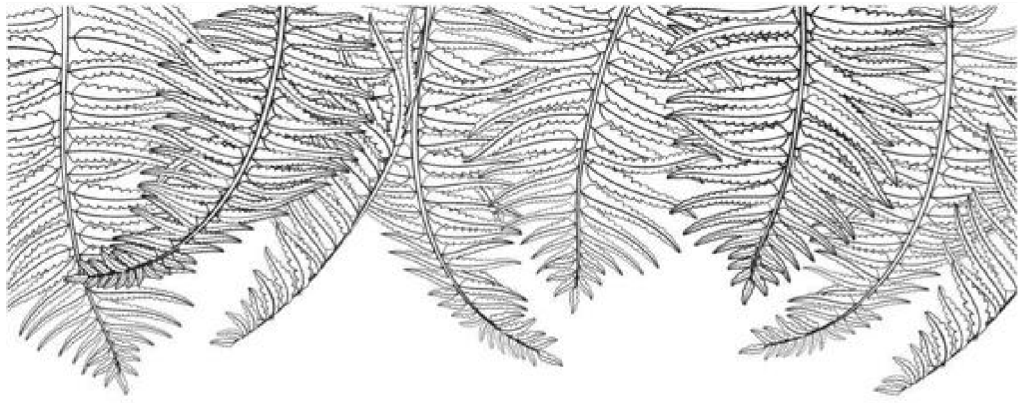
Fern reached for the forbidden fruit, desperate for the knowledge it would bring. But she couldn't quite reach. She tried to climb up the shelves, but her blasted skirt kept getting in the way. She pushed a chair in front of the shelf and stood on it, but the spine remained beyond her touch. Glancing around to make sure she was truly alone, she unbuttoned her boots (the bottoms were slick and terrible for climbing, as she had learned one unfortunate day in the neighbor's orchard) and pulled them aside. She pushed one of the heavy tables over toward the shelves, cringing at the *screeech* it made as the legs scratched across the floor.

Climbing on the table, she perched her toes on the edge of the surface and leaned. So close, she could practically smell the aged, musty smell of the pages. *A bit...further...*

“What are you doing!”

She started, twisting to see the source of the reprimand.

And then she fell.



Chapter 3

ALEXANDER CARROWAY'S HEAD WAS buried in his own work, dissecting the collected anthologies of Carl Friedrich Gauss. The *Princeps mathematicorum* was nearly committed to memory, as Alex would present his doctoral dissertation on the subject in four weeks' time. Focus was of the utmost importance. Too much of his future was riding on his presentation to allow for distraction.

A curious sound from the main hall of the library broke Alex's fierce concentration. He perked up. No one was ever here on a Saturday morning, as most students were still sleeping off the previous night's escapades.

Alex scratched at his notes, blacking out several words before trying again. And again. *Keep your focus.* Persistence was a strong suit. His tutors praised this trait so frequently that he considered it his defining characteristic, challenging his precocious mind and instilling in him a great sense of pride in his abilities.

And he was well on his way to achieving his dream. At twenty-seven years of age, he was far and away the top

mathematics scholar at Oxford who had not yet joined the faculty. This achievement had not come without sacrifice. He lived the life of a monk instead of a typical university student, devoting his life to his studies. His friends nagged him constantly, urging him to come out and share a pint or chase local girls. He allowed many friendships to wither away in the wake of his studies, mourning the loss but understanding it would eventually lead to a larger gain.

Of course he had regrets. At this very moment, his best friend Henry was most likely sleeping off a wild night of debauchery or possibly returning to his own room after spending the night in the arms of a local shop girl he fancied. Henry had the luxury of enjoying social life in Oxford and in London, sparing enough of his hours to attend the bare minimum of lectures to maintain student status.

It was not as though Alex lacked opportunities to experience life at its fullest, or at least fuller than the library alone. He was aware he was a reasonably good-looking man. His wavy auburn hair, bright blue eyes, angular features, and long, lean frame earned enough appreciative stares to convince Alex that he was at least passably attractive.

But he could not afford the distraction of women. Goals required sacrifice. Unlike most of his peers, he did not have a family fortune to inherit or a lucrative business he would run after term ended. Oxford was far from a haven from responsibilities, but the place where he would prove his worth. He had to create his own future, and he would make a name

for himself without assistance. And he couldn't make his name satisfying his basest desires.

There was the sound again. The distinct noise of furniture scraping on the ancient wooden floors echoed in his ears. Alex stood, his jaw clenched, intent on weeding out the cause of this flagrant interruption.

He stepped into the main corridor and froze. There was a girl—a *girl!*—standing barefoot on a table laden with books, leaning precariously towards the shelves. A green dress, far finer than what he typically saw amongst women in town, hung off her slim form. Wisps of light brown hair escaped the knot at her neck. Her face twisted in concentration as she stretched one arm out.

Alex couldn't hold back his exasperation as he cried out. "What are you doing!"

The girl twisted in mid-air, her eyes wide as she lost her footing and tumbled. He reached her side in two quick strides, just in time to block her fall, sending both of them sprawling into a heap of skirts on the hard library floor.

Alex sat up as best he could as the girl, a young woman upon closer inspection, pushed herself off his chest. His arm had wrapped around her waist and he pulled away, propping himself back up to his feet. He glowered down at her. "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

She looked as though she was thoroughly annoyed with his rescue, brushing off her arms and narrowing her gaze. "I'm reading. Why else would I be here?"

He stood dumbfounded and more than a bit perturbed. Alex Carroway did not enjoy feeling dumb, and he certainly did not appreciate the distraction. The library was *sacred*. He had spent the past eight years of his life in this space, and he was not about to let it become a tourist attraction for local girls. “You’re not supposed to be in here. This library is for mathematics students only.”

“I am a mathematics student.” She must have read his incredulous look correctly, because she clarified, adding, “Well, not a mathematics student *here*, but a student nonetheless.”

The girl popped to her feet with remarkable alacrity before looking back to the shelf, presumably at the book she had been reaching for. “Can you help me a bit?”

“Excuse me?”

She turned and huffed. Then she spoke slowly, as though he were simple. “I said, Can. You. Help. Me?”

Alex shook his head. How had she gotten in here, and was she out of her mind? “You can’t have a book. They’re for mathematics students *here* only.”

“Well, the problem is that this book,” she said, pointing at Descartes’ *Meditations*, “is obviously mis-shelved. It should be with books on philosophy, not mathematics. Clearly, the librarian saw ‘Descartes’ and thought mathematics, as most people would, but you see this book is not about mathematics, at least as far as I know, because I haven’t read it, and that is why I would very much like to read it. And because it is not a

mathematics book, and it's in the wrong place, clearly there is no reason for this book to be exclusively limited to mathematics students, wouldn't you think?"

She had managed to strike Alex temporarily mute. The girl looked at him with wide eyes and a slight smile, as though waiting for him to accept her analysis.

He squared his shoulders and lifted his chin, drawing inspiration from his most intimidating professors. "If I give you this book, will you leave at once?"

Her eyes lit up. "Yes, of course!" The sheer euphoria in her voice gave him pause, but Alex stepped past her before he could dwell on it, nearly tripping over her discarded boots. His eyes flicked to her stocking feet and back to her face. She hardly seemed embarrassed by her state of dress, merely eager to get her hands on the book as she bounced on her toes.

He climbed on a chair and reached the desired book, but held it tight in his hands. "Come with me," he barked. She followed as he strode out of the library, but when he stopped she nearly slammed into his back. "You'll need your shoes."

She sighed heavily and then ran back, pulling her skirt up to her knees to put on her boots. He looked away, rubbing his brow. *This is ridiculous. There must be something wrong with her.*

She jumped to her feet. "I'm ready. May I have the book now?" She put out her hand and smiled broadly, her eyes sparkling in the dim light.

Alex turned with a grumble and continued his strident steps out of the library toward the street. He could hear her keeping pace behind him, so he did not stop until they were out in the blinding sunlight. When he turned again, she nearly collided with him once more. She clearly had no sense of boundaries.

“Do you swear you will return this within the week?” he asked her solemnly, looking directly into her eyes. *They are remarkable*, he thought, despite his irritation. Such a unique color, like copper flecks in an emerald.

“Yes. Probably before then.” She extended her hand again.

Alex looked at her with narrowed eyes. “Before then? You do realize it’s in the original French.”

She rolled her eyes. Had no one told her how rude she looked? “*Je ne suis pas idiote*. I read French. And I read quickly.”

Wanting this bizarre interaction to end as quickly as possible, Alex handed over the book without asking further questions. He tilted his head back and looked toward the sky, exhaling on a huff. “Please take care of it,” he said.

She stared at the book in her hands, running her fingers over the gold imprinted letters of the title. “I shall.”

“May I ask,” he said, his curiosity getting the better of him, “what do you want with it? It’s not exactly...reading for young ladies.”

Her eyes shot back to him, a trace of pity in her expression. “You wouldn’t understand, not when you have anything you

would like to read available to you at a moment's notice. You should be grateful for it.”

The curious girl turned and started to walk away. As Alex turned to return to his work, he heard her call out. “Wait!”

He stared at her as she approached, terrified of what she might request next. His father had always warned Alex not to feed stray animals for they are likely to return and ask for more. Would she expect an entire encyclopedia next?

“What’s it like?”

Alex blinked. “Pardon?”

“What’s it like,” she repeated, “to learn here? To have every piece of knowledge the world has ever known available to you? To speak your mind and have people respect you for it?”

Never in his life had someone left him as speechless as he had been during the few minutes with this young woman. I’ve never thought about it that way,” he said haltingly. “Yes, I suppose it is wonderful.”

She smiled, clearly pleased to have stumped him. “It’s nice to meet you.” She turned away again, eyes already back in her book.

“Wait!” he called, instantly aggravated that he was echoing her. “You never told me your name. Who are you?”

Again, she turned, then slapped her hand to her forehead. “How rude of me. I’m Fern.”

His eyebrow quirked. “Fern?”

“Yes,” she said. “It’s nice to meet you.” She spun on her heel and slipped into the crowd, maneuvering her way down towards High Street, never lifting her eyes from the book.

Alex shook his head, watching her slight form disappear into a mass of people. *What an unusual girl*, he thought. *I’m so glad to be rid of her.*

She was certainly the most interesting thing that had happened to him in quite some time, he thought as he marched back to the library, eager to resume his work. Although finding their encounter interesting damned her with faint praise, considering how painfully dull his life had become. His work was his passion, and he enjoyed it thoroughly, but now with his future standing so close at hand, he was somewhat... dissatisfied? As though the dream he had worked for years to achieve somehow was no longer sufficient.

Alex was still thinking about the odd girl when he returned to his room in Pembroke College that evening. It was just before supper, much earlier than Alex typically retired, but he could not seem to focus on his work. As he unlocked his door, he saw the slender form of Lord Henry Winchester, current Viscount Morley and future Earl of Fensworth, striding towards him, a sly grin on the young nobleman’s face. Henry had the distinct luxury of having studies as a hobby, something to pass the time until receiving his earldom. He was currently working at a snail’s pace towards a degree in English literature—or was it history now?—eager to avoid spending more time under the current Fensworth’s tutelage.

“Alex,” Henry drawled. Clearly, he had already been imbibing, or perhaps had not yet stopped from the night before. “I didn’t know you could find your way back at this hour. Have you solved all the mysteries of the universe yet?”

Alex pursed his lips and glared at his friend. They had interacted this way since their first few days in undergraduate at Pembroke when the two found themselves locked out of the college gates. Alex had been in the library, and Henry had discovered a nearby pub with a collection of particularly buxom servers, but their simultaneous stranding at the gates after curfew left them united in a mission to find a way in without alerting the guards and facing punishment. Together they had scaled a trellis, walked along a six-foot-high stone wall, and leapt into a rosebush to avoid detection. When they arrived back at their rooms, clothing torn, covered in scratches, and laughing hysterically, they were friends for life.

While their friendship was pure, Alex could not avoid envying Henry for the privileges his birth allowed him. Henry would inherit a powerful title, and his status as a member of the peerage would give him connections and security in his future. Henry was free to enjoy his time, and spend money as he wished, sparing not a single thought about the security of his future. Alex spent his free time tutoring and studying, saving his funds, and planning his next steps with care. While he was proud of his choices, Alex could not help but feel resentment when Henry stood before him in evening clothes, ready for a night on the town.

“No,” Alex said, “there are many mysteries yet to be solved. I assume you’re planning to find some trouble tonight?”

Henry laughed, tipping his head back. “Would it be a Saturday without trouble? And you’re coming with me.”

He did not have space in his life for the type of trouble Henry enjoyed. Although Alex never read the scandal sheets, Henry was their primary subject, cataloging his exploits like the heroes of ancient Greece. Despite his love of roguish behavior, Henry was loyal to a fault, the type of friend Alex was grateful to have found.

Shaking his head, Alex opened his room’s door and tossed his heavy leather bag onto the spindly desk chair. The cramped space resembled a cell, and heavy vines growing over the half window deprived the dank chamber of sunlight for most of the day. His desk overflowed with books and papers, and his unmade bed beckoned. He sighed and let his shoulders droop. He would need to clean up before falling asleep. “I can’t go out, I’m exhausted.”

Henry followed his friend into his room. Henry turned his nose up slightly taking in Alex’s crowded basement space. Henry rented a spacious set of rooms on the second floor more akin to a London flat than his own monk’s cell, taking full advantage of the laundry and dining services available to resident students. He routinely offered his extra space to Alex, but Alex declined, his pride not allowing him to take advantage of his friend’s kindness. “God bless it, Alex, you

need to get out. You'll go mad in here. You have to see the world beyond Pembroke."

"I happen to like Pembroke," Alex replied, picking a discarded shirt off the floor and stuffing it into his laundry basket. Another task to take care of this weekend, as he refused to spend the money on the laundry service.

"I do as well, but there is more in Oxford than the library offers." Henry pushed a pair of Alex's pants off his bed and sat down, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, his dark eyes sparkling. "I'm taking you to a party."

Alex didn't look up from his dirty clothing as he replied. "What kind of party?"

Henry's mouth curved into a wicked smile. "A fantastic party. You remember Sir Roland, my chum from Eton?" Alex groaned and then nodded, remembering the crass young man who enjoyed mocking Alex for his humble upbringing. "Well, he's in from Town, he got an invitation to a masquerade at Boar's Hill tonight."

"Boar's Hill? I'm not familiar."

"It's about a thirty-minute ride into Oxfordshire. Roland will ride with me in my curricule. I want you to go as well."

Alex laughed, tossing a sock at Henry. "No, I'm not going to some society ball. I would have no idea what to do, when to bow, how to introduce myself..."

Henry threw the sock back, landing it on Alex's shoulder. "Like hell, you're not. And besides, times have changed. I'll

introduce you to the right people, and it will be so busy no one will even notice if you make a mistake. You need a good time, and this will be a step up from burying your head in a book. Do you know who the daughters are?” When Alex shook his head, Henry replied with awe in his voice, his dark eyes wide. “*The Flower Sisters.*”

Alex lifted his palms in question. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Henry stood up and sighed, fixing Alex with a patient smile. “Only the finest looking girls in London for the past many years. Their father is a viscount, quite the big shot in Oxford and London. High society in the *ton*, and the family seat is in Oxfordshire. Two girls are married, but there are more. Two or three, I’m not sure how many, but if they will be there, certainly many other beautiful girls will be there as well.”

“I don’t understand that logic. Why would more beautiful girls be there?”

Henry shook his head in mock disappointment. “Every bachelor in England will set his sights on the Flower Sisters. And since the girls can’t marry all of them, other beautiful girls will be there to soothe the broken hearts of those eligible gents. And with romance in the air, we can certainly make a little mischief.”

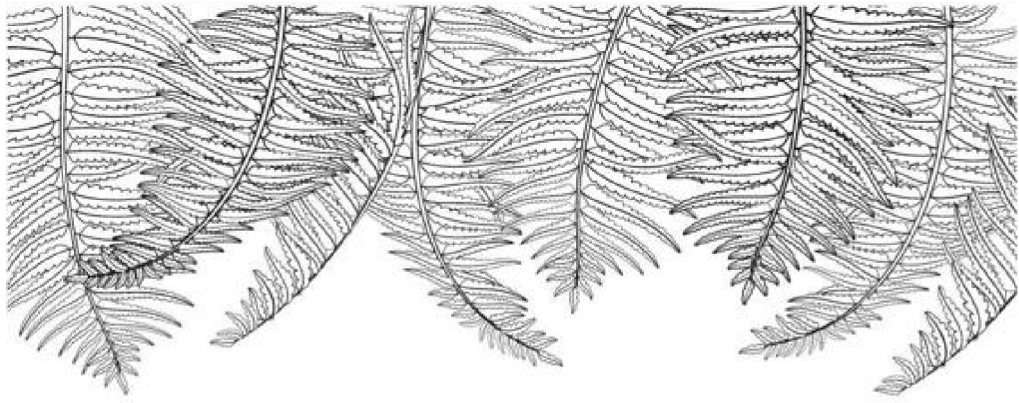
It sounded dreadful. A room packed with aristocrats, all of them staring at him in his outdated suit and his Birmingham accent, his improper manners and his awkward way with words. No, it would be a disaster.

“Alex, you need to get back out there and meet someone new,” Henry said, his tone softer. Alex winced. Two years ago he courted a lovely art student from Sussex. He fancied himself in love when in reality he was most likely accustomed to her presence and the security of knowing she would be his wife and this aspect of his life was taken care of, another task crossed off his list of accomplishments. Upon graduation, she moved to London and quickly became engaged to a prominent art dealer. Alex did not even know about her betrothal—nor did he find her letter ending their relationship in the mess on his desk—for nearly a fortnight because he had locked himself away to prepare for an examination.

Henry clapped his hands on Alex’s shoulders. “But here’s the beauty of it—it’s a masquerade. You’ll be in disguise, no one will know who you are. You can do anything you want, be anyone you want, and no one will be the wiser.”

Alex looked around his room, the laundry heaped in the corner, the pile of books on his desk, the unmade bed. “Anyone I want?” he asked tentatively.

Henry grinned. “Come on, let’s get ready. The carriage leaves in an hour.”



Chapter 4

*D*UBIUM SAPIENTIAE INITIUM. If Descartes believed doubt is the origin of wisdom, Fern would surely acquire wisdom today, as she doubted the value of the activity bustling around her.

Violet's bedroom was one of the largest in the spacious Boar's Hill mansion, a Georgian brick landmark that soared four stories above the ground, with wide wrought-iron balconies hanging from the double windows leading to each bed chamber on the second floor. It screamed of generational wealth in subdued tones, crying privilege and comfort, but not loudly enough to draw derision. For Fern, it was home, far more than their stately townhouse in Mayfair, a structure designed to impress and intimidate, a second office for her father during his appearances in Parliament.

On the morning of the masquerade, the room seemed as cramped as a broom closet. Three young women and their mother hummed inside with two ladies' maids flitting about, bringing in gowns, hair decorations, undergarments, tea trays, and the occasional reticule for consideration by the fine ladies.

The air was thick with unspoken tension. Normally London's finest families would not make the trek from town to Oxford for a birthday celebration, but tonight would be Violet's return to society, after her ill-fated engagement went sour. Lord Redborne's birthday was in reality an excuse to introduce their middle daughter to the marriage mart once again. Violet would need to be spectacular if she was to attract another proposal.

Fern watched her twin's reflection in the mirror at Violet's vanity as Rose dusted her pale cheeks. At twenty, Rose could expect to attract the attention of suitors as well. An unexpected pang struck Fern's chest at the thought of her sister becoming a wife. Rose had trained for this moment for her entire life, but living apart from her twin was akin to wrenching Fern's spine out and asking her to stand tall on her own.

Fern hoped for a sudden outbreak of hives that would leave her bedridden and unable to go downstairs. But life wasn't fair, she thought as she examined her pale skin for any sign of redness. Alas, none were to be found.

"Fern, it's your turn," she heard her mother call. Knowing the woman was on edge, Fern decided not to push her luck. She stood with a sigh and rolled her eyes. Her mother scoffed and set her hands on her hips. "Fern, you must stop that. You know how rude it is."

Fern knew rolling her eyes was rude, but she wasn't aware she did it. Her eyes rolled without her commanding them to, like she let some of the steam out of a kettle. It kept her from

exploding. Surely doing a little something wrong was far better than a big something wrong.

“I’m sorry, Mama.” Fern walked to the center of the room where a small platform awaited, shedding her simple day dress. By the time she reached the platform, she wore only her chemise and corset, which hung limply from her slim frame. She had little figure to speak of, none of the gentle curves of her older sister or the lithe grace of her twin, but a collection of angles and awkward points.

Her mother’s maid slipped the new gown over Fern’s head, helped her put her arms through the sleeves, and let the fabric fall to her feet before fastening the line of buttons up her back. Fern knew the gown was something special; her mother and sisters’ gasps of delight made their opinions abundantly clear. But her limbs twitched awkwardly under the attention until she saw the glowing look of approval on her mother’s face. Her mother loved her and protected her at all costs. But perhaps tonight, just once, her mother would be proud of her.

Fern smiled, her lips tight. “It’s very nice,” she forced out, ignoring the seams scratching her neck.

“You look lovely, Fern,” her mother said, lightly touching her daughter’s cheek. “I’m so proud of you.”

Fern’s heart glowed, the bliss brought on by the praise spreading warmth through her body. She could wear this dress and go to a ball every day for the rest of her life if it made her mother happy.

As Fern sat at the dressing table to have her hair styled, a knock sounded at the door. Mrs. Boyd, the housekeeper, stepped into the room and found Lady Redborne amongst the mayhem. “My lady, there is a bit of a problem with the crystal. It appears we broke several glasses at the last party, and we may no longer have enough that match.”

Lady Redborne stood, shaking her head. Although she seemed put out, Fern knew her mother relished in solving problems. Fern had been her primary problem for the past two decades, and she knew how overjoyed her mother became when Fern made progress toward “normal.”

As Lady Redborne left Violet stood and followed, insisting on seeing to the crystal crisis herself. Rose looked on as the maid styled Fern’s hair, coming closer each time Fern flinched. “Nicole,” Rose said pleasantly to the maid. “Perhaps I should take over. Fern and I have been practicing our hairstyling, and I would love to try something.”

Nicole’s shoulders dropped, and Fern couldn’t miss the maid’s relieved sigh. It was not unheard of for Fern to run from the dressing table with her hair halfway styled, threatening harm upon her maid with her hairpins.

Rose stood behind her sister and took up the brush as Fern shook her shoulders loose and exhaled slowly. “Thank you,” she murmured.

Rose smiled in return as she worked Fern’s hair loose. “You’re quite welcome. I thought you might need me.” Fern’s hair was fine, with the same luster as Rose’s but in a slightly

lighter shade. But few would make the comparison as Fern's hair rarely hung brushed out. She hated the sensation of a brush on her scalp. It made her skin crawl and her teeth hurt. Only Rose knew the right level of pressure, the exact places to touch and hold, to keep Fern calm during the ablutions.

When Fern looked in the mirror, she saw Rose had brushed her hair until it gleamed and hung in loose curls around her shoulders. She pulled a few strands up and away, leaving the rest loose to frame her cheeks. While it was unfashionable to wear her hair down, Fern despised the pulled-tight feel of modern chignons and Rose knew it. She adorned Fern's style with a few pearl clips, then stepped back. "You look beautiful." Rose admired her work and placed her hand on Fern's shoulder. With her hair brushed and her expression soft, Fern could see the resemblance she shared with her twin.

Fern put her hand on top of her sister's. "Thank you. I don't think I could do this without you."

Rose sat on the bench beside her. "I can't do this without you." She sighed and pressed her lips into a thin line. "Do you think Mama will be angry with me if I'm not a success tonight?"

Fern tilted her head and furrowed her brows. "Why wouldn't you be a success? You're good at these things, and unlike me, you most likely won't make an utter fool of yourself."

Taking Fern's hand, Rose rubbed her thumb over her twin's palm, soothing both of them. "It's not that. There is all this

pressure after what happened with Violet, Mama won't be able to take it if I'm not offered for quickly. I'm not even sure I want to get married."

Fern pulled her hand away and dropped her jaw. "Not get married? Why not?" Few opportunities existed beyond marriage for women of their station, and their entire lives had been engineered to ensure an advantageous match. Being the wife of a powerful man was an achievement of the highest order.

Fern could not imagine herself as a wife. She knew there was more to her future, although she couldn't identify precisely what. Marriage wouldn't be unwelcome, per se. The lurid gothic novels she had found buried on a high shelf amongst her father's old ledgers had piqued her interest in the opposite sex and what could transpire between a married couple. Unfortunately, she would have to convince a man to look at her in order to move on to anything more interesting.

A married woman enjoyed significantly more freedom in society than an unmarried miss. She had heard of ladies attending lectures at Oxford in their free time, even enrolling as students. As Fern was unlikely to secure her independence and satisfy her intellectual needs through marriage, she would need to make her own path. But she wanted her sister to have everything she desired. She deserved it.

"Marriage is all you and Mama have ever talked about," Fern continued, assessing her sister carefully.

“I know,” Rose said. “But now that I might meet someone, and it actually matters... I wanted a love match, like Mama and Papa, but I’ve never felt that sort of attraction towards another person, nothing like we’ve read in books. And I don’t want a marriage in name only like our sisters have, with those dreadful men who do nothing but go to their clubs or hunt or simply waste their time.” She huffed out her breath as she rolled her eyes, still enchanting while wearing the silly expression. “I’d be dreadfully bored, going to parties all day, calling on other bored women. I want something more, someone who has a purpose, a gentle soul who will care for me as a person, not simply a bank account. Someone I can truly love.”

“You’ll find that person, I have no doubt.”

Rose’s emerald eyes lit up. “What if I didn’t go at all? What if I feigned illness and stayed upstairs?”

“No!” Fern cried with a laugh. “You can’t leave me alone in this. Maybe we can be sick together?”

Rose smiled and hugged her sister close. “Mama would drag us downstairs in our robes and force us to dance. There is no escape, I’m afraid.”

Fern reached for her cup of chocolate and warm milk—she despised tea—and lifted it to her lips. As she set it down, the cup caught the side of the saucer and tipped over. The brown liquid spread over the tabletop and dripped onto her silk skirt. “No!” she cried, jumping up. “Oh, no!”

Rose grabbed a napkin and wiped her sister's skirt with quick motions. The smudge grew larger, spreading across the green chiffon. Fern fluttered her hands at her side. "Mama will be furious," she whimpered.

"No, she won't," Rose said. "Here, take this off then help me." She unbuttoned her sister's dress and let it drop to the floor, then turned so Fern could undo her own buttons. Holding her pink gown in her hands, Rose handed it over to Fern. "Put this on," she said, her voice allowing no argument.

"Rose, I couldn't!" Fern held the delicate silk like it was something dangerous and could detonate at any moment. "Mama would never allow it."

"Mama will never know, she will be far too busy to notice," Rose replied, a smile curving her lips. "We can help each other. I'm not ready to be the belle of the ball tonight, and you're afraid to embarrass Mama. So let's not be ourselves." Rose winked and darted down the hallway, returning with one of Fern's ball gowns from last year's party. She pulled the light green dress over her head and grinned at her sister.

Fern cocked her head and stared. "I don't understand. Shouldn't I wear that?" she said, pointing to the minty green gown.

"No," Rose replied with a sly smile. "I will wear this." She held the green frock against her chest. "I can go as Fern, and I can meet people and interact with no expectations. I can decide if I'm ready to go on with this courting nonsense once I've met some gentlemen when they're not trying to impress

me. And you can go as me. I can make mistakes and no one will fault me. You can be yourself and won't disappoint anyone."

Fern processed Rose's idea, a mischievous tickle of promise in her chest. "But won't people recognize us?"

"We favor each other enough that in the dark and behind our masks, no one will notice the differences." Rose picked up the green and pink masks from Violet's dresser. Rose had painstakingly embroidered them over the past several weeks, adorning them with crystals complementing their coloring and eyes. She had stitched each girl's initials on the silk ribbon holding the mask in place.

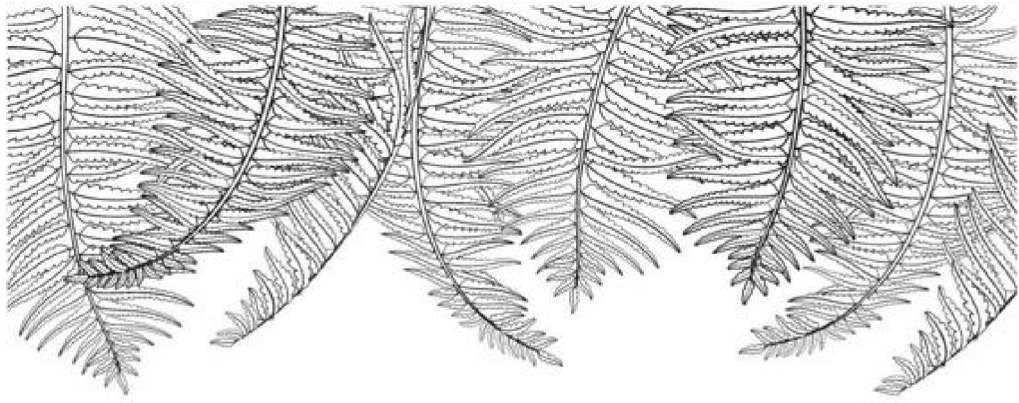
She handed the pink mask to Fern and her eyes went soft. "Fern, I love you. And I need you to be out there tonight, with me. Please, will you do this?"

Fern hesitated. If her mother discovered their deceit she would be furious. But to spend one night free from the pressure to be normal, to fit in...it could be wonderful. She lifted the pink mask to her face and looked at her reflection.

What would it be like to be Rose for just one night, to not be a disappointment to her family? She might actually enjoy herself, perhaps even meet someone...

The thought made her cheeks heat, and she cleared her throat. Fern turned to her twin and nodded with far more confidence than she felt. "I'll do it."

Rose grabbed Fern's free hand and squeezed, shrieking with delight. "Oh, this will be wonderful! Here, button up my dress, we need to get ready!"



Chapter 5

“**T**HE WORLD IS CHANGING quickly, son,” his father had said when Alex started his first year at Oxford. “When you graduate, you will have the power to mold the world in which we live. You can make things better for all of us.” The Carroway family of Birmingham existed far outside the trappings of wealth, and Alex spent his childhood in a cramped but tidy apartment above his father’s printing business.

As a child surrounded by books and a deep-seated love of the written word, Alex approached learning with reverence, something to be treasured. When the elder Mr. Carroway printed a set of mathematics texts, eight-year-old Alex fell in love, specifically with the crest showing the publisher—the Oxford University Press. *Someday my name will be on a book like this.*

Mr. and Mrs. Carroway were determined to provide their son with the education they lacked, and education reforms allowed their slight, bookish son to attend the posh Harrow School outside London. To see their child break through social

barriers and make a name for himself on his own merit was entrancing. For Alex, attending Harrow meant diving into the river of privilege with both hands tied behind his back. He was miserable, a constant target of his wealthy and connected classmates for his Brummie accent and secondhand uniform. Coming home for visits, Alex witnessed his parents laboring long hours in the shop, doing without and scrimping to save for his tuition. Along with the works of Shakespeare and Plato, Alex learned the careful dance of straddling both worlds, never quite belonging in either place.

Sitting in the bumpy open-air carriage, his heart pounded furiously, like a schoolboy at the margins again. He shifted in the slightly too-small suit he borrowed from Henry, pulling the sleeves of his jacket down to cover the worn cuffs of his shirt. The black silk mask pulled over his eyes cut off his peripheral vision, and he experienced an eerie sense of vertigo as he moved. Henry drove the horses at what must have been an unnecessarily brisk pace, doing nothing to ease Alex's nerves. A strong whiff of brandy made his stomach turn. As if Sir Roland could sense Alex's unease, he lifted his flask of liquor in a mock toast before spilling a large quantity over his waistcoat.

Alex's knees nearly connected with the gravel drive as he tumbled from the coach, stumbling to catch up with Henry as his friend handed the reins to a waiting groom.

"A few words of advice," Henry said when Alex reached his side, as though his friend had not narrowly avoided making a scene. "First, masquerades make people lower their guard.

You're likely to see some behavior you wouldn't expect in a ballroom, so don't gawk."

Alex's mind raced to imagine what sort of debauchery could arise in this group of stuffy-looking ladies and gentlemen, but Henry kept going.

"Second, the punch is always foul. Champagne is key to survival. Find a footman, slip him some coin, he'll keep you stocked all night."

Alex had only enough coin to pay for the fare back to Oxford. While he trusted Henry with his life, he did not trust him to remember his obligation to deliver Alex back to Pembroke safely.

"And if you happen to catch the eye of some foolish girl," Henry remarked, "you can talk all you like—"

"But don't touch," Alex interrupted. Society girls were precious things, not to be sullied with the likes of him.

Henry chuckled. "Oh, have some fun, it's nearly the new century. But *don't* let anyone catch you kissing, or you'll have an irate father to contend with."

"No kissing, understood."

"Oh, you can kiss, but don't get caught. And for God's sake —" Henry smirked, unable to maintain his stern expression. "Don't put your hands up her skirts." He clapped Alex on the shoulder and climbed the marble stairs, with Alex, jaw hanging open, close on his heels.

The first steps inside the regal estate were enough to push the breath from his lungs. The domed ceiling soared above him, a mural of a hunting scene spreading the length of the hall. A variety of landscapes, still-lives, and portraits of distinguished-looking gentlemen and large families surrounded by heavy gilt frames nearly obscured the dark mahogany paneling that reached two stories up to the ceiling. Thick oriental rugs muffled his footsteps, and exquisitely uniformed footmen in matching livery lined the path, taking coats and hats as they distributed delicate crystal glasses of champagne.

“Don’t forget, the host is Benedict Waverly, but his title is Lord Redborne,” Henry murmured at his side, and Alex repeated the honorary under his breath. “He’s practically a saint at the university for all the funding he’s had Parliament direct our way, highly influential.” He elbowed Alex in the ribs. “A good person for you to know.”

Alex nodded even as he gulped, the knot in his throat causing him to cough. The gentleman held court at the entrance to the ballroom, shaking hands and bowing in an elaborate dance reminding Alex of the mating habits of birds. Alex approached with ice in his veins. *What if he recognizes I’m an imposter? He’ll see right through me—*

Henry elbowed him firmly in the ribs, and Alex blinked hard, staring into his host’s face. “Lord Redborne,” Alex stammered. “It is a pleasure.”

“The pleasure is mine,” Lord Redborne said, his gaze already darting to the next guest. “Enjoy your evening.”

He released a massive exhale, momentarily lightheaded. Perhaps this would not be so impossible as it had seemed, particularly with Henry and Roland at his side.

“I’m getting us drinks,” Henry said, pushing Henry forward into the crowded ballroom before disappearing into the throngs of guests. The room teemed with people, women decked in exquisite gowns glittering like jewels on the parquet floor, interspersed with gentlemen in sharp monochrome jackets. As he pulled at his collar, he spotted a footman carrying trays of punch. If he could get closer, perhaps he could inquire where he might find a glass of whiskey. “Liquid courage,” he muttered as he began to move.

The crush of people left him breathless. The air hung thick with perfume, and the sounds of chatter and the small orchestra bombarded his senses. Every eye in the room appeared to find him immediately and identify him as an outsider, and familiar anxiety rose in his veins, making his skin prickle with discomfort. *I don’t belong here.* Heart skipping in his chest, he turned swiftly in his place and collided with a cloud of pink.

Alex froze, his hands on the shoulders of the young woman in front of him. He pushed back with a stumble, apologies falling from his lips. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t see you, I—”

“It’s all right, I’m not hurt,” the woman said, her head cocked in confusion, as though surprised by his presence.

Alex's heart stopped tumbling and held completely still at the sight of her. A delicate, pointed chin, light brown hair hanging in waves around her neck, lush lips and sparkling eyes behind her mask that seemed to devour him, drawing him in. He couldn't quite see the color of those eyes—brown perhaps? maybe green?—but they seemed to glitter in the low light. She stared at him for an inordinately long time, as though memorizing and making sense of his features before blinking repeatedly, her eyes widening and the corners of her mouth tipping up into a smile.

He found himself unable to speak. *What is happening to me today, I am never without words!* “I, um...”

“Alex, here you are.” Henry's laconic drawl caused Alex to jump as his friend stepped between Alex and the young lady. “Ah, Miss Rose, it's lovely to see you. I haven't seen you since the Henderson ball last summer.” Henry took her hand and brushed a kiss to her knuckles, and Alex's jaw clenched as he fought the urge to pull her hand from Henry's and kiss it himself.

“Miss Rose, may I introduce my dear friend, Mr. Alexander Carroway.” Her eyes lifted to his, thick lashes fluttering and a shy smile on her pink lips.

“And this,” Henry continued, “is the lovely Miss Rose Waverly, daughter of the Viscount Redborne.” Alex's eyes widened as the young woman blushed and then dropped into a practiced curtsy.

Alex mimicked Henry's bow as well as he could and swallowed hard as he stood again. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Rose."

"We have met," she said, then closed her eyes for a quick moment before meeting his gaze again. Alex quirked his head, but Henry spoke before Alex could question her statement.

"I hoped I could claim a dance from you tonight, Miss Rose," Henry said, sliding his shoulder in front of Alex and attempting to claim her attention.

The lady's eyes flew to the young aristocrat. "Oh, um, my Lord, I—I seem to have misplaced my dance card."

Henry's head tilted, and Alex watched her closely. She pulled at the fabric of her skirts, eyes darting around the room as though looking for an escape.

"Then perhaps I will dance with you sometime in the future," Henry said, the energy draining from his voice. He turned and grimaced as he made eye contact with Alex, shaking his head as he made a push for the refreshments, leaving Alex and Rose in his wake.

"Would you like some champagne?" she asked, her voice bright.

Alex gave her a dazed look. The young woman's expression had completely changed, bright and open, as though she wanted nothing more than to keep Alex by her side. *This is... unexpected.*

“Yes,” he replied. “I would love some champagne.” Beaming, she began working her way through the crowd, sliding through the revelers with practiced ease. The woman grabbed two glasses of champagne with a nod from a passing footman, then continued to maneuver until she sat on a bench in an alcove just outside the ballroom.

“Here,” she said, shoving one glass into his hand, then drinking deeply from hers. The heat of her fingers raced up his arm, and his breathing quickened. Unlike most of the women at the party, she did not wear gloves, nor did she sip daintily from her glass. He followed suit, draining the glass in a few gulps. The bubbling wine tickled his nose and fortified him enough to remember his manners.

“It’s lovely to make your acquaintance, Miss Rose. You are the daughter of our hostess, then?”

She nodded, pressing her fingers to her lips. “One of the many. Daughters, I mean, not hostesses.”

“I understood your meaning,” he said, his heart soaring when she rewarded him with a half smile. She shifted on the bench, glancing towards him for short bursts before looking away again. “You told Lord Morley that we had met before. Have we met?”

She pressed her lips together and touched her fingers to the shallow divot at the base of her throat. He was instantly jealous of those fingers. “I meant,” she said, her voice breathy, “we had met a moment before, when...” She trailed off, unable to meet his eyes.

“When I nearly flattened you?”

She let out a giggle, a sound so sweet and delicious he wanted to hear it again, immediately and as often as possible. “It wouldn’t take much, I’m a bit...wobbly.”

“Wobbly?”

Another giggle, and this time when she met his eyes she did not look away. “My mother says clumsy, my father says awkward. I prefer wobbly.”

“I have wobbly moments myself.” Alex summoned his courage. “Are you planning to dance tonight?”

She hesitated, crossing and uncrossing her ankles. “I am not particularly fond of the ballroom.” She sounded a trifle embarrassed. “I’m not much of a dancer. You know, the wobbling.”

He leaned in and mock-whispered, “Neither am I, but the dance floor is so crowded I doubt anyone will notice. Shall we have a go at it?”

She blinked and worried her lower lip before giving him a little nod. She put her hand in his, pausing a beat before allowing her palm to settle completely into his. His heart soared as he led her into the ballroom as a waltz began. Alex found himself pulling her close, much closer than was appropriate, to accommodate the crush of dancers, a protective surge building in his chest.

Miss Rose had been correct, she was a terrible dancer. She resisted his lead at first but after a few measures of music, she

relaxed into his hand, allowing him to move her across the dance floor. Alex was awkward at best, bumping against her feet more than once before losing himself to the music, the feel of her in his arms.

Alex gazed at her with wonder. She did not act like what he assumed of an aristocratic heiress, one who was, according to Henry, one of the most desirable ladies in England. Her eyes were never still, darting between his and her surroundings, each movement hesitant, as though she was uncertain of her place in the world.

Alex understood that feeling all too well. “Miss Rose,” he said, leaning forward so only she could hear his words, “you’re doing wonderfully. Not wobbly at all.”

Her spine relaxed beneath his hand as a slow smile spread across her lips. “You’re not wobbling a bit either.”

On the contrary, he might collapse at any moment at the sheer joy of being so close to her. She was beautiful. She had to know every man in the room wanted her, but she watched him as though Alex were the only person in the universe. *The belle of the ball, Miss Rose Waverly. Everyone wants her, and she’s in my arms.*

As they turned with the dance, he noticed Miss Rose’s fingers moving against his hand, tapping rhythmically on his knuckles. “Are you all right?” he asked.

She met his gaze with wide eyes. He would get lost in those eyes if she kept looking at him like that. “Yes? Why do you ask?”

“You’re tapping your fingers.”

Even in the darkened room, he could tell her face flushed as she dropped her gaze. “I do that sometimes,” she said, her tone cautious, as though she feared his judgment, “when I’m nervous. I know this song and can play it on the piano, so sometimes I play to calm myself down.”

He stroked his thumb across her palm and pulled her slightly closer to him. “You do not need to be nervous with me, I assure you. I am no one of consequence.”

“Oh,” she said, furrowing her delicate brows. “I strongly disagree.”

Pride, unexpected and warm, rushed through him, and he felt like a king. He may not have the wealth, or the title, or the connection, but only Alex Carroway, a printer’s son from Birmingham, had Miss Rose Waverly defending him. He would be hard-pressed to let her go at the end of the night. “If the ballroom is not your favorite room, I take it the music room is?”

“It would be, but my mother has a tendency to work on her embroidery there, and apparently my playing distracts her,” she replied, a mischievous smile on her pink lips.

“How so?”

“Have you heard of Mussorgsky?” she asked, her eyes narrowed.

“*Pictures at an Exhibition*, correct?”

She beamed at his recognition. “Right!” she gushed. “*The Hut on Fowl’s Legs* is simply extraordinary, with a dynamic range that boggles the mind!”

She had stopped dancing, her hands fluttering as she described the music as though she wanted him to experience it the way she did. She was entrancing, unlike any woman he had ever met...

Rose stopped suddenly, a flush rising on her neck as she bit her lip, returning into his arms to continue the waltz. “Well, as you can see, my concept of soothing music is not in line with my mother’s.”

The dance ended, and the pair joined the flood of people moving off the dance floor. “Then what is your favorite room?” he asked as they walked into the corridor alongside the ballroom. He needed to know more about her, to learn everything he could about this wondrous woman.

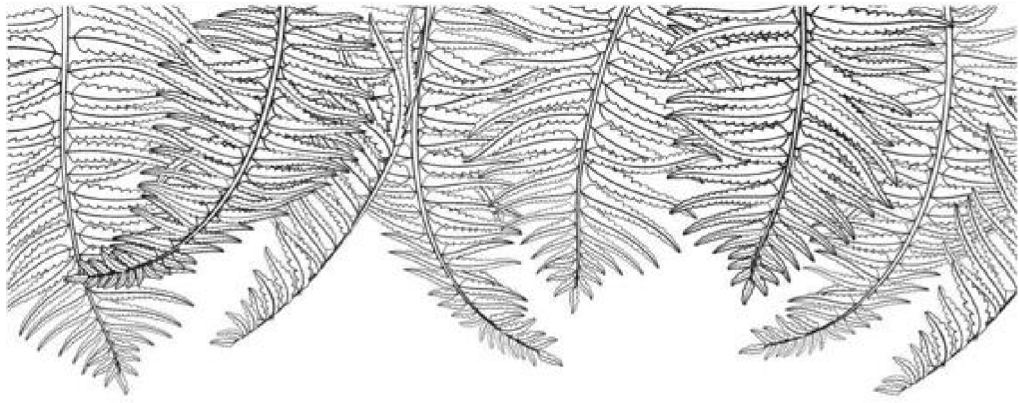
“I’ll have to show you, but—” She gulped in a lungful of air, as though bracing herself. “I prefer spending my time reading rather than learning to dance.”

Alex had never been a man of faith, but he sent up a silent prayer of thanks to whatever deity was watching over him that night. Could this be real? Could this phenomenal, beautiful woman who had charmed him completely also be a bibliophile?

“I must admit to sharing the same preference,” he replied.

Her face lit up at his response, eyes sparkling. “Then I have something I must show you.”

Alex would follow her anywhere. As she took his hand, he desperately needed to keep her close and discover all her secrets, like a puzzle delighting him more with every moment she gifted him. Alex let himself hope, even dream of being enough for her.



Chapter 6

FERN'S HEART POUNDED, CERTAIN her hand was sweating as it remained wrapped in his. *It's him*, she thought, again and again, stealing glances in his direction as though he might disappear into her imagination if she lost sight of him. *His name is Alexander. What a beautiful name.*

But he was *different*. He didn't belong here, didn't carry himself with the ease and arrogance of the men who shared ballrooms with her sisters. He lacked the confidence of knowing he was worthy of his surroundings. He was a *scholar*, a man who used his mind to navigate the world.

A kindred spirit.

He had touched her, caught her in his arms, even while she was overwhelmed by the noise and the smells and the sound and wanted to escape. But he *caught her*, saved her from herself. And she hadn't flinched or pulled away. His hands were warm, comforting, slightly calloused and rough, but so gentle. Her nerve endings stood on end but didn't scream in alarm, tingling pleasantly as warmth spread through her. She never felt that way when anyone besides Rose touched her, let

alone a stranger. But in the morning at the library, and now on the dance floor, she enjoyed his embrace, even craved more of it. The discovery thrilled and terrified her.

Fern jolted from her thoughts. She bit the inside of her cheek; Rose had said her long silences unsettled others, but Alex simply watched her, as though giving her all the time she needed. She cleared her throat. “Can I show you the house? I mean, the appropriate places for me to show you. The interesting ones too.”

His eyes sparkled, and his mouth spread with a delighted smile. “I would enjoy that. Should we leave breadcrumbs in case I get lost?”

With an easy laugh, she took his hand again and lifted it up, examining where his skin touched hers. She had not worn gloves, much to her mother’s chagrin. The seams of the satin material grated at her flesh and made her teeth clench. *Yes*, she thought, *I like this touch*. He looked at her slightly askance but said nothing. If anything, he seemed to enjoy the contact as well. *Good*, she thought, *I haven’t done something wrong. Perhaps I’ve done something right*.

“What a remarkable home,” Alex said as they walked down the corridor, gazing at oil paintings lining the walls. “You grew up here?”

Fern nodded, seeing her home with appreciative eyes. “Here and at our home in London, but mostly here.” She ran her hand along the wall, fingers dancing along the sleek wood

between frames as she had done countless times before. “I have four sisters, one is my twin.”

“Really?” His blue eyes glimmered like pools of water in the sunshine. “Is she exactly like you?”

Fern’s stomach lurched. “A bit,” she said around the knot that appeared in her throat. She coughed and shook off his question. “We used to run down this hallway in only our stockings when the maids took the carpets out to be beaten. I could usually slide farther than my sister, and then the dogs would join in and chase us. We would laugh and shriek until our housekeeper found us and sent us outside.”

Alex chuckled. “It sounds like you were a handful.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Fern replied, stepping in front of him and stopping in front of a massive door.

“I wanted to show you this,” she said, opening the door and stepping aside with her chin held high. She was instantly gratified when Alexander gasped, his eyes greedily taking in the magnificent space. The library was a masterpiece, a temple to the Redborne family’s love of knowledge. The library was clearly used, as opposed to serving as a monument to the estate’s history. Books littered every available surface and others reshelved haphazardly, as though the reader could not waste time returning them to their proper locations. Soft leather chairs and couches clustered by banked fireplaces, her father’s spaniels lazily sprawled on the pillows snoring softly. “Do you like it?” she asked, holding her breath for his response.

Alexander walked to a nearby shelf and removed one of Fern's favorites, gazing at the cover. "*Gulliver's Travels*," he whispered, turning the pages reverently. "Is this a first edition?"

Fern beamed. "It is. I read the entire thing in one night the first time I got my hands on it."

Alexander chuckled. "I got my own copy, not nearly as nice as this, for my seventh birthday, but it took me more than one night. How old were you?"

She froze. The truth could scare him off, but she had already lied enough for one evening. Fern gulped and met his eyes. "I was four."

He stopped turning pages and looked at her, lips parted. "You are remarkable, aren't you?"

Her cheeks turned to flame, and she attempted to divert his attention from her oddities. "My father loves reading more than anything else. Well, not more than his family, but he is at his happiest when he is reading. I suppose I inherited the quality from him." She turned to face him directly. "What do you read?"

He gave her a lopsided grin, and her heart tumbled. "Mostly mathematical works these days, but when I have the chance..." He winked before dropping his voice to a low whisper. "I adore Sherlock Holmes."

She barked out a laugh and snorted when she tried to cover it. "You enjoy solving mysteries, then?"

“I’m quite terrible at it,” he said with a bashful smile. “It’s nice to have someone else doing the intellectual heavy lifting for a change.”

Butterflies took flight in her stomach, but this did not feel like nerves, but rather bubbling ripples of joy, champagne bubbles spreading out from her center.

“What do you enjoy reading?” he asked, continuing to scan the titles, stopping occasionally to pull a title from the shelf.

“Everything,” she sighed. “Poetry, novels, history, phil—” She stopped suddenly. If she referenced Descartes, he might make the connection between her and the strange, unpleasant girl in the library. She knew their interaction had been full of *some things wrong*. If he knew the real Fern, he would not want to see her again. And she had to see him again.

“Poetry, you say?” Alexander seemed not to notice her silence. “Whose work do you enjoy?”

“Byron, of course, and Blake, but I love the Americans as well. Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman, and Dickinson, the woman from New England. She’s brilliant.”

He nodded at her as if in approval, and warmth spread through her. She was unaccustomed to this sort of attention, this unspoken praise, but she wanted more of it. Especially if it came from him.

Alexander held up a thin volume of poetry he had pulled from the shelf. It was well worn, the leather cracked and the

bindings separated from frequent use. “I assume Tennyson as well? I am not as fond of his work, to be honest.”

Fern had spent hours with the pages, devouring the words again and again, until their rhythm and cadence became a part of her. “Quite a bit of it can be pedantic, but *The Princess* speaks to my heart.”

Again, Alexander seemed surprised. “Really? I wouldn’t have thought...”

But Fern was lost. Just saying the title had spurred her memory and words began pouring into her mind.

Ask me no more: what answer should I give?

I love not hollow cheek or faded eye:

Yet, O my friend, I will not have thee die!

Ask me no more, lest I should bid thee live;

Ask me no more.

Ask me no more:

thy fate and mine are seal’d:

I strove against the stream and all in vain:

Let the great river take me to the main:

No more, dear love, for at a touch I yield;

Ask me no more.

Fern did not realize she had been speaking the words aloud until she looked at Alexander. His mouth opened in an O of surprise, his blue eyes wide as he took her in. She winced then

bit her lip. Clearly, she had done something terribly wrong for him to look at her like that. *Rose would never do such a thing, Rose would—*

“You memorized the passage?”

She looked down at her feet, unsure what answer would earn his approval. Finally, she told the truth. “I’ve memorized the entire poem.”

He gaped at her. “All seven parts?”

She nodded. “And the conclusion.”

Alexander ran his fingers through his auburn hair and chuckled. “You are certainly not what I expected you to be.”

Fern’s stomach dropped. “I’m sorry, Mr. Carroway, I—”

Alexander took her hands in his, interlocking his fingers with hers until they were linked, woven together. Warmth rushed through her, spreading from her fingertips down to her toes, making them curl in her silk slippers. “You’re much more than I expected. You truly are remarkable.” He gave her a bashful smile. “Will you call me Alex, or is that too forward?”

His praise made her heart sing. She was soaring, his words filling her with inexplicable pride. “It’s not,” she whispered.

Alex dropped his eyes then and put the poetry book back on the shelf, and Fern saw a blush creeping up his neck. “I suppose we should go back to the party.”

“But must we? There’s so much...nonsense out there,” she said, wrinkling her nose.

Alex met her eyes with a solemn stare. “I hereby vow I will protect you from any and all nonsense.”

She grinned in return. “I believe you.”

Tucking her hand into the crook of his arm, the pair left the library and returned to the ballroom. He led her back to the dance floor, where they joined the throng moving in time to the music. Fern lost herself in easy conversation with Alex. She never found discourse pleasant, and yet with him the words came effortlessly. He spoke about being a student at Oxford, about his dreams of studying at the London School of Economics and earning a post with the government. She told him about playing piano, her favorite symphonies, and her discomfort around strangers.

“You seem perfectly calm with me.” He squeezed her hand playfully.

“You’re not a stranger,” she replied, then flinched.

“I just met you tonight,” he responded, his hand gently pulling her closer until they were nearly flush in their embrace.

Fern leaned forward. Despite the crush of people, she felt perfectly safe with Alex, as though he had wrapped a cocoon around her. They moved to the music in something resembling a waltz but was far too intimate to be classified as such. The world around them blurred and her eyelids drooped closed. She never wanted to leave his arms.

Alex pulled back from her and she became aware the music had stopped. “Are you all right?” he said, watching her dazed

face with a slight frown.

She blinked at him as her lips quirked into a smile. Had she ever smiled so much before? “Yes, a bit overheated is all.”

He took her hand and led her off the dance floor. “Can I take you out on the terrace?”

The pair passed through open doors onto the wide terrace her mother had turned into an extension of her lavish gardens. Massive stone planters divided the space into smaller alcoves, and trellised hyacinth, honeysuckle, and rose bushes created the illusion of privacy. The night was unusually warm for April, and the air hung thick with the perfume of flowers and the crisp scent of grass.

What is happening to me? she thought as Alex slipped his hand into hers, leading her away from the crowds and behind a trellis of climbing clematis. Her heart pounded as her mother’s warnings about propriety rang in her ears. The danger, the threat of discovery sent an unexpected thrill through her, her thoughts scattering. She never wanted to disappoint her mother, but she never felt like *this* before.

“You’re nervous,” Alex said, dropping her hand. “Is it something I’ve done?”

Her breath caught. “No, well, yes, but, in a good way.” Alex raised one eyebrow, a smile playing on his full lips. “We shouldn’t be here alone like this.”

His eyes widened, and he took a step back, turning back to the party. “I apologize, I thought, because you said you don’t

like crowds, that it—”

Fern grabbed his hand and pulled him forward until he stood a few inches in front of her, so close she could see his chest rising and falling quickly under his jacket. She laced her fingers with his. “I don’t want to go back.”

He cleared his throat and shifted on his feet before looking into her eyes. “Now I know that I am being too forward, but I have to ask. May I kiss you?”

She couldn’t even speak. Fern had never kissed anyone. The mere concept of kissing turned Fern’s stomach. It had to be wet, slimy, and simply too uncomfortable for her taste.

But looking at Alex and the way he gazed at her, the excitement coursing through her veins, she was desperate to try, bobbing her head in the slightest nod of agreement. She felt the pressure of his lips, so feather-light she was unsure if he had actually touched her. She leaned into his touch further, keeping her fingers laced with his. Alex brought his free hand to cup her neck, grounding her as her heart threatened to burst from her chest. The pressure of his lips deepened against hers and she released a shaky sigh of pleasure. She was warm and cold and sparkling, like electricity flowed through her. Fern never wanted it to end.

But all good things must end. She heard the tolling bells of the nearby chapel, followed by squeals of delight from inside the ballroom. It was midnight. Time to unmask.

Alex smiled against her lips. He pulled back and untied his mask, letting it drop from his face. One side of his mouth

lifted nervously, as though waiting for her approval. She touched his cheek gently, stroking her fingers along his cheekbones. “You’re so beautiful,” she said, then winced at her admission.

He shook his head and chuckled bashfully. “Not nearly as beautiful as you.” He leaned in towards her again, his breath mingling with hers. His fingers pulled at the pink silk ribbon holding her mask in place as his lips danced against hers. He would pull back and see her, see the face he knew as *Fern*, not *Rose*. She couldn’t bear seeing his face, knowing she had deceived him.

As he began to lift the mask from her face, Fern twisted away from him and darted out of their secluded hideaway. “Miss Rose, wait!” she heard him call, but she did not hesitate. She pushed her way past the laughing guests, desperate to reach the stairs and then her bedroom.

Fern wrenched her way past a group of her mother’s friends and collided with her sister. “Fern!” Rose’s brows raised as she assessed her twin.

“I need to get upstairs, now!” Fern gasped. Rose grabbed Fern’s hand and led her down the servants’ hallway, pulling her up the back stairs and into Rose’s bedroom. Fern collapsed on the bed, pulling her fingers through her hair, scattering pins as she pulled the locks in front of her face.

“My god, Fern,” Rose sat at her twin’s side and pulled her hands from her hair. “What happened?”

Fern's stomach filled with lead. "Rose," she whispered, tears beginning to fall. "I've done something terribly wrong."



"She's not here," Henry said for what must have been the seventeenth time.

"She has to be here, she lives here!" Alex retorted as he raked his hand through his disheveled hair.

Henry sighed and put his hands on his hips. "She must have gone to bed as everyone else has. Like you should be. Come along, man, we need to leave before Roland gets himself into more trouble." A game of piquet had ended poorly for their friend, and now he owed several lords more sizable sums than he could easily produce on his allowance. Despite the urgency, Alex was not budging.

Why should he? Alex always scoffed at the notion of love at first sight, but what he experienced tonight was unlike anything he had felt with any other woman. Miss Rose Waverly had given him the perfect evening. His lips still tingled from their kisses, he could smell her scent on his clothing, like fresh grass and sweetness. But he couldn't understand why she ran after their kiss. Had he done something wrong? He needed to speak to her, to understand what had happened.

Henry interrupted his thoughts. "We have to go, the carriage is waiting. I finally got Roland inside but I don't trust him to

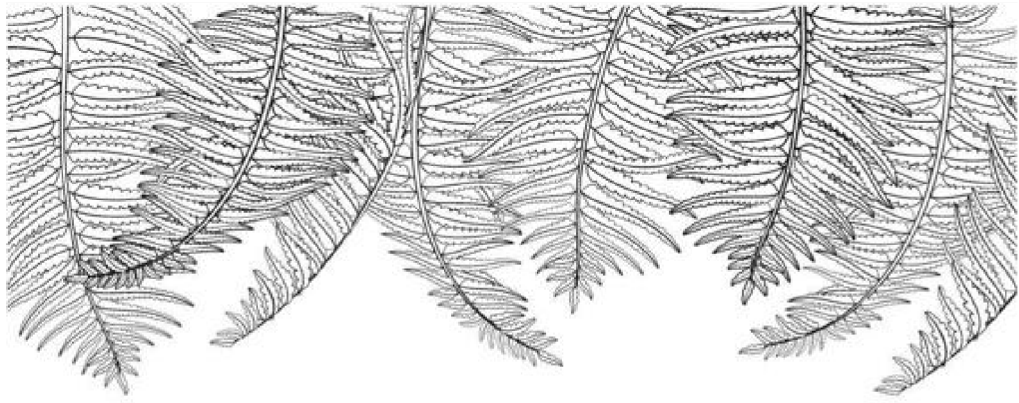
stay. Please, Alex, we can come back tomorrow and find her. You can give her back her mask then and see if she is as perfect in the light of day.”

Alex traced over the initials embroidered on the pink silk ribbon—RCB. Rose. He wondered what her middle name was. He was still wondering when Henry shoved him into the curricule and then snapped the reins, sending the horses into motion.

For the past four years—hell, for his entire life—he had eschewed the desires of his heart to follow his head. His entire existence was to pursue one goal, one vision of his future, and everything else—desire, lust, love—had to wait. But what if he only had one chance? His mother and father spoke often about falling in love the day they met, of knowing the other was special, unlike anyone else they had known before.

Risks were not a part of Alex’s vision and could only disrupt his plans. But what would happen if he did not take a risk now? He could miss out on love, or at least the opportunity to find it.

Alex stared out the window at the retreating Boar’s Hill. *She is in there, he thought. My future is in that house. And tomorrow I will find her.*



Chapter 7

“IT’S NEARLY HALF PAST three, where is everyone?” Lady Redborne was beside herself. After a ball that London gossips had already dubbed the *fete of the century*, she expected to be inundated with callers. True, she needed to depart the festivities early when Violet, still raw from her broken engagement, dissolved into tears and needed consolation. Aunt Margaret said Rose had been dancing and talking with at least one gentleman. Of course, Margaret had consumed copious amounts of sherry and was known for her poor eyesight, so her reports remained not entirely trustworthy.

“Perhaps your girls didn’t make quite the impression you had hoped,” Aunt Margaret remarked from her chair by the fire. *An Illustrated History of Animal Husbandry* was open on her lap, and she appeared to be reading it as though she were enjoying a novel.

Lady Redborne shot her a quieting glare. “My girls were perfect ladies all night. You danced, didn’t you, Rose?”

Rose nodded with wide eyes as she attacked her embroidery, while Fern attempted to re-read her copy of

Descartes, although she found herself stuck on the same paragraph.

Her mother released a loud sigh and pushed off the silk divan. “I must see what is taking Violet so long.” She harrumphed once more before storming from the parlor in a cloud of muslin, slamming the door behind her.

Rose met her sister’s eye and wrinkled her nose. “Well, that was pleasant.”

Fern closed her book on her lap. “We shouldn’t have expected anything different. Did you even speak to any gentlemen last night?”

“Only in passing,” she replied. “I had a lovely evening chatting with Aunt Margaret about her coming out. Apparently she had too much sherry and cast up her supper in a potted plant.”

Fern groaned even as she laughed. “The experience doesn’t seem to have put her off the stuff.”

“But surely your Mr. Caraway will call today,” Rose said, her eyes glittering. “After what you told me, he must be wild for you.”

“He doesn’t even know me.” The knot reappeared in Fern’s throat. “He thinks it was you.”

“He will recognize you immediately, though,” Rose said. “When he calls, just tell him the truth. It won’t change anything.”

It will change everything. Last night, she had stepped into Rose's pink slippers and in doing so escaped the pitying stares and lowered expectations. How ironic she only was like her true self when she stepped into the role of her twin.

But Mr. Alexander Carroway was special. A brilliant scholar, kind and honest. A man like him deserved to be proud of the woman by his side. Not ashamed of her. Not worrying she would do something wrong.

Both girls started when their butler knocked on the door. Salisbury stepped into the parlor, "Mr. Alexander Carroway to see Miss Rose." Both girls jumped to their feet.

"Now's your chance, tell him the truth," Rose whispered.

"Not yet, I need to think!" Fern replied.

"You've had plenty of time to think, now he's here!" Rose hissed.

Fern shook her head, panic rising like bile in her throat. "No," she said, "no, I can't see him. I'm shaking, I'm too nervous, I'll make a fool of myself."

"But he fell for *you*, not me, he will surely realize it when he sees me."

"But I was pretending to be you!" Fern cried. "I wasn't nervous, I didn't need to worry, because I could be you. But I can't let him leave. I can't—" She choked back a sob. "I can't let him leave, Rose."

Rose grabbed her sister into a tight hug, stroking her hair. "I'll buy us some time. I can pretend it was me until we get a

better idea of what to do. But Fern, you'll have to tell him, eventually."

Fern nodded, then rushed to crouch behind the sofa.

"What are you doing?" Rose asked incredulously.

"I need to hear what happens!" she replied, her voice muffled by the upholstery. "Pretend I'm not here."

Salisbury stepped into the doorway. "Mr. Alexander Carroway," he announced.

Rose stood, plastering a smile on her face. "I can do this," she whispered. "I'll do anything for you."



It was far later than he had planned when Alex arrived at Boar's Hill. He needed to borrow a horse from Henry, and true to his image, Henry refused to be roused from his bed without Alex threatening bodily harm.

After a brief and nervous ride, Alex found himself in the majestic corridor of Boar's Hill. Funny how the home seemed so much larger and intimidating in the light of day without hundreds of guests pushing around him. Aware of how out of his element he truly was, his hand trembled when he gave his card to the skeptical butler.

It's not important, he thought. She didn't care who I was last night, and she won't today. And when he stepped into the parlor, he saw his Rose. She stood near the window, dressed in

pink linen. Funny, her hair was darker than he had remembered it, perhaps it had been the lighting, but no matter. She was beautiful and smiling at him.

“Miss Rose,” he said softly, bowing awkwardly with a crooked grin.

She smiled, walking over and extending her hand. He took it and bowed again, and the excitement in his veins cooled. He felt nothing at her touch, none of the marvelous connection they had experienced the night before. He had expected fireworks, the warmth spreading through his skin like liquid honey when he touched her lips on the terrace. “It’s—it’s lovely to see you again,” she stammered.

Perhaps it was the intimacy they shared. Of course they would feel uncomfortable when standing in her parents’ parlor. Why did this feel so discomfiting, after the incredible bond they shared last night?

“Please, have a seat.” she motioned toward the sofa. He sat tentatively, then popped up again.

“I have something for you,” he said, eager to see her reaction as he handed her a small wrapped package.

Rose smiled and opened the paper, her face falling the slightest bit. “Oh,” she said. “A...book.”

“It’s a poetry book. *De Profundis* by Oscar Wilde. It was published posthumously, and I know you enjoyed his prior works, so I thought you would like it.”

She blinked, then smiled in his direction as he set the book unopened by her side. “How thoughtful, thank you.” Her eyes kept darting to the sofa by the window and she shifted in her seat.

Alex shifted, his stomach souring. Her smile had not seemed forced last night, and yet she was clearly uncomfortable today. The poetry book should have thrilled her. What had changed?

“I do hope you enjoyed the festivities last evening,” she said.

Memories flooded back to him, the delightful sound of her laugh, the feeling of her hand in his. Their kiss. “You know I did,” he replied with a shy grin.

She blushed and turned away. “I’m happy to hear that.” She clenched her fists in her blush pink skirt and immediately released them. “And what do you have planned for this afternoon, Mr. Carroway?”

Mr. Carroway? Why not Alex? “I will be back in the library. Final exams begin in less than a fortnight, and I must be ready.”

“Oh, and what are you studying?” He could have sworn Rose flinched immediately upon asking the question.

He looked at her in confusion. They had discussed mathematics for at least an hour the previous evening. “Maths,” he said, his voice even.

“Of course.” She laughed, a little too brightly for his ears.
“How silly of me.”

Silence fell between them. Alex ran his sweaty palms over his trousers as Rose sniffed and looked everywhere but at him. His stomach sank. *She’s embarrassed by me. I was a diversion for a night, but now it’s back to reality.*

He stood in a rush, knocking his shins into the low table between them. “I’m afraid I must be going. I borrowed a friend’s horse, and I’m certain he will miss it.”

Rose looked positively horrified by the prospect of borrowing a horse. She stood and curtsied to him. “Thank you for coming by, Mr. Carroway, and thank you for the book. I shall, erm...read it posthaste.”

He pressed his lips into a thin smile and drew her mask from his coat pocket. “You left without this. Last night.” He held the mask out and she took it, careful to avoid his touch. “I was worried,” he said, his voice low.

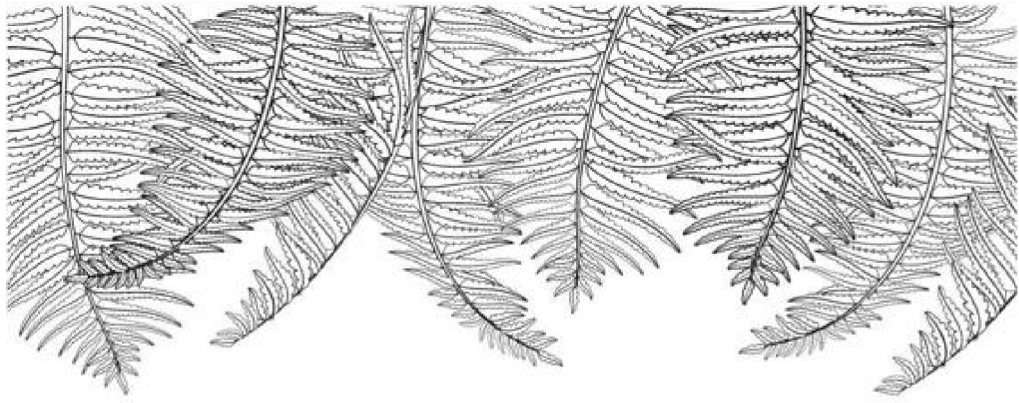
She looked up at him, and he could see her eyes clearly for the first time. They were green, like an emerald glittering in the light. He could have sworn he remembered her eyes differently, as being more faceted, with flecks of amber and gold. He must have been wrong. He was clearly wrong about many things.

“Thank you.” She gestured toward the door.

Alex nodded again to Rose, then stepped into the hallway. After retrieving his coat and hat from Salisbury, he found a

bored-looking groom waiting for him in the drive with his, well, Henry's horse. As though they were desperate to be rid of him as soon as possible.

What in the hell was I thinking, he thought ruefully. She was a fantasy, nothing more. He mounted the horse and rode away from Boar's Hill, intending to never look back.



Chapter 8

“**M**ORE CHOCOLATE, MISS?”

Fern heard the woman’s foot tapping but ignored it. For nearly two hours she had occupied the finest table in the Broad Street tea shop, the one with a perfect view of the entrance to the Bodleian, and had thus far successfully repelled any encroachment from potential interlopers.

The proprietress cleared her throat. “Miss?”

“Yes, please, another,” Fern stammered, not taking her eyes off her target, and the woman left with a huff.

Perhaps she shouldn’t have had another chocolate. She’d become jittery, but it couldn’t be helped. She would not be able to stay much longer either. Her mother would discover her absence when she was called to dinner. But Fern was certain Alex was in the library, or at least could assume so from what he had told her sister that morning. He would have to leave at some point, wouldn’t he?

Fern’s chest tightened at the thought of him and she rubbed at her sternum. She should have spoken to him immediately

when he arrived at Boar's Hill, but seeing Rose, poised, beautiful, *perfect* Rose, Fern knew Alex would find her inadequate. But Fern wasn't ready to let him go. He was a glimpse into a world she had only dreamed of, lived the life she yearned to experience. What would it be like to study like the men? To be given every opportunity to contribute knowledge to the world instead of merely being a consumer?

She had never felt more alive than she did in his presence. Fern had always assumed being courted meant giving up something of herself, taking on the role of a lady, not a scholar. With Alex, she had been both parts of her and he admired her for it, had even been attracted to her for her intelligence, not in spite of it.

She jolted in her seat, slopping chocolate milk onto the linen tablecloth. Alex exited the heavy front gates of the Bodleian, dressed in gray trousers and a white shirt, a navy jacket over his gray vest. He tossed his leather satchel over his shoulder, wincing at the weight. He rubbed his eyes and dropped his head as he descended the path toward Broad Street.

Fern threw a handful of coins on her table and dashed out of the restaurant, causing the flummoxed serving girl to spill her tray with a shout. She darted across the cobbled street, dodging vehicles and pedestrians, until she stood directly before a perplexed Mr. Alexander Carroway.

His face screwed up in confusion. Fern watched him blink hard, as though a spark of recognition flared and then died

away. Her heart sank. *He is looking at me, of course he would have no interest. He wants Rose.*

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

She held up the copy of Descartes. “I wanted to return this,” she said, handing the book over to him.

“You read it already?” he asked, his eyes narrowed.

“Of course,” she replied tartly. “Twice.”

Alex ran his fingers roughly through his hair. With a rush, Fern remembered how his fingers had touched her cheek and a delightful shiver ran through her. “It’s been a terrible day for me,” Alex said with a sigh, “and I do not have the energy for another conversation, Miss...”

“Fern.”

“Right. Fern.” He nodded to her and moved to step past. “Good day, miss.”

“You called on my sister this morning.”

Alex froze in place. Fern’s heart thrummed so hard she worried she would not be able to hear his response.

Alex turned cautiously and stepped closer to her. “What did you say?” he asked, his eyes narrowed.

Taking a steadying breath, Fern spoke. “I’m Fern *Waverly*. Rose is my twin sister.”

Alex’s eyes opened wide for a brief moment, then he began to laugh, loud and with so little control that several passersby stared. “Of course you are,” he spat out, as he gestured

towards the heavens. “Of course! The day can only get worse.”

Fern registered the flashing pain of insult but pressed on. “I know you met her at the party, but I need you to know something.” She paused, drumming up her courage.

I want to be with you, she thought, willing herself the courage to say the words out loud. *I want you to know I am the woman you kissed.*

But something behind Alex stopped Fern in her tracks. Three women walked together across the street wearing scarves from Lady Margaret Hall. It was too warm a day for such accessories but clearly the women were proud to be identified as students. These women may be outliers, but they were part of this world, existing in the orbit of learning instead of hovering on the periphery.

Fern felt a visceral longing to be among them. For a moment she forgot she was talking to Alex and about to reveal the truth behind last night. Life as an academic was *right* to her, like scratching an itch that had irritated her for two decades. Her pulse raced at the opportunity she had in front of her, a way to reach her dreams and make them a reality. Alex already breathed the rarified Oxtonian air, knew the secrets, and had the connections. But if she admitted she had fooled him at the masquerade, he could walk away and she may never have the chance again. He was the first person who had seen her brilliance as a gift, even if he thought she was someone else. Perhaps he could listen, even *help*.

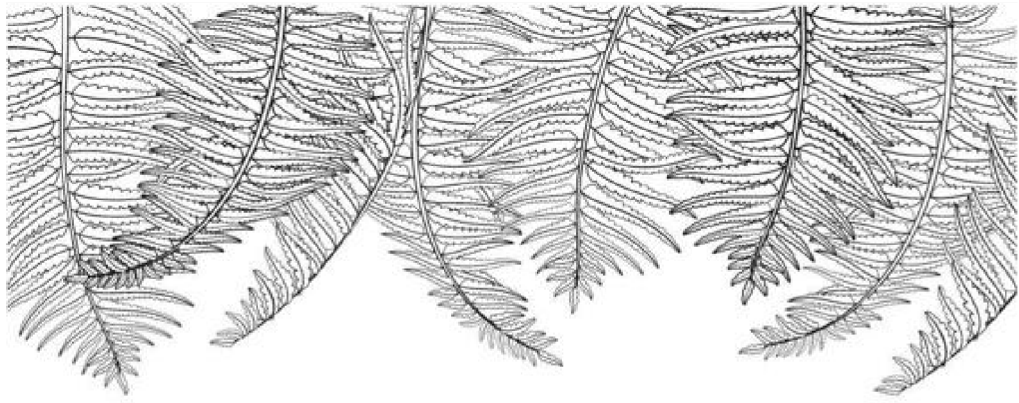
She clenched her fists in her skirt. She would have to be dishonest, not only with Alex but with Rose. *Rose*, the sister who made everyone happy, who always got what she wanted.

Why can't I get what I want?

“Miss Fern, what is it?” Alex’s sharp voice cut into her thoughts.

I want you, but I want Oxford more.

“I can help you win my sister’s heart. But you need to help me get accepted to Oxford.”



Chapter 9

A LAUGH BURST FROM Alex's chest, sounding even more unhinged than he had a few moments before. "Why would I do that?"

Fern's jaw clenched. "I saw you at the party and I know you desire my sister. She told me what happened on the terrace." Alex's cheeks warmed. "She's a bit shy, you see, and is nervous about being courted. You're a nice man, Mr. Carroway, and she may not see it yet but you could make her happy."

Shaking his head, Alex laughed without humor. "She made it very clear she has no interest in me."

"She was unlike herself at the party," Fern replied quickly, taking a step closer. "She felt more comfortable with you than she had with any gentleman before, and perhaps was a bit more...forgiving when you took liberties with her, and she had some remorse in the light of day."

Remorse. Of course Rose would regret having kissed him. He could never offer Rose the life that she intended to have.

“I will help her see the value of your suit. She’s my twin, and no one knows Rose Waverly better than I do.” Fern’s eyes lit up in her pale face. “Rose told me she had a lovely evening with you and wants to see you again, she was simply nervous when you called.”

A flutter of hope stirred in his chest. He had given up on ever having Rose and now this strange girl was giving him another chance. But a concern pulled at the back of his mind.

“Why would you help me?” he asked, crossing his arms.

“I want to see my sister happy,” she said. “The gentlemen my father wants her to marry do not care about her as a person, they only see her as a conquest. You’re different.”

He scoffed and shook his head. “Why go through all this trouble for me? There must be other nice gentlemen pursuing her.”

Fern glanced away and took a deep breath as though steeling herself before turning back to face him. “Because I want to go to Oxford.”

He looked at her askance. “Then why don’t you just apply, like everyone else? I have no special access or influence,” he replied.

“Because it’s not that simple,” she retorted. “I want to study maths, like you.”

Alex’s eyes widened. “That’s—it’s impossible, no college has accepted a woman for maths, they are not even permitted to attend the lectures.”

“I know.” A flush rose in Fern’s cheeks as her eyes flashed. “It’s patently unfair. Women are allowed to study languages, and classics, and art. Why not maths?”

“But it’s—,” Alex stammered as he struggled to identify exactly why it was problematic. “They are not ladies, not like you.”

“What do you mean, *ladies like me*?”

Alex pursed his lips, searching for the correct words. “Your father is a peer, is he not?”

Fern waved her hand as though it were nothing. “A viscount, so minor, at best.”

Alex shook his head. “Spoken like someone who has never had to question their position in the world,” he said in a gravelly tone.

“I am constantly reminded that my position as a woman prohibits me from doing what I want in the world, whereas you have never been second-guessed because you are a man.”

He flinched as her point hit home. “I’ll give you that,” he acknowledged. “But why mathematics? Why not study poetry or art?”

“Because maths is the only thing I’m good at.” Fern scowled.

Alex sighed. “Does your father know of your wishes?”

She nodded, her eyes dropping. “He thinks it is ludicrous as well. And improper. But he doesn’t understand.” Fern looked

up at Alex, and something about her eyes made his breath catch. Hazel, with hints of gold sparkling in the sun. So very much like her sister's eyes, at least as he remembered them. The ground below him shifted, the strongest sense of déjà vu he had ever experienced. She must bear a striking resemblance to her sister, which could explain why he felt an unsettling pull toward her in the vulnerable moment.

“I have been a disappointment as a daughter and will likely never marry,” Fern said in a rush. When Alex raised an eyebrow at her comment, she replied, “I’m very odd, as you certainly know, and no one will want me. It does not bother me, in truth, more time to myself, but if I can’t be fulfilled as a wife or a mother, why can’t I pursue the one thing that makes me happy?”

Alex could understand her logic, the discomfort of not belonging in the role set out for you. “And how am I supposed to help you?”

“Help me prepare for the entrance exams. They are to be held at the end of the month, and I have no idea what to expect. If my scores are high enough, they will have to accept me, no matter my gender.”

He scoffed again. “Clearly you don’t understand Oxford.”

She glared. “Then help me understand. Talk to the right people, anything, just help me try. You’re the only person who has even listened to my dreams without laughing and telling me to forget about them.”

“And what if I can’t help you? I don’t have magical powers, I’m a student. What if you still don’t get in?”

She squared her slim shoulders as she met his gaze. “Then I am in the exact same position I am in now. No harm will be done.”

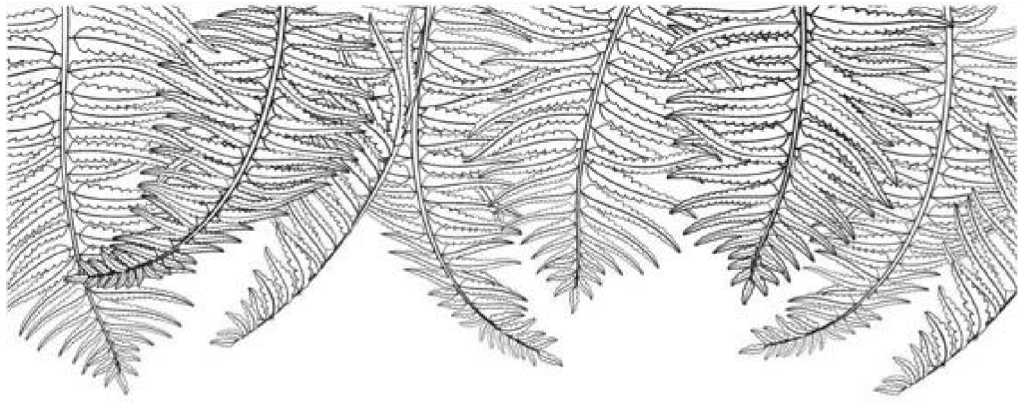
Alex began to reply but stopped. How terrible could it be? She would quickly discover she’s not academically up to snuff and abandon this wild idea about Oxford. And in the meantime, he could court Rose properly, perhaps rediscover the magic that they shared. A little time working with her would hardly impact his own studies.

“Fine, I’ll help you.” He flinched as she screamed and threw her arms around him, then jumped back and straightened her evergreen jacket.

She cleared her throat and extended her hand to shake his. As he took it, a spark rushed through him, a connection shimmering in his veins for a moment, immediately bringing to mind the moment he first touched Rose. He looked up at Fern, her hair flying wildly from its bun, her eyes wide and chin lifted high. He swallowed to regain his composure, releasing her hand as though burned.

“We start tomorrow, then?” she asked, bouncing on her toes.

Good god, Alex thought as he gave her a tepid smile. What have I gotten myself into?



Chapter 10

““**W**HERE WERE YOU? I’VE been waiting for you!”

Rose burst in the moment Fern set foot in her bedroom upon returning from town, her mind racing after her impulsive decision. Diverting Alex’s attention to Rose meant she would give up the chance for any relationship with Alex. To feel his hands on her skin, his lips on hers... While her stomach clenched at the loss, she had to be practical. Fern was not the marriageable lady in the family, that position fell to Rose. In four weeks she could sit for the entrance exams. If she could help Alex in his courtship for a short time, he would be beholden to Fern and help her study. And if Alex and Rose did ultimately fall in love...

Nausea washed over her, and she took deep breaths to let it pass. This was the right choice, the most logical decision. The only solution leaving all three parties involved satisfied, even happy. A romantic connection could be fleeting, but her academic career would bring satisfaction for a lifetime.

“I went into town for a new book and some chocolate,” Fern replied as she moved to her dressing table, pushing loose

papers and notebooks out of the way to make space for her newest acquisition, a novel she had grabbed from the shelf without even reading the title, her mind scrambling to make sense of her new arrangement with Alex.

Rose flopped down on Fern's bed, sprawling over the counterpane. "Mama allowed it?"

Fern's nose twitched. "I told her I was getting new gloves, the old ones itched. Violet is still out of sorts, so Mama was happy to be rid of me." She moved to sit down on her bed and peeled off her boots and stockings, then laid on her back next to her sister, staring at the plaster ceiling.

"I'll give you a pair of mine to show her," Rose replied. "Mama won't remember I bought them last spring." She propped up on her elbow and looked down at her sister with narrowed eyes. "What were you really doing in town?"

Wincing, Fern squeezed her eyes shut for a moment before replying. "I happened to see Mr. Carroway while I was there."

Rose groaned and rolled on her stomach, tucking herself against Fern. "I was dreadful with him, I'm so sorry."

Despite feeling her heart pound in her chest, Fern shrugged. "I wanted to see him again, to see if what happened last night was real. And it wasn't." The lie made her stomach turn. Perhaps if she repeated it enough, it would become true.

Rose pushed up on both hands. "What do you mean?"

"Exactly that. What happened between us at the ball was the magic of the evening, nothing more." Fern held her sister's

gaze, admiring the pure green of her eyes. She had never envied Rose for her beauty, only for her ability to be so easily loved. “He was in love with the idea of *you*, Rose. The darling of the family. I would never be enough for him.”

“But the way you spoke of him,” Rose insisted. “You’ve never been like that before.”

Fern twisted the fabric of her skirts tightly in her fingers. “I have no interest in being courted, and he would certainly not want to pursue me once he got to know me better,” she said, proud of herself for keeping her tone light. “But he’s a nice man, Rose. He would be exactly what you said you were looking for, someone who would work hard, respect you, and treasure you. You should speak with him, get to know him a bit.”

“Will you tell him the truth then?” Rose asked. “That it was you at the ball, not me?”

Fern hated being deceptive. Being frank was simply more efficient, even if she offended some sensibilities along the way. “I would like to be his friend, Rose. Nothing more, but he won’t allow it if he knows what I did.”

“You’re not giving yourself enough credit. He liked you, not ___”

“He’s not for me, Rose,” Fern snapped, more forcefully than she had intended. After a calming breath, she continued. “I do not have feelings for him, truly I don’t. You trust me, don’t you?”

A part of Fern wanted Rose to refuse, to urge Fern to tell Alex the truth. Was it possible Fern could win Alex's heart all on her own?

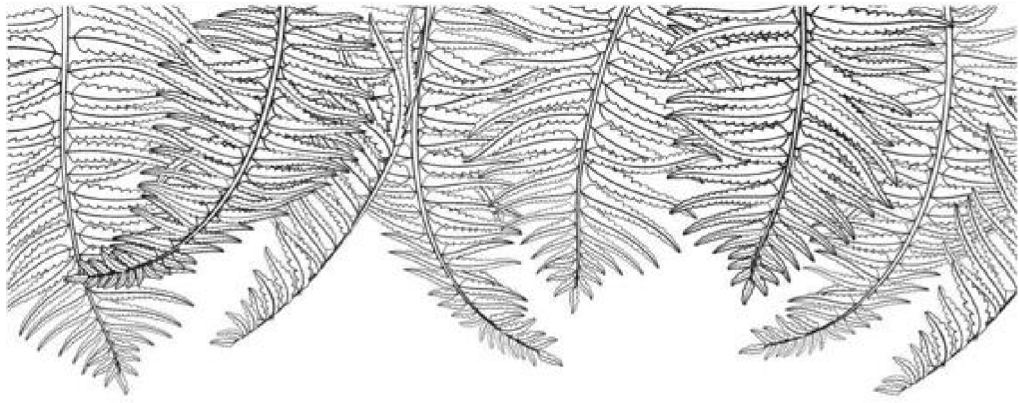
She glanced down at her fingernails, bitten to the quick. The sleeve of her dress had an ink stain on the cuff, as did her fingers. *I could never win him. I would never be enough.*

Rose's feathered brows furrowed. "I do trust you, but I also want you to be happy."

I deserve to be happy, she thought. For a moment she almost told Rose her plan, but the words caught in her throat. Rose would never go along with it. Not only was she a terrible actor (as demonstrated by her performance when Alex called on her), but she would not approve of any form of deception. Rose valued character and honesty above all.

But the likelihood of her falling for Alex was minimal, she rationalized. He was not at all the type of man she had in mind as a suitor. If she could keep up their courtship for long enough, she could sit for her examinations and secure her space at Oxford, then Rose and Alex could end their courtship when they saw fit. No one would even have to know her involvement.

Fern forced a smile as she squeezed her sister's hand. "I will be happy, I know it. I just need a bit more time."



Chapter 11

“THIS DOESN'T MAKE ANY sense.” Alex leaned back on his heels, crossing his arms over the chest of his tweed jacket.

“It makes perfect sense,” Fern retorted as she gestured toward the table tucked into the sidewalk outside the ice cream shop on Magdalen Street, surrounded by cascading hyacinth trellises and overlooking the sandstone walls and Gothic spires of Balliol College.

Alex fidgeted with his sleeves, uncertain if he could convincingly play the part of a confident gentleman in Rose's presence after their last meeting had gone so poorly.

Fern shifted a chair so its inhabitant would have an unimpeded view of the street while being surrounded by the romantic aroma of flowers. She nodded approvingly at her work, then pointed for Alex to sit, as though she were staging him to be painted for a portrait.

“Rose is shopping with Mama up the street. By this time of day Mama always grows tired and takes the carriage back, and we have time to shop before the carriage comes back for us. I

will insist Rose joins me for an ice. She would never refuse. She adores ices, and she thinks this is the best shop in Oxford. Take care to remember that,” she said, wagging a finger at him before she darted back up the street to meet Rose.

The plan still unsettled Alex. Fern had assured him Rose would not know of her sister’s involvement, and Rose would be kind enough to give Alex another chance after their disastrous meeting. She had equipped him with ample advice (*Praise her eyes, laugh at her jokes heartily and praise her wit, do not use sarcasm, she finds it distasteful*) and provided conversation topics (the latest style of hats, romantic novels, various flavors of tea sandwiches). It all seemed contrary to the woman he remembered from the masquerade, but Fern knew her sister, so Alex would have to trust her.

It seemed like only a moment before he saw the sisters walking toward him. *It is remarkable, he thought, how similar they are.* Identical height, nearly identical coloring, and their smiles... How had he not noticed they shared a smile?

Alex feigned concentration in his book while Fern stepped into the shop to buy their ices. Alex looked up and put on a surprised face as he stood. “Miss Rose?” he said, his voice catching.

She turned towards him and her lips twitched upward, and he felt as though the sun had burst through the clouds. She had dressed all in pink again, this time in a crisp coral dress and sun hat, white gloves covering her long fingers. Fingers that

had touched his face. He remembered holding her hand, how electricity pulsed through his veins at their contact.

Rose's eyes darted toward the shop's entrance, but then she stepped toward him tentatively. "Mr. Carroway, how lovely to see you again."

"It's a pleasure to see you as well. Would you care to join me for an ice?" he asked, motioning towards the table.

A smile of pleasure crossed Rose's face. "This is my favorite table. It has the best view of the street, for people watching." Alex smiled as well, reminding himself to thank Fern later.

"Please join me." He pulled out a chair for her and waited, his breath frozen in his lungs.

She moved towards the seat and then stopped. "Oh, but my sister is inside buying me an ice, so I can't—"

Fern burst through the door, a chocolate ice in her hand. "Oh Rose, I only had enough money in my bag for one ice, so I'm afraid—oh, hello, Mr. Carroway."

"Good afternoon, Miss Fern," he replied with a bow. "I was speaking to your sister, and perhaps I may help with this problem. Miss Rose," he said, "may I buy you an ice?"

A hint of delight gleamed in Rose's emerald eyes. "Of course," she replied. "I prefer lemon."

"Then I shall return momentarily." He stepped into the store and ordered two ices with his heart fluttering wildly, one in vanilla and one in lemon. As the ices were prepared, he

glanced out the window at the sisters. A frown crossed Rose's face as she spoke to her twin, but eased when Fern rubbed Rose's arms and drew her into a hug.

When he stepped back to the table, Fern had disappeared. "Where has your sister gone?" Alex asked as he placed the lemon ice in front of Rose and sat.

"She took her ice to the garden. She prefers to be alone with her books." Rose said with a shrug, lifting of one shoulder in an act of unparalleled grace.

Rose was right about one thing—the ices were indeed the best he had ever tasted. They sat in silence as they ate, Rose worrying her lower lip as her glance darted to Alex.

"Are you from London originally?" Rose asked, fidgeting with her serviette.

"No," Alex replied. "From Birmingham."

Rose gave him a tight smile. "I hadn't noticed an accent."

"I've worked very hard to eliminate it," he replied. The accent exposed him as *other* from his first days at Harrow, leaving him ridiculed and dismissed as common by his posh schoolmates. He despised returning home for school breaks because invariably he would spend days upon his return to campus removing the trademark Brummie vowels from his speech.

"Do your mother and father still live there?"

"My mother." Alex swallowed. "My father passed away several years ago."

Rose's lips pulled down, and she leaned toward him. "I'm terribly sorry to hear that. He must have been a lovely man."

Alex nodded, momentarily unable to speak. "He was. My mother still lives in our old house."

"Do you support her?" Rose asked.

He shifted uncomfortably. If he were to marry Rose, he would no longer have to worry about providing for his mother. The days of late nights tutoring and doing his own wash would be a thing of the past.

But weeping over his father would not endear her to him. "I do, but that's a much longer conversation. How was your shopping today?"

"Delightful. I bought a new dress. Have you seen the newest necklines from Paris?" Rose said, her eyes flashing with delight.

"I...can't say I have," he replied.

"Simply scandalous, but all the rage in London, so I've heard, but I haven't made it to London yet this season."

"Oh, do you go to London often?"

"For parties, balls, occasionally, but more during the season."

He blinked. "The season? Which season?"

Rose's head tilted. "The...*Season*. The social season?"

Alex's stomach fell like a weight in his gut. "Oh," he said, clearing his throat. "Yes, of course, the Season. I've heard

quite a bit about it.” *I’ve never been, of course. I’ve never wanted to before now.*

Rose was back to worrying her lower lip when he was brave enough to look back at her. “It can be fun, but I’m already growing tired of it. The same people in different dresses and different ballrooms... It can become dull. I’d rather find something more meaningful.”

“Like what?” Alex watched Rose raise her eyes towards the spires of the distant college and remembered his conversation with her at the party, her passion for learning, and her unbridled enthusiasm over his work.

“I was thinking of becoming more serious with my needlepoint.”

Alex bit the inside of his cheek and released a slow breath. *What was I thinking, this could never work between us. I was a fool.*

They picked at their ice cream for another few moments before Rose cleared her throat and gave him an expectant smile as she got to her feet. “Thank you for the ice, Mr. Carroway. It was lovely chatting with you.” She pulled in a breath as though she wanted to say something more but stopped herself, her shoulders sagging.

Alex pursed his lips and stood, wondering if it would even be worth asking to see her again. “Miss Rose, I—”

“Did you enjoy your ices?” Fern scrambled onto the sidewalk, stumbling briefly on the curb, her cheeks flushed as

though she had run some distance. Her eyes darted between him and Rose, hazel eyes sparkling. For a moment, Alex couldn't pull his gaze away from her and her eager expression.

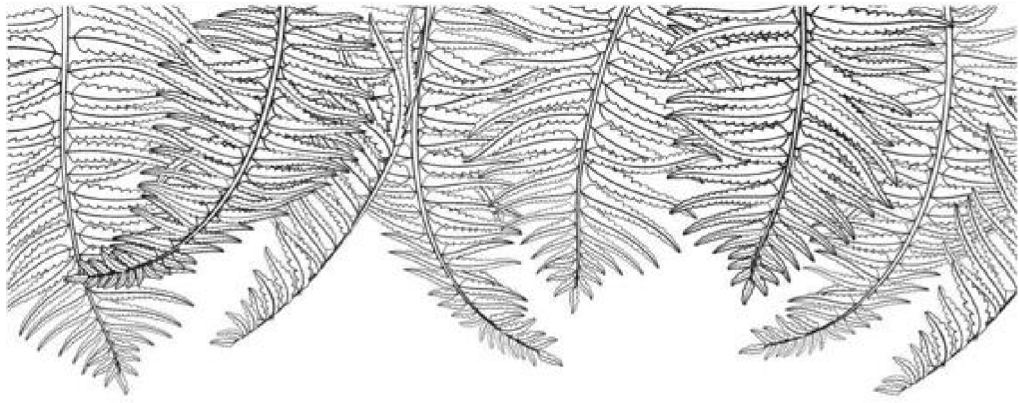
“We did,” Rose replied, her posture stiff.

“Oh, Mr. Carroway,” Fern said before he could identify the change in her sister. “You seem to have dropped something.” She handed him a tightly folded piece of paper. He unfolded it and saw a note written in neat, squared handwriting. *Bodleian, 9 am Sunday.*

Alex took a deep breath and nodded at Fern. “Thank you.” He turned to Rose and took her hand to his lips, placing a gentle kiss on her gloved knuckles. “Thank you for a lovely afternoon, Miss Rose. May I call on you again?” He was certain she would refuse, but he had to try.

Rose smiled, a real smile reaching her eyes, and butterflies took flight in his chest. “Yes, that would be grand. I look forward to it.”

He watched with a wry smile as the sisters walked arm-in-arm up the street and disappeared onto Bond Street. *Perhaps this isn't such a wild scheme after all.*



Chapter 12

“**H**E IS QUITE LOVELY, you know,” Rose said, her voice dreamy.

Alex had just left Boar’s Hill in a hired carriage, having called on Rose for the second time in as many days. Before leaving, Alex had slipped her a paper with specific instructions of where they should meet, confirming they would begin their work that evening. Fern pulled at the bodice of her muslin day dress and bit the inside of her cheek, glancing at the clock on the mantle and wondering if she would have the patience to wait until after supper to listen to her sister’s rambling.

Rose was still speaking, her words piercing the veil of Fern’s thoughts. “He’s not a well-bred gentleman like Mama and Papa wanted, but...” She looked up, her emerald eyes soft. “He is so kind and intelligent, and genuine, unlike the other men I’ve met.”

Fern’s teacup rattled in its saucer as she put it down, relief mixing with an odd sense of dread in her mind. “Then you owe it to yourself to give him a chance.”

Her chest tightened as she tried to block out the confusing emotions rattling through her when she thought of Alex. Fern treated feelings the way she did when memorizing the various classifications of animals in the wild, each demonstrating specific characteristics which could be studied and labeled. She learned the symptoms and manifestations of certain emotions, the body language accompanying human reactions in herself and others. She knew anger, happiness, fear... But jealousy was something she had not felt so intensely before. Seeing Alex fawn over Rose made a knot develop in her throat, tears pricking at her eyes and heaviness deep in her gut. But classifying her emotions allowed her to compartmentalize them. She bundled this information and put it aside.

“But I can’t imagine marrying a man like him... He’s a tradesman’s son.”

Fern stiffened. “Does that bother you?”

Rose shook her head. “No, of course not. I only wonder if he would be comfortable here, with our family.”

Fern almost mentioned the masquerade, how Alex had acted as the consummate gentleman, as though he belonged. Up until he kissed her, of course. The thought made her cheeks flare.

“He’s a good man, who works hard and would take care of you,” Fern said, then lowered her voice as she thought about their older sisters’ unhappy marriages. “I don’t know him well, but he doesn’t seem the type to carry on with other women or gamble or drink.”

Rose nodded solemnly. “He wouldn’t. And I wouldn’t be opposed to a quiet life, growing old with a scholar and not a man of leisure.”

For the first time in her life, Fern had a vision of her future not focused on mathematics. She saw herself sitting with Alex in a library, discussing the novels they had read, sitting together in front of a fire and reminiscing about the years they spent together.

Glancing up at her sister, she saw stars dancing in Rose’s eyes. *Perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad if Alex married Rose*, she thought. *They would be happy together.*

Even if I am not.



When Alex finally dropped his books at her side, Fern checked the clock on the wall. Two past nine. The sky beyond the high half-windows of the basement was already pitch black and the library deserted. “You’re late,” she said as he sat down. Perhaps her jealousy was not as well-compartmentalized as she had thought.

He stared at her, his nose twitching with disdain. “I’ll do better next time,” he said with heavy sarcasm. Fern, however, perked up instantly when he began pulling books and notebooks from his satchel. She grabbed one of the largest texts, Bernard Riemann’s treatise on number theory. Eagerly she began paging through it, jotting notes in her leather

notebook as she went. After a time she became aware of Alex watching her, reading what she wrote. Or at least attempting to.

“What have you written?” he asked, head tilted.

She understood his confusion. Fern’s mind moved much faster than her hands, so she developed her own shorthand, quick symbols conveying the meaning of entire words and ideas in a few strokes. Completely incomprehensible to anyone but Fern, she had to admit it made her appear somewhat of a madwoman.

“It’s just my way of writing. It lets me work more quickly.”

Alex looked at her as though she was an animal in the zoo, and her shoulders folded inward. She hated the feeling of having done something wrong, something abnormal. “I’m sorry,” she said, the words flying from her lips. “I’ll stop.”

“No, don’t stop.” Alex hesitated. “It’s quite original, actually. I’ve never seen anything like it.” She smiled at the implied compliment and Alex cleared his throat. “Right. Well. You need to know the type of work you will do on the exam. You won’t see much number theory until later in your studies, but we must spend some time with geometry and sets.”

Over the next two hours, Alex laid out a series of problems for Fern to solve. Fern tackled the first few easily, but as he increased the challenge, she began to falter. She had no real theory or strategies to fall back on when her initial intuition failed, but Alex seemed to know when to push her, the right moment to make a suggestion or point out a method she had

not considered. She felt a rush every time she found the solution, basking in the pride in his expression.

“You’re a quick learner,” Alex said, “but you’re going to need to write out your thought process. You can’t keep skipping right to the answer.”

“I see it,” Fern insisted, the adrenaline of learning waning. “I don’t need to write it down.”

“But you do,” Alex retorted. “The examiners won’t care if you *see* it, they want to understand how you reached your conclusion.”

Fern snorted in annoyance. “If they’re so smart why can’t they see it too?”

Alex laughed, shaking his head. *Blast*, she thought. *Something wrong again.*

“You’re right,” Alex said, and she immediately calmed. “But unfortunately examinations don’t work that way.” He sat back and studied her, brow furrowed. “Mathematics does suit you. But you have an uphill battle. The examiners will not like the idea of a woman sitting for the exam, no matter how brilliant she is.”

Did he just call me brilliant? A thrill ran through Fern’s veins.

“You will need to give them something they have never seen before, something to astound them so much it would be a crime to keep you from studying here.”

Fern pulled another notebook from her bag. “I have been working on this,” she said, opening to a page covered with scattered notes and drawings. “I’ve been reading the works of Professor Sylvester recently.”

Alex’s eyebrows raised in surprise. “James Joseph Sylvester, the Savilian Chair for Geometry?”

Fern nodded. “Have you worked with him?”

“Not yet,” Alex said, rubbing his brow. “He’s a bit controversial here. He earned the spot having never held a prestigious post in a British University, and many of the other professors didn’t like that. Rumor is his unpopularity is less due to his experience than his Jewish faith.” Fern winced and Alex sighed in agreement before looking at her notes. “How did you get these papers of his? They’re not formally published yet.”

She gave him a wry smile. “The librarians are not entirely above reproach,” she muttered. “I bribed one.”

Alex pursed his lips, clearly displeased with her breach of library etiquette. Putting the matter aside, he asked, “And what do you think of his work?”

Her lips pulled up as excitement rushed through her. “It’s brilliant. I love poetry—” She winced the moment the words left her mouth, waiting for him to recall the night reading poetry in the library.

“I didn’t know,” Alex said.

The tension left her shoulders and pressed on. “His *Laws of Verse*, studying the mathematical algorithms of prose, it’s fascinating. I’ve been working on a theory. When translated properly from the original Greek, most of the prosody of the prose can be maintained.”

“Prosody?”

“The codified principles of versification in metrical poetry. I believe between the metric and synectic meter, there lies a third, the chromatic...” Fern talked Alex through her theory, demonstrating several examples of her findings. As she spoke, she became more animated. When she reached the end of her explanation, she nearly bounced in her seat, eager to see Alex’s reaction.

He simply stared, his eyes wide. “Fern, this is an incredibly advanced theory, no one besides Sylvester is doing work like this.” He sat back, shaking his head. “And you didn’t read this somewhere? You came up with it on your own?”

Fern’s eyebrows furrowed. “Of course I did this on my own!” she said, voice indignant. “Who would I copy this from? My maid?”

“Have you ever spoken to Sylvester about this?”

“No,” she said, her voice low. “Women aren’t allowed in his lectures.”

Alex stood up and began to pace. “I’ve heard Sylvester is looking to publish an addendum to his work, but he hasn’t found the right person to complete the translations. He needs

someone with a mathematical eye who can identify the meter, but also knows Greek and Latin.” He stopped in his tracks and stared at her, wide-eyed. “You know Latin? And Greek?”

“Of course.”

“Then maybe we’ve been going about this the wrong way.”

Fern leaned forward on her elbows, her heart tripping over itself. “And what is the right way?”

He thought for a long moment. “By sitting for the examinations, you will open yourself up for questions from the entire panel of professors and they can find any reason to dismiss you. If you work with Sylvester directly, convince him of the value of your contributions to the project, he can overrule any opposition.”

“But I’d have to convince Sylvester,” she countered. “Why would he listen to me, when he won’t even let me hear him speak?”

“I can help you,” he replied. “I mean, I have my own work, but this is groundbreaking.” He scratched his chin. “I would love to be a part of work like this. The opportunity to impress John Joseph Sylvester is not one to miss.”

Her head tilted. “But I thought you wanted the School of Economics?”

“I do, I think,” he replied, blinking as though he saw something unexpected. “But this is *exciting*. London is the logical choice, but...” He looked up at her as though he had

made a significant realization. “Maybe I want to work with someone like Sylvester, do this sort of research and teach?”

“You’d be wonderful.” Fern couldn’t fight the smile on her lips. “You’re a good teacher, you’ve already helped me.”

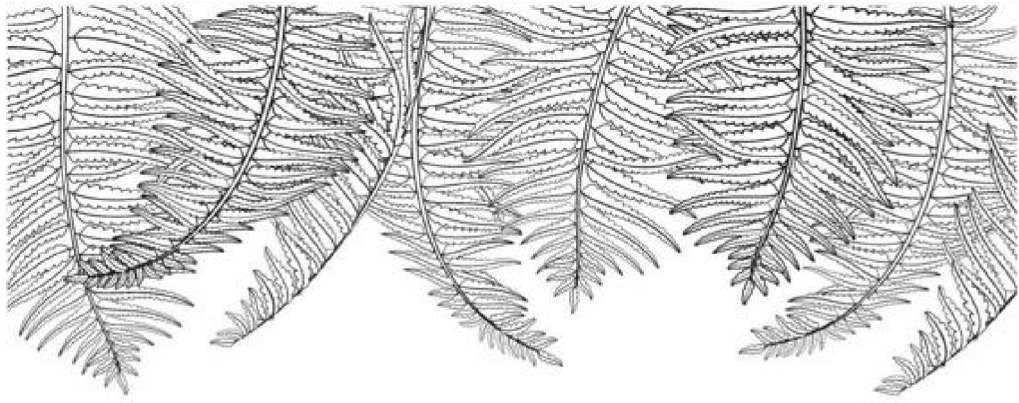
“You know,” he hesitated, running his hand through the loose waves of his hair. “I’ve considered it before, but I thought I wanted something bigger...” His eyes scanned her notebook again. “Maybe this will change my mind.”

“So you’ll help me, then?” Fern’s heart thrummed in anticipation.

“I’ll help you,” he relented. “We will have to prepare this before the examinations in four weeks, in case Sylvester won’t listen.”

“And then?”

Alex sat back down and sighed. “Then we hope for the best.”



Chapter 13

“THIS WILL BE BRILLIANT!”

“I’m not so sure,” Alex replied, casting Fern a dubious look over the water.

“Yes, but something needs to be done,” she replied, passing him a heavily laden picnic basket.

The previous day, Rose entertained Lord Oliver Lassiter, the son of an earl, for tea. Their mother was nearly beside herself with the attention of a future earl, despite Lord Oliver’s unfortunate underbite and tendency to reference his mother as “mumsy.” Fern needed to redirect her sister’s attention back to Alex, and quickly, or else he would give up his courtship of Rose and his study sessions with her.

The Christ College meadows rolled lush and green behind Fern on the unseasonably warm day and had drawn nearly everyone in Oxford to the Thames. Punting was one of the most popular leisure activities for Oxford students and residents, and the banks and water teemed with people eager to spend a day rowing along on flat-bottomed boats designed more for conversation than speedy travel. After nearly a

decade on the campus, Alex had not once taken part in the activity, a fact Fern found shocking.

Alex eyed the boat with one brow raised, then glanced back up at Fern. “And how can you be sure you will get stuck?” he asked.

“I always get stuck,” Fern replied. Alex tucked the picnic basket she had prepared into the glossy cherry wood punt, another of Henry’s possessions he had allowed Alex to borrow for the morning, which he had pulled onto the sandy shore. “It’s crowded today and Rose enjoys being seen, so I will take her on a little excursion in our own boat.”

“And when you become helplessly stuck?” he suggested, apparently still unsure of the mechanics of the plot.

“You will, in a moment of astounding coincidence, happen upon us and offer for Rose to climb into your punt. You will alert another boater of my need for assistance, and then the two of you will be free to enjoy the picnic you happened to overpack for your own time on the river.” She grinned. “As I said, *brilliant*.”

“I’m really not terribly...good at this, you know.” He prodded his pole in the water as a gondolier would then teetered precariously as his balance wobbled. “What if I can’t help you?”

“Then it will be a delightful story to laugh over during tea,” she retorted.

Alex heaved a reluctant, accepting sigh. “All right. Am I to wait here for you to pass by?”

Fern rolled her eyes. For such a clever man, he was quite terrible at this. “No, you are far too visible. Pull into that cove ahead, and we will be by in half an hour’s time, at the most. Rose is waiting for me back at the boathouse, so we won’t be long.”

His auburn brows pulled into a V, and she had a strong desire to rub her thumb over them to ease the furrow. *He’s nervous*, she thought, proud of herself for recognizing the emotion in him, and her subsequent desire to soothe it. “Please don’t worry,” she reassured him. “This will work, I promise!”

But of course, even the best-laid plans are sometimes destined to fail. By the time Fern had dashed back to the boathouse, her sun hat flapping behind her by its ribbons, Rose stood in a gaggle of smartly dressed young ladies, laughing politely.

“Fern,” she gushed, pulling her sister into the group. “You remember Lottie and Caroline from cotillion, don’t you?”

Fern froze in place, feeling her heart begin to pound. These girls had never been cruel to her, per se, but their wide-eyed, tense stares, as though Fern were a dangerous exotic animal in a cage, set her aback. “I do,” she said stiffly.

Awkward silence descended. Fern’s cheeks warmed as tears pricked at her eyes. *I suppose this is progress*, she thought wanly, *I am at least aware when I am making a fool of myself.*

Caroline turned quickly back to Rose. “As I was saying,” she said, as though Fern did not exist. “We were just off to play croquet with the Helmsford girls, and I thought you could join us on the meadows.”

“That would be delightful,” Rose beamed. “Fern, would you like to join us?”

The polite but strained looks on Lottie and Caroline’s faces made it perfectly clear Fern’s presence would be anything but delightful.

“But Rose,” Fern said, hating her suddenly childlike tone. “You—we were to go punting.” Instantly she felt selfish and greedy over her sister’s attention, then a sick sense of shame sat like a heavy weight in her chest.

“But I don’t enjoy punting, and we always get stuck,” Rose said, her voice low. “You get so...frustrated.”

Yet another thing I have done wrong. Fern forced a smile as she lifted her face towards the breeze. “I understand. Please, go enjoy yourselves. I have a book, after all, so I can pass the time.”

Rose looked at her in concern. “Are you certain you don’t want to join us?”

Fern nodded quickly. By speaking she may reveal how hurt she felt. She was always being rejected, always cast aside. How foolish she had been to think Rose would want to spend the day with her when a better opportunity awaited.

Drawing a small poetry book from the pocket of her skirt, she smiled broadly at the girls and turned away, making haste towards the boathouse.

She fumbled her way into a small rowboat and passed a few coins to the dockhand, hoping she could catch Alex before too much time passed by. She rowed haphazardly, putting distance between herself and the shore. She could see Rose and her friends ascending the hill, skirts blowing like flowers in the breeze, laughing gaily. *I will never be like them*, she thought, the knot in her throat growing until she nearly choked on it.

Maneuvering the boat by herself was equal parts laborious and humiliating. She attracted the stares of other groups out enjoying the gentle waters and the warm day as she blew past with her hair plastered to her face, gasping for breath.

When she ran aground on a high bar of land, she nearly threw herself from her seat with the jolt of impact. Both of her oars shot from her hands and immediately began their own trip along the current. Fern stared as they drifted away then took in her surroundings, having missed the main route of the Thames as it curved around a bend, and was now obscured in a small cove, hidden from view and completely at the mercy of the water. A sob escaped her throat.

“Fern!” The voice startled her. She looked up to see a punt entering the cove, Alex standing at the helm. He had abandoned his jacket and stood tall in his fawn trousers, his broad shoulders straining in the sleeves of his white shirt, his waistcoat shifting across his chest with his motions. His blue

eyes were wide with concern as he pulled up alongside her, nearly tipping himself out of the boat as he hit the shore. “I saw you pass by so quickly, I couldn’t keep up. What happened?”

“I’m stuck,” she spat out.

Alex, blast him, laughed. His mouth opened broadly, flashing a dazzling array of white teeth, his eyes creasing as laughter escaped him. “So I see.”

She huffed, crossing her arms tightly over her heaving chest. Alex pursed his lips together to stifle his amusement. “Did you toss Rose overboard?”

Fern looked at her hands, watching her fingers tap on the seat of the boat. “She did not want to come with me,” she murmured, suddenly ashamed.

“Oh,” Alex breathed. *He must be so disappointed, surely he will leave too—*

“I’m so sorry that happened to you,” he said warmly, and Fern looked up. He knelt on the bow of his boat, nearly at her eye level, watching her. “Are you all right?”

The sympathy in his voice brought the knot back into her throat with a vengeance. She swallowed hard against it, steadying herself as she met his gaze. “I’m fine,” she replied. “And I’m sorry I didn’t bring you Rose.”

He shrugged. “There’s nothing to be done about it now.” He looked around her and the rowboat. “Where are your oars?”

She pointed down the river, where her oars had become stuck along the bank some fifty meters from their location. “Well,” Alex said with a sigh, “it appears I will be performing a rescue after all.” He stood to his full height, rolled his shirtsleeves up his forearms, and extended one hand out to Fern, looking at her expectantly.

Fern did not anticipate electricity to rush through her when he took her hand. The warmth of his body shot through her like lightning, so sudden she nearly pulled her hand away. Her gaze flew to his. The blue irises appeared brighter, pupils larger, and she wondered if he felt it too.

He must have felt something, for Alex’s cheeks flushed as he cleared his throat. “Are you coming over?”

She bobbed her chin and allowed him to pull her to standing as she gathered her skirts in her arm. Alex led her over the water between their boats, his free hand wrapping around her waist to stabilize her as the boat wobbled. She fell to her seat on the punt with a flop, breathing quickly. Alex, noting she was safely in place, began to push the boat away from the bank.

Or at least, he attempted to. “It’s stuck.”

Fern raised an eyebrow. “I told you so.”

“No,” he retorted. “My boat is stuck.”

“Well, unstick it then!” Fern shot back, feeling panic rising over her.

Alex pushed at the shore with his pole with increasing force, but the punt did not budge. “Can you help me?” he huffed.

She looked at him aghast. “How am I supposed to help? I got stuck too.”

He shot her an impatient look over one shoulder. “I don’t know, *something!*”

Fern grabbed an oar from his punt and leaned forward, pressing her chest against the smooth wood of the boat by his feet, and pressed the oar along the shoreline. Together they heaved, pushed, and jammed with all their might to dislodge the punt, until perspiration stuck their clothing to their skin. Alex stood tall, pushing a damp curl from his forehead. With surprising grace he leaped to the shoreline, leaving Fern alone on the bow.

“What are you doing?” she shrieked, jumping to her feet and bobbling about before finding her balance again.

Alex tossed her the pole, and she dropped the oar with a clatter. “I’m going to push.” He pulled off his boots and socks and tossed them into the punt before rolling up the hems of his trousers. “You use the pole to push us from shore, and I’ll jump back on when we are free.”

“I don’t think that will work.”

He looked at her with a wry smirk, his expression making her want to giggle for some untold reason. “Do you have a better plan?”

She shook her head and gripped the pole tightly, ready to direct the boat away from the shoreline as soon as they were free. Alex screwed up his face with effort as he shoved against the bow. A loud squelching sound cleaved the air, and the boat lurched into motion, caught in the current pulling away from the shore.

“Jump!” Fern shrieked as she floated away from her would-be rescuer.

Alex set into a run, his feet slapping on the mud before throwing himself through the air towards the departing punt. He collided with Fern, his arms flapping around her until their chests pressed together, his momentum and her complete lack of grace sending both of them tumbling onto their rear ends into the shallow, murky waters of the Thames.

Fern burst to the surface sputtering, pushing her hair from her face as she gasped. Alex, just inches away, looked similarly astounded to have found himself up to his waist in water. He turned slowly to face her, blue eyes wide in shock. She let out a moan, then grappled with her skirt pocket, extracting a completely sodden copy of Emily Dickinson’s poetry.

And he laughed. It started slowly, from low in his chest, then erupted into a full-bodied guffaw, his face split into a brilliant smile.

“It’s not funny,” she sputtered. “I’m—I’m soaked!” In a panic, she started wiping the sodden pages on her equally damp shirt.

“I think that’s a lost cause,” he said with a chuckle.

“I’m still going to try,” she retorted with a low cry as the pages disintegrated under her touch.

“Fern.” She looked up at his stern voice to see Alex crouched low in the water.

She tilted her head. “What are you—”

He waved his hand against the water, sending a splash directly into her face. She dropped her jaw and gasped in horror as rivulets fell from her nose and chin. When the water cleared from her eyes she saw Alex, a playful smirk on his lips.

“You! Why would you—”

“You’re upset with yourself, and you haven’t done anything wrong,” he said. “You need to smile and forgive yourself. Besides, this outing seems to be a wash.” He slapped his palm against the water, sending another wave her way. “Literally. We might as well enjoy it.”

Jaw dropped, Fern stared at Alex aghast. “Are you *playing*, Alexander Carroway?”

He shrugged. “I suppose I am. You must bring out my childish side.”

Fern scowled and began to turn away, then spun as she dragged her arm through the water. *Splash!*

“There is nothing childish about this,” she huffed. “My book”—*splash*—“is ruined!” *Splash!*

Alex mimicked her sputtering expression of surprise for only a moment before he returned the splash.

Fern anticipated his response and ducked out of the way, leaping to the side to return the assault.

Soon they were both lost to their amusement, gasping through laughter until they realized the punt was drifting away. Giggling, Alex grabbed Fern's hand as they pushed their way through the water to retrieve it.

Alex grabbed the side of the boat, then used his other arm to hoist Fern up. His strength took her aback, noting how the muscles in his chest stretched under his damp shirt as he lifted her, how the swell of his arms shifted as she gripped his biceps for support. Her body ran along the length of his as he lifted her, her skin burning where he touched her, the contrast of the cold fabric against her flaming skin making her shiver.

She was breathless when he placed her on the bow, her hands still gripping his forearms for support. His gaze dropped, lingering over her dress where the fabric clung to her body, then diverted his gaze. "We should get your boat," Alex said, his voice like gravel.

Suddenly sobered, Fern ducked her head, rounding her shoulders. Alex watched her, brows furrowed for a moment, before grabbing the rope leading to her row boat. Alex tied her boat to the back of the punt before pushing himself easily back onto the craft. Withdrawing his jacket from beside the picnic basket, still safe and dry, he draped it around Fern's shoulders.

“Thank you,” she murmured, meeting his eyes. He gave a meek smile in return but said nothing.

Their return to the nearest boathouse was uneventful, and Alex helped Fern from the punt, ignoring the smirks of the dockhands as they walked back along the path toward Christ College.

“So...you weren’t kidding when you said you were terrible at punting,” Alex said with a gentle smile.

Fern couldn’t help the laugh escaping her. How simple it was for him to put her at ease. “You don’t seem to be an expert at it either.”

“I need to practice a bit,” he said, puffing his chest out. “Then I’ll be the best out there.”

She watched him carefully, the graceful curve of his lips, the slope of his nose, the sparkling eyes framed by thick lashes. “You’re joking.”

“I am,” he replied, dipping his head. “But I should practice again if I want to improve.”

“You don’t like being bad at something, do you?”

He chuckled. “Oh, there are plenty of things I’m not good at.” Fern raised an eyebrow and gestured for him to continue. “My grandmother attempted to teach me to knit, that was a disaster. And as much as I love it, I could never write poetry.”

“There are worse faults to have.” *Trust me, I know.*

He shrugged and dropped his head. His voice was low, almost shy when he spoke. "I'm not terribly good at fitting in."

Fern stopped and caught his forearm, forcing him to turn and face her. "What do you mean?"

He smiled and kept walking, although he slowed his pace. "When I was growing up, I was the only working-class boy in my level, so I learned to be the best at everything I could. Sports, my classes... I thought if I could be better, I would be left alone. I wasn't entirely correct, but at least I felt better about myself."

"Surely you don't feel that way now." Fern wanted to pull him into his arms, to hold him close and cry, *I understand, I feel the same way!* But she kept her distance. He was not hers to hold.

"I do, but it's less common. Oxford may admit men like me, but we do not truly belong." He cast her a sideways glance. "I'm grateful for you, though. I wouldn't have managed to impress Rose without your help."

The words extinguished the glow starting to burn in her chest. She wrinkled her nose to fight the urge to cry. "What about me? Do I make you feel like you don't belong?"

He stopped and looked directly at her. "Of course not, Fern. It's easy with you."

He watched her for a moment, then shook his head and continued along the path. Fern wondered if he had truly *seen* her, recognized her as the woman he met at the ball.

“What happened with Rose?” Alex said gently as they walked back towards the meadows. “You said she didn’t want to come along.”

Fern hesitated. Jealous as she was, she couldn’t paint her sister in a bad light. “Rose has many friends, so it can be hard for me to find time to spend with her. She seemed so excited about punting when we discussed it last night, but today...” She pulled Alex’s jacket tighter as a shiver passed through her. “She wanted to be with her friends.”

“You couldn’t go along? I would have eventually concluded you had abandoned me to the elements.”

Fern smiled, the slightest lift of her lip. “Rose’s friends don’t like me. I don’t blame them, honestly, I don’t find them terribly interesting.”

“No discussions of literature then?” he asked, his tone joking. “Or of great questions in philosophy?”

Fern snorted. “Lord, no. Can you imagine? Transitioning from dances to Descartes?”

“Did you truly read the *Meditations*? Entirely in French?”

“I did,” she retorted, more than a little irritated by his doubt. “Have you read them in French?”

“No,” he replied. “According to my tutor, my French is deplorable. My father insisted it was a gentleman’s language, so I had lessons as a boy. Sadly, it never stuck.”

“Does your father speak French?”

She saw a flicker of something dark pass over his expression. “He didn’t, no. He passed away three years ago, suddenly. An apoplexy.”

Aside from a distant aunt and grandfather, Fern had never lost a family member to death. The idea of her father disappearing from her life terrified her. “I’m so sorry, Alex. I can’t imagine.”

“I spent my childhood wanting to be exactly like my father, then he wanted me to be everything he wasn’t. Educated, connected, wealthy.” Alex released a humorless laugh. “When he died, I forgot how to apply myself for a while. I wondered why I was working so hard when he would never see it.”

“You work for yourself, then.”

“And my mother.” His eyes brightened at her mention, bringing a smile to Fern’s face. “She still lives in the same house in Birmingham. I established a trust for her with my portion of the proceeds when we sold my father’s shop, and she lives off those funds. It’s the least I could do for her.”

“And you as well?”

When he spoke she could hear the notes of his Brummie accent piercing through his carefully practiced speech, as though discussing his family had pulled him back home. “Not so much, but if I’m frugal, I can make do. After my Da passed, I needed to support her, to pay her back for...”

Fern looked at him closely. “For what?”

Alex hesitated, kicking a stone ahead of him on the path. “My father gave up so much of his own happiness to give me a good future. He worked himself to an early death to support me.”

She touched his arm, bringing him to a halt. “It wasn’t your fault. You must know that.”

Shrugging, Alex continued walking, allowing Fern’s hand to drop from his arm. “I can make sure she lives comfortably.” He cast her a sideways glance. “It’s not the lap of luxury like you’re used to.”

Fern flinched. “I am aware most people do not live the way I do, and I’d never—”

“I’m sorry,” Alex interrupted. “It was rude of me to say that. I suppose I have a bit of a chip on my shoulder about being... different from most of the students here. Most devote their lives to scholarship for the joy inherent in learning, while I have my mother to support.”

“Have you ever considered studying what you love, doing the work that makes you happy?”

Alex laughed, giving her a wry smile. “Not all of us have the privilege, Fern.”

Fern bit her lip. This entire day was a disaster. Not only had Alex completely missed the opportunity to see Rose, but Fern had made a fool of herself and Alex, then insulted him for providing support for his mother.

She prepared herself for her sister's censure as they approached the meadow, where Rose and her friends watched them approach with astonishment on their faces.

"Mr. Carroway?" Rose gasped. "Fern, what—"

"I was enjoying a punt when I happened upon your sister," Alex said smoothly, a bemused smile on his lips. "She had gotten stuck and unfortunately, her boat overturned while I attempted to extract her." He laughed, as though the entire encounter had been nothing but amusement. "The only casualty was poor Miss Dickinson's poetry."

Rose cocked her head to the side. "Miss Dickinson? Was she in our class at cotillion?"

Fern watched as Alex regarded her twin carefully, as though uncertain how to respond. Fern decided to rescue him. "Thank you for your assistance, Mr. Carroway," She removed his jacket and handed it back with trembling fingers.

"How kind of you to rescue my hapless sister." Rose beamed, placing her hand on Alex's arm. "I always dread boating with her, as she always becomes stuck."

"I'm simply happy I could be of service," he replied, smiling at her upturned face.

Fern scowled, then handed the picnic basket over to Rose. "Mr. Carroway, you left this in the punt."

He looked at Fern for a moment as he took the basket, then turned to her sister. "Miss Rose, would you be so kind as to

join me for a picnic? I'm afraid I overpacked, and I should probably dry off a bit before I return to class."

"We've already eaten, but I'd be delighted, given your heroic rescue of dear Fern," Rose gushed. "Caroline, Lottie, may I introduce you to Mr. Alexander Carroway. He is a top scholar at Oxford, bound for the London School of Economics next year."

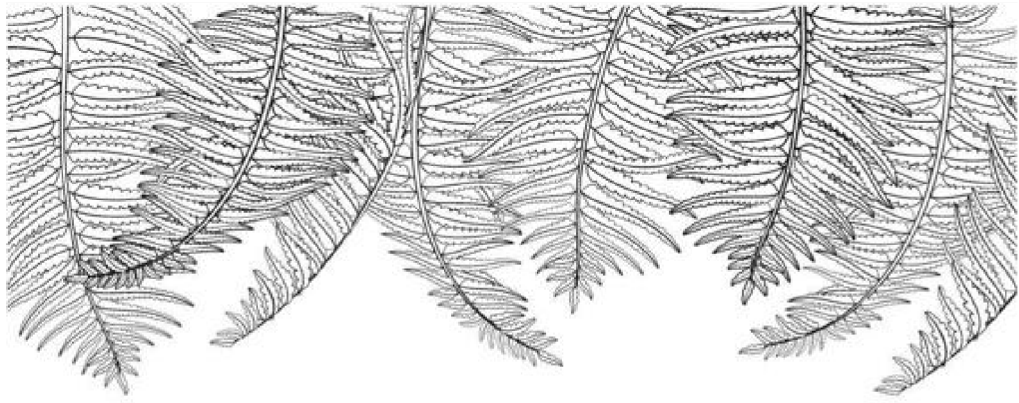
The ladies had been studiously admiring Alex's form, now obvious under the damp clothes sticking to his skin. A rush of possessive fury swelled as they admired the arms and chest that had held her earlier, then quickly dismissed it. *I have no right to be possessive*, she scolded herself. *He belongs to Rose, not me.*

Alex smiled as he donned his coat, clearly bemused by the attention. "A pleasure, ladies. Would you care to join us as well?" The ladies twittered as they flocked around Alex, who had taken Rose's hand in his arm, leading the party back into the meadows.

Fern stood frozen on the path, her dress stuck to her shivering body. Alex looked back, and for a moment she saw what she hoped was regret in his eyes. "Miss Fern," he hesitated. "Would you like to come along?"

A quick thrill rushed through her, then vanished when she saw Lottie and Caroline stiffen. Her stomach sank as she shook her head to decline, leaving the party to continue along the meadow.

She was not wanted. Even Alex had only invited her as an afterthought. Rose was the prize, as she always would be. And Fern would forever be the runner-up.



Chapter 14

“ISN’T HE DELIGHTFUL?” ROSE leaped onto Fern’s bed and bounced twice before flopping on her back with a dreamy sigh.

Fern grimaced from her position on her window seat and pulled the shawl tighter around her shoulders, forcing her gaze to her novel. Despite having changed from her soaked clothing, her bones still retained a persistent chill.

“What a stroke of luck Alex happened upon you!” Rose said with a grin. “He was absolutely lovely with the girls, we could have talked for hours had Mama not needed me.”

“Oh?” Fern mumbled, her eyes glazing over but remaining on the page in front of her.

“You should have heard his stories about playing cricket at school. Did you know he was quite the athlete?”

Fern gave a non-committal hum.

“Lottie couldn’t stop gushing about him,” Rose continued, giggles lacing through her syllables. “How handsome he is, those *eyes*, oh, it was glorious.”

“You want your friends to be jealous of you?” The words escaped before Fern could censor the judgemental tone.

“No, I don’t want that,” Rose replied. “But I certainly wouldn’t mind having him on my arm at the Henderson ball in July.”

The image of Alex, dancing with Rose the way he had with her, made jealousy sink its ugly claws into her gut.

“I never should have worried about him, he’ll be a smash.”

Fern lifted her eyes from her novel. “What will Mama and Papa think of him?” she asked.

Rose hesitated, twisting her mouth into a grimace. “I’m sure Mama won’t approve, but Papa might.” Rose traced the embroidered patterns on Fern’s counterpane with her slim fingers. “But Alex is a different sort of man, an intellectual like Papa. Papa’s bound to respect him.”

Fern pursed her lips. Alex had confided in her about feeling as though he didn’t belong. It wasn’t her place to share, but shouldn’t Rose at least consider his feelings? “Do you think he would enjoy spending time with us? All of us?”

“I was worried at first,” Rose replied, a crease appearing between her brows, “but Fern, he was so charming, and *funny* with the girls, as though he had known them for years! I had no idea he was so funny!”

I knew. The jealous monster growled. “Of course he’s funny.”

Rose rolled until she faced Fern on her side. “I’m sorry, I keep forgetting about how you met...” She pressed her pink lips together tightly. “Are you certain it doesn’t bother you, to hear about us together?”

“Not at all,” Fern said, rising to her feet, hoping to dislodge the jealous monster. “Alex has no feelings for me.”

“But do you have feelings for him?”

If Fern had answered in the affirmative, she was certain Rose would have ended the courtship immediately. But if the courtship ended, Alex would no longer help Fern with her preparations.

“He’s exactly what you’re looking for,” Fern replied, hoping her sister wouldn’t notice the dodge. “I would enjoy having him as a member of the family.”



Most university students viewed the end of April like the coming of dawn, when the dark nights and frigid mornings of winter give way to flowering trees, warm breezes, and a respite from the rigors of classes.

Like his classmates, Alex eagerly anticipated the end of term, signifying the end of his studies and the start of the next chapter of his life. When they met in the library, he asked Fern to give him feedback on his dissertation, and he should have known she would not hold back.

“Have you read Gauss before, or do you just enjoy tormenting me?” he asked as she scratched out an entire paragraph of his writing.

“Of course I’ve read it,” she retorted. “And this is incorrect, you know.” She hastily erased a note he had written in the margin and replaced it with one of her own. He scowled as he read it, irritated he had not caught his error earlier.

Fern nodded her approval, then looked at him quizzically. “I suppose I should have asked you earlier, but why Gauss? His work is much more scientifically relevant, I would think you would want to study someone more closely related to economics.”

“I’ve always been drawn to Gauss.” Alex rubbed the cramp out of his hand. “He was born poor, unlike so many mathematicians. His mother was illiterate, and he received no formal education until adulthood. He was driven entirely by the desire to make sense of the world.”

“You feel a kinship towards him then?”

He shrugged. “I suppose so, although my family was closer to being respectable.”

Fern tilted her head as she looked at him. “How would you define ‘respectable’?”

Alex closed his notebook and gazed upwards, as though the answer could be found on the ceiling above him. “Wealthy, I suppose? Connected? It’s difficult at Oxford, when everyone

can list their relations back to William the Conqueror, and my grandparents were tenant farmers.”

“There is nothing disreputable about humble beginnings.”

Alex scoffed. “You don’t see the difference because you are already a part of the respectable class. You have not seen the way people look at me, my clothing, my accent... They know I don’t belong here.”

Rose gave him an incredulous glare. “Of course you belong here, and you need to stop telling yourself otherwise. You’re *brilliant*. Isn’t that what this place is supposed to be, full of the most incredible minds in the nation?”

“As long as those minds can afford all the trappings. I’m the son of a tradesman, which is certainly not the norm.”

“Well, you must consider who sets the norms,” Fern replied. “It’s not people like you and me.”

“Let me ask you a question.” Alex leaned forward on his elbows. “Your father is a viscount and holds massive influence at this university. Why isn’t he helping you with admission?”

She flinched and then pursed her lips together. “He does not approve of me, or any woman, studying maths. It’s...unusual, irregular, and he hates anything uncommon. But if I were to win a place and impress the professors on my own, it would be much harder for him to refuse me. Not impossible, but at least more difficult. I think if I wanted to pursue art or poetry he would be amenable, but being able to discuss maths does not help me win a husband.”

Alex's eyebrows shot up. "Is such a thing expected of you?"

She laughed, although he could sense the bitterness in the sound. "Not of *me*, my mother and father know better than to expect me to marry. They're holding out hope of Rose making a good match."

His gut twisted. Was she hinting he was not an appropriate husband for Rose?

Fern shook her head as though she could hear his thoughts. "I'm not saying you aren't a good match. You're fantastic. You are a scholar and have a bright future." She gave a wan smile. "After Saturday, you're all Rose has talked about."

Saturday's picnic had been a smashing success, despite its awkward start. Rose had fawned over Alex's heroism in rescuing her sister and boasted to her friends about his intelligence and bright future. He felt awkward and out of place at first, but Rose's natural ebullience and charm allowed him to relax enough to enjoy the experience. When he had finally returned Rose to the family's carriage, she had stood on her toes to kiss him briefly on the cheek before stepping inside, leaving him reeling but somehow empty inside. Things were proceeding exactly as he had hoped, but his thoughts kept returning to the water and to the young woman he had left behind.

"If you're not expected to marry, what does your family want for you?" Alex asked.

Fern shrugged. "I suppose they expect me to be a companion, most likely for my Aunt Margaret." She

shuddered, and Alex cracked a smile. “I suppose by the fifth child, parents stop having ambitions for their children and simply want them to leave the house.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” Alex said. “All parents have dreams for their children.”

“What dreams did your parents have for you?”

Alex sighed, memories washing over him. “My father’s dream was for me to go to the London School of Economics and work for the government. My father envied the men in those posts, their travel, connections, prestige... He never had the chance to do that sort of work but hoped maybe I could.”

“And is that what you want as well?”

He hesitated. London was what he wanted, it was what he had worked for his entire life, the destination, the endgame for his years of labor. Being a professor would be nice, but it was not the vision his father had held for him. His father had worked so hard to provide for Alex’s future, only to have his own stolen away.

“It would be wonderful, helping discover mathematical talent and mentoring the next great minds at the university... But it’s not respected, and certainly not lucrative.”

She must have read the tension on his face because a smile pulled at the edge of her lips. “I suppose being a riverboat guide is not in your future employment plans?”

Alex laughed, and she beamed. Fern’s smile was infectious when she chose to share it. “No, certainly not.”

“So if you were not a mathematician, what would you be?” she asked, propping her chin on her hand.

He made a show of thinking. “Certainly not a poet, or a musician. A stable hand, perhaps? I could be a carpenter, my father taught me quite a bit when I was young.”

“You can fix things?” Fern’s eyes glittered, as though collecting these tiny details of his life and stashing them away gave her great joy. It made him want to give her more.

“I built an entire set of bookshelves for my mother when I was twelve. I was so proud of myself, I told everyone in the neighborhood about it. There was a whole party in our parlor when she put her first book on it. How humiliating when the entire thing collapsed.”

Fern’s laugh was enchanting. Her head tossed back as she giggled, so free and unrestrained it made him chuckle in return. She wiped tears from her eyes. “If you’re so talented, perhaps you can fix this dreadful table.” The table in question, the only one available in their deserted alcove, was woefully uneven and had a tendency to shift violently when they put weight on one corner.

Alex stood and dusted off his shoulders. “Let me give you my expert assessment.” He sat down and scooted under the table, his back on the wooden planks of the floor. “Ah, you see, here is the problem.”

“Where?” He turned his head to see Fern flat on her back next to him, staring at the bottom of the table. He paused for a

second, a quick thrill running through him. *She holds nothing back, does she?*

“Here.” He pointed to one leg. “It seems this leg is...shorter than the others.” He turned and put out his hand. “That will be ten quid.”

She burst into laughter, placing her hand into his as he laughed along with her. It must have been the late hour, or the lack of sleep, or the unusual nature of their relationship, but he felt an intense sense of kinship with Fern, as though despite their wildly different experiences and backgrounds, she understood a part of him no one had been privy to before.

He rolled to his side to face her and pulled her hand towards him, unable to hold back his own laughter. She rolled as well, grinning openly at him. They were mere inches apart. He could smell her, a mix of outdoors and honey, like a meadow in spring. Her eyes sparkled, and he was struck by the kaleidoscope of colors in her iris, greens and browns and blues scattered about. *Has she always been so pretty?*

Alex could not remember the last time he had laughed so openly, had let himself be silly and have fun. It had happened with Fern in the river. And before it had been...

The ball. With Rose.

Alex blinked hard at the sobering thought and cleared his throat. “We should...”

She must have sensed the shift in the atmosphere because Fern turned away as they both climbed out from under the

table, brushing dust from their clothing.

Alex found he couldn't look at Fern yet, as though they had shared something remarkably intimate yet undefined. As much as he wanted to pretend it hadn't happened, he wanted to be back in it again, lost with her. But he couldn't, Fern was a distraction. *London. Rose.*

He squared his shoulders and met her eyes. "I set the meeting with Sylvester for two weeks from now, the day after my thesis defense. I told him the barest information about you, how you are a mathematics student I am assisting and you have some brilliant ideas he may be interested in hearing." She raised one eyebrow. "I know, I'm going to have to tell him more eventually, but I don't want him to refuse outright because of who you are. Once he has seen your work he will see the merit of your application."

"Will he refuse to see me if he knows the truth?"

Alex shook his head vigorously, although he wished he was as confident as he appeared. "He has experienced prejudice in his life, and I would think Sylvester of all people would be willing to take a chance on you."

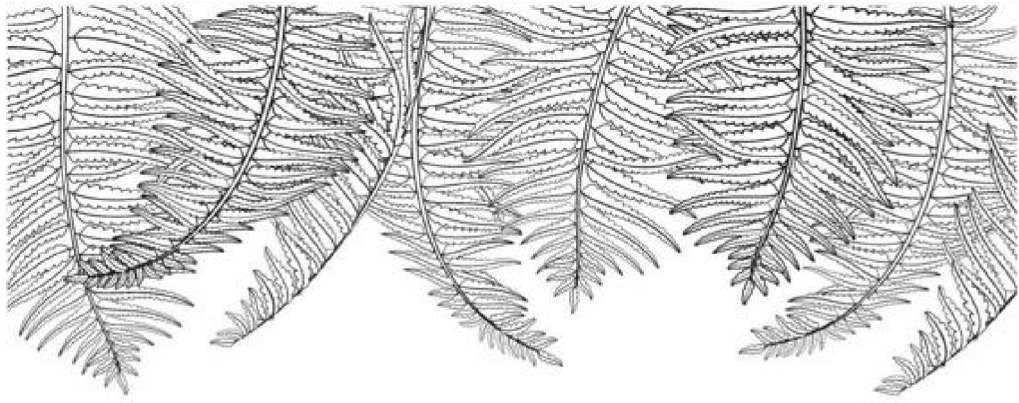
They sat in silence, the weight of their futures hanging in the air.

"Have you told Rose we're working together?" Alex asked, not meeting her eyes.

Fern shifted on her feet. "I haven't."

“Are you at all bothered by keeping...*this*,” he said, gesturing vaguely at the space between them, “away from your sister? Don’t you tell her everything?”

Fern’s jaw set as she blinked hard. “No, it doesn’t affect her. We are merely helping each other, after all. I will present my work to Sylvester, and you will win Rose. We both get what we want, and she will be none the wiser. As long as we do our work and keep this to ourselves, nothing could possibly go wrong.”



Chapter 15

*H*OW CAN ANYONE DRINK *this swill* ? Fern touched the delicate edge of her teacup to her lip, allowing the slightest amount of tea to reach her mouth before setting it down again. Her mother had decided it was too childish for Fern to drink chocolate and warm milk at tea time, but Fern dumped spoonfuls of sugar into her cup until it reached syrup-like proportions and became palatable. Fern gave the sugar bowl, placed slightly beyond her mother's elbow, a longing look before taking another biscuit from the tray.

“Mr. Pendleton called today,” Lady Redborne informed her husband. The viscount enjoyed taking afternoon tea with his family, an anomaly among his peers but a habit the girls appreciated. “And Lord Flannery.”

He raised his bushy eyebrows in appreciation. “Pendleton is the son of a marquess,” he noted.

“A second son,” his wife said with disdain. “But Flannery has been quite successful in the markets lately.”

“But his teeth...” Her father winced.

“Rose always did like horses,” Fern muttered.

“Fern!” Violet hissed, trying unsuccessfully to smother her giggle.

Lady Redborne heaved a sigh. “Only a half-dozen gentlemen have shown an interest, and I’m growing concerned. Rose, did anything unusual happen at the ball?”

Fern’s sister stiffened and shot her gaze toward her twin. “Mama,” Fern said, “I don’t think Rose really liked any of those men.”

Rose nodded gratefully. It wasn’t unusual for the sisters to speak for each other, although typically it was Fern who remained mute. “She’s right, Mama.” She took a deep, steadying breath. “What about Mr. Carroway?”

Fern’s stomach dropped. *This is what I wanted, this means my plan is working.*

Lady Redborne’s nose twitched. “Which one is he again? The nervous one?”

“He’s not nervous, simply shy,” Rose replied. “He’s the one studying maths. He’s going to be a doctor soon, you know.”

Lord Redborne sat back in his chair. “He must be one of Whitehurst’s students. I haven’t spoken to him in ages.” He chuckled. “Remember when we got those cows over Magdalen Bridge, and—”

“Now is not the time, Benedict,” Lady Redborne interrupted. Her daughters secretly delighted in hearing tales of their father’s collegiate exploits, and while his wife always

appeared embarrassed by them, they suspected she enjoyed them as well.

Rose redirected her appeals. “Mr. Carroway is brilliant and extremely mannerly towards me.”

“Is he of the Sussex Carroways?” Lady Redborne asked.

“No, they only have girls,” Violet interjected.

“He’s from Birmingham,” Rose said firmly. The table went silent as her mother cast her father a concerned look. “He is not from a family of means, but he works hard.” She shot her father with a determined look. “Isn’t that what you want for me? A man who will work hard and appreciate me?”

Lord Redborne shifted. “But would he be able to provide for you?”

Fern felt a strange flash of hope. No, Alex was unlikely to provide the lifestyle to which Rose was accustomed. Perhaps the courtship would end there, perhaps...

Perhaps there would be room in Alex’s life for *her*.

Violet spoke up. “Rose should be able to marry someone who will make her happy, right, Papa?”

Lady Redborne sipped her tea and sniffed audibly. Her husband took her hand and squeezed it in reassurance. “I’ll reach out to Whitehurst,” he said, “learn more about this Carroway fellow.” He gave Rose a kind smile. “I need to know if he’s worthy of you before I let him pursue you.”

Rose beamed, then glanced at Fern with a smile. “He’s wonderful, Papa. You’ll adore him. Everyone does.”



By Tuesday morning, Alex’s eyes were itchy from lack of sleep as he settled into his seat in the examination hall on High Street. Time was slipping away like sand through an hourglass, the future rapidly becoming the present, and hours spent sleeping were few and even farther between.

Working with Fern had consumed his previous evening, as their conversations drifted from mathematics to poetry, from poetry to art, and from art to their futures. He lost track of time completely, enjoying the companionable moments and a welcome respite from the rigors of studying.

He did not want to admit how much Fern had occupied his thoughts of late. Despite ruining a perfectly good pair of trousers and embarrassing himself in front of half of Oxford, he had enjoyed himself immensely during their misadventures on the Thames, laughing harder than he had in quite some time. He could not forget the look of pain in Fern’s eyes when she admitted Rose had abandoned her, then the reluctant levity as they stood in the water together.

Nor could he ignore the heat rushing through him when he took her hand, the longing in her expression when she saw him drenched to the bone. The heat in her eyes when she had caught him admiring her form beneath her sodden dress. His

body collided with hers for only a moment, but he felt her slender curves pressed against him. He remembered it well enough to dream of his hands and mouth on those curves, caressing her smooth skin until he awoke in the early hours of the morning, panting and desperately uncomfortable.

And two nights ago, when they lay next to each other like fools underneath the table... He had come perilously close to kissing her. A moment more, an inch further, and his lips would have been on hers. Something about the ridiculous moment had felt *right* in a way he couldn't describe. With her, he was lighter, freer than he had been in years.

But Fern was, well, *Fern*, his study partner and the sister of the woman he courted. She was awkward and funny and had no interest in him beyond what happened in the library. Anything more was simply a product of his sleep-deprived imagination and her physical resemblance to Rose. It was simply inconceivable to look at Fern like she was...more.

“Mr. Carroway?” Professor Whitehurst’s deep baritone disrupted Alex’s musings. With a start, Alex got to his feet and descended the stairs to the lectern, his anxiety climbing as he approached his professor and two gentlemen he did not immediately recognize. “I’d like to introduce you to two of our program’s top benefactors.” He motioned to a slim man with a straight posture carrying his nearly bald head to an obscene height. “This is Lord Alistair Strathmore, head of the political science program at the London School of Economics and former Fleet Commander in the Royal Navy,” Whitehurst intoned proudly.

Alex's thrust out his hand. "It's a pleasure, my lord, an absolute pleasure," he stammered.

"And the voice of Oxford in Parliament, the Honorable Benedict Waverly, Viscount Redborne." The short, slightly rotund gentleman passed his gaze over Alex, examining him from head to toe. When Alex met his eyes, he was taken aback—they were identical to Fern's in every way, enough to make his knees tremble in recognition. Immediately he was taken back to the ballroom of Boar's Hill, the man clasping his hand and absently welcoming him inside, where he met—

"A-a pleasure, my lord." He stumbled over his words, watching his two worlds collide in terrifying slow motion. Did Redborne know—

"We were all mates at school, and I had dinner with these gentlemen yesterday, informing them of the impressive work you were doing," Whitehurst informed Alex. "They too were quite impressed, and hope to attend your presentation next week."

"It would be an honor, sir." To have his presentation witnessed by two gentlemen of this caliber could change everything for him.

"I understand that your future is of interest to my daughter," Whitehurst said, his eyes narrowed. "If all goes well, I may see fit to find a space for you in Strathmore's program, with my recommendation, of course."

For a moment he gaped, staring agog at the gentlemen. Whitehurst chuckled. "I am going to assume Mr. Carroway is

enthused about this opportunity.”

“Yes, of course, yes, thank you!” Alex gushed, shaking each hand again eagerly. “I promise I will impress you.”

“I’ve no doubt of that,” Strathmore was far more stoic in his tone than the professor. “Until next week then.”

Alex could only nod dumbly as Whitehurst led the gentlemen to seats of honor at the front of the room and then winked at Alex as he returned to the podium to deliver the lecture. Alex stumbled back to his desk, flipping open his notebook to a blank page, a page he filled with not a single word over the ninety minutes of instruction.

Everything was falling into place, even more perfectly than he could have hoped. He could not possibly ruin this now.



Alex’s entry into the library was foretold by a large crash, then a muffled curse as he picked up the books he had knocked from the table.

“You will not believe what has happened,” he said, his tone flat as he fell into the chair beside her.

Her stomach clenched in worry. “Then you must tell me, immediately.”

“I’ve met your father,” he replied, his gaze catatonic.

Well, that was certainly something she could not believe.

“Professor Whitehurst, he and your father are old friends. Your father is going to recommend me for a place at the School of Economics, assuming my defense goes well.”

“But what about Sylvester, and teaching?” she asked, leaning forward into his line of vision as her pulse raced. “Is this what you wanted?”

He nodded, finally meeting her eyes. “Yes, I suppose so. Yes. A government post is far more lucrative potentially, and more respected than an assistant professorship.” There was less certainty in his tone than Fern would have expected, and it concerned her.

“Then this is wonderful news,” she said, unable to shake the unpleasant nerves in her stomach. “Your presentation will certainly impress him, and you will secure your space in London. Your future is set, Alex.”

He nodded again, his eyes still dimly focused on a space somewhere in the distance.

“Alex!” she said, her voice sharp enough to cause him to start. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he replied, too quickly. “It’s just—it’s real now.” Alex sat back, his expression a mix of awe and trepidation. “Everything I have wanted since I was a boy, it’s about to happen.”

“You’ve earned it.” A hesitant smile crossed her lips. *But is it truly what you want*, she thought, though she did not let the words escape. She could not forget the look on his face, the

pure joy he radiated when he talked about teaching future mathematicians. She did not see the joy now.

In ten days she would present her work to Sylvester, and Alex would share his thesis the day before. The same sickening dread she had been building for days became even stronger. What would happen if they both got what they wanted?

“Rose is enamored of you,” she said, her voice cautious. “Perhaps it is time you speak to my father about your intentions with her?”

“And what will happen if your father does not approve of me?” he asked.

She hesitated, cursing herself once more for allowing this tangled web to weave around them, about the insecurity Alex had exposed. “You have already impressed my father, and he sees a bright future for you. What better way to show his support of your courtship than by supporting your academic future?”

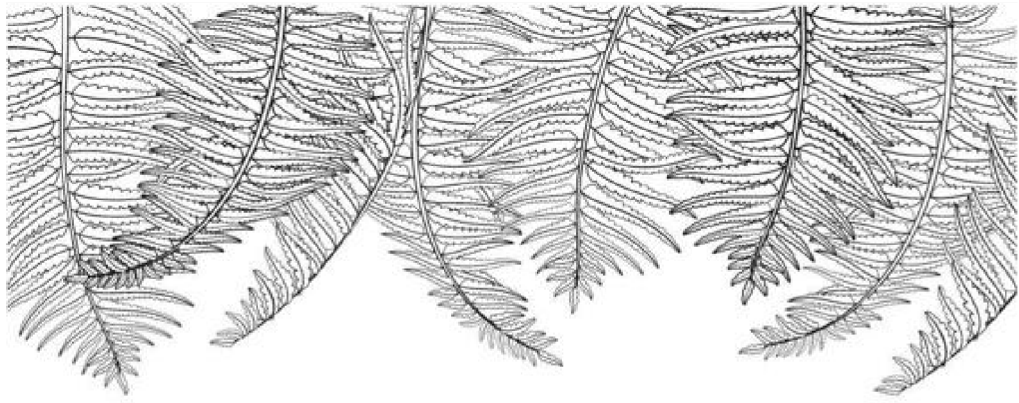
How are the lies coming so easily now? she reflected wanly. Have I ever been truthful with him?

Ten more days, then I will present to Sylvester. Ten days and the future is mine.

“My father will have a vested interest in your success if you are courting his daughter. The future is no longer the aristocratic class, it is in minds like yours, Papa says so himself.”

“So you believe he will accept me as a suitor?” he asked, looking at her as if her opinion meant everything to him.

Her heart twisted as she responded. “I can only hope.”



Chapter 16

“**B**UT HOW AM I to choose?” Rose’s plaintive huff brought Alex back to attention.

The gloomy weather was typical for late April, the sky dark and the wind whipping mercilessly along Oxford’s winding streets, the kind of day where everyone with an ounce of sense stayed indoors. Rose and Alex had sought refuge in a fashionable shop on Bond Street, having abandoned their picnicking plans.

Rose’s nose wrinkled as she examined two pairs of kid leather gloves. Alex shifted on his feet, keeping his elbows tucked tightly to his sides to avoid touching anything in the posh shop. He never had the occasion to be concerned with matters of fashion, and certainly didn’t expect to provide an opinion on the subject consuming Rose’s entire attention. “Well,” he said, treading carefully, “they look nearly identical, I doubt anyone would notice.”

Rose looked at him, eyes rounded, before scowling. “This is pale pink.” She gestured to one pair. “And this is Spanish pink.” His eyebrows raised. She huffed and turned back to the

gloves. He had very little space in his mind to contemplate the various shades of pink.

“What about these?” Alex asked, picking up another seemingly indistinguishable pair.

Rose eyed him in confusion. “Those are baby pink, only acceptable for a young mother.”

This was a world he didn’t understand, to which he didn’t belong, where the nuances of shades of pink spoke volumes. Alex took a deep breath, exhausted by remaining constantly on guard for mistakes when in Rose’s presence.

His eyes kept darting toward the domed building a block away. Fern planned to work at the library during their outing, only after dropping him notes to suggest appropriate compliments and where to buy her a special gift. *Not the bookstore!!* she had written, punctuating it with an ugly, disgusted face strongly resembling her twin sister. Alex chuckled thinking about it.

“What is amusing you so?” Rose asked, softening her expression.

“Nothing, I’m...” He thought quickly. *What would Fern say?* “With your beautiful face, no one will notice the color of your gloves.”

She smiled and fluttered her lashes before turning back to the gloves, and he let out a sigh of relief. It was hard work keeping Rose amused. She was undoubtedly a kind woman, and he knew her to be intelligent, although he had yet to see

the furious curiosity he observed at the party. Rose seemed to exist as a specimen for others to observe under glass.

Under any other circumstances, Alex would begin to wonder if courting Rose was still worthwhile. She was perfectly pleasant, but he never could rest in her presence, as though he never quite met her expectations. But Rose meant more now. Courting her meant courting her father, and with that, his future position in government. Was he willing to risk his future by giving up now?

But is London the future I truly want?

Swatting the thought away, Alex took the gloves from her hand—*Spanish pink*? “Allow me.” Rose beamed as he purchased the gloves, missing the flinch on Alex’s face when he paid the shopkeeper. *I’ll need to cut my work with Fern short this week, see if I can get in some extra tutoring sessions.* Courting Rose was becoming an expensive habit.

The pair exited the store and Alex felt a proprietary thrill as Rose put her hand in the crook of his elbow and smiled at him. “I’ve had a lovely day, Mr. Carroway,” she trilled, gracing him with a dazzling smile.

He gave her a pleasant smile in return as his chest warmed under her attention. “And I as well, Miss Rose.” Upon reaching her family’s carriage, he helped her footman load the packages into the cabin with care.

“I hoped you would join me in the carriage for a moment.” She turned to her footman. “Around the park, if you will. We

will drop off Mr. Carroway at the Bodleian.” The footman nodded and went to deliver the news to the coachman.

His heart pounded as he stepped into the carriage and shut the door behind him. Alex lowered himself onto the bench across from Rose, palms sweating, and watched her apprehensively. Not once since the ball had Rose sought time alone with him. She had never even seemed to desire it. Now they were behind a closed door and Alex had no idea how to proceed.

“You have been most kind to me, Mr. Carroway.” She gazed up at him through her dark lashes. “I was hoping...you would come sit by me?”

He was by her side in an instant, heart racing. She faced him and her eyes flicked to his lips. *Should I—does she want me to kiss her?* He remembered their kiss on the terrace and his blood heated, recalling the silken texture of her lips, the sweet urgency of her touch. Surely a kiss would remind them both of what they had shared.

“I’ve had such a lovely time getting to know you,” she said, her voice breathy. “You’re unlike other men I’ve met. You want to know me for who I am, not because of my father or his title.” Sweat broke out on his upper lip. Did she know how crucial the viscount was to his future success?

“Oh,” he replied, unable to think of anything more profound to say.

“I was wondering if you would like to have dinner with my family. I think my father would be amenable to your suit if you

were to present yourself.”

“You—you mean that?” His world tilted. She wanted *him*?

A lovely blush spread on her cheeks. “I do. I wasn’t certain I was ready to marry, but…” She fluttered her eyelashes as she met his gaze. “You’ve changed my mind.”

Suddenly she was leaning forward, so close her lips brushed his. His hands went to her shoulders, his palms drifting over the silken fabric.

He felt—nothing. Absolutely nothing. He pulled back slowly. Rose’s lids drooped over her eyes, her skin flushed. The carriage ground to a halt and he heard the door wrench open, temporarily blinding Alex with the sudden shock of daylight, his lips inches from Rose’s, hands still firmly on her shoulders. Fern took one step up into the carriage before stopping with a jolt.

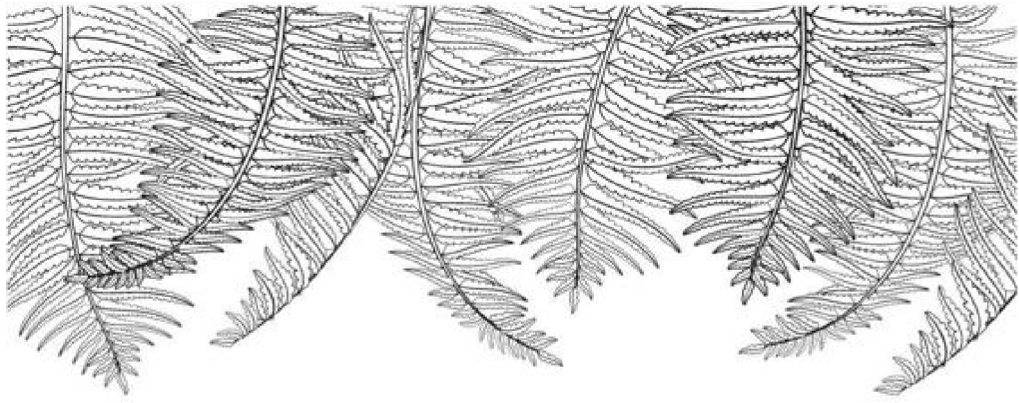
Her jaw went slack as she recognized his proximity to her sister, the flushed cheeks, his guilty expression. “Oh,” she gasped. “I didn’t know—”

“I was just leaving,” he said in a rush as he pushed past her, bumping his shoulder against the door as he stumbled into the street. He turned back to the carriage, attempting to salvage some shred of propriety. “Miss Rose, I would be delighted to join your family for dinner,” he said, his voice choked. “Miss Fern,” he murmured in her direction, but she avoided his eye.

Alex stormed up the path to the Bodleian, willing himself not to break into a run. He was gasping for air by the time he

fell into a library carrel, realizing he had not even brought his books. Rose Waverly wanted *him*, Alexander Carroway. If they were to marry, he would be guaranteed a respectable profession and status in society. He would never want for anything and would be free to pursue the life he had dreamed of, what his parents had imagined for him with every sacrifice they had made.

And he was terrified of it.



Chapter 17

“THE FUTURE IS IN the educated man, my dear,” Lord Redborne’s voice echoed from the parlor as though he were delivering a speech to Parliament. “You should have heard what Whitehurst was telling me about the boy, and he knows what the future holds for Britain.”

“A student, though?” his wife asked, her tone skeptical. “Is a student enough for our daughter?”

“As Strathmore said,” Redborne repeated, “the idle nobility will be a thing of the past by the end of the next generation. A man of learning stands a far better chance of success in this world than one who has done nothing to better himself.”

“But what of Rose’s connections? Who will she socialize with?”

The Redbornes’ sigh reached the hallway through the closed door, where Rose and Fern stood with their faces pressed, one above the other, against the door frame. Salisbury had passed them several times, shaking his head at their behavior but not encouraging them to move along.

“Lily is a countess and Marigold a marchioness,” Redborne remarked. “With sisters of such high station, Rose will never lack invitations.”

“Besides,” Aunt Margaret interjected in a dry tone. “It would be lovely to have someone intelligent to converse with at dinner.”

“This sounds promising,” Rose whispered, beaming.

“It does,” Fern replied, although she did not share Rose’s enthusiasm.

“It would be perfect, wouldn’t it?” Rose whispered, her eyes cast up towards the ceiling as though she could see the heavens above. She pushed off the wall and grabbed her sister’s hand, pulling them both up the stairs to dress for the evening’s dinner. “I feel like he knows me so well, and I know him, don’t you think?”

Fern had also come to know Alex. Learning how he liked to tease her about her eccentric habits and discovering his teasing didn’t bother her. Admiring his intelligence and his humility. Memorizing the curve of his smile, the way his blue eyes lit up when she said something particularly clever, how his auburn brows furrowed when she said something he wanted to question further. How he listened to her like she was someone worthy of his attention.

Lady Redborne had begrudgingly extended a formal dinner invitation to Alex after Rose convinced her of the value of inviting one of Oxford’s finest minds into their home. Fern had been right in her estimation of her father. Lord Redborne saw

Alex as something of an investment, as the viscount's name would be associated with Alex's in the future.

Rose wanted the finest of everything. Five courses, including passed canapés over cocktails, stuffed partridge, roast game from the family estate accompanied by pureed vegetables, and the chef's specialty, berry trifle. The night would be exquisite and, Fern predicted, thoroughly awkward.

Rose was still talking, rattling off a laundry list of Alex's finer qualities, and Fern shifted in her seat. "He always knows what to say to compliment me, and what to get me as a gift. He knows me so well!" Fern pressed her lips together. *He knows you because I told him about you.* But she said nothing.

In five days she would need to present her work, which had evolved into something much larger than what she had initially expected. Each revelation brought her deeper into the world of prosody, expanding in depth and breadth as she and Alex discovered together. She had learned how he thought, what questions would coax a deeper revelation from him. He learned how to critique her work and challenge her ideas, and instead of being offended, Fern found it exciting and illuminating.

The first and most significant hurdle—convincing Sylvester to meet with her—was behind them. But guilt haunted Fern every time Alex mentioned her sister's name. She couldn't risk telling him the truth about the ball now, for Alex would abandon his efforts to help her.

This had gone beyond her control. She had meddled so thoroughly, and now nothing was right, except when she was alone with him in the library. Those were the moments she craved.

I need him to hold out for five days, that's all I need.

Rose still spoke as Fern dropped her new dinner gown over her slim shoulders. “You were the one who convinced me of the merits of a poor scholar, you know,” she said with a coy smile. She sat at her dressing table and gazed at her reflection. “We can live simply, a nice townhouse, only a few servants, while Mr. Carroway entertains foreign dignitaries and I entertain the other wives in my drawing room, our children playing upstairs with the nanny.”

Fern scoffed, playing absently with a hairpin. “Do you like *him*, or the life you would live with him? Because I can't see you happy with a man like Alex.” Immediately she regretted her words. Would it be obvious how she felt?

“Of course we would be happy,” Rose retorted. “I don't know him incredibly well, of course, but he's kind to me. The men our sisters married, with titles and prestige, they're not terribly pleasant, nor interesting. Shouldn't I marry someone who treasures me?”

Rose was right. No one would treat her sister as well as Alex. Rose always got the best in life, as she deserved.

Rose sat up suddenly. “You could live with us, Fern!”

Fern felt gutted, as though her sister had reached into her chest and torn out her heart. “Oh, no, I certainly couldn’t—”

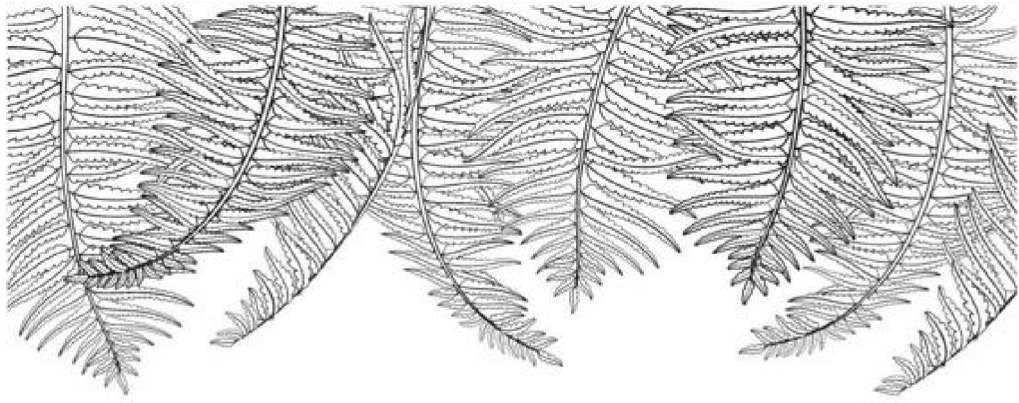
“It would be glorious!” Rose exclaimed, grabbing Fern’s hands tightly. “You could help me care for the children, and you could talk to Alex about all those books you’re both always reading, and we would never have to be apart.” Rose smiled as her eyes misted. “You know how I have been afraid to meet someone, how nervous I was at the masquerade?”

Her love for her twin battled with jealousy and frustration. She wanted nothing more than for Rose to be happy, but why should Rose assume she could never find love on her own? Didn’t Fern deserve happiness too? “I remember,” she whispered.

Rose sighed and squeezed her sister’s hands. “I was terrified of the thought of leaving you. How can I wake up every day and not have you nearby to talk to? It would be miserable being apart from you. And what if you needed me?”

Hurt pummeled her, like sharp knives slicing at her heart. She was a problem to be managed, not capable of living without incident. Rose could find love wherever she looked. Why did she have to want the one man to intrigue Fern?

“Oh Fern, please think about it,” Rose pleaded. “It would be simply delightful. Besides, I think Alex would love you.”



Chapter 18

*M*Y LORD, MY LADY. Start with the utensils on the outside and move in. When in doubt, smile and nod. For god's sake, don't ever... Alex's heart stopped. What had Henry said never to do? His heart pounded as the Redborne carriage rounded the gravel drive to the stately home. He once again wore his friend's ill-fitting formal attire, and even after suffering a crash course in proper etiquette, Alex remained convinced this evening would be an utter disaster.

He descended from the carriage, his feet numb as he climbed the stairs and entered the magnificent manor. He heard the butler intone his name, and in an instant Lady Redborne stood before him awash in a sea of navy blue silk. "Mr. Carroway, how lovely to see you. Our Rose has told me so much about you." Her voice was pleasant but somewhat cool, as though she had not yet made up her mind about his presence in her home.

Alex bowed—*too low? Not enough?*—and stood. "How lovely to visit your home again. Thank you for your hospitality, Mrs.—my lady."

Her eyes narrowed infinitesimally as she registered the near breach of etiquette and led him into the parlor, two King Charles spaniels nipping at his heels.

Stepping into the parlor, Alex barely took a breath before Rose was at his side. He gasped at the sight of her, her pink gown sparkling with delicate gold embroidery and her hair swept up and embellished with pink ribbons and pearls. Her alabaster skin gleamed in the candlelight. “I’m so pleased you could make it,” she whispered, putting her hand in the crook of his arm and squeezing.

“I wouldn’t miss it,” he replied.

“Welcome to my home, Mr. Carroway.” The booming voice of Lord Redborne resonated in the room, and before Alex could blink his hand was engulfed by the viscount’s, shaking firmly. “You did not mention to my old friend Whitehurst that you were interested in my Rose.” He gave him a scolding look, although humor glittered in his hazel eyes. “That’s quite the detail to leave out, my boy.”

Alex swallowed hard, desperate to find words. “I wanted to be certain you respected my work before I came to call on your daughter formally—”

“And this is Lady Margaret Cartwright, Lady Redborne’s aunt,” Lord Redborne interrupted as an older woman, her white hair swept into an unforgiving chignon and dressed in flowing amber silk, stepped forward and looked him over.

“That’s not your suit, is it, young man?” she remarked glibly.

Alex gulped. “I’m afraid not, I—”

“And my daughter, Violet,” Lady Redborne said as a young woman dressed in purple, resembling a more petite version of Rose, bobbed a curtsey.

Before Alex could complete his bow, Lady Redborne’s strained voice rang in his ear. “And where is Fern? She should be ready by now.”

“I’m here, Mama.”

Alex turned toward the familiar voice and froze. Fern stood in the doorway, dressed in a high-waisted dress of pale green organza, fit tight around her bodice before cascading from a seam just below her breasts. Forest green velvet trimmed the square neck of her gown, accentuating her graceful collarbone and slim arms. Her hair was not up but hung in loose waves around her shoulders. His heart lurched and a strange warmth washed over him. She was beautiful. She was—

“Oh, Fern, darling, you simply cannot wear your hair like that,” Lady Redborne exclaimed from Alex’s side. With her lips tight she turned to Alex and forced a smile. “You will have to excuse my youngest daughter. She is a bit, well...she doesn’t do well with soirees such as this.” The pink flush of humiliation climbing Fern’s cheeks sparked a deep pang in his chest.

“Please excuse me,” Lady Redborne swept Fern out of the room. The pair returned several moments later, Fern with her hair in a tight knot and her jaw clenched.

Conversation over cocktails and hors d'oeuvres was stilted, as Lord and Lady Redborne attempted to engage Alex in conversation and Alex did his best to avoid saying anything inappropriate, resulting in a great deal of smiling and nodding.

“Do you have plans to go to London for the end of the season, Mr. Carroway?” Lady Redborne asked.

“Um, yes, my lady, but not for the social gatherings.” Alex absently petted the dog pressing its head against his knee. “I hope to start my postgraduate studies at the London School of Economics this summer, and I will need to find my own lodgings in town.”

“Oh, Mama, Mr. Carroway should be our guest in London!” Rose grinned at her brilliant idea.

“Rose, Mr. Carroway will of course be welcome as our guest, but I will ensure he finds proper lodgings, suitable for a man of his position,” Lord Redborne said proudly, as though he himself had discovered Alex’s talents.

“He could stay with us until he finds his own lodging,” Rose retorted. “And besides, Fern will not be attending the season so her room will be available.”

“Why am I not going?” Fern asked, a crease appearing on her forehead.

Lady Redborne looked at her with surprise. “Why, you never enjoy going to London, so I told Rose it’s probably for the best that you stay here. The noise, the parties, the socializing.... It’s just too much for you, dear.”

“Do you remember last year, at the Henderson ball?” Aunt Margaret chuckled. “When she refused to get out of the carriage? She screamed so loud half of Mayfair ran to see if a woman was being murdered.”

Fern looked down, pulling at her fingers as her cheeks turned a deep shade of crimson. Alex rubbed at the increasing ache in his chest. His gaze kept darting to her, watching as the bright light faded from her eyes. Fern seemed to shrink with each passing moment until she was a shell of the vibrant woman he knew from the library.

Salisbury interrupted the moment by announcing dinner. Rose stood and put her hand in Alex’s arm, beaming. She floated alongside him as they followed Lord and Lady Redborne and Aunt Margaret into the dining room. Fern walked in last, unaccompanied. He felt as though he was being carried along in a rush of water, unable to break the inevitable stream of events proceeding before him.

“What are you studying at Oxford, Mr. Carroway?” Lady Redborne asked over their cream of asparagus soup.

“Mathematics, my lady. Specifically, I’m interested in the work of Carl Friedrich Gauss and number theory.”

Lord Redborne chuckled. “I should have you speak to my man of business. You could straighten out my ledgers better than my property manager.”

“The mathematics involved in bookkeeping is drastically different from number theory,” Fern said, not looking up from her soup. “It’s not even an apt comparison.”

“Fern,” Violet hissed in warning.

“Don’t be rude to your father, Fern,” Lady Redborne said sternly. Fern’s jaw stiffened, and she put her spoon back in her soup.

“She’s right, my lady.” Alex felt suddenly defensive of Fern. “It is a completely different—”

“Oh Mr. Carroway, you wouldn’t know but academic subjects are a forbidden topic at our table.” Aunt Margaret chuckled. “Fern has a tendency to get a bit...heated.” The Waverly family, with the exception of Fern, laughed as though sharing an inside secret. Alex shifted in his seat, fighting the knot that had drifted from his chest to his throat.

Their conversation stayed on safer topics until dessert. Lady Redborne had warmed to him considerably as they discussed his future in London, and Rose kept the discussion lively with her sparkling observations and efforts to keep Alex at ease.

“I’ve ordered more dresses for you for the summer, Fern,” Lady Redborne said, leaning towards her.

Fern sat up and blinked at her mother. “Why did you do that?”

Lady Redborne put her hand over her daughter’s. “I know it’s difficult for you, so I thought I could help, dear. I know how much you dislike fittings.”

“Mama, I’m old enough to choose my own dresses,” she retorted.

“Fern, your mother is only trying to help,” Lord Redborne interjected, a warning in his tone.

“I think now would be a lovely time to retire to the music room, don’t you think?” Rose suggested, her voice high and tight.

Fern’s nostrils flared and she drummed her fingers against her thighs as the family moved to the music room for after-dinner drinks. Alex walked behind her, overcome with the desire to reach out and squeeze her hand. She took a glass of sherry from a tray, only to have her mother take it from her and put it back with a scowl. “Would you play for us tonight, Fern? Your music is so lovely.”

Fern looked up at her mother through her lashes. “I—I hoped I could be a part of the conversation tonight, Mama.”

Her mother cupped her daughter’s cheek. Although the comment was not meant for him, Alex still heard the words. “Your sister is being courted by this man, Fern. She wants this to go well, and it would be a shame if, well, you...”

“If I did something wrong,” Fern murmured. Her mother nodded and Fern gave a tight nod before walking over to the grand piano set to the side of the room. She did not lay out music, but simply sat and began to play a tranquil sonata that he identified as Brahms. Her music was soft, unobtrusive, and she blended into the background, essentially removing herself from the small party. The two couples sat on low sofas with Violet and Aunt Margaret in nearby chairs, Alex attempting to sip his port as his stomach turned increasingly sour.

“I knew you were a pianist, but I didn’t know your sister played as well,” Alex said to Rose as they sat down.

Her brows furrowed. “Pardon?” She glanced over at Fern before turning back and answering without meeting his gaze. “Oh, I play a bit, but not much these days, I’ve been quite busy.”

“Oh,” Alex replied in confusion. Their discussion about her music on the night of the ball rushed into his memory. “I thought you enjoyed piano and played it often?”

“I thought I heard Rose practicing last week,” Violet said.

Aunt Margaret scoffed. “It’s best we let Fern play, Rose commits unspeakable crimes against music when she plays.”

But Rose had told him how important music was to her. An unpleasant thought began turning in the back of his mind, but Lady Redborne interrupted his thoughts.

“Mr. Carroway, I understand you have big plans for after the School of Economics?”

Alex cleared his throat, speaking up over the increasing volume of the piano. “I hope to enter the foreign service, my lady, perhaps as an economist or in diplomacy.” He noted that Fern’s fingers had paused on the piano, letting a thick silence fall over the room.

“Very impressive, lad,” Lord Redborne crowed. “I have been harboring some interest in becoming involved in government service myself, I’m becoming rather bored as I approach my old age.”

Alex hazarded a glance towards Fern as she shifted into a new piece with a look of fierce determination on her face.

“Fern, darling, perhaps something a bit more sedate?” Lady Redborne called, but Fern made no change to her selection. It appeared as though she had not even heard her mother’s suggestion. As the dynamics increased in intensity, her eyes closed, her body moving as though in a trance.

“Would you be interested in a foreign posting?” Lord Redborne said, leaning towards Alex to be heard.

“Pardon?” Alex asked, leaning in even further and tilting his ear.

“Is there any more of this sherry?” Aunt Margaret called, her voice growing louder with each glass. “It’s quite excellent.”

Violet got to her feet. “I’ll find Salisbury,” she said as she left the room.

“Fern, please—” Lady Redborne implored. Fern’s music increased in pace, her fingers moving at a breathtaking speed.

“Perhaps we should go back to the parlor—” Rose suggested with a strained smile. Both of the dogs began to whine.

“Salisbury!” Lady Margaret cried.

“*Fern!*” Lord Redborne’s bellow made everyone in the room start. Fern’s hands flew off the keys, and she stared at her father with red cheeks and eyes as wide as saucers. “Stop that this instant!”

Fern stood with her eyes blazing. “You asked me to play, so I played. I’m not the bloody entertainment.”

“Fern!” her parents cried in unison as her aunt gasped. Fern ignored them and stormed from the room.

As she reached the doorway, she stopped, turned on her heel, and walked up to Alex. She curtsied, never breaking eye contact. “I don’t believe I greeted you properly. It’s lovely to see you, Mr. Carroway. I hope you have a pleasant evening.” She turned again, head held high, and marched from the room. Moments later, the windows of the music room shook with the force of her door slamming.

Lord Redborne turned to Alex, his jaw set and face reddened. “Perhaps it is best if you were to go.”

He stood quickly, his eyes shooting to Rose. “Yes, of course. Thank you so much for your hospitality.”

“I’ll see him out,” Rose said, leading him to the hallway where Salisbury waited with his coat and hat, wearing a tight expression. A storm was blowing in as they stepped outside to wait for the carriage, the wind whipping around them as they stood, sharp droplets of rain pinging on the stones at their feet. “I’m so sorry about my sister’s behavior,” she said, frowning.

Alex bit the inside of his cheek. He didn’t want to leave, but it wasn’t because of Rose. “Is she all right?”

Rose sighed. “She can be...difficult. A lot of the time, really. We try to make things easier for her because so many

things upset her, but..." She trailed off, emotions clouding her face.

"I'm sorry." He squeezed Rose's hand. He knew Fern could be challenging, but to treat her like a disobedient child? Dread had settled deep in his chest during the evening, becoming overwhelming, and he dropped his hand from hers to clench his fists at his side.

Fern deserved better than this. It was no wonder she wanted an escape from the world, the opportunity to shine in her own right at Oxford. For a brief moment, he wanted to chase her to her room and hold her in his arms, assuring her he understood and would help her when no one else would.

Rose's face brightened as she looked at him, brilliant eyes sparkling. "But even with all that, I hope you had a nice evening. I certainly did."

His cheeks warmed, and he wondered if Rose knew he was thinking about her sister. "I'm happy to hear it." *And I never want to do it again.* He gazed at Rose in time for her to lean into him and kiss him square on the lips. Alex froze — nothing about this moment, standing in front of this house, kissing this woman, felt right. A gust of wind pushed against him, setting him off balance and pushing him away from her embrace. His heart pounded and blood rushed in his ears. In some form of divine intervention, the carriage emerged.

"My father is traveling to London tomorrow for several days, for...business, I suppose," Rose said, leaning close. She put her hands on his chest and gazed into his eyes. "I thought

perhaps when he returns, you could have a conversation with my father about our future. After tonight I'm certain he will be amenable."

"I— yes, of course," he stammered.

She raised on her toes and gave him a quick peck on the cheek, then dashed into the house.

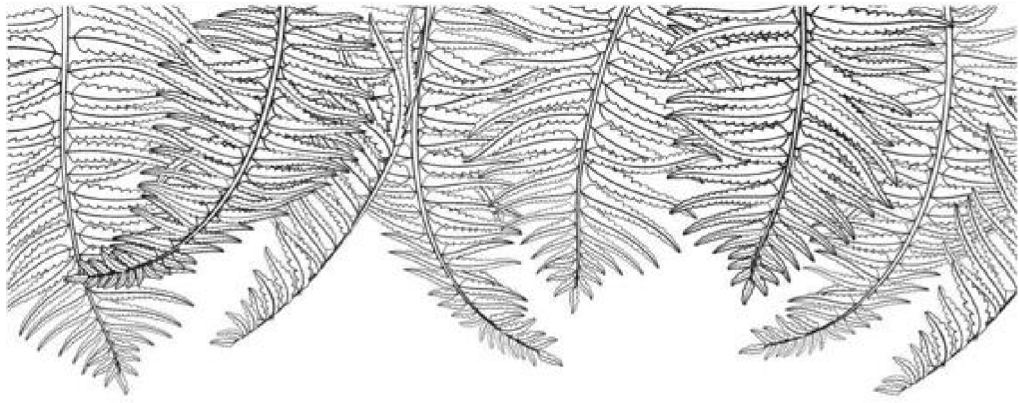
Alex's feet were frozen to the spot as he worked to calm his breathing. His relationship with Rose was moving forward, and he was powerless to stop it, dragging him along a path despite it feeling increasingly wrong.

He covered his head with his arm as he stepped towards the carriage, the rain coming down harder with each step. Before stepping into the coach, he looked up at Boar's Hill one last time. Lamplight illuminated a second-floor picture window as the silhouette of a woman walked towards the glass and sat, opening a book. *Fern*, he thought. *It has to be her*. After a moment, Fern turned and looked out at him through the streaks of rain, then gave a small wave. His pulse raced again, but this time he welcomed the sensation as it filled him with a sense of elation he had not experienced all evening, quickly replaced by a profound sadness knowing Fern was all alone, dismissed by her family.

The driver cleared his throat behind him. Alex gave a quick wave back to the figure in the window, then climbed into the carriage as the heavens opened above him. He tried to focus his thoughts on Rose, but he couldn't stop thinking of Fern, her anguished face, her simple wave.

The ache in his chest did not lessen as he pulled away from Boar's Hill. Having seen her interactions with her family, Fern's secrecy about her studies made so much more sense. Fern struggled to find a place where she belonged. She was a misfit in the world of her family and in the world of academia. Alex was her only ally, even more so than her twin. It was natural for him to want to protect her. He was her friend and did not deserve to be treated as an outsider.

If she's just my friend, then why do I want to run back and steal her away?



Chapter 19

THE WAVERLY HOUSEHOLD HAD begun to feel the strain of Aunt Margaret's visit, and everyone eagerly awaited her return to Hampshire. Salisbury had hidden the more expensive bottles of brandy, Lord Redborne suddenly needed to attend to urgent business in London, and Lady Redborne suffered from increasingly debilitating bouts of headaches forcing her to retire early.

Rose was adept at making conversation, but even she had her limits. She begged off shortly after breakfast to ride with her friends, leaving Fern to entertain her aunt, apologizing as she made a dash for the stables. Fern did not mind the situation terribly as Aunt Margaret had proven to be a delightful source of enlightening conversation. Margaret sprawled on a settee in front of the fireplace clutching a well-worn copy of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, while Fern sat at one of the large library tables with her notebooks spread in front of her like a fan.

"Have you read this yet, dear?" Aunt Margaret waved the book over her head in Fern's direction. "It would scandalize

your mother and incense your father if they saw you reading it. Therefore, I wholeheartedly recommend it.”

Fern attempted to suppress a smile. Aunt Margaret made Fern feel a bit more like she fit within the family’s genetic code. “I haven’t, but I’ll put it on my list.”

“What are you writing there?” she asked, motioning for Fern to come closer.

She hesitated, then lifted her notebook and came to sit beside her aunt. “I’m working with prosody, the study of the metrical patterns in poetry. Much of the meter is lost in translation to English, but a man from Oxford, Professor Sylvester, has determined how much of the prosody can be maintained by applying the correct algorithm.”

“I won’t pretend I understand what you said nor do I have any desire to do so, but I am impressed by your efforts,” Margaret said, squinting as she looked at the page.

“Thank you,” Fern replied, feeling rather chuffed with her praise.

“This is mathematics, then?”

“Yes, in its purest form. All language is a form of mathematics. Music as well.” Seeing the world as a series of complex systems made it less overwhelming for Fern, and gave her comfort when little was to be found.

Margaret sat back and examined her. “And the man who is courting your sister, he also studies mathematics.”

Fern’s neck heated. “He does indeed,” she said carefully.

“And is he the man you are seeing when you sneak out of here?” Fern dropped her notebook. “Don’t deny it,” Margaret waved her hand airily. “You keep pleading a need for new ribbons or paper, but I never see you bring any bags in. You’re not covering your tracks very well.”

Mouth gaping, Fern stared at her aunt. “I—I mean, he—” She steeled herself. If anyone would understand, it would be Aunt Margaret. She exhaled and leaned back against the cushioned seat. “Yes, he is helping me to present this work to Professor Sylvester. I hope to earn a place to study at Oxford.” She felt nearly buoyant having shared the burden of her secret with someone else.

Margaret raised one thin white eyebrow. “Is that a possibility?”

“I don’t know,” Fern said, reluctant to put a voice to the worrisome doubts plaguing her. “I know my work is good, and if I were to apply as a son of the family I would certainly be accepted.”

“But you’re a daughter,” Margaret stated simply. “And a well-bred one at that.”

Fern nodded. For a moment she had let herself hope her great-aunt might have a solution, some possibility Fern had not yet explored.

“That does complicate things,” Margaret said, closing her book and admiring her great-niece. “As does the *tendre* you hold for Rose’s suitor.”

Fern stood quickly, smacking her hip into the arm of the settee. Wincing, she shook her head fervently. “No, no, it’s not like that,” she insisted. “We’re merely friends, nothing more.”

“You always have your hair done nicely and your clothing neat. And your face at dinner, watching him with Rose...” Margaret gave her an understanding smile. “He is a darling young man.”

Tears stung her eyes. “He’s—he’s easy to talk to,” Fern replied, not meeting her aunt’s gaze. “And I’ve never had anyone understand me the way he does. But he doesn’t think of me like that,” she said, her throat tightening.

Margaret let out a low chuckle. “I’m not so certain. The way he looked at you, stealing glances all night...”

“It’s nothing, it can’t be anything.” Why would Alex want her when Rose was a possibility? Thinking about it made her feel grievously disloyal to Rose.

“Let me give you some advice, my dear girl,” Margaret said, squeezing Fern’s hand. “Don’t wait until you’re an old woman like me to have regrets about not taking charge of your life. You have more to offer him than you give yourself credit for. But for goodness’ sake, don’t lose your temper with him.”



“You’re not listening, I am explaining it!” Fern cried, throwing her pencil down on the table. Alex pressed the heels

of his hands to his eyes, reeling in his frustration. After three hours of work, both of them had reached their boiling points.

Alex ran his fingers roughly through his hair, leaving it sticking out in all directions. “This is what I’ve been telling you. If you don’t explain your thinking, and how you arrived at your conclusion, Sylvester will find every flaw.”

After classes that afternoon, Alex stopped in Professor Sylvester’s office, holding his breath as he told him the name of his student and the topic of her research. Sylvester initially balked but admitted his curiosity had been piqued. The meeting would still take place, but Alex knew Fern would have to be spectacular to convince the man of her abilities.

He struggled with his own thoughts that evening. It had been two days since the disastrous dinner and he’d spent considerable time ruminating on the evening’s events. Rose was a beautiful, shimmering light. She was kind and gracious, and she seemed to have developed genuine feelings for him. Rose’s father and the connections he would provide would guarantee the future he always wanted. He would not have to worry about his mother being cared for. He could even afford to move her from Birmingham to London with him and provide for her properly.

But the idea of asking for Rose’s hand in marriage made his stomach turn. The Waverly family was kind and reasonably welcoming, but he had left Boar’s Hill with a heavy weight on his chest. Everything about it felt wrong, as though he were

experiencing a surreal dream instead of enjoying dinner with his future family.

Fern never mentioned what he had witnessed in her home, and he was reluctant to bring it up. She already had her nose buried in her notebooks whenever he arrived in the library and made no move to discuss what had taken place.

Hence their current position at a study carrel in the Bodleian, approaching their fourth hour of work. The sun had long since completed its descent on the temperate spring day, but Fern showed no sign of stopping. Alex's stomach rumbled unpleasantly and his head throbbed.

"I don't know how to explain how I know the pattern, I just...do." Fern rubbed her temples, squeezing her eyes closed.

"Say the words in your head when you think about your theory," he said, taking a deep breath to maintain his patience.

"That's the problem, I don't have any words," she replied, her voice curt. "I've never had to explain it before. No one has ever been interested."

"Well," he said, leaning forward, resting his elbows on the table. "I'm interested."

Fern wrung her hands on top of her notebook. "It doesn't make sense. I've—I've tried to explain it, but—" She stopped, as though weighing her next words.

Alex watched her intently. He had never seen her without words. Frankly, she often had too many words.

Fern huffed. “I can’t explain it... It’s like...” She squeezed her eyes shut again and shook the tension from her shoulders. “Poetry is like music, but for mathematics. When I play music, I can feel where it’s going, where the cadence and the patterns will arrive when they settle. It’s soothing, and I can’t explain why it feels that way, what happens with the notes or the chords, I know when it’s right. Don’t you?”

He nodded, watching her face in earnest. She opened her eyes, and the green and amber irises glittered. Her mind was mesmerizing, he couldn’t keep his eyes off of her.

“It’s the same way with math. I can...*feel* where the numbers are going. And when it’s right, it’s a sense of satisfaction, a beautiful closure, like the resolution of a chord.” She looked at Alex as though desperate for him to understand. “Can you see? When it’s right, you feel it, even if you can’t explain it.”

Alex could only stare, his mouth agape. Fern looked down at her hands, red rising in her cheeks. “I said something wrong, didn’t I?”

“No,” Alex said, grabbing her hand without thinking. “Not wrong at all. It’s—I don’t think you realize how special your mind is.”

His breath caught when he saw Fern’s eyes brimming with tears. “Fern, what’s wrong?”

She took in a shuddering breath. “I’m always saying the wrong thing, doing the wrong thing. My family, they—they don’t want to hear from me.”

“That’s not true,” Alex said, squeezing her hand. “Maybe it’s easier for you to be yourself when you’re not with them. I didn’t see the Fern I know the other night.”

“It is true,” she said, her shoulders slumping. “The night with my family was a perfect example, wasn’t it? I learned how to hide, how to fit in as best I could, but it still wasn’t enough. I wasn’t...right.”

“Is it always like that with your family?”

Fern looked down, pulling her hand away and worrying her lower lip in her teeth. “They don’t mean any harm by it, really. They love me, I know, but...” She sighed. “They treat me as though I’m a child, like they expect me to combust at any moment, like I’m fragile and about to shatter. I know it’s to protect me because they hate to see me distraught, but...I wish I could make my own decisions. Rose is choosing her future,” she said, gesturing at him. “I suppose it’s a natural consequence for being how I am.”

He shook his head. “Being exactly how you are is valuable, is *wonderful*. You have so much to offer the world.”

Fern released a humorless laugh. “Rose asked if I would stay with her after you marry, to take care of your children. She doesn’t think I could live alone. My mother always compared me to Aunt Margaret, and perhaps she was right.”

Alex’s gut clenched. Fern as their *nanny*? The vision horrified him. Fern was destined for far greater things. Not to mention the thought of marrying Rose but having Fern nearby suddenly made his blood run cold.

“Fern, no,” Alex insisted, “that’s ludicrous. You’re different, but it’s not a bad thing. You constantly surprise me. You—” He was unable to put into words what he felt in her presence. “You are incredible.”

She paused, wringing her fingers together. “No one has ever said anything like that to me before.” Her voice shook when she looked at him. “I don’t deserve those kind words from you.”

Alex leaned forward and lifted her chin, looking directly into her eyes. “Don’t say that. I admit I had my doubts when I met you, but...” He wiped a fallen tear from her cheek with his thumb. “You’re unusual, yes, but you challenge me, and everyone around you. Lord knows I haven’t been able to think straight since I met you.”

Fern put her palm over his hand, holding it to her cheek. “I don’t understand how, but...” Her voice faltered. “You see me.”

He stared at her, the startling intimacy of the moment giving him pause. Rose had said Fern was distant, unable to connect with other people. But she had bared her soul to him, and he was driven to do the same for her.

This was the connection he sought with Rose. But...this was *Fern*, the woman who had consistently pushed him in the direction of her sister.

His thumb shifted under her palm, tracing the curve of her cheekbone. Her eyelids dropped, hiding the multi-faceted green of her eyes for a moment before her gaze connected with

his again, her lips slightly parted. *What would it be like to kiss her?* It was a question he had asked before, often in the privacy of his room late at night, but now, with her inches away from him, it became more pressing, a desire threatening to overcome him.

No, she is not for you. If he felt something for Fern, he could not act on it. It would be completely inappropriate, and risky beyond belief. He would put his entire future in jeopardy.

He cleared his throat and pulled away from her. "It's gotten late. I should get you home before anyone worries."

Gathering her books, Fern nodded, hastily wiping tears from her cheeks. Alex's stomach clenched. He had put her in a terrible position. He was considering marriage to her sister. He should not speak to Fern or touch her as he had. But still, he felt at ease with Fern in a way he never did with Rose.

They walked out into the night in silence, the cool air causing Alex to shiver. The street was deserted and Alex sighed with frustration. "I can walk if there are no hacks to be hired," Fern suggested, understanding his annoyance. "It's not far."

Alex scoffed and shook his head. "That's ridiculous and completely unsafe. I have another idea."

He led her along Pembroke Square until they reached the stables where the wealthier students housed their horses and carriages. After careful negotiations and a hefty, wince-inducing bribe to the guard and a yawning stable hand, Alex

led Henry's horse from the stable. The Waverly girls were going to leave him penniless.

Fern's eyes widened. "Is that your horse?"

Alex shrugged. "Not exactly, but it's the best I could do, and I had to pay two guineas to get it." He led the saddled horse into the street and stood before a clearly reluctant Fern.

"I'm not much of a rider," she mumbled, jumping back as the horse shook his head and let out a snort.

Alex paused at the sight of her eyes, wide as saucers as she considered the horse. "Have you ridden much?"

"Not at all since I was a small girl," she replied, her shoulders tense. "They terrify me, in fact. So large and smelly and—" The horse snorted again and Fern jumped back with a shriek.

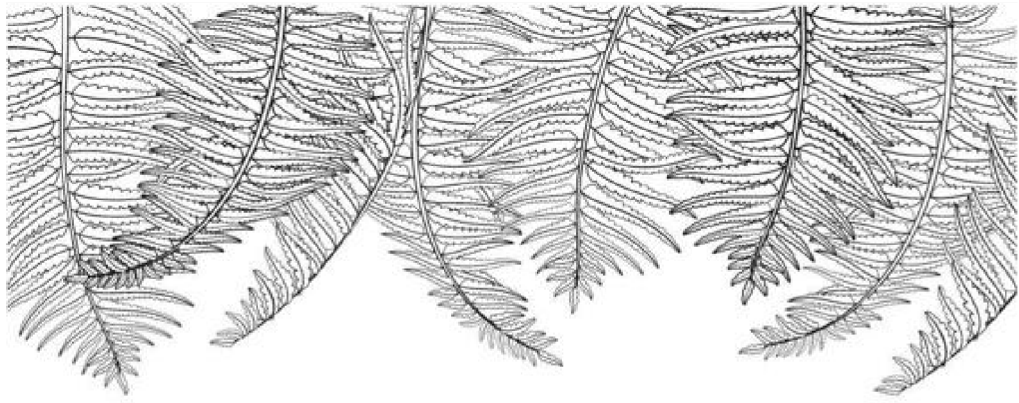
He had to laugh. Even Fern cracked a smile in return. "It's all right, I'll help you." He took her hand and led her towards the horse. He knew this was a bad idea but there was no turning back, even as the warm rush spread from her fingertips and down his arm, settling low in his spine. He released her for long enough to mount with relative ease, swinging his satchel over his shoulder and reaching down to take her bag.

"I take it you have ridden before," Fern said dubiously.

Alex nodded. "I spent summers working with my grandfather on a horse farm." Chivalry be damned, riding with Fern like this would be a mistake. What he felt for Fern had changed, had evolved into something stronger. But he was a

gentleman, and unless they planned on walking back to Boar's Hill, he would have to make do.

Alex forced a smile, hoping to infuse her with some of his confidence as he extended his hand to her. "Now come on up."



Chapter 20

“THIS WILL NEVER WORK,” Fern said emphatically. Of course, she had to get home somehow, but riding a horse? With *Alex*? He would touch her, feel her as her body panicked. No, she would walk if she needed to.

“It will work, you can sit in front of me. I won’t let you fall,” Alex said, his hand still extended toward her.

She huffed. “I can’t ride astride with you already in the saddle. I’d have to hike my skirts up.”

Alex hesitated. Even in the low street gaslights, she could see his cheeks color. “I’ll avert my eyes. But I need to get you home before you’re in serious trouble.”

Summoning her courage, she took Alex’s hand, hiking up her skirts with her free hand. He caught her boot and helped her swing onto the saddle, settling down between his legs. Her heart pounded, her breath coming fast and uneven. She held her hands up, terrified to touch the horse lest it spook and throw her.

“It’s all right, I have you,” Alex wrapped his arm around her waist, settling his hand just above her hip. His other hand caught hers and wrapped them around the front of the saddle. “Hold on here and lean against me,” he said, his voice low and gravelly, rumbling against her back and she sat up taller to minimize their contact. “Are you ready?” he said, leaning over to her ear. His breath was warm against her cheek and she shivered, then nodded to hide her reaction.

Fern had been wary of horses since she was a girl. She could tolerate riding behind one in a carriage but gave them a wide berth in all other situations. Riding the beast was simply out of the question. But somehow, in Alex’s arms, her terror subsided, the low tremor in her pulse humming in his presence.

Alex started slowly, riding at an easy pace until they left the city center. He eased the horse into a trot and then a gentle canter, pulling Fern closer as he increased his speed. The wind rushed by Fern’s face, catching her hair and sending it in all directions. The air was cold on her bare legs, but she didn’t feel immodest. Now she understood why people enjoyed riding. She felt free, as though she were flying.

Fern had never been so close to a man before, and she reveled in the scandalous sensations. The hard planes of his chest and stomach, the weight and strength of his arm across her abdomen sent shivers rushing along her spine. Her pulse quickened at the steady rolling motion of his hips against her backside, the heat of his hand on her hip, the steadiness of his

breath against her temple. She was trusting him completely, and the notion thrilled and terrified her.

“Don’t ride up to the front,” Fern said as the horse slowed outside the familiar stone gates. They arrived at Boar’s Hill far too quickly, wrenching her from the pleasure of being held in Alex’s arms. “There is a servants’ drive just ahead, I can walk from there.”

“I won’t have you walk alone,” Alex said, his voice low. Her heart jumped at the protective tone, wishing the ride were longer.

Alex dismounted and led the horse to the servants’ drive, where he turned to Fern and reached up to her. His wavy hair was messy from the ride, his cheeks pink, and his blue eyes glimmering. He was breathtaking, and a knot grew in her throat. After Alex was engaged to Rose he would become hers, another possession and pleasure belonging to her twin simply because she knew how to act, pleased their parents and made everyone happy. Unlike Fern.

Alex put his hands on Fern’s waist and lifted her down. She stumbled a bit as her back leg cleared the horse and he steadied her, pulling her close against his chest. Fern relished in his warmth for a moment before she pulled away, straightening her skirts. “If I go up this path I’ll be close to the kitchen door. It’s never locked and no one will be in there at this hour.”

“I’ll go with you,” he said, his tone allowing no argument. He carried both of their bags as they walked silently along the

path, stopping to tie off the horse on a fence rail. The house was dark as they approached, the solid brick edifice illuminated only by the light of the half moon. “Are you certain your family won’t know you’re missing?”

“My father is in London, and Aunt Margaret told my mother I had gone to bed early with a headache.”

Alex let out a low laugh. “So your aunt is onto us?”

Recalling the conversation with her aunt and the mention of her feelings for Alex caused her pulse to speed up once again. *There is no us, we are only friends.* “She supports my studying,” she replied tightly.

They hurried along the garden path to the portico shielding the kitchen door from the elements, arriving out of breath but out of sight. “Thank you for taking me home.” She paused. “For everything.”

Alex smiled wanly, putting the satchels down. Fern’s bag fell as he released it, spilling several notebooks onto the stairs. As they gathered up papers, Alex picked up a small notebook, its pages falling loose. “What are these?” he said, standing to examine the revealed sketch.

Fern swallowed a shriek as she reached for the book. “Oh, they’re nothing, it’s—”

“These are yours?” he interrupted, his eyes fixed on a drawing of a carefully detailed sketch of a Scottish thistle, with each part of the bud and stem labeled in intricate writing. He turned the page and inspected a sketch of a sprig of

hyacinth in the moonlight. “These are remarkable,” he breathed. “They could be in a textbook, with this much detail.”

Her cheeks warmed as she bathed in his praise. “It’s just something I do sometimes. I’m terrible at embroidery, so this occupies my hands.”

He turned another page, tracing his fingers over the bold lines capturing the striking curves and soaring domes of Bodleian. Another drawing, featuring the main doors of Bodleian, the collegiate coats of arms intricately captured on the page. Alex chuckled as he turned to the next page, a sketch of the interior of the mathematics library. “May I keep this?” he asked with a grin. “It’s a picture of my second home.”

She smiled, warm with the pleasure his appreciation gave her. “Of course.”

Carefully, he tore the page from the binding of the notebook and tucked it into his pocket. As he did, Alex glimpsed the page underneath. “What is this?” he asked, holding the notebook closer.

Fern’s eyes widened in horror as she reached for the notebook. “No, that’s not, it’s not—”

“It’s me,” Alex said with awe in his voice. She had captured him in a three-quarter profile, his head tilted down, with a lock falling over his forehead. His hair was a bit too long and curled around his ear and neck. He was in need of a trim. She had tried again and again before she captured the exact line of his jaw, the curve of his cheekbone, the slight dimple in his cheek. His eyes were looking back towards her, the thick line

of lashes dramatic under feathered brows. His mouth was curled slightly in a smile, as though she had captured him at the precise moment when she made him laugh. She had drawn him from memory while waiting for him to arrive at the library one day. “You drew me?”

Fern squeezed her eyes closed as humiliation washed over her. “It just—it’s—I sometimes draw people and—”

“Is this how you see me?” His voice caught as he met her eyes.

This is the sort of time when it’s helpful to be able to read emotions, Fern thought ruefully. She would have felt angry and distrustful if she had found a sketch of herself in someone’s notebook. But he’s not yelling, or frowning, he looks...happy? “Are you upset with me?”

“No.” He chuckled. “My mother would love this.”

“She would?” That was not what she expected to hear.

His lovely mouth curved into a smile. “She always tells me I’m handsome, and honestly, I never truly believed her. I thought she was being a fawning mother.” He paused, gazing at the drawing again. “You created this.”

Fern nodded, a sudden surge of pride in her work welling up in her chest. “I draw a lot, you know. I see pictures and find the patterns and draw what I see. I’m terrible with people, normally.” She took the notebook and flipped back, past several attempts she had made to sketch her sisters, mother, random people she saw on the street. He had captured their

bodies with precision, but their visages were smudged, erased again and again from existence. “The faces always look wrong, like I’ve stolen all the life from them. I’ve never gotten a face right before yours.”

When Fern looked up, Alex was not looking at the sketches. His eyes were gazing at her face, taking her in as though he was seeing her for the first time. The same way he looked at her in the library at her father’s masquerade. “I have never met anyone like you,” he whispered, raising his other hand to cup her cheek, his thumb catching the corner of her mouth.

She could see the battle raging inside him, the newly discovered longing warring against his sense of responsibility and propriety. God help her, she wanted his propriety to *lose*.

Fern knew she should stop what was happening, should go inside, should tell him she would never see him again, but she couldn’t. *Would it be so bad if, just once, I had something special instead of Rose?*

His lips met hers and her body burst into flames. His kiss was firm, needy, and he pulled away for a moment to take in her expression before catching her lips again. His tongue flicked against the seam of her lips, and she sighed and opened her mouth, eagerly welcoming the exploration of his tongue with her own.

She felt rather than heard the low growl escaping him. Alex put one hand on her waist and the other on the nape of her neck, pulling her flush against him, the notebook falling with a flutter to the ground. She savored the heat of his body through

the fine wool of her jacket and skirt, pressing closer, eager for more of his touch, more of *him*.

His lips left her mouth, tipping her chin back and exploring her jawbone, her neck. She gasped when his teeth caught her earlobe, licked the curve of her ear, languishing in the hollow where her ear met her jaw. “You’re amazing,” he murmured against her skin. She grabbed the fabric of his lapels and pulled, desperate to have him even closer. He brought his eyes back to her face, to her parted lips, her wide eyes, and kissed her again. “You’re beautiful,” he whispered against her mouth.

In his arms, Fern believed his words. She felt perfect exactly as she had been made. Not less than, but enough. With Alex, she was more than enough.

Deep inside the house, a dog began barking. Alex jumped back, blinking repeatedly. When she dared to look at Alex she saw his ashen face as he averted his eyes, running his hand over his mouth as though he wished to erase her touch. *Oh lord*, she thought, her throat tightening, *I’ve done something truly horrible*.

She fumbled with the door handle, desperate to get inside. “I need to go—”

“Fern, I’m sorry,” Alex stammered. “I was—”

“Please, forget it happened.” Fern’s hands were trembling so violently she could barely grip the doorknob. But why did she desperately want to kiss him again?

“I can’t just forget.” He hesitated. “Will you tell Rose?”

Of course. This wasn't about Fern, after all. He wanted to protect Rose, and the relationship they were building. The kiss they shared was an aberrance, not a reflection of his feelings for her. Rose would win, once again.

"I don't tell her everything," Fern said, her voice icy. "You needn't worry."

"But will I see you tomorrow?" Worry lines creased from the edges of his lips which moments ago had caressed hers. "We only have three days until your meeting, do you want to prepare?"

Her dream of Oxford was so close. In three days she could be part of the shining beacon of knowledge she had worshiped for most of her life, but only if Alex helped her.

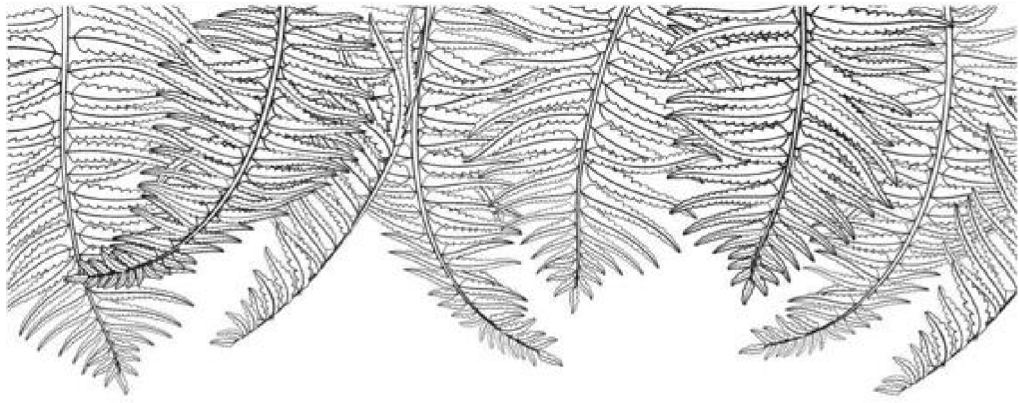
But she could not destroy Rose's dream for hers. Rose wanted to marry him, and Fern would not break her heart. Rose and Alex made sense together. Rose was destined to be the bride, the happy wife, and Fern... She was destined to be alone. She had to let him go.

"I'm sorry, I have other plans." Her heart protested every word. "Your own presentation is coming up, you needn't waste your time."

"It's not a waste, I enjoy being with you, and the work is both of ours—"

"Good night, Mr. Carroway," she said, forcing herself to meet his eyes.

Alex stood in the moonlight, looking gloriously handsome and ruffled, hurt radiating from his expression. “Of course,” he finally mumbled. “Good night, Miss Fern.”



Chapter 21

WHEN ALEX THREW HIMSELF down on the worn leather chair in Henry's apartment, his entire body ached. His head was pounding when he arrived at Pembroke and grew worse when he had to explain to a new guard on duty why he had Lord Henry's horse in the first place at the late hour. Even worse was the persistent ache from unresolved lust, only exacerbated by a twenty-minute ride on horseback.

Henry handed him a glass of whiskey and lounged across from Alex in a matching armchair, looking annoyingly at ease. "With that expression, I am willing to wager you have gotten yourself into quite a heap of trouble," Henry said with a smirk.

Alex grumbled a low curse. For their entire relationship, Alex had been the logical one, the staid and stable friend, the person who got Henry out of trouble and never got himself into it. Alex knew Henry would enjoy gloating over the reversal in fortune, but it was still bloody irritating.

"I'm certainly in it now," Alex replied, drinking deeply from his whiskey, wincing as it burned down his throat. "You know I've been courting Rose Waverly."

“And incomprehensibly she is responding well, so I’ve heard.”

Alex narrowed his eyes at the cut but continued. “Her father has offered to write me a recommendation to the School of Economics.” He sighed. “I think she wants me to ask her to marry me.”

Henry sat back in his chair, his face spreading into a grin as he raised his glass. “Well, congratulations are in order! I never would have thought you would be the one to catch the fair Rose, but well done!” Henry paused, taking in his friend’s pinched expression. “But I take it you’re not completely thrilled with this arrangement. You told me you fancied yourself in love with her.”

“I am. I was. I don’t know.” He noted absently that the whiskey burned less the more he sipped.

“What has happened to change your mind?”

Alex sighed. “She has a sister.”

Henry groaned. “As I understand it, she has several sisters. Which one is causing the problem?”

“Her twin, Fern.” Alex swirled his remaining whiskey and a took large sip. It burned even less now but had not dulled the ache in his chest.

A delighted laugh escaped Henry’s lips. “Rose Waverly has a *twin*? Good God, how has the world been denied this glorious knowledge until now?”

“She’s...different,” Alex replied, watching as Henry’s brows furrowed.

“Different how?” Henry asked.

Alex paused to consider the question, struggling to reconcile how he had first seen Fern, how dismissive and rude he had been to her the day they met in the library, with the woman he had been unable to resist kissing earlier that night. “She’s brilliant, eerily brilliant in fact, and it makes her...eccentric.”

Henry leaned forward, draining his whiskey and pouring himself another before topping off Alex’s glass. “Eccentric how? Collecting pet birds eccentric or screaming obscenities from the rooftops eccentric?”

Alex scoffed. “Neither of those. She hates social situations and would spend all day in the library if she could.”

“Are you certain you’re not describing yourself?” Henry asked, arching a brow.

“No, it’s more than that.” Alex leaned his head back against the chair. “It’s like she doesn’t entirely understand what’s happening around her, but at the same time is sensitive and empathetic to a fault. And what she says and what she thinks...” His mind recalled her profound explanation of how she sees numbers, feels mathematics. “Her mind is beyond anything I have ever experienced before.”

“And how do you know all this about Fleur? Did Rose tell you?”

“Fern.” Alex shifted, a weight settling in his stomach. “She asked me to help her get a spot in the maths program at Oxford, She...” He cleared his throat. “She offered to help me court Rose if I helped her prepare.”

“That seems...nice?”

“I thought it would be.” Alex ran his hand roughly through his hair. “And then I got to know her, and she stopped being so strange and became...” He looked up at his friend and gave a nervous smile.

Henry sat back with a long, low whistle. “I... Wow,” he said, shaking his head. “So you have feelings for Fawn?”

“Fern, for God’s sake. Her name is Fern.”

“Fern,” Henry repeated. “Has anything happened between you and...her?”

Alex nodded slowly. “Tonight. Quite a bit.”

Henry raised an eyebrow as Alex buried his head in his hands. Henry did the same, then picked up his glass and drained it. “Good lord, Alex, you’re living in a bloody romantic novel. Do you think Fern will tell Rose what happened between you?”

Alex shook his head with enough force to make his neck crack. “She wouldn’t want to do anything to hurt her sister. She loves Rose above all else.”

Henry nodded once with conviction. “Good, that simplifies things. Does Fern have feelings for you?”

Alex hesitated. Yes, she had responded to his touch, but then shut him out. Had he just been imagining a mutual attraction? “No.”

“Then chalk this up to a bad case of nerves,” Henry said, lounging back again as if he had solved all the world’s troubles. “You wanted a last taste of bachelorhood before you committed yourself. Choosing the sister for your dalliance was ill-advised, but you’ll survive it. Within a year you’ll have forgotten it ever happened.”

Alex said nothing. He stared into his nearly empty glass, eyes unfocused and unseeing. “I don’t know if I can forget her, Henry.”

Henry sighed, cursing under his breath. “Well, that does complicate things.”



Fern’s hesitant footsteps echoed through the empty library hallway as she wound her way to the deserted basement carrel they used for their study sessions. Her fingers tightened around the note she had received that morning.

Fern,
I’m sorry for my ungentlemanly actions last night.
I acted deplorably and would like to apologize in
person. Please meet me in the Bodleian at 4:30.

This work is too important for me to simply walk away. I need to see you.

AJC

Her free hand drifted to her omnipresent satchel containing her work, a lifetime's worth of dreams and hopes, discoveries that would never see the light of day without Alex's help. She could not simply put it away because she had crossed a line last night.

Fern froze in place and swallowed heavily at the sight of Alex. His hair stuck up in every direction, and she knew he had been raking his fingers through it all afternoon. His necktie was loose and the top button of his shirt undone, exposing the small triangle of skin at the top of his chest. When he saw her, he shot to his feet, his brilliant blue eyes gleaming and a nervous smile pulling at the side of his mouth. Even in the dim, dank basement, he stole her breath away. Steeling her spine, she continued forward, hoping to infuse herself with the confidence she lacked at the moment.

"I worried you wouldn't come." His words were breathy, and she realized he may be more anxious than she.

"I nearly didn't." She sat across from him, keeping her gaze lowered.

"Do you want to talk about—"

"No." Her exclamation reverberated in the empty stacks around them.

Alex pursed his lips and examined her for a long moment. “Fine.” Fern forced her attention to her notebook, but couldn’t help noticing his eyes darting to her, again and again.

Before long he threw down his pencil and stared at her. “We can’t pretend nothing happened.”

“Nothing. Happened,” Fern hissed with a glare.

“You can’t pretend—”

“I certainly can pretend!” She closed her eyes and forced her breath to calm before looking at him again. “There is too much at stake now,” she said, her voice even. “Alex, it was a momentary lapse of judgment, it—”

“Is that really all you felt?” His eyes bored into hers. She froze under his gaze, completely exposed. And for some unknown reason, it did not frighten her.

“Please forget about it,” she said, burying her head back in her papers.

Tension radiated from his stiff shoulders and clenched hands. He heaved a deep breath before picking up his pencil again.

She did the same but could not bring her pencil to move. His mere proximity summoned memories of his hands and soft lips on her body. Heat rushed through her and settled low in her belly, strong enough that she needed to squeeze her legs together and shift in her chair.

Alex’s eyes darted up. “Are you all right?”

She stiffened in her seat. “Yes, of course.” A pause. “No,” she spat out. “I’m terrified. My work, everything I have wanted, it all depends on a single opportunity to impress someone I have never met, and who will probably dismiss me outright because I am a woman, or young, or something else I cannot control.” Her brow creased as she searched his eyes for understanding. “And I may have ruined things with my closest ally.”

“You haven’t ruined things.” Alex reached for her hand on the table but she pulled it away. “I initiated the kiss, not you.”

Fern shook her head and sighed. “You’re right. We can’t forget that we...” She trailed off and waved her hand in front of her mouth, her cheeks heating. “And I enjoyed it, but—”

“You enjoyed it?”

Despite being a woman who was rarely short on things to say, particularly to Alex, words completely escaped her. She could not possibly capture the riotous emotions coursing through her when she looked at him and the pleasure she saw in his eyes, the aching desire to feel his touch and hear his voice, simply to be in his presence, to feel the warmth of his gaze. For the first time in her life, she had found someone who cared for her, just as she was. He was a rare gift, indeed.

But it was a gift belonging to someone else.

“You’re courting my sister, Alex.” Her voice was barely above a whisper. “I couldn’t possibly—”

“But what if I weren’t courting your sister?” Fern’s heart tumbled, threatening to burst from her chest. “If I ended things with Rose, so we could be—”

“You can’t,” Fern whispered, lacking conviction in her tone. “Everything we both worked for would fall apart. We would have to tell my father about working together. If he knew you were helping me you’d lose your recommendation, and Rose would never speak to me again.” An intense ache took hold in her chest, so fierce she struggled to breathe through it.

“Fern?” he asked, pulling her hands into his. “What do you want?”

She swallowed heavily, unable to verbalize her desire. *I want you.*

“I don’t want to hurt anyone,” she finally said. “I can’t hurt Rose.”

“But what if I don’t want to be with her anymore?” Fern pulled her hands back and stared at Alex aghast. He met her gaze and continued. “Things with Rose haven’t been right from the start. I don’t want to court her anymore.”

“You wanted to be with her,” Fern retorted. “You wanted me to help you—”

“It doesn’t change the fact that I care far more for you than I do for your sister.”

“That’s not true.” Fern gripped her hands into her skirts, willing her voice not to tremble. “You—you’re confused,

that's all. You're stressed, and—" Her heart flipped, battling against the persistent voice in her head.

You'll never be able to win him away from Rose.

"I won't let you give up your future for me," she spat out, squeezing her eyes closed. "I don't want to be anything more than friends."

The air hung heavy between them. More than once Alex took in a breath as though he wanted to say something, but stopped.

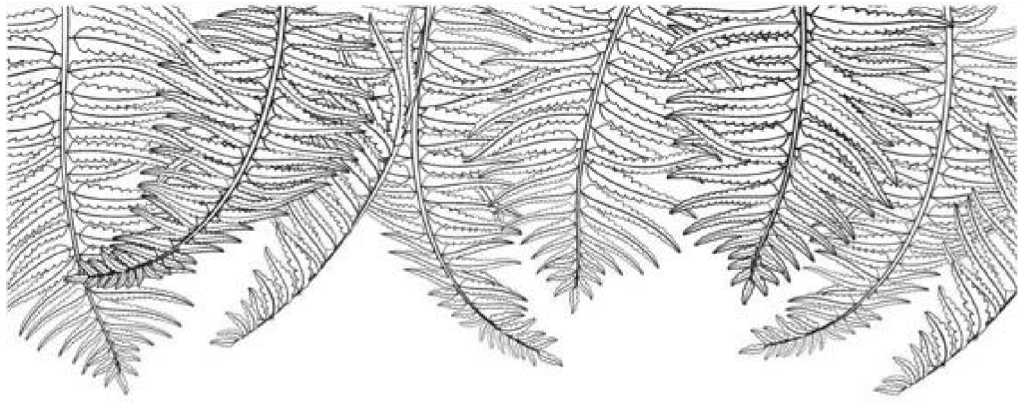
"I understand," he said finally, his cheeks slightly pink as he looked back down at his work. "We will be friends then, and nothing more."

Fern nodded, allowing her eyes to find his. For a moment, she considered saying no. She wondered what would happen if she let herself be the beautiful one, the beloved one. If she allowed herself this one pleasure, this one comfort in a world of constant unease. Would it be so selfish?

I have made this mess, and I will have to live with it.

"Friends," she said, her face straining into a smile.

He bobbed his head in return, and what looked like regret flashed in his eyes. And for a moment, Fern let herself believe he was as devastated by this situation as she was.



Chapter 22

“S IP, PLEASE, FERN, DO not slurp.”

Fern set her teacup down as gingerly as possible, but her trembling fingers caused the cup to wobble audibly in its saucer. Lady Redborne flinched as though she had shattered glass.

“I’m sorry, Mama,” she murmured. “I was just thirsty.” She hoped the beverage would fortify her enough to get her through several more hours of preparation, but she wondered if there was enough tea in all of England to keep her eyes open. Suffering through the bitter taste was penance for her actions.

Fern had not slept well, once again. Throughout the night her mind had wandered through countless scenarios, alternative endings to their conversation in the library. Was there some way she and Alex could be together, a combination of factors that allowed her to fall into his arms without blowing up every other aspect of her life?

When the first light of dawn crept its lavender fingers past the curtains of her bedroom, Fern accepted what she thought

was impossible. She was falling in love with Alex. In fact, she considered herself already fallen. Of course, prior to this date, she could not have defined falling in love or even identified the value of the practice, but she was now absolutely certain love was real and she was in it, deeply, with him.

The realization had pulled her from her bed, throwing back the curtains and opening her windows wide. She had sucked in the early morning air, chilling her face and her lungs. She had found this incredible person, the man who made her feel whole, as though she was not deeply flawed. And he belonged to her sister, by Fern's own doing! If she were to admit how she felt about him, Alex would end his courtship of Rose, and Rose would be devastated. She would certainly tell Alex how Fern deceived him at the ball. There was no possible scenario in which the two most important people in her life would forgive her, let alone love her.

Her exhausted mind continued racing, only vaguely aware of the chatter between her mother and aunt at the breakfast table.

“Fern?”

She blinked to clear her eyes and saw Rose watching her, delicate brows furrowed, over her tea.

“I'm sorry, I was... thinking about a book I need to finish.”

Aunt Margaret cleared her throat and shot Fern a wink. Fern wished she would develop the ability to truly become invisible.

“I can’t imagine there is anything in the library you have not yet finished, my dear,” her mother said airily, but Rose held Fern’s gaze.

“Mama, Fern and I were going to take a walk through the gardens,” Rose said, her voice light and pleasant. “Can we gather some flowers for you and Aunt Margaret?”

“Don’t you have errands to run in town?” Aunt Margaret asked with a smirk.

“That would be lovely,” her mother replied, ignoring her aunt’s remark. “Fern, do hurry back though. We have quite a bit of work to do if you are to be ready for next season.”

Fern’s stomach gave an unpleasant lurch. “I’m sorry?” she choked.

Lady Redborne smiled at her youngest child, although her voice was tight. “I decided it may be best for you to go to London after all. I thought you might try to have a season again and find someone to marry. Once Rose marries you will want to find a match of your own. You’ll be so lonely by yourself, my dear.”

“Of course,” she said, her breath catching. “I should hate to be lonely.”



“You’re not telling me something,” Rose said, catching Fern’s elbow as the two descended from the terrace into their

mother's gardens. Gravel paths wound through neatly trimmed hedges overcome by vines of morning glories, beds of lilacs, tulips, and marigolds crowding the edges. The paths gave way to an entire wall of roses, carefully pruned to climb trellis-like over a collapsed wall. The fields beyond grew unimpeded around a marble rotunda at the far end edging the woods, and wildflowers spotted the rolling green landscape like drops of paint on an earthen canvas.

Rose had not spoken a word until the girls were far beyond the rose garden, into the wild meadows beyond the sight of the house. She stopped in her tracks and spun to face Fern, her cheeks red. "You haven't slept and you won't even talk to me. You haven't been reading, either, I haven't seen you with a book in hand in days. Now what. Is. *Wrong?*"

Fern bit her lip hard enough to draw blood. What could she possibly say at this point?

She gave a heaving sigh. "There is a professor at Oxford working with the prosody of metrical poetry." Rose raised one eyebrow, the well-known signal warning to stay on track and not wander off on an intellectual tangent. "I'm working on some translations of poetry, and I hope to present my work to him, and maybe..."

"Maybe you will be able to study with him." Fern's jaw dropped. Rose gave her a sad half-smile, and Fern immediately eased. She always admired her sister's limitless ability for empathy, even if she could not comprehend it herself. "I knew you dreamed of studying at Oxford," Rose

said, taking her sister's hand and squeezing it. "You've always wanted to."

"How did you know?" Fern whispered.

"Whenever we go into town, you insist on walking across the campus, and I've seen you watching the students," Rose replied. "You envy them so, and it breaks my heart."

Tears pricked at Fern's eyes as she felt utterly exposed. She had thought only Alex knew her secret.

"I know it's unlikely," Fern said. "But I still want to try, I have to—"

"Of course you have to try!" Rose interjected, her voice rising as her eyes sparkled. "It's your dream, and I can't imagine anyone more deserving of a place at Oxford than you."

Fern grasped her sister by the shoulders and pulled her in for a hug, her shoulders heaving. "What if I—what if the professor won't even listen to me? What if—"

"Then we plan your next steps together," Rose said, rubbing her hands over Fern's trembling back. "I'll always help you, in any way I can. I only wish you had told me sooner."

Fern pulled back and allowed Rose to brush a tear from her cheek. "You would have helped me?"

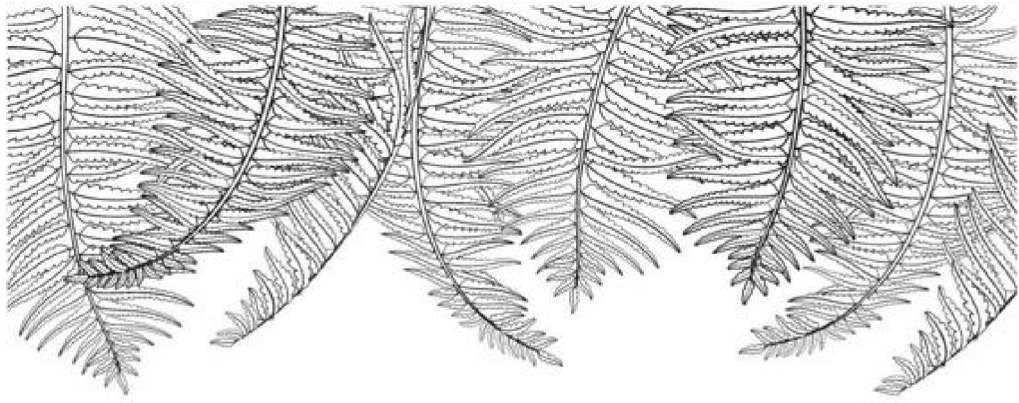
"Well," Rose laughed. "I would not have been of much help with the mathematics, but certainly Alex could have been of assistance."

Fern's heart dropped as she watched Rose's eyes light up. "Oh, how did I not think of this sooner? Alex will help you!" Rose gasped. "He certainly knows this professor, and I'm certain if I asked him he would—"

"That's not necessary," Fern interrupted, her voice pinched. "He's busy with his own dissertation, he won't have time for me."

"Nonsense, he meets with his tutors tomorrow so it will finally be over with," Rose said with a swish of her hand, and Fern felt a flash of unwarranted irritation. *She doesn't understand how important his work is, she doesn't understand him at all.*

"Alex will be your brother soon enough," Rose said. "And you will be a student at Oxford, I'm sure of it." She drew her twin in for another embrace, and Fern was immensely grateful Rose could not see the fresh tears on her cheeks. "Oh Fern, soon we will both have exactly what we want."



Chapter 23

“**Y**OU HAVE TO SPEAK as though you believe in what you’re saying!” Fern bellowed from the back of the lecture hall.

The hour had crept past midnight, and while students preparing for their final assessments crammed in every inch of available space in the library, the small lecture rooms of the examination halls on High Street were deserted, providing the perfect place for a dress rehearsal for Alex’s dissertation defense. Fern had taken on the role of examiner with glee, interrupting his speech with abrupt questions and suggestions for improvement.

“I do believe in what I’m saying,” he retorted, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“You don’t sound like it.” Fern lounged back in her seat, crossing her ankles. “You’re rushing through your final conclusions as though you want to avoid questions when you should welcome the interrogation.”

Alex flinched. “I’m not exactly *eager* for it.”

“But it’s why you’re here,” she said, getting to her feet and descending the stairs of the lecture hall as though she owned it. She stood across the podium from Alex, rising on her toes to lean onto her forearms. “What good would an education be if learning never challenged you? Why do you think I want to attend Oxford instead of simply absorbing information from a book?”

He couldn’t fight the smile pulling at the corner of his lips. Fern had a knack for reminding him how fortunate he was to be in the position to contribute to his field.

Two days had passed since their kiss, two days in which Alex examined every option, every angle that might allow him to pursue his feelings for Fern. He knew he had to stop courting Rose, but it wouldn’t make Fern want to betray her sister to be with him. Yes, her body had responded to his touch, and she admitted her attraction to him. But tonight she had kept her distance, although he caught her watching him more than once before she averted her gaze, a pretty flush spreading over her freckled cheeks. He couldn’t be simply imagining something existed between them, could he?

“All right.” Alex shook out the tension in his shoulders. “Again then?”

“Only if you’ll do it the way I tell you to.”

He heaved a dramatic sigh. His brain had started to fog over, and he was becoming giddy from exhaustion and nerves. “Fine, then maybe you should do it.”

Her eyebrows shot up. Suddenly she was full of energy. “Present your work?”

Watching her light up with joy, Alex let himself smile in return. “By this point, I think you know it better than I do.”

“Lovely.” Fern bounded around the lectern and bumped him out of the way with her hip. “Allow me.” Fern’s eyes sparkled with mischief.

She took a deep breath and stood up tall behind the podium, making a big show of organizing Alex’s notes as he took a seat in the first row with a smirk.

Fern cleared her throat. “My most esteemed colleagues,” she droned in the sweeping, dramatic tone favored by his professors. Alex burst into laughter as she continued, naming each of his examiners in turn and praising their work, most of which she made up on the spot. “And Professor Buttersworth,” she said, feigning a swoon and fanning herself, “Your work on the multiple derivatives of the Pythagorean theorem,” she said in a low, husky voice that set his pulse racing, “simply thrilling!”

Alex gave her a mock scowl, then sat up ramrod straight, hand high in the air. “Excuse me,” he called in a shrill voice. “I simply can’t *believe* you haven’t thought of this before! Have you even *gone* to school?”

Fern’s eyes shot wide, but they sparkled with mirth. “You’re mocking *me* now? Really? After all of your *these books are for mathematics students only* nonsense!” She scrunched her

nose up and shook her finger at him sternly. “*Can you read French? Why aren’t you wearing shoes?*”

“I never said that!” Alex retorted, coming up to stand behind her, nearly doubling over with laughter.

Fern giggled as he grasped her by the waist, pretending to wrench her away from the lectern. She, as he had expected, fought back, gripping the sides with all her might as she shook with laughter.

Without warning Fern spun around and put her hands to his sides, tickling under his arms. Alex let out an undignified shriek and lept back, causing Fern to grin with delight as she pursued him. “Stop!” he laughed, unable to control himself, flinching before her fingers even reached him.

“I’m not even touching you.” She smirked as she approached him like a predator stalking its prey.

“You’re tickling me with your mind, then,” he gasped, failing to contain his laughter.

Fern lunged forward and Alex, ready for the attack, gripped her hands before she could make contact, spinning her around and under his arm so her back pressed against his chest, their arms wrapped together just under her breasts.

They froze in place, chests heaving. Alex’s breath drifted over her hair, and he let himself breathe in her scent, the mix of grass and honey he had come to crave. He tilted his head down, brushing his lips lightly over the hollow below her ear. She shivered but did not pull away. After a beat, she relaxed

against him and he closed his eyes, relishing in her proximity. How could he possibly convince her what they shared was special? That it was worth fighting for, consequences be damned?

Her breathing changed. He could feel it coming faster, but also deeper somehow, as she tilted her head to give him more access to the delicate curve of her neck. Alex let his lips drift along the slim column until he reached her shoulder, feeling her pulse thrum against his skin.

Their breath rose and fell together as she leaned further into his arms. Holding her close, sharing her inhales and exhales, felt right, as though he had found his way home. Alex released her hands and brushed one palm against the underside of her breast until his thumb drifted up and found her peaked nipple. Her breath caught as he stroked again over the tender bud. She arched further into his touch, moaning softly as his hands opened to hold both of her breasts in his palms.

“Tell me to stop, Fern, and I will,” Alex murmured against her ear.

He expected her to protest, but instead, she turned her head towards him, tilting her chin until she caught his lips in answer.

Lifting one hand to cup her jaw, Alex fed on her mouth hungrily. He felt a sudden need to know her completely, to discover every part of her body, how to make her sigh and moan and smile. His tongue found hers and they clashed, sparring as they had so many times with their words.

Fern spun in his arms to face him fully and Alex did not hesitate to drop his arm low around her waist before dropping his palm to her bottom, pulling her flush against him. She moaned in response, her breath catching as she pressed her hips against his arousal.

For a wild moment, Alex wanted nothing more than to take her there in the lecture hall, to have her body and soul. The fabric of her skirts bunched in his hands as he lifted it higher and higher—

Fern pulled away so quickly that he almost fell backward. She stared at him, her hazel eyes glistening. “What are we doing?” she whispered, her voice so low he could barely hear it over the staccato of his pulse.

Alex leaned forward, pressing his forehead against hers and letting their breaths mingle. “Fern, I—” He exhaled heavily and pressed his eyes shut as he shook his head. “This is impossible.”

“My sister.” Her voice sounded like a prayer. “Your career. We would ruin all of it.”

“But I can’t ignore this.” His voice trembled with the force of his emotions. “Can you?”

She tipped her chin low, and Alex couldn’t resist placing a soft kiss on her head. “I don’t have a choice.”

“Don’t you?” he retorted, taking her hands and gripping them tightly. “Of course you have a choice. We have options,

there is nothing so impossible to overcome if you're willing to try."

"You're willing to give up your future?" Fern stepped back from him, and he felt the sudden cold of her absence deep in his chest. "I don't think my father will look kindly on you if you toss over one daughter for another."

Alex flinched. So much was tied up in his relationship with Rose, it seemed impossible to untangle it all. But how could he possibly give up Fern?

"We could try," he said, taking her cheeks in his hands. "We could talk to your father. We didn't plan this, we just need to be honest. He can't be angry if we tell the truth."

Fern squeezed her eyes closed. "Alex," she said on a shuddering exhale, "there's something I need to tell you."

His heart jumped as hope took up residence. Would she agree to fight for a future together? Would she give him a chance?

"When you met my sister, at my father's party," Fern continued, her eyes glistening. "It wasn't—"

The door to the lecture hall burst open, causing them both to start and jump away from each other as an older man with wild gray hair and a tweed suit poked his head into the room. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm sorry, Professor Hawkins," Alex called, immediately recognizing one of the senior mathematics faculty. "Final preparations for tomorrow, sir."

Hawkins squinted and nodded with recognition. “Mr. Carroway, you will do better with a good night of sleep.” He cast his gaze over Fern. “*Uninterrupted* sleep.”

Alex glanced at Fern as her cheeks turned crimson. “Of course, sir, thank you.”

The pair hastily gathered their things and exited the room, Hawkins trailing them silently and bidding farewell as they exited the examination hall. The shouting reached Alex’s ears before they set foot on the street and he groaned. Fern stiffened by his side and looked at him quizzically.

“Trashing,” he said, answering her unspoken question with the tone of a graduate student who had seen too much nonsense from younger students over the years. “They’re celebrating the last day of examinations and the start of summer. After this, they’ll all go bathe in the Thames.” He sighed. “It doesn’t show the best side of Oxford.”

“You don’t participate?” Fern asked as they stepped onto High Street and took in the sight. Hundreds of students packed the streets, throwing confetti and shredded papers while passing around bottles of wine and champagne as they processed along the front of the examination buildings in a makeshift drunken parade.

Alex smiled, remembering Henry pulling him from his room to join the festivities during his first year. “I did during my undergraduate days, but recently I’ve celebrated by sleeping for several days in a row.”

It took a moment for him to feel Fern pressed to his side, her entire body petrified. He dropped his gaze to her face and tensed. Her eyes were round and glassy, and all the color had drained from her cheeks. He took her clammy hand and squeezed. “They’re harmless, stay by my side and we’ll slip through.”

Fern bobbed her head as he led her forward, but as soon as they reached the edge of the group another crowd of students pushed in behind them, effectively trapping them in the mass. The mob swayed and pushed, and he heard Fern groan by his side. A protective instinct overwhelmed Alex and he reached to put his arm around her waist.

But it was too late. The crowd jostled forward, and Fern was pushed from his side, caught up in the swell of bodies. “Fern!” he cried, his voice lost in the joyous shouts surrounding him. Her eyes caught his, wide and full of panic, as she drifted further away.

Alex threw his weight into the bodies around him, ignoring the protesting students as he battled towards her. Every nerve in his body fired, adrenaline rushing with the need to help her, to protect her. A moment later he lost sight of her in the mass of students. Fear twisting in his gut, he lunged forward and tripped, stumbling to his knees.

There she was, curled in a tight ball among the teeming mass of legs, her face tucked into her knees as she was buffeted from all sides. He kneeled before her, gripping her upper arms. “Fern, you have to get up,” he said into her ear.

He was big enough to avoid significant injury in this crowd, but Fern's slight form could be trampled by the unwitting drunkards around her.

She didn't move or respond, the trembling of her shoulders the only sign of life. "Fern," he repeated, more harshly this time. "Stand up, you'll be hurt."

"Go away," she hissed, and he stiffened. Did she expect him to leave her like this?

"No," Alex insisted, leaning forward and forming a protective wall around her with his body. "I'm not leaving, you're coming with me."

The exuberant laughter and shouting surrounded them in a dramatic counterpoint to the panic rushing through Alex as he stared at Fern's inert body. He put his hands on her shoulders and she released her knees to push off his hands, tumbling to her side and rolling up once more.

"I—I don't want—I don't—" Fern stammered, shaking violently enough to make her teeth chatter.

"I'm *not* leaving," he repeated, picking her up and pulling her into his chest like a child. Alex shouldered his way past the raucous celebrants, carrying her out of the street and into a small garden, sitting heavily on the wrought-iron bench under a sagging willow. His heart pounded in his ears as he fought to stabilize his breathing as his instincts to protect her fired.

Fern had not yet moved, her arms still wrapped around her knees as her entire body vibrated. "Fern, sweetheart," he

murmured, stroking his hands over her back, her hair. “You’re safe, it’s over.”

She did not seem to hear him or at least didn’t respond. He traced his hand down her back, smoothing over each vertebra like pearls on a string. “I’m here, Fern,” he repeated, again and again like a mantra. “I’m not leaving.”

It seemed like an eternity before she relaxed, opening up like a creature emerging from its shell. Her wide eyes took him in and he gave her a slow smile. “There you are,” he whispered, pushing her hair behind her ear and pausing to rub his thumb over the smooth petal of her earlobe.

“You—you—” A shuddering breath fell out of her lungs and she collapsed against his chest, burying her face under his chin. “You didn’t need to do that,” she whispered. “I told you to go away.”

He chuckled, loving the feel of her relaxing into him, her cheek against his heart. “Did you honestly think I would walk away?”

“I didn’t want you to see me,” she said, her uneven breath feathering over his neck.

Alex touched his fingers to her chin and lifted her face to meet her eyes. “What happened?”

She averted her eyes and worried her lower lip between her teeth. He dragged his thumb along her lip to release it and was rewarded with a hint of a smile. “You know how I can get... overwhelmed. After what happened in the lecture hall....” A

pink blush spread under the freckles on her cheeks and across her nose, and Alex traced it with the pads of his fingers. He couldn't seem to stop touching her. "All the shouting, and the people," Fern continued, her eyes fluttering, "it gets to be too much and I—my body stops. I can't move, or think." She sighed. "I lose my temper and shout or hit." She sat up suddenly. "Did I hit you?"

He kissed her forehead. "You tried, I was too quick," he said with a wink, but realized his mistake when her face fell and schooled his features. "I knew you didn't mean it. You were frightened."

"I lose control, and I *hate* it," Fern whispered. She tried to bury her face back in his chest but he held her shoulders, maintaining their eye contact.

"I can understand," he replied. "Are you feeling better now?"

"Embarrassed, mostly," she admitted.

"You don't need to be."

Fern lifted one hand and traced the line of his jaw with her fingers. "You didn't leave," she said, her voice barely a whisper. "Why didn't you leave?"

He stiffened. Had she been left alone in such a state before? "I wouldn't leave you. I never will."

She dropped her gaze. "No one wants me around when it happens."

Alex wrapped his arms around her, smoothing his hands along her back as residual tremors passed down her shoulders and spine. “I never want to see you hurting, but Fern, you have to listen to me about this.” Her eyes rose to meet his. “You’re the strongest person I know. I can’t imagine anyone being brave enough to go up against a bloody university to chase their dream. You could have given in, stopped fighting, but you never did. Yes, your mind is different, but...” He kissed her forehead. “Your difference doesn’t make you weak, it makes you *strong*.” Tears glistened in her eyes as she stared at him, the corners of her mouth twitching as though she wanted to smile but was afraid to. “You don’t *need* anyone,” Alex said, “but you have me.”

Fern finally let the smile emerge, and it spread across her face like the first rays of sunlight at dawn. She was luminous.

She lunged at him, pressing her lips against his. Alex smiled, taking her mouth hungrily, matching her desperation with strokes of his tongue. She gripped his shoulders, shifting her legs so she straddled him. Their kisses were desperate, the adrenaline coursing through their bodies. Her weight settled on his lap, her heat pressing against his arousal. He groaned and rocked his hips, seeking more of the sensation.

Now, his body screamed, the ridiculous notion of taking her in a public garden suddenly seeming extremely rational. Fern’s proximity made all logic and reason flee his mind. He gripped her bottom and arched his hips against her, treasuring the moan falling from her lips.

“Alex,” she moaned. “Please—”

A chorus of hoots and whistles interrupted her plea. Alex popped his head up and glared at the half dozen young men standing just outside the garden, laughing and enjoying the show he and Fern provided. “Well done, mate!” one called, lifting his champagne bottle in a toast.

Alex rolled his eyes as the congratulations continued, while Fern quickly stood and smoothed her skirts, meeting his eyes with a shy smile. “I need to get back home,” she said, touching her hand to his chest.

Alex nodded, taking her hand in both of his. “I wish you could stay with me,” he said, cupping the nape of her neck and bringing her close. “I would keep you with me forever if I could.”

But I can't. She doesn't want to be kept.

The crowd was dispersing when they reached High Street, a line of enterprising carriages ready to transport the soused young men to their dormitories or taverns to continue the celebrations. Alex walked Fern to the front of the line, opening the hack door for her and handing the necessary coins to the driver.

The memory of her words before their interruption came back to his mind. “You wanted to tell me something, back in the lecture hall?” he asked, unwilling to release her hand yet.

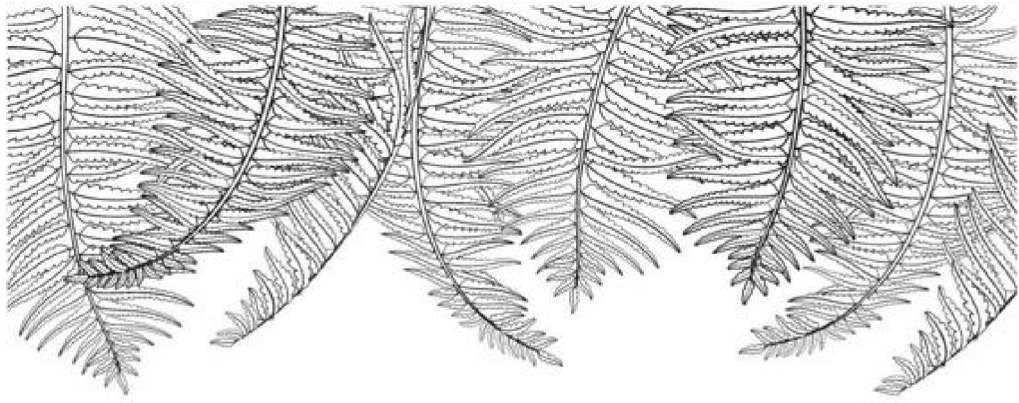
Fern hesitated. “It’s been a long night, and you need to rest. We can speak after your presentation tomorrow. Should I meet

you in the library when it's done?"

He nodded, his hands itching to touch her face, her hand, anything. But she had drawn away.

The hack driver cleared his throat loudly, and Fern turned. "Good night, Alex," she said from the seat. "And best of luck to you tomorrow, but you won't need it."

He nodded, a weight settling on his chest as he watched her ride away, already counting the moments until he could see her again.



Chapter 24

ALEX STEPPED ONTO HIGH Street and blinked in the bright midday sun. He released a heavy sigh, exhaling years— *decades*—of self-imposed pressure for success. The light breeze lifted his hair away and he let his shoulders drop. “I’ve done it,” he said, letting the words drift away with the wind.

He expected to feel a more intense emotion upon leaving the examination building the next morning, of relief or elation, certainly crippling exhaustion. But all he felt was a vague sense of waiting for a catharsis that never came.

His defense had gone without a hitch. When it was finally over, Professor Whitehurst shook his hand, voicing the words he had imagined again and again. *Congratulations, you are a Doctor of Philosophy in mathematics.* Strathmore and Redborne had not been in attendance, although Whitehurst promised to write to both gentlemen with the news of his success. It was done, his future was assured.

He walked towards Magdalen Bridge, stopping to watch the waters of the Thames drift beneath him. Squeezing his eyes

closed, Alex could hear Fern's voice as they tumbled off their punt into the water, could feel the soft skin of her lips against his, the frantic beat of her pulse under his palm as he held her close.

Alex's lips tipped up, recalling when an examiner asked the same question Fern had posed during their practices. When he recited his response, he wished Fern could see the impressed expressions on the stoic mathematicians' faces. *She should have been there*, he thought. He even checked the dark corners of the small lecture hall, hoping to see her leaning against the wall, her satchel slung over her slim shoulders, a proud smile on her face.

Many knew what he had accomplished. But Fern was the only person who understood what this *meant*. Even as he shook hands with his examiners and received their congratulations, all he wanted was to see the look on Fern's face when he shared his news.

He exhaled slowly, allowing his breath to mingle with the cool breeze off the water. He should write to his mother. She had sent a telegram the prior evening wishing him luck. Alex shared precious little communication with her over the past several months, and the fact made him wince with guilt. His father's dreams for his son had finally come to fruition. Unfortunately, he was no longer around to see it. Alex felt a dullness in his chest, knowing he had successfully cleaved himself from his humble upbringing but had firmly planted himself in a world where his working-class family would never belong.

Alex had not needed his mother or father for well over a decade, but, standing on Magdalen Bridge as a doctor of mathematics, he wondered if he had any space left in his life for the people he loved.

I would love for Fern to meet my mother. The thought came to him so quickly and powerfully that he released a laugh. There was something natural about Fern meeting his family, understanding him completely, and being a part of his history. He imagined taking her to Birmingham, sharing a meal with her in his childhood home, strolling in the gardens and along the canals. Making her a part of his past, and perhaps his future.

And she promised to wait for him.

He pictured Fern sitting at their table, her fingers drumming as she awaited the news. His news, his future entwined with hers, for better or worse.

This was the thought making his legs move before his mind recognized his destination. Alex's footsteps increased in cadence until he was running along High Street, drawing stares and laughter, but he did not mind for a moment. He was grinning, filled with a purpose he had never experienced before, something greater than mathematics, or academia, or status, or wealth. It was the chance to define himself as something more than a scholar. The chance to build his own family and legacy.

When he passed through the Bodleian's massive doors, he slowed his steps to an acceptable speed, winding through the

ancient hallways until he arrived at their study carrel. He would never be able to see this library and not think of Fern, and the idea made him smile even wider.

Let Redborne refuse to write the recommendation. Alex would find another way, another sponsor for his work in London. Fern was worth it, worth battling all the obstacles standing in their way.

He continued grinning as he strode confidently through the Bodleian, weaving through stacks and down stairwells. *I'm going to tell her how I feel*, he thought, his heart threatening to leap entirely from his body, as he turned the corner to see their table. *I want forever with her, I want—*

Their table was deserted. Alex stood still for a moment, then looked around as though she might be hiding. Finally he sat, pulling books from his bag before realizing he had nothing to work on. For the first time in his adult life, he was at rest.

For the first hour, Alex told himself Fern had misjudged the length of his presentation and would be along shortly. He paged through his books, unable to focus on anything. During the second hour, he worried she was unable to get away from home. By the end of the fourth hour, he stood, gathering his books with limp arms.

The cold grip of dread wrapped around his heart. *I have something to tell you*. The words had seemed insignificant the night before, but in the light of day, they took on new meaning. He had twice now acknowledged he felt something for Fern and she had rebuffed him both times. The physical

connection they shared had become incendiary, out of their control. But how could they act on it without destroying everything and everyone around them?

Fern valued her family above all else. Her love for her twin had been the lodestone of her life. How could he possibly ask her to throw her family away? She did not want to pursue a future with him.

He stumbled out of the library in a daze. Not ready to return to the solitude of his rooms, he walked to the mathematics building and paced the familiar hallways, craving something that made sense.

“I understand congratulations are in order.”

Alex blinked hard and focused on the elderly gentleman standing in the dim corridor outside the mathematics offices. “Yes, thank you, Professor Sylvester,” he stammered. “It’s quite an honor.”

The man nodded his head curtly. “Well, welcome to the ranks of the elite, Mr. Carroway.” He began to pass by Alex but stopped. “And I’m sorry I had to cancel the meeting with your student for tomorrow, but we can reschedule for next month.”

Alex’s head was suddenly crystal clear. “You canceled the meeting?”

“Yes, I sent word to Miss Waverly first thing this morning,” he replied, smoothing the cloud of white hair above his ear. “I assumed she would have told you. I was called to Paris and

will be at the Sorbonne for the better part of the next month. I'll have my assistant set up another meeting when I return."

In one month. After the entrance examinations. After Fern's time had run out.

"Sir," he said, his voice rising in intensity, "Miss Waverly is attempting to earn admission to the mathematics program, and her meeting with you—"

"I do understand," Sylvester interrupted. "But the university is not ready for her, nor will they be for some time. The faculty will not see her as a student, but as a woman, and a well-bred one at that, *and* the daughter of one of the university's most powerful allies. Even if she were to be admitted, what would it be like for her here? It would cause a scandal, especially if her father is against her studies."

Pressure built in Alex's chest until he felt smothered. "But if you were to insist on her admission—"

"I understand more than most the sting of rejection for being different." Sylvester let his words hang in the air. Alex recalled how he had mindlessly accepted the thirty-nine articles of the Church of England as part of his dissertation defense, a standard prerequisite for awarding of the title. Sylvester, a devout Jew who was unwilling to make the religious proclamation, would never receive the highest accolades of academia. Alex outranked him, simply because of his birth.

"But it is also the reality of our world," Sylvester continued, his features tightening. "I would be happy to meet with her

and advise on her work, but I will not risk my position here to advocate for her.” His face softened. “I’m sorry, but the sooner she understands the reality the sooner she can make a different plan for her future.”

Alex nodded numbly. *Her dream is over as mine has just begun.*

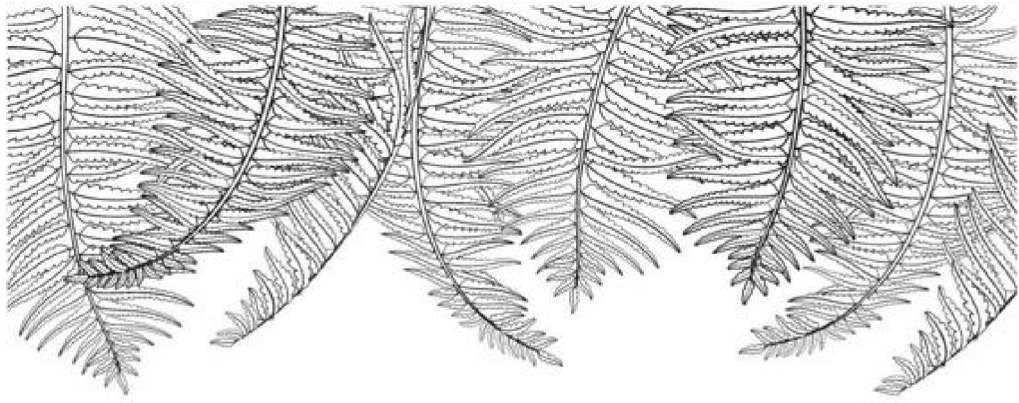
“Perhaps as your wife, she would be your partner in work,” Sylvester said. “It’s not at all uncommon, even if she cannot be credited.”

“She—she’s not—“ Alex stammered.

Sylvester flattened his lips. “I apologize, Whitehurst told me you were to marry Redborne’s daughter, I must have been mistaken.”

“No,” Alex croaked, his voice weak. “I—I am to marry her sister. I was, at least.”

A weighted silence fell while Sylvester considered Alex and his words. “You are a smart man, Carroway, that much is clear.” He gave Alex his back and continued down the hallway, tossing his last words over his shoulder. “But do not let your heart drive you to do something foolish.”



Chapter 25

“I AM A FOOL,” Fern said to her ceiling. In her entire life, she had never once thought herself a fool. Naive, perhaps, and ignorant at times, but never a fool. Perhaps this was why she was so blindsided by the letter she received that morning, the single sentence completely flattening her.

Canceling our meeting, my assistant will contact you in a month to reschedule.

No further explanation had been provided, no apologies offered. She was summarily dismissed. And if she were being honest with herself, this should not come as a surprise. Fern had been unbelievably fortunate to get a meeting with the legendary J.J. Sylvester, and it had only happened with Alex’s assistance.

“I am a fool, a bloody turnip,” she cried, smacking her fists on the counterpane. Fern should have known she was seeking the impossible, but she had let herself dream, even believing she could convince Sylvester of her merits. But what would

have happened if she had somehow convinced the professor she should be admitted to Oxford? Did she expect an entire university to cast off generations of bias towards female students and accept her as one of their equals?

Perhaps Sylvester might see her in a month and listen to her work. But it would still be too little and too late. The class list would be set, and Fern would not be a part of it.

“Bloody. Stupid. Foolish. *Turnip.*”

Fern gripped her pillow and squeezed until she lost sensation in her fingers, then released. As the blood rushed back into her extremities her nerves fired and tingled, angrily protesting the return of circulation. She wished for numbness, for escape, for the ability to deny her reality.

She should never have gone into the library in the first place, let alone chased Alex down and demanded his help. If she had not pushed him and manipulated him into helping her, the dream of attending Oxford would have remained just that—a dream, a fantasy, a wish. Coming this close, only to watch it fall apart, was far worse than never having it within reach at all.

“Fern?” The door to her room opened and Rose slipped inside, her brows drawn in concern. “Are you all right? I saw you received a message this morning, is something wrong?”

Fern crushed the pillow to her face.

“Fern,” Rose said, her voice gentle as she climbed into the bed and settled herself beside her sister, lifting the pillow

away. “Please, what’s wrong?”

“I am a fool,” she repeated, but this time her voice broke. Tears spilled from the corners of her eyes, trailing along her temples and falling into her hair. “I was an idiot.”

“What happened?” Rose took Fern’s hand and squeezed it.

“Sylvester won’t meet with me. It’s too late to arrange for the examinations. I will not attend Oxford.”

Rose was quiet, holding on to Fern as she silently wept. “You’re not giving up, are you?” she finally asked.

Fern sat up on her elbow and stared at her sister incredulously. “I don’t have a choice. There is no other way. If I were a man, my work would have been snapped up years ago, I would be receiving my degree and influencing the future of mathematics, not taking lessons on tea room etiquette from our mother.”

“It’s incredibly unfair, isn’t it?” Rose pushed a tear off Fern’s cheek. “I wish someone else could see how remarkable you are.”

Fern’s heart clenched at her sister’s remark. *You’re remarkable*. Alex’s words echoed in her head. She could hear his voice the first time he said those words to her, in the library of Boar’s Hill.

But he hadn’t said it to Fern. Alex had said it thinking she was Rose.

And now he had seen her at her worst, in the midst of a fit she couldn’t control. He did not need her chaos and noise in

his life, to be saddled with a woman who was so utterly *wrong* in so many ways. He would never choose her, but Rose still deserved the truth.

“Rose, I need to tell you something,” she said, her jaw tightening. “About Alex.”

“Have you heard? Did everything go well this morning?” Rose sat up, taking Fern’s hand with her. “I didn’t know what to say, how to even ask him. Is he truly a doctor now?”

A small smile broke over her lips. “I don’t know for certain.” She squeezed Rose’s hand, willing her voice not to tremble. “You should write to him, ask for yourself. He will be pleased to hear from you.”

Rose considered her sister for a long moment. “Was there something else you needed to tell me?”

Fern squeezed her eyes shut, summoning courage before looking at Rose. “I was not entirely truthful when I said I had no feelings for Alex.”

Rose stiffened but did not release Fern’s hand. “What do you mean?”

She looked down at where her hand joined with Rose’s, their fingers intertwined just as they had been on so many other occasions. Through triumphs and heartbreaks, so important at the time, but trivial compared to what Fern was about to say. “We were working together, like you suggested, on my preparation.”

Rose tilted her head. “I...I didn’t know. He didn’t tell me.”

Fern exhaled slowly. “I know, and we should have. But then I started to feel...affection...”

She stopped when Rose tightened her grip and pulled Fern towards her in an embrace. “I’m not surprised,” she mumbled against Fern’s hair. “He’s an intelligent man, and so kind. And you can talk to him, unlike so many other gentlemen.” Rose drew back and gave her sister an understanding if somewhat pitying smile. “I understand how you might fancy him.”

Fern bit the inside of her cheek. “I never intended to steal him—”

“I know,” Rose interrupted, as though dismissing her concern altogether, and the understanding tone of her voice vanished. “But you won’t be working together any longer, and soon he will be my fiancé. The little *tendre* you feel for him will surely disappear.”

Fern shook her head, unable to believe what her sister was saying. Was that all her sister believed her capable of? A girlish infatuation? She had a flashing desire to tell Rose outright about their kisses, Alex’s declarations, to shatter the illusion Fern was unworthy and could never interest someone like Alex, let alone win his affection. But Fern had never given her sister a chance, undermining their relationship from the start. Her stomach twisted.

“Perhaps that is why Alex and I get on so well because he is so much like you,” Rose said wistfully, before turning to Fern, her gaze direct. “But Alex wants to marry me, Fern. It would

only make things difficult if you were to tell him about this... fixation of yours.”

“Rose, I would never—”

“Good,” Rose said, standing from Fern’s bed and smoothing her skirts. “You’ll forget about it in no time at all.” She gave her sister one last smile, although it did not reach her eyes. “And I know you can keep a secret.”

As Rose swept out the door without looking back, Fern’s blood ran cold. With trembling hands she lifted her notebooks from her desk, papers overflowing with equations and sketches, ideas and poetry, and tore them out, one by one, until the pile nearly covered the floor. Feeding them to the fire, she watched as her dreams disappeared into smoke and ashes. She did not have the heart to try again. Where mathematics had once been a source of comfort, numbers now only caused pain. She would not have Oxford, and she could not have Alex if she wanted to keep her sister. All of her anguish, the plotting and scheming, and it had come to nothing.

Fern stood and wiped the ash from her hands on her skirts then crossed to her desk. Steadying her breath, she opened the note Aunt Margaret had pushed into her hand before her carriage departed that morning.

There is no good to be had from you staying at Boar’s Hill. Spare yourself the pain and come be my companion. My cottage in Hampshire has an

*overflowing library and plenty of stuffy old ladies
we can scandalize together.*

Tears blurred her vision as she contemplated her next steps. She would have to leave Oxford after Rose's wedding to Alex. She could not bear to watch them live together as husband and wife, nor could she stand being surrounded by scholars who would not have her in their company. Her twenty-first birthday was only a few weeks away. Perhaps it was time to listen to her mother's teaching, settle down and become a wife. After all, two decades of rebellion had left her bereft of hope and a future.



“This is a terrible idea, Alex.”

Alex leaned over Henry's shoulder to see what he had written. Henry scrawled the message exactly as Alex had dictated it, but his supporting role had not prevented Henry from making editorial comments.

“If you have a better one I'd be thrilled to hear it,” Alex growled.

“You need to talk to her,” Henry repeated as he dropped his pen, although since Alex had ignored the first dozen times he made this suggestion, he should know Alex was unlikely to listen now.

Alex shook his head. "I can't simply call on her, not without seeing Rose."

Henry twisted in his seat and fixed Alex with a glare. "And why exactly do you not want to speak to your fiancée?"

"She's not my fiancée."

"But she will be," Henry retorted. "I'm not trying to be cruel, but you know Redborne expects you to ask for her hand when he returns."

"I know." Alex groaned and turned away, running his hand through his hair and pulling at the ends. "He's returning the day after tomorrow, and I'm certain he will want to meet with me." His small room at Pembroke felt unusually cramped, as though he was being smothered by its brittle stone walls. "But I'm not ready to deal with that yet."

"When will you be ready?" Henry insisted. "He'll be back in a matter of days. Are you certain he wants you to ask for Rose?"

"I'm certain. If he's planning to write me the recommendation, I know the engagement is an expectation."

"And what if you tell him how you feel about the twin?"

Alex crossed his arms over his chest. "He'd be furious with me, as would Fern. She won't do anything to hurt her sister."

"Then the decision is made," Henry said with an air of practicality. "You're getting everything you wanted, and more than you deserve, if you ask me. Marrying Redborne's daughter will give you access to everyone you need to be

successful in government work. You could run for office with those connections.”

“But I don’t know if that’s what I want,” Alex cried, leaning his hands on the desk and dropping his head. “Maybe I should forget about London and foreign service. I should stay in academia. I could teach.”

Henry scoffed. “You’re frightened because you don’t know anything besides school. You’ve spent nearly a decade of your life on this campus, Alex, of course you’re scared to leave it.”

“It’s not fear.”

“Then what is it?” Henry challenged. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m thrilled to be a perpetual academic, it’s a wonderful way to avoid responsibility in life. But that’s just it—you can’t avoid responsibility forever.”

Alex pursed his lips as Henry’s words struck closer to his heart than he wished to admit. “I’m not avoiding responsibility.”

“You’re postponing it then. But your reckoning comes when Redborne returns to town and you ask for Rose’s hand.” Henry picked up the letter and waved it in the air. “Time is running out for this little dalliance with the sister.”

“Her name is Fern,” Alex burst out, his breath gasping. “And it’s...” He sat on his bed and buried his head in his hands. “It’s more than that.”

Henry turned his chair to face his friend head-on. “What do you mean?”

Alex lifted his head and gave a weak laugh. “I’m certain now what I feel for Fern is more than a passing interest. She’s...”

“Different?” Henry offered, echoing their previous conversation.

“Phenomenal.” His throat suddenly closed up with the force of his emotions. He felt an uncontrollable need to be the one who convinced her of how phenomenal she truly was.

Henry cleared his throat. “Will you really go so far as to end things with Rose, then?”

Alex groaned. “If I do, I’ll certainly lose my recommendation to Strathmore, and London.”

“It will be hard to gain a position with such a black mark against you,” Henry conceded.

“But marrying Rose, seeing Fern as a sister, I couldn’t—” Alex dropped his head back into his hands. “And even if I ended things, and Rose was devastated, I couldn’t ask for Fern’s hand in exchange, Redborne would have my head.”

“So what do you want, Alex?”

Alex lifted his head. “I need to see Fern. Just to talk to her for a moment. If I can ask her, directly, tell her my intentions...”

“And what are your intentions?”

The answer came to him with such stunning clarity he needed to close his eyes. A weight lifted from his shoulders,

the release of so much tension he nearly laughed aloud. "I'm in love with Fern," he said, not bothering to hide his smile. "I know I am, and I think she loves me too."

Henry sat back and rubbed the back of his neck as he released a deep exhale. "That's...yes, she needs to know that."

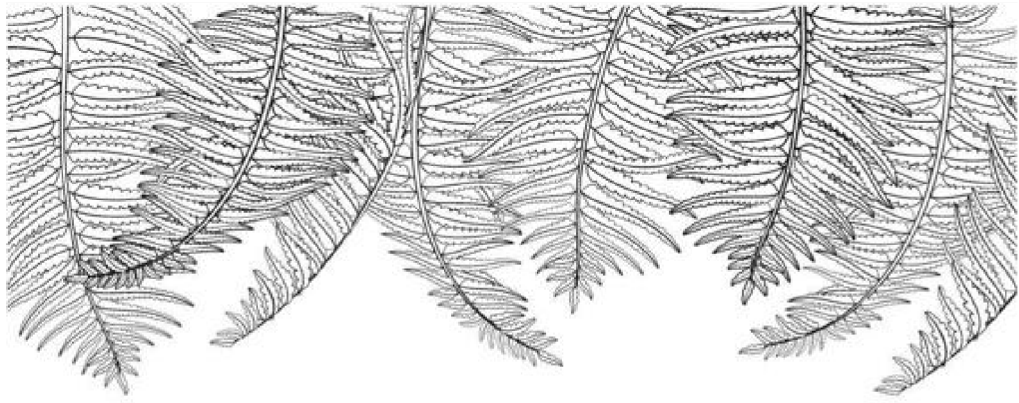
Alex nodded. "So you see why I can't marry Rose."

"I agree it would be a poor idea." Henry shook his head with a chuckle. "Remind me again why I am the one to deliver this note, in my dreadful handwriting?"

"Rose will recognize my hand, and I can't put Fern in the position of having to explain why I'm writing to her," he replied. "Rose needs to find out about us, but Fern wants to be the one to tell her. And if you go, you can insist upon an answer before leaving. You can charm anyone, Henry. Surely you can keep Rose occupied until Fern writes a response."

Henry hesitated, then folded the letter, writing Fern's name on the exterior. "You have to get yourself out of this mess, Alex. You've worked too hard to be undone by such nonsense."

"I know," he replied. "I just hope I don't destroy everything in the process."



Chapter 26

*T*HIRTY-FOUR PAINTINGS ON THE first floor. Fourteen landscapes; eleven portraits, five individuals and four of the family; six hunting scenes; three still lifes, mostly fruit.

As far as Fern knew, there had never been a detailed accounting of the artwork in Boar's Hill, and while she did not anticipate a need for such information, with limitless time on her hands it seemed like an appropriately mindless task to keep her distracted.

While she clung to a ludicrous hope Sylvester would change his mind and Alex would declare his love for her while Rose stepped aside graciously, deep down she knew it was hopeless. Her only path was to escape the situation entirely. If she left Oxford, the lies she had told her sister and her prolonged deception of Alex would never come to light, and the people she hurt would never know of her actions. Cowardly, and certain to destroy her, but perhaps the people she loved could remain unscathed.

"Do you need some help, Fern?" Rose asked from her perch on the settee in the parlor. She was curled onto the yellow silk

brocade reading a novel, the light from the leaden glass window behind her illuminating her profile like a religious icon.

“I don’t mind doing this alone,” Fern replied absently.

“And I don’t mind helping, although I’m not entirely certain why this task is so pressing.” Rose stood, smoothing her damask skirt, and assessed her sister with a furrow in her brow. “I know you’re still upset about the meeting, Fern.”

Fern set her lips in a firm line, not breaking her gaze from her notes. “It’s fine,” she said. “It cannot be helped.”

“Surely you can do something—”

“Pardon me, ladies.” Both girls jumped at Salisbury’s voice from the doorway. “Lord Henry Winchester, Viscount Morley to see Miss Rose.”

Fern and Rose exchanged identical expressions of confusion, and the normally unflappable Salisbury looked momentarily lost. “Shall I send him in?”

Fern’s eyes shot to Rose as she adopted her best “welcoming company” expression. “Thank you, Salisbury.”

“Do you know who that is?” Fern asked.

“I’ve heard of him,” Rose replied as their butler left the room. “We’ve met once or twice at large parties, and he’s apparently a complete scoundrel. Why he’d be here is beyond —”

“Miss Rose, how lovely to see you!” The impeccably dressed gentleman strode into the room like a man leading a parade, chin high and arms extended wide to greet her.

Lord Henry stopped in front of Rose and took her offered hand, lightly touching his lips to her knuckles. “I have not seen you since your father’s soiree.”

Fern’s heart stumbled, and she saw Rose stiffen before cutting her sister a quick glance. “I—we—why yes, that was an enjoyable evening, was it not?” Rose stammered.

He gave her a dazzling smile. “We were only introduced briefly, and I’m afraid you did not save me a dance, as you were otherwise occupied with my friend Mr. Carroway,” he said, giving her a quick wink. Rose pressed her lips into a smile, even as a muscle in her jaw twitched.

Fern squeaked, apparently loudly enough to distract Lord Morley from Rose. Fern squeezed her eyes shut as a wave of dizziness swept over her. *Henry, is this Alex’s friend Henry?*

He turned and dropped his hand into his trouser pocket before extending his palm to Fern and taking her hand. “I don’t believe I have had the pleasure of making your acquaintance.”

Fern’s stomach turned to lead. This was certainly Alex’s friend Henry, the man she met at her father’s ball. The one who lent Alex his horse, his best friend and confidante. *He knows*, she thought as her heart began to pound. *He met me at the ball and he knows.*

Lord Henry took her hand, and something hard pressed in her palm. Her eyes met his, and he raised his eyebrows, the slightest bit, before glancing at her hand. He dropped his lips to graze her knuckles.

“Lord Morley,” Fern croaked, dipping into a quick curtsy and dropping her hand into her skirt pockets. Squeezing gently, she felt the give of folded paper under her palm.

“I hope you’ll forgive my rudeness in dropping by unannounced,” Lord Morley said as he sat on the brocade settee Rose had vacated, propping one ankle on his knee and leaning back, spreading his arms wide. “I heard a lovely rumor that you, Miss Rose, are to be engaged to my dear friend Mr. Carroway.”

Rose’s face lit up, and she sat in the matching chair opposite him. “Indeed, although he has not asked my father yet.”

“Would it be possible to get a tea tray? I’m afraid I’m rather parched after the ride.”

“Of course,” Rose replied pleasantly. “I’ll ring—”

“Allow me!” Fern interjected, jumping to her feet. “I am hoping Cook will make me a chocolate, and I enjoy helping her.”

“But Fern—” Rose stared at her sister with panicked eyes, but Fern ignored her distress.

“I’ll return in a moment!” she called as she darted out the door and down the hallway toward the kitchen. The note burned a hole in her pocket and she withdrew it the moment

she reached the secluded alcove outside the servants' entrance to the kitchens.

The handwriting was unfamiliar, but she instantly recognized the prose.

I was devastated to hear Sylvester canceled the meeting. It is disgraceful he will not look at your work, and I will speak to him further about the value of your contributions. I want to see you again. I am a doctor now, but it seems hollow after what has happened to you. Will you meet me again? Please send word with Henry. He penned this letter to avoid Rose recognizing my hand.

Fern leaned against the wall and slowly collapsed onto the stone floor. She felt a thrill knowing for certain Alex had earned his degree, and a bolt of satisfaction knowing he was indignant on her behalf.

But she could not face him, not with the sting of Sylvester's rejection fresh in her mind. Speaking to him would not give her another chance to attend Oxford, it would only make it harder to see him ask for Rose's hand. They could never be together, not the way she wanted. Avoiding him was the only way to save her heart.

She turned the paper over and withdrew a pencil from her pockets and scrawled a brief response.

I cannot see you, it will be too difficult. I—

“Fern?” Crumpling the paper in her hand and shoving it in her pocket, Fern looked up to see her mother walking towards her, concern creasing her brow. “Darling, why are you out here?”

“Oh,” Fern blustered as she got to her feet. “I—I wanted to see if Cook would make me chocolate, since Lord Morley asked for tea, and—”

She stiffened. “You know Lord Morley? *Rose* knows Lord Morley?”

Fern swallowed, attempting to dislodge the lump in her throat. “Do you know him, Mama?”

Her mother pursed her lips. “Only by reputation.”

Fern exhaled slowly. “He is a friend of Mr. Carroway. I suppose he wanted to speak more with *Rose*, get to know her better before they marry.” Simply saying Alex’s name was becoming difficult.

Lady Redborne took Fern’s hand in hers. “Come with me, my dear.” Wordlessly, she led her youngest daughter into the music room and closed the door behind her. Fern sat by her side, her spine stiff.

“I cannot imagine how difficult this must be for you.”

Fern’s stomach dropped. Did her mother know what happened with Sylvester, or how she felt about Alex? “What do you mean?”

Lady Redborne smoothed her daughter’s hair from her forehead and tucked it behind her ear. “You’ve been...troubled

recently. Not yourself.” Her mother sighed. “It’s always difficult to read your emotions, but it’s been clear even to me.”

Fern dropped her gaze as her cheeks heated. When would she stop making things more difficult for the people she loved?

“It must be hard for you,” she continued, “seeing Rose fall in love and become engaged. I remember when my older sister married. I was terribly jealous. I was still so young, barely fifteen, but seeing my sister as the center of attention, not just from an adoring suitor but from everyone else in the family. Well,” she said with a wry smile, “I did not handle it terribly well, I must admit.”

“What happened?” Her posture began to relax. Fern could not recall the last time her mother had spoken to her at all without being scolded.

Her mother chuckled. “Oh, I was dreadful. I hid her gloves, stole letters from her betrothed. Once I spied on them kissing and told our father about it. He was livid!”

Fern couldn’t help her smile. “Did she ever forgive you?”

“Of course,” she replied, touching Fern’s cheek gently with her palm. “The love sisters share is different from what exists between a man and woman. Rose may fall in love with Mr. Carroway, but she will always love you first, and you her. It is a bond that cannot be broken. It can be strained and tested, but will never break.”

“But what if—” Fern stopped, attempting to calm her racing heart before speaking again. “What if I were to do something dreadful, something selfish.”

“Rose loves you,” her mother said, then paused, studying her wedding band for a moment before looking back at her youngest daughter. “Fern, I know I have been hard on you, perhaps too much so.” Her mother’s eyes glistened. “You were always a challenge, not because you meant to be but because you were always so much *more* than the other girls.”

“How so?” Fern said, her voice trembling.

“You experience the world more intensely than other people. The sounds are louder, the air is fresher, the sun is brighter. And you expect more from the people around you because of it. And while I have called you difficult, I fear I missed so much of the beauty that is you, Fern. It’s what makes you special.”

A tear fell from her mother’s eye, and Fern felt as though her heart was being wrenched apart. How many times had she characterized her mother as overbearing, dismissed her as vapid, or unkind?

Her mother stared at her hands before speaking again. “I did not know how to raise a child like you, Fern. You are so much like your father, but when he wasn’t here...” Another tear spilled down her cheek. “I have treated you badly because of my inadequacy. But I always loved you. You have always been deserving of more than what I have given you.”

“Mama, that’s not true. I always knew you loved me.”

“But I did not show it as well as I should have.” Lady Redborne reached out and pulled her daughter into her arms. For the first time in as long as she could remember, Fern did not resist, dropping her head against her mother’s shoulder.

“You are truly exceptional, my beautiful girl,” she said, stroking Fern’s unruly hair. “And someday a man will discover you and see you and love you. He will not try to change you as I have, but will value you just as you are.” Her mother sat back, taking Fern’s cheeks in her palms.

“When you find someone who loves you, who makes you feel beautiful and brilliant, who becomes a better person when he is with you, then you will have found love. I found that love with your father, and I want nothing less for you.”

“But— but what if it is impossible? If he can’t love me forever?”

Lady Redborne’s head tilted as she considered her daughter. “Love is precious, and it is fleeting. If you find such love, you must do everything in your power to cherish it for as long as you have it, whether it is years or merely hours.”

Fern pulled her mother close again, letting her tears fall against the fine linen of her mother’s dress, and her mother held her daughter until she had no more tears to shed.



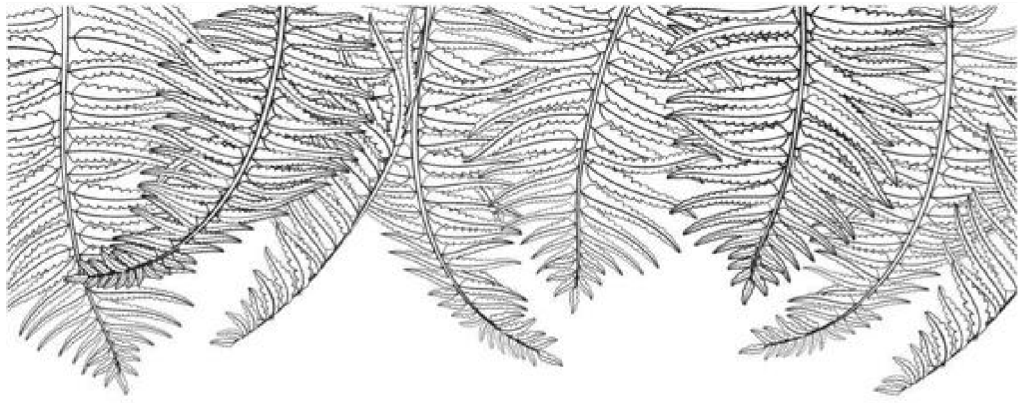
When Fern returned to the parlor to find Lord Henry and Rose deep in conversation about the upcoming London season,

she had made up her mind. And as the young lord kissed her hand in farewell, she pressed a folded paper into his hand and he nodded in understanding.

What she felt for Alex was love, and it was pure and so fragile. After seeing her at her lowest point, Alex had *stayed*, he had always stayed for her and had seen the good in her when no one else did. He was the only person who never gave up on her.

There was no point in hoping for a future in which they could be together. Too many obstacles stood in their way. But she could have *him*, could let herself feel everything she desired, all the safety and comfort and pleasure her body and heart craved.

Tonight Fern would follow her mother's advice. Love is indeed fleeting, and it is worth fighting for.



Chapter 27

THE MOON HUNG LOW over Boar's Hill, its bright light threatening to expose Alex on his midnight sojourn. Certain he'd be discovered, he dismounted long before reaching the main drive and walked his—well, Henry's—horse along the servants' path Fern had shown him previously. After tying the animal to a fence under the cover of a large birch, he took an exterior path, wild grass threatening to overtake the trodden path as his steps led him around the fragrant gardens until he reached a wide meadow. Glow worms glittered in the air and along the tall grass. It looked as though the world had turned upside down and the stars had descended from the heavens to illuminate his way.

In the distance, he could see the rotunda Fern had indicated in her note. Moonlight reflected off its marble dome like a beacon. A low light flickered inside the columns, welcoming and warm. When he reached the rotunda, Fern stood on the far side with her back to him.

“Fern,” he breathed, and when she turned his heart stopped. Her hair was loose, falling in waves around her face and down

her shoulders. She wore a simple silk dressing gown, cinched neatly with a row of buttons at her narrow waist, draping over her hands and pooling around her feet. The fabric was such a dark green it appeared black in the shadows but shimmered like emeralds in the dancing flame from a single lantern. Her eyes shone, multifaceted orbs of sage and amber illuminating her delicate face.

“You’re here.” She stepped towards him then stopped, as though afraid to continue.

“Of course,” he replied, stepping into the rotunda. Blankets and a pillow lay behind her, and he looked at her quizzically. “Are you—why—”

“Please let me speak for a moment,” Fern interrupted. She swallowed hard, then met his gaze directly. “I don’t want to talk about what happened with Sylvester.”

“You know he will reschedule—”

She held up her hand to stop him. “It won’t matter, Alex, and we both know it. Oxford will not be the place for me. And I can accept it.” He watched her eyes glisten for a moment, and she paused and blinked before continuing.

“When I told you I felt nothing for you, and we should forget what happened between us, it wasn’t the truth. I have cared for you from the moment we met. Forgetting you—us—” She paused again, gathering her breath. “Forgetting you would be impossible.”

Fern stepped forward until she was close enough to touch him, but her slim arms hung by her side. Alex had never seen her so composed. Normally her hands were in constant motion, her eyes flitting about and her speech rapid. But now she appeared confident and poised. Attraction and pride and something much more primal swam in his chest until his heart threatened to burst.

“My father will return tomorrow, and you will offer for Rose’s hand.” Alex began to interrupt but again she silenced him with a raised palm. “It is the right choice, the best choice for all of us. You have earned your future, and I will not ask you to throw it away. If I were in your shoes, I would do the same thing.”

“There has to be another way, Fern—”

“There isn’t,” Fern interjected. “And please, let me finish.” Alex closed his mouth, even as a lump built in his throat.

“Tomorrow you will belong to Rose, and you will make her happy. She will make you happy.”

You would make me happier. He wanted to scream the thought as soon as he had it, but Fern wouldn’t allow it. She needed the space to speak her mind, and he respected her too much to interrupt again.

“And once you are engaged, I will expect you to uphold your vow to Rose, cherish her and protect her for your entire life.” She looked at her feet, and her hands lifted to the buttons holding her robe in place at her waist, her voice shaking. “But I love you, Alex. I need you to know I will love you for the

rest of my life, but I will let you go if it means seeing my sister happy and you fulfilled.”

She looked wise beyond her years, as though she had tossed away the last vestiges of girlhood, leaving her in her truest state, a woman of wisdom and power, self-possessed and beautiful.

“I won’t stay in England after you marry Rose,” she said, her voice clear. “And I won’t marry either. There could never be someone else for me, and I’m content knowing that.”

Alex watched, his breath catching, as her fingers nimbly released the row of silk-covered buttons. “Everything I have wanted has been denied me, and I ask you not to deny me this.” She released her hands from the robe and pushed the billowing fabric off her shoulders until it fell into a sea of green silk on the marble around her feet. He gasped as he took in the sight of bare skin, luminous in the lantern light, like the marble surrounding them. “I do not regret meeting you, or falling in love with you, and I never will, even though you can never be mine. And I will not regret what happens tonight if you will have me.”

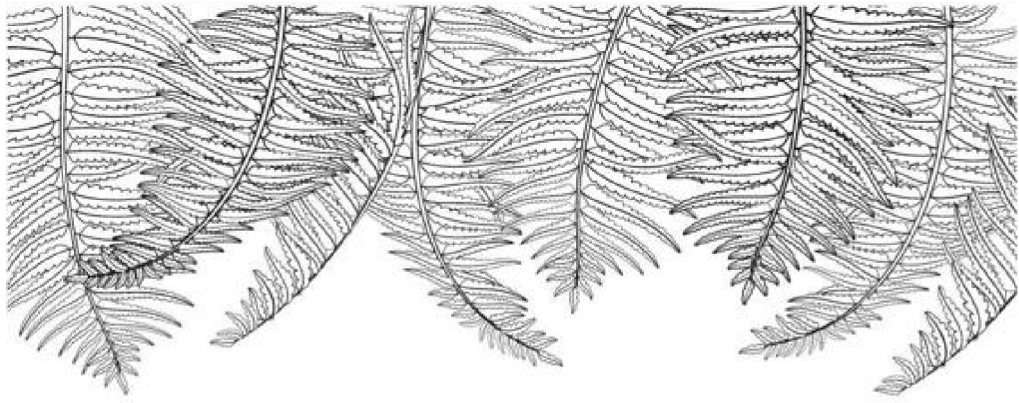
With those words, and the risk implied, insecurity flickered in her eyes, the first he had seen from her all night.

“I could never deny you anything, Fern,” he said, closing the distance between them and taking her hands in his. “But what about *your* future, your life after tonight? We can’t go back—”

“I am absolutely certain,” she said, squeezing his hands and bringing them to her waist. “This will be the one thing in my life I cherish for the remainder of my days. Please, Alex.”

Alex drew her in, surrounding her with his arms and feeling the heat from her body permeate through his clothing, into his bones. There wasn't even a choice for him to make, no debate to be had. He could never love another like he loved Fern, not Rose, not anyone. She may not be ready to hear it, but after tonight nothing would change his mind. “I can never forget you, Fern.”

Fern stood on her toes and kissed him, her lips brushing over his lightly, then deeper. “Then we will have a night to remember.”



Chapter 28

DESPITE THE CRISP AIR surrounding them, Fern's naked skin seemed to ignite under Alex's touch. The chill barely reached her. In fact, she worried she might burst into flames if she had been required to stay under her robe for a moment longer.

"Are you certain?" Alex repeated, his lips brushing against her earlobe and tracing around the curve of her ear.

"I am, Alex." She pulled back to look at him straight on. "I thought you knew better than to doubt me by now."

With a laugh, he captured her face in his hands and pulled her in close. Fern had scant experience with kissing, but this, *this* was unlike anything she read in novels or poetry. These were kisses that set her soul ablaze, stopping time and making the rest of the world fade into oblivion. Nothing in the world existed beyond his lips.

Except his hands. "Oh," Fern exhaled as Alex's palm swept over her bare breast, her nipple pulling into a tight bud in the chill air.

Alex held still. “Do you like this?”

“I’m deciding,” she replied, and he chuckled against her neck.

“Fern, there are times to be analytical and times when it is best to throw thinking out the window.” His lips danced across her collarbone, settling a kiss against the pulse at the base of her neck. “This may be the latter.”

She placed her hand over his and rocked forward, the increased friction of her breast on the calloused skin of his palm sending her nerves dancing into reckless abandon.

“I must think,” she said, her voice breathy. “If I don’t think, I won’t be able to remember.”

Alex dropped one arm low on her waist, his fingers settling into the curve of her lower back. He rocked his hips against her, eliciting a low moan from her throat. “If you can’t remember this, then I am doing a poor job of it.”

Fern’s head dropped back. She felt as though her bones had taken leave of her body along with her senses. “I want to be sure I’m keeping track of things.”

Further explanation was halted when Alex’s lips closed around her nipple, pulling it deep into his mouth, the delicious suction and slight scratch of his teeth on the sensitive flesh making her moan. She gasped and threw her hand to his head, unable to decide if she should push him away or hold him tight. She settled for gripping his hair as the wicked sensations tore through her.

“What do you need to keep track of?” he asked, lifting his mouth from her chest for long enough to gaze at her, one side of his mouth lifted in a sly smile.

She was momentarily flustered. “Well, what you’re doing. What I’m doing.”

Alex stood to full height and captured her lips with his once more. “You are intelligent enough to know something of what is expected.”

“Of course I understand the logistics,” she replied, as though she were being quizzed. “Although, some of the... specifics are still unclear and warrant further examination.”

His laughter rumbled in his chest below her hands. “Fern...”

“It’s true,” she said, pushing back and meeting his gaze with indignation. “I’ve certainly read descriptions in novels and seen depictions in artwork but it always seemed so acrobatic.”

“Humans have successfully been coupling for generations, without specific instruction,” he assured her, the corner of his mouth lifting. “I’m certain you will get along fine.”

Fern tilted her head as she considered him. “You’re not new to this, are you?”

His cheeks flushed in the flickering candlelight. He was so darling she wanted to hold him close and never release him. “I—well, that is, I’ve—” He looked away and rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m not a lothario but I’m not...*green*, either, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Good,” she replied, feeling strangely relieved. “Then you can teach me.”

“Teach you?” he whispered, almost reverently, as he stroked his knuckles across her cheek.

“I trust you,” she replied. *I have not earned your trust*, she thought as her heart gave an unpleasant twist. *But I trust you completely.*

“You’re shivering,” Alex said, pulling her close and wrapping his arms around her. “You must be freezing.”

She shook her head, but Alex pulled her closer. Dropping his coat from his shoulders, Alex draped it around her and led her to the blankets she had spread across the marble surface. “You planned this with some detail,” he remarked, his eyes shining with amusement.

“I do not like to leave much to chance,” she said, feeling uncertain of herself. Did he think less of her because of her wanton intentions?

If he did, his eyes showed no sign of it. Freed of his jacket, Alex made quick work of the buttons on his waistcoat and shirt, dropping his braces and removing his shirt before balling the clothing up and laying it on the blanket. He then stood beside her as he took her hands. “I meant it every time I said you were exceptional, remarkable, and brilliant. You are so much more, just—” He hesitated for a moment, his blue eyes flickering. “I lo—”

“Stop,” Fern blurted, pressing her fingers to his lips. “Don’t say it, I can’t bear it.”

“But I mean it, Fern, I—”

“Show me,” she whispered, taking his hands and putting them on her hips, then wrapping her arms around his neck. “Please show me.”

Fern sensed the moment he came undone, when the tethers holding him back, keeping him stoic and responsible for so long, broke loose. She knew, when he pulled her hips flush against his, moaning as he shifted against her, that the rigid length beneath his trousers indicated his arousal. She wasn’t aware, however, of the effect such contact would have on her, how heat pooled between her legs and pleasure spiraled and coiled tight within her. How some primal force ached and felt empty, longing for something she could not name but vitally craved.

Alex eased her back onto the blanket. The scratch of the flannel against her bare skin wrenched her from the moment as she stiffened and wrinkled her nose. He hesitated, then lifted her forward and spread his soft linen shirt beneath her back. “I thought this would be more comfortable,” he murmured against the skin of her shoulder as he laid himself down beside her.

This simple act shattered her will, demonstrating far more powerfully than with words that he loved her, *loved* her, in exactly the way her mother had described. Not in spite of her differences, but because of them. There was no going back

after this, no matter what their bodies shared. Fern was certain she would never love again after Alex, and the thought did not sadden her but filled her with an overwhelming thrill. To experience love, so pure and rare, one most people on earth would only glimpse. She would have one night of the greatest joy imaginable.

Alex's lips seared a path across her collarbone and trailed over the curve of her breast and ribs, then drifted over the soft skin of her belly. Fern's hips arched towards his fingers as they traced along her hip, across her thigh, and settled in the space between her legs.

She gasped as his finger slid along her crease and he paused, waiting for her to respond. "Do you like this?" he asked again, meeting her gaze over the heaving swell of her breasts.

Fern could only nod, robbed of speech by the riotous sensations pouring from one little finger. How could it be possible for every nerve in her body to be focused on those few inches of skin? He continued to explore her, stroking and soothing her slick heat, even as she felt like she may burst at any moment. She marveled at his touch, the power it held to completely undo her and leave her craving more. The moment she built up the courage to ask for it, he pulled his touch away. Her eyes popped open as she began to protest, only to feel his lips caressing the space his fingers had vacated.

"Alex!" she hissed, unsure if she was protesting or praising his actions. Apparently understanding her meaning, he gently

lapped his tongue over her sensitive flesh, the scratch of his stubble abrading her upper thighs while he kissed and sucked her intimately. She lost all control, all sense of reason as the ache inside her built, twisting and flexing until she was desperate, unable to control the wanting she felt even though she lacked the words to describe it.

Just as she feared she might perish from this overwhelming ache, he pressed his tongue deep into her. She unraveled as she arched her back, her guttural cry echoing in the rotunda, bouncing like the flickers of light off the marble columns, her body pulsing with indescribable ecstasy.

Fern was only partially aware of Alex back at her side, holding her close to his chest as she trembled, the aftermath of her climax still ricocheting through her body. Alex stroked his warm hand over the chilled flesh of her back, making her shiver. He kissed her softly across her nose and temple and brushed his lips over her eyelids until they fluttered open.

She stared at him in wonder and he treated her with a brilliant, if somewhat self-satisfied, smile. "I'm beginning to understand why you recommended I think less," Fern said, brushing a soft kiss across his lips.

"I doubt anyone has ever asked you to think *more*," he replied.

She laughed as she burrowed her face against his chest, savoring the feel of the coarse hairs on her cheeks. Alex touched his fingers to her chin, lifting her mouth back to his as he kissed her with renewed intensity.

The indescribable ache returned, clawing at her even more intensely than before, although now Fern had an idea of how to soothe it. She also knew Alex. He would let her control every moment of the evening, ensuring she was satisfied even if it left him wanting. *He deserves more.*

Unpracticed and fumbling, Fern brought her hands down his chest to his trousers and popped open the top button. His hand caught hers before she could go any further. “I need to know,” he gasped. “I need to know you are absolutely certain you want to do this. Because I—” He released a low laugh and pressed his forehead against hers. “I have wanted this for longer than I’m proud to admit, and I will stop whenever you wish, but—”

“I don’t want to stop.” Fern did not expect to hear such conviction in her voice, nor did she anticipate feeling it so deeply in her soul. This would be her farewell to Alex. After tonight he would be gone, and she would have to find her own way. Her heart clenched, and she fought the sob threatening to tear from her throat.

“Where did you go just now?” Alex watched her closely, as though he could read her thoughts.

She pressed her lips to his. “Nowhere,” she said. “I’m right here with you.” Their kiss deepened as she released one button after the other.

A low, feral grunt escaped Alex’s throat when she finished her work, pressing his hips forward against her hand. Fern’s breath caught in her throat at the feel of his length, hot and

heavy in her palm. She had of course read descriptions of a man's arousal, but her visualizations had been heavily influenced by classical sculpture which was, she had now learned, inadequate. The reality was somewhat more intimidating.

"Fern." She jumped at his voice, despite the soothing tone, and met his cautious gaze. He must have sensed her apprehension because he began to pull away from her.

"No, don't," she insisted. "I was surprised—"

"I need you to trust me to take care of you," Alex said, the plea in his voice enough to make her heart beat even faster. "I will always take care of you, for all my life."

Fern knew it was a lie and was certain Alex knew it too. They would never have each other, would never be the person the other could depend on for eternity. But for that night, in the magical microcosm they had created in the rotunda, it was the truth. Their lives together would begin and end in the span of a few hours, while the world slept, unaware of how her entire universe had changed. "I know," she whispered, unsure if she voiced it aloud or let her hands tell him.

Because she had reached for his waist, helping him shrug his trousers and drawers down past his knees and off completely. Rolling to her back, Fern welcomed his weight as he shifted over her, settling between her thighs as he kissed her, leaving her delirious and wanting. The heat of his arousal pressed against her opening, prodding where his lips and tongue had been only moments before.

“My love,” he voiced, and the words nearly shattered her on the spot. “This may hurt. I haven’t been someone’s first before, but my understanding is—”

“I know.” Fern didn’t know. She had no idea, in fact, other than what her oldest sisters had said about the marriage bed, describing it as tolerable and somewhat uncomfortable but over with soon enough. Nothing about what she experienced with Alex could be described as merely tolerable, and the agony in his eyes at causing her pain nearly made her weep. “I trust you.”

In one slow movement, he edged into her, rocking himself into her flesh. His breath was harsh against her neck. “Breathe, darling, I’m here,” Alex murmured, and her body released a modicum of tension until he reached resistance, her body resisting his entry. His jaw clenched, neck straining as he battled to hold still.

Fern knew he wouldn’t move, he could never bring himself to hurt her. In a flash she considered ending things there, stopping him before he bound himself to her with this act, knowing she would eventually cause him far worse pain than she was about to endure.

Fern held his hips tightly and bucked against him.

He pushed deep inside her as a bite of pain rattled her body. Alex moaned, dropping his head into the space between her shoulder and neck as tears pricked her eyes.

“I’m so sorry,” he breathed, his voice catching. “Are you hurt?”

She shook her head. “It’s nothing, it—it’s uncomfortable but already fading.”

Alex kissed her lips, her nose, her temple, as he began to move inside her. A new sensation overwhelmed her, a counterbalance to the ache she had felt, a remarkable fullness stretching and soothing her simultaneously.

Within moments Fern had no control. Her mind abandoned her, leaving her a writhing mass of raw nerves, responding only to Alex’s touch, his lips and hands and body pressing on hers, possessing her in an earthy, primal fashion. She met him stroke for stroke, the stretching and pain giving way to an incredible coiling tension so much stronger than what she felt before, powerful enough to pull her into an abyss of her own desire.

Fern clutched his shoulders as they moved together, Alex murmuring words of affection and praise in her ear. She had always imagined such congress would be awkward, but nothing felt as natural, as fluid and beautiful as this act. It was as though a higher power designed them simply to satisfy the needs of the other.

The intensity of Alex’s movements increased, and she sensed herself tightening until she felt him all the way to her fingertips. He slipped his hand between them, reaching the place where their bodies were joined. His thumb began to strum at the heart of her arousal and heat built more quickly, rocketing her toward the pinnacle.

He lifted his head, a curl stuck to his forehead as he captured her gaze. "I love you." His words tore through her, destroying what little semblance of control she possessed. "I will always love you."

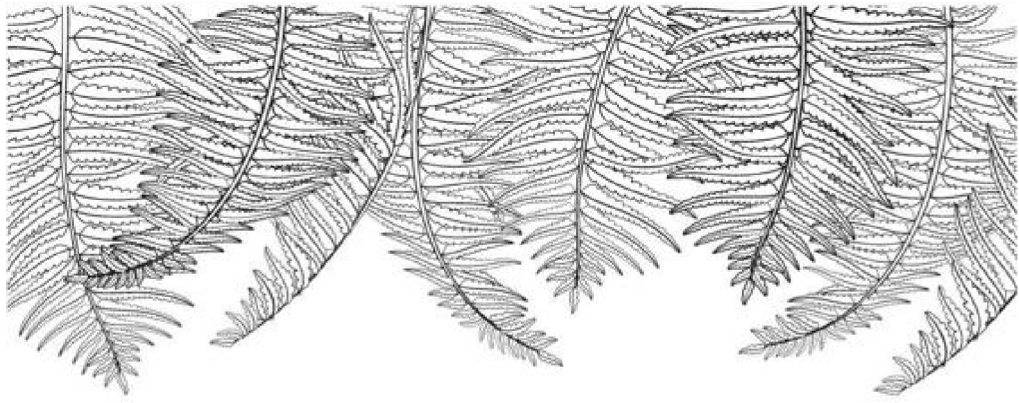
Fern's cries echoed in the night, shattering over the meadow like scattered starlight as she quaked and spasmed, her words lost to the power of her release. Alex moaned in response and quickly withdrew as his body surrendered to climax, tensing and pulsing onto her stomach before he collapsed against her heaving form.

It was some time before a cool breeze swept over them, bringing a cruel reminder of the outside world into their idyllic escape. Withdrawing a handkerchief from his jacket, he cleaned her skin tenderly before drawing a blanket over them both, pulling Fern into the cocoon of his arms.

"I meant what I said," he murmured against her hair as she tucked her head under his chin, grateful he could not see the pain etched on her face. "I know you don't want to hear it, but it's the truth."

The truth. What a simple, horrible, bloody worthless concept. What a mess she had wrought. "I will not regret tonight." Her words were caught in another breeze, stronger this time. Fern wondered idly if a spring storm would descend upon them.

"I regret nothing about knowing you," Alex replied, drawing her even closer before settling into sleep.



Chapter 29

WITHOUT OPENING HIS EYES, Alex sensed dawn's arrival in the breeze nipping his ear, the subtle dampness of dew drops scattered like stars across the flannel wrapped around him. His back and neck ached from sleeping on the hard floor, but he made no move to change his position. He felt only the glow of warmth inside the nest of their arms as he held Fern's back to his chest, his body wrapped around hers. He inhaled her earthy scent, so remarkably feminine and sensual his breath caught.

He wanted to freeze the moment, to stop time entirely so he never had to release her. He willed away the thoughts of what would happen when they left the rotunda and faced the consequences of their actions.

Despite what Fern had said the night before, he could not live with only a single night in her arms. He wanted forever. When her father returned, Alex would ask for Fern's hand instead. He did not anticipate a simple conversation, but Alex considered himself a gentleman and, after what took place last

night, would insist upon their union. Redborne would certainly be reasonable when he heard the circumstances.

It was too much to expect there would be no backlash. Alex would not receive a recommendation to Strathmore; he could be blacklisted from government posts forever if the viscount so desired. He needed to find a new path, a new future for himself. But Fern would be a part of it, and having her was more than enough.

His heart tightened at the thought of telling Rose. She would understandably be heartbroken, and her relationship with Fern would suffer for their actions. Alex understood her reluctance to hurt her sister but saw no other option. He would see her through, always by her side.

His palm drifted over the curve of her hip and waist and settled low on her belly. With a soft moan of contentment, Fern arched her back in a stretch then settled her slim form flush against him. “Good morning,” Alex murmured against her temple.

“It’s not morning yet,” she replied, burying her head under the blanket. “I’m not ready to leave.”

“Then don’t.” He placed one hand on the curve of her breast and was rewarded as her nipple tightened against his palm, and he stroked and caressed her until she was writhing in his arms.

The motion of her hips made his already stiff cock pulse with awareness. His hand left her breast and slipped down between her legs, sliding easily through the slick folds. Alex moaned aloud discovering she was damp and ready for him,

then nudged his knee between hers, opening her body to his exploration.

Her breath came in gasps and spurts until she clapped her hand over his, guiding his fingers toward her entrance. He delved one digit into her wet heat and she moaned in response.

“Have you ever touched yourself like this?” he asked, pressing kisses along her neck.

Fern paused before answering. “I have but—it’s never felt quite so good.”

Alex lifted his hand and placed it above hers, guiding her into position, stroking her finger over the tight bud of nerves. “That’s it,” he whispered. “How does it feel?”

“It’s—I—” Her breath escaped in a moan.

“I’ve left you without words,” he mumbled against her temple with a grin. “That’s quite an accomplishment.”

“I have words,” she stammered in return. “I can’t—can’t seem to find them right now.”

He smiled as he withdrew his hand from hers before sliding his finger back inside her. Fern gasped, then rocked her hips forward, driving him deeper. Alex responded to her need, sliding a second finger into her tight opening, feeling the flesh grip him as her tension built. “Please,” she hissed, her head falling back against his, her hand moving as quickly as his as she sought her pleasure.

Fern cried out as her body shuddered, convulsing around his fingers. He continued to stroke and caress her as waves of

pleasure coursed through her body. Alex withdrew, embracing her, kissing her hair and shoulders as she came down to earth. She turned in his arms until she faced him, her cheeks flushed and eyes bright. She looked so beautiful and joyous he couldn't resist kissing her lips, praying he would be the man who could make her feel this way for all of eternity.

Her brow furrowed as she ran her hands over his chest to stroke his cock. Alex uttered a low oath and clenched his teeth. "Fern..." he hissed, losing his ability to speak at her touch.

"It must be the same for you," she said, leaning back and pushing the blankets aside to examine him more closely. "Should I touch you as well?"

Dear God in Heaven. "It's a bit different," he muttered, desperately trying to maintain control as she wrapped her slender fingers around his shaft. "I have a more of a...hard limit."

Her eyes darted to his as she stroked firmly, her eyes shining with determination. Alex saw stars. He wrapped his palm around her hand to still her. "My sweet, you're asking a lot of me. I don't want to lose myself with you."

Fern released him, nudging his shoulders until he rolled to his back. She threw one knee overtop him to straddle his thighs, watching him curiously. "It seems unfair, doesn't it?"

He held her hips, trying not to grip too tightly as she wrapped her fingers around him once more. "Many things in life are unfair," he replied, unable to think of anything more

profound to say as all of his blood rushed to his throbbing cock.

Considering her position with her brow furrowed, Fern shifted experimentally. “Last night, we were like this, only reversed,” she observed. “If we were to...it should be possible...”

“Fern,” he said, raising one eyebrow, suddenly wary. “What are you thinking?”

She did not respond, but lifted on her knees and positioned herself over his erection. “Will you help me?”

Blinking back disbelief, Alex held his arousal in place as she lowered herself, inch by glorious inch, onto him. He clenched his teeth and threw his head back, releasing a growl from deep in his chest. When he opened his eyes, he saw her stunned expression, her eyes dark and hooded with desire, her mouth opened, lips flushed and swollen. She gripped him internally, surrounding him with velvety heat until she rested on him, his cock fully seated.

Fern’s amazed gaze met his, then a slow smile spread over her lips. “We fit perfectly,” she remarked, as though making a scientific observation.

“We do,” he said, shifting his position and causing her eyelids to flutter. “We seem to be perfectly suited.”

Fern responded to his movement with her own, adjusting and writhing overtop him until she found a rhythm. Alex held

firm, letting her discover what satisfied her, eager to watch her come apart with pleasure.

Within moments she was riding him. Alex met her movements with deep thrusts, feeling the intense pressure building in the base of his spine. Gritting his teeth, he strained for control, wanting to stretch the moment for as long as possible.

He took her hand and moved it between them, touching the place where they were joined. "Perfect," he whispered as he urged her to stroke her center of nerves, then held her hips and guided her into rhythm.

Fern threw her head back with abandon. Alex marveled at the bounce of her breasts, the deep pink of her taut nipples, her flushed cheeks and swollen lips, her hair wild and loose. "Perfect," he repeated as his pleasure raced towards its peak.

Fern fell forward with a gasp, gripping his shoulders and driving her hips onto him, taking him as deep as possible as she crumbled around him. He lifted her hips and withdrew quickly, thrusting once, twice more, into his fist before his climax overtook him, leaving him shattered and broken, heaving for breath as she collapsed onto his chest.

The first light of dawn broke through the lavender haze, spreading its soft orange and pink fingers over the pair as they struggled to regain their composure. Swifts and swallows called to each other from the trees surrounding them as the meadow came to life.

After cleaning them both with the now-ruined handkerchief, Alex rolled and covered Fern again, not wanting to relinquish his hold on her. “We can’t stay here much longer,” Fern whispered, breaking the golden silence of the moment. “We’ll be seen.”

Wordlessly Alex helped her to her feet, retrieving her robe before donning his drawers and trousers. He waited until they were both fully dressed and gathered the blankets before he spoke again. “Send word as soon as your father returns and I will call on him immediately.”

Fern stiffened, then nodded as she turned away. “Of course,” she said, her voice low. “You’ll forgive me if I’m not there when you call.”

Alex tilted his head in confusion. “Why wouldn’t you be there?”

She turned swiftly, her eyes glistening. “Don’t be cruel, Alex. Don’t make me watch while you—” She stopped and shook her head with vigor.

“You can’t possibly think I will continue with your sister after this? I want to be with you, Fern!”

“You can’t, it won’t work!” Her fists clenched at her side. “We were meant for one night, it’s too complicated now.”

“It’s not enough reason to go through with a charade,” Alex replied, straining to keep his tone even. “I can’t be with Rose, not anymore. I want *you*, no one else will ever be enough.”

“Then what will happen to your recommendation?” Fern retorted. “Your dream, your future, you’ll lose it all.”

“Dreams change,” he said, taking her hands. “I can’t imagine my future without you.”

Fern shuddered, and he drew her close, wishing he could remove all anxiety from her life, protect her from everything causing her harm. “I’m not certain I can do this.”

“Let me, then,” Alex said, stroking her hair and bringing her to arm’s length so he could look at her directly. “Let me speak with your father. I’ll make it right, I swear.”

She pressed her lips together into a thin line. “He should be back today, after luncheon.”

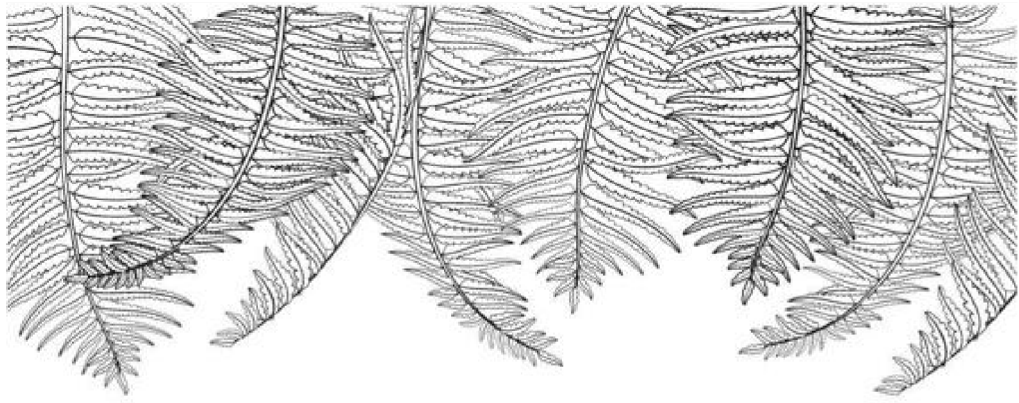
“You can expect me then.” Leaning forward, Alex pressed his lips to her forehead and pulled her into an embrace. “I’ll talk to your father, and we can tell Rose together.” He stroked his hand up and down her back. “I will be by your side the entire time. They love you, and I love you. We will get through this.”

Fern trembled in his arms. “I’m terrified, Alex.”

“I know,” he replied. “But we have each other now.”

Several moments and many slow kisses later, he watched Fern walk swiftly along the border of the field toward the gardens of Boar’s Hill. Alex mounted and rode in the other direction until reaching the road, where he paused to catch his breath. How had he allowed his plans to go so far off track? Weeks ago, his life was narrow and focused, his dreams within

reach. And then Fern stepped into the library, into his life, and made him doubt everything he held dear. But what value would prominence or wealth be if he did not have Fern to share it with?



Chapter 30

FERN OFTEN WONDERED IF, prior to a cataclysmic event in history, there was a premonition of the oncoming disaster. Did the residents of Pompeii set their gaze on Mount Vesuvius for a beat longer on such a fateful day? Did the people of Antioch tread more carefully, as though they knew the ground would soon break apart beneath them? Or had the crisis taken them unawares, sweeping them towards the inevitable destruction without seeing it coming?

When Fern slipped through the servants' entrance to Boar's Hill, Mrs. Boyd stood in the kitchen. The housekeeper eyed her tangled hair and mud-stained dressing gown before raising a knowing eyebrow. Fern blushed under the critical glare.

"Miss Fern," Mrs. Boyd said, her voice sharp, "Are you all right?"

She nodded so quickly her vision blurred. "Yes, I'm—I just need—" she stammered, then stopped herself. "Did anyone notice my absence?"

Mrs. Boyd looked at her through narrowed eyes. "No, they did not."

Sometimes it is helpful to be invisible.

“Mairi,” the older woman called to the young maid who had entered the kitchen. “Run a bath for Miss Fern. She will need clean clothes as well.”

Fern scrubbed herself with fervor, silently mourning as the lingering scents of Alex washed away from her skin, leaving only a distinct soreness between her legs along with a smear of blood.

It felt like a premonition, watching the red fade into pink in the soapy water. But unlike the people of Pompeii or Antioch, Fern knew disaster was imminent and she would not survive intact. Her stomach knotted, her head pounding. She wished to go back in time and undo everything she had done to lead her to this moment.

The stupefying effects of their passion having drained away like the bath water, Fern saw her situation clearly. She had to make a choice—her sister or Alex. The person who was her constant, her touchstone throughout life, or the person who accepted her completely and made her feel worthy of love.

Choosing a life with Alex would mean giving up her father and mother as well. But the life she had before meeting him held no promise, no chance of happiness. Alex wouldn't marry Rose, no matter what Fern said or did. He was too honorable a man to harbor the feelings he held for Fern and still marry her sister, no matter what consequences he would face.

She dressed slowly, combing the tangles from her hair before braiding it tightly. The hours passed slowly as if they

too dreaded what was coming. By the time the sun crested over the tree line, Fern was a ball of nerves. She sat with a huff in front of her mirror and stared at her reflection. Her lips were flush from his kisses and dark shadows fell below her eyes, evidence of a night with little rest. She was pale and drawn, as though the impossible decision had already drained her vitality.

“You’re being maudlin,” she said out loud, hoping she could bolster her spirits. “Rose will understand, we could not help it.”

“Could not help what?” Fern jumped as Rose entered her room and plopped onto the bench beside her. She lifted Fern’s ivory-handled brush and began pulling it through her chestnut locks as she admired her reflection. “Were you talking to yourself again?”

Fern swallowed, finding it difficult to breathe. “I was,” she admitted.

“It’s nearly eleven, I hope Papa isn’t much longer,” Rose said, bumping her shoulder against her sister. “Alex will call soon and we can finally put this waiting behind us.” She put the brush on her lap and sighed dreamily. “I can’t wait to be married, start my real life.”

“This life isn’t real?”

Even a scowl couldn’t mar Rose’s beautiful face. “You know what I mean. As long as we live here we will be treated as children. Mama barely lets me out the door without reminding me of my manners, and Papa thinks we’re still little

girls playing with dolls. And I can't imagine how it will be for you."

Fern dropped her gaze to her lap and bit her lip.

"Will you please consider my offer to live with us after we marry, at least until you find someone of your own?" Rose asked.

Fern winced and then stood. "I think it would be a dreadful idea."

Rose turned so her back was to the mirror and faced her sister, her mouth turned down. "I had forgotten about your... affection for him. I do hope it has passed though, it would make things terribly uncomfortable when we become engaged."

"Rose," Fern choked out. "Last night something happened —"

"Excuse me, ladies," came Salisbury's low voice. "Mr. Alexander Carroway is here."

Rose looked at Fern with a wide grin then a gasp as she put her hands to her head. "My hair is still down!"

Fern hurried towards the door, heading off her sister. "Let me greet him, take a moment to gather yourself."

Rose's delicate face glowed, and Fern's heart cracked in two. "Thank you, Fern. I don't know what I would do without you."

Fern paused on each step during her descent, her fingernails digging into the wooden banister as she willed her trembling knees to hold. Alex waited in the drawing room, dressed simply in a crisp tweed suit. His entire face lit up when she entered the room.

What would it be like to have someone show delight in her presence? To anticipate her arrival with glee instead of dread?

Fern looked past him to the portrait hanging above the fireplace. She had studied it during her catalog of artwork the previous day. Her family, captured when she and Rose had just turned twelve, her seated mother flanked by her husband and surrounded by daughters. Fern's eye immediately went to her sister. Rose glowed with vitality, her beauty on display in a series of brush strokes. Fern stood by her side, slightly in her shadow, her lips flat and eyes wide. Fern remembered the day clearly, how frustrated she had been by hours of sitting still, how her mother and father lost patience. But Rose never did. She never lost patience and held her hand through the entire sitting.

I can't betray her like this.

"You're early," she managed to gasp. "My father hasn't returned yet."

Alex closed the gap between them in three large strides, waiting until Salisbury left before taking her hand and pulling her to the far side of the room, kissing her soundly. "I couldn't wait," he whispered against her lips. "I needed to talk to you, to see you again."

For a moment the world fell away and she was back in the rotunda, back where time did not exist, where there were no sisters or fathers or professors, no limits and no rules. Where they could love each other without worrying about the consequences of their actions.

She broke the kiss. There was no use in dwelling on impossible dreams.

“I can’t do this,” she said, watching his face fall.

“What? What changed your mind?”

“Rose will be down in a moment, and she fully believes you will propose. If we tell her the truth, I’ll destroy my family. Rose doesn’t deserve this. The truth is—” Her voice caught in her throat. She cleared it and tried again. “I should have told you, but at the party—”

“Fern, don’t do this,” Alex interrupted, pulling her close and stroking her back. “I know this will be difficult, but I will stand with you through it all. We both made mistakes. I should have told Rose as soon as I started having feelings for you.”

“I lied to Rose,” she said through unshed tears. “I never told her about helping you court her.”

He hesitated before responding. “You had no ill intentions.”

“But I did,” she said, pushing against his chest so she could see his eyes, the beautiful blue pools filled with love and adoration. He wouldn’t look at her so fondly when he knew the truth. “I wanted you to help me get into Oxford and I—I manipulated you, and I used your feelings for Rose—”

“You didn’t. I truly thought I wanted to be with Rose, but she wasn’t the right person for me. *You* are the one for me, and nothing can change how I feel. This will hurt, but we will get through it together.”

“Alex, you’re here!” Alex and Fern jumped apart as Rose swept into the room, beaming. “Why don’t you sit?”

“I’m afraid I won’t be long. Miss Rose,” Alex started, staying on his feet as he shifted. He drew a deep breath and met her eyes. “I’m sorry, but I won’t be asking your father for your hand today.”

Rose’s expression darkened as her gaze darted between her sister and the man she hoped to marry. “What—what do you mean?”

Alex looked to Fern. Bile rose in her throat as she anticipated the pain she was about to cause. Alex’s voice was low when he spoke again. “You’ve been nothing but kind and gracious to me, and I certainly never intended to hurt you, but marrying you would be wrong.”

Stars swam in front of Fern’s eyes. She bobbed on her feet for a moment before reaching out to grab Alex’s arm. “Alex, wait—”

“I have feelings for Fern,” Alex said, the words tumbling out. “Romantic feelings. I love her. I’m so sorry, Rose.”

“For Fern?” Rose gasped, her voice barely a whisper. “I—I don’t understand. Fern?”

“We didn’t plan on it,” Alex said carefully. “We never meant to hurt you—”

“Stop,” Rose hissed. She sat down hard on the settee, as though her legs had given out before fixing her twin with a hard stare. “Fern, please. Tell me this isn’t true.” Fern could hear the desperation in Rose’s voice, for something to explain what she had just heard.

Fern’s tears fell unencumbered down her cheeks. “I’m so sorry, Rose.”

Rose shook her head, as though she were waking herself from a bad dream. “This isn’t real, it can’t be.” Her green eyes shot between Alex and Fern. “Is this some terrible joke? You can’t be serious.”

“I’m in love with Fern,” Alex said, taking Fern’s hand in his. “I’m so sorry to hurt you like this.”

Dozens of emotions passed over her twin’s features before her gaze became intense, her eyes unblinking. “All those times,” she said, slowly standing from the settee, her fists clenched at her sides and cheeks flushed as she stared at Fern. “All those times we talked about Alex, you never once said you and he...”

She could see Alex wince at her side, but she couldn’t look at him, nor at Rose. She dropped her gaze to the ground, releasing Alex’s hand and wrapping her arms around her chest.

“You went behind my back, knowing how I felt about him.” Rose’s words were crisp and sharp, and Fern rounded her

shoulders, stepping back from the verbal assault. “How could you do this to me? To *me*, of all people—”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you, I truly didn’t—“ Fern cried.

“You were jealous.” Rose’s words struck Fern like knives. “You were jealous I was going to be married, and you set out to ruin everything for me.”

“Rose, please stop.” Alex stepped between Fern and her sister. “Fern did not want to deceive you, she has been devastated by this.”

Rose ignored him, focusing her venom on Fern. “You’ve always been selfish, wanting the world to bend around your requirements, then dismissing us as shallow and stupid when you don’t fit in.” Rose advanced on her, pointing one delicate finger towards her chest. “I defended you, I stood by you, and wanted nothing but happiness for you, but this?” A single tear fell from Rose’s lashes. “This is unforgivable!”

Fern nodded, a nearly imperceptible bob of her chin, each cut of Rose’s words tearing into her and bleeding her slowly. She was right. Fern had destroyed her sister’s happiness so she could have something she wanted. She was selfish and horrible.

Rose’s mouth twisted as she stared at Alex with daggers in her eyes. “Did you know she told me she had no feelings for you? She said you and I should be together, and I was a better fit for you. She said you would make *me* happy. Did she tell you all that?”

Alex shook his head slightly, brows furrowed. “I don’t understand,” he said, looking to Fern for clarification. “What is she talking about? When did you say those things?”

Fern closed her eyes and squeezed them shut, as though she could wish away this horrible moment and stop the inevitable from happening.

“Wait.” Rose looked between them, her expression incredulous. “You didn’t tell him about the ball?” Her voice was tight and shrill as she spat out the words, making Fern’s entire body tremble. “How it was *you* he danced with and kissed that night?”

Alex turned his gaze to Fern, his lips parted. “What does she mean?” Alex asked, his shoulders tense. “I never saw you at the ball.”

“She didn’t tell you?” Rose gasped, then released a mirthless laugh. “Of course she wouldn’t. And you said she wasn’t deceptive. She’s been lying to you from the start!” Rose gave him a pitying gaze. “You never even saw me at the ball. Fern was pretending to be me. Then when you came to call she panicked and insisted I play along. It was all a game for her.”

“That can’t be true,” Alex muttered, his voice low and intense, like a rumble of thunder in the distance. He stared at her, his expression pleading. “You would have told me. Please tell me this isn’t true.”

A low laugh rumbled in Rose’s throat. “For a smart man, you aren’t very bright. Did you truly not see it?”

Fern felt the earth moving beneath her, as though heaven and hell had exchanged places and she tumbled into oblivion between them.

“It’s—“ Fern gasped, her lungs having stopped functioning altogether. “I didn’t mean for you to find out like this—”

Rose looked at her sister with disgust, her eyes rimmed red. “Well, I will leave you both to it,” she said, each word trembling with barely controlled emotions. “Liars, both of you. I can’t believe you would deceive me like this, string me along and play with my heart. Perhaps you deserve each other.” She stormed towards the door and grabbed the handle with a trembling hand.

Fern finally found words. “Please, Rose, you have to forgive me.”

Rose spun back to face her sister. “Oh, I most certainly do not. I *cannot* forgive you for this. You’re not the person I thought you were.”

And she was gone. Her footsteps echoed through the hallway, and the sound of a door slamming caused Fern to jump. Only then did Alex raise his eyes to meet Fern’s.

“Alex,” she whispered. But she knew it was too late. His eyes were shuttered and his shoulders stiff.

“It was you.” His voice was cold, so icy it made her shiver. “At the ball, the woman I—” His breath came out in a rush. Tears fell down her cheeks but couldn’t move to wipe them

away. “You knew it was me, from the library, and yet you still —” He shook his head. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“If you knew I had deceived you, then you would have stopped courting Rose, and I couldn’t let you go.”

Alex exhaled with a huff. “You mean you needed my help.”

She froze. “Yes, but that wasn’t the only reason.” Fern’s words tumbled out, but Alex held up his hand, putting distance between them.

“There were so many times when you could have told me,” he murmured, his face twisted as though he were trying to make sense of her.

“I barely had you, Alex. I was sure you would leave me for Rose as soon as you knew the truth. Everyone always wants Rose, not me.”

“I didn’t,” he shot back. “I wanted *you*, I was ready to give up everything for you.”

Fern flexed her fingers at her side, drawing tall. “Rose was right,” she said and Alex’s eyes widened. “How did you *not* know? How did you not recognize me?” She shook her head as her chest heaved. “You didn’t *want* it to be me. You wanted it to be Rose, beautiful, perfect Rose who would be the perfect wife for you. You saw exactly what you wanted to see, and ignored me, ignored the truth.”

“That’s not true,” he sputtered. “If I had known, if I had just...” He pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes. “I loved you, Fern,” he said when he raised his head again. *Loved. Past*

tense. She pressed her palm to her chest as her heart shattered. “If you had told me, I would have understood.”

“You wouldn’t have believed me! How could you possibly understand—”

“You didn’t trust me to understand?” He ran his hands roughly through his hair and shook his head in disbelief. “I threw myself at your sister, like a *fool*, and you let me, you *encouraged* me. You distracted me from my work, making me focus on *you*, thinking we were helping each other when you were using me!”

“Alex,” she howled, “I was scared, I wanted—”

“You wanted Oxford.” Alex’s voice was harsh, rougher than she had ever heard it. “And you manipulated me, and your sister, and your parents to get what you wanted. You hurt the people who loved you most in the world.” Alex pressed his fist to his mouth, his shoulders curled. When he met her eyes again, he looked gutted. “I would have forgiven you, you know.”

“Then forgive me now.” Fern stepped forward and reached to touch his cheek, but Alex turned his head away.

“I can’t,” he said, his voice flat. “If you couldn’t trust me enough to tell me the truth, then I can’t trust you either.”

Frustration and fear melded into a white-hot heat in her throat. “Do you truly not see your culpability in this? *You* could have told Rose you kissed me, and how you felt something for me, long before now. *You* could have ended

things, instead of keeping us both while you made up your mind. It didn't have to go this far. You were using her for your career, just as I used you."

He flinched before curling his lip. "You admit you used me, then."

She threw her arms wide. "Yes, I did, but I had no idea it would turn into *this!*"

"I didn't either!" he shot back. "I had no intention of falling in love, in letting my entire life become confused and—and a *wreck*." His chest heaved as he watched her, his eyes glistening. "I had a *plan*, Fern. I had everything figured out. And now I have no idea what I'm going to do."

"I'll help you, we'll find something—"

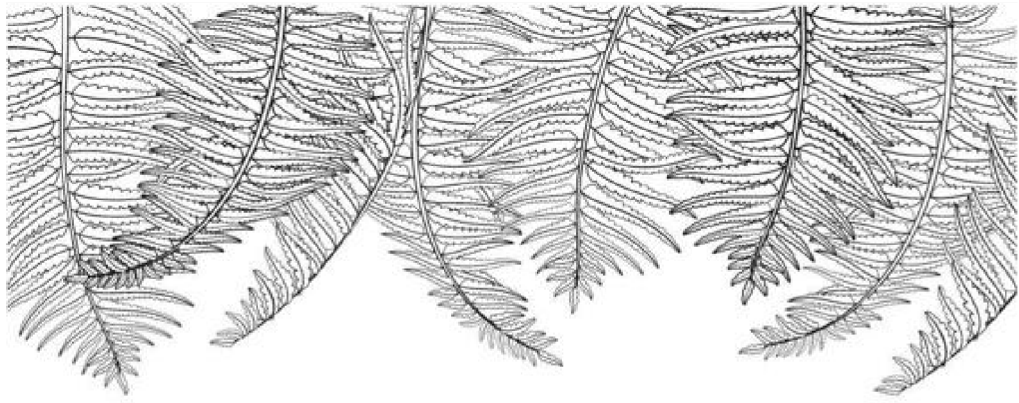
"I don't want your help!" Fern's knees trembled as his words echoed in her mind. "I don't want your help," Alex repeated, his voice shaking as he shook his head.

"I'm so sorry," Fern whispered, but Alex walked towards the door.

He turned to face her at the threshold. "You're not what I thought you were, Fern. I—I need to go."

"Please don't—" Fern reached out, but Alex pulled away.

"No, I can't—" He drew in a heaving breath. "I need to think about this. I don't—I don't know what to think anymore."



Chapter 31

A THICK CLOAK OF fog laid over Birmingham, obscuring the spires of St. Martin in the Bull Ring Cathedral and dampening the sounds of the busy streets. Coal dust choked the late afternoon air from the myriad trains and chimneys spewing the byproducts of industrial advancement into the lungs of its residents. Alex's mother's modest brick home in Shard End, one of dozens tightly packed in a neat row, had always been distinguishable by its brilliant yellow door, the color of the daffodils she so loved. Now, after three years without his father to care for it, the wood more closely resembled dried mustard.

"I'll have to paint it for her," Alex muttered to himself. "Or find someone to do it." When Alex left Birmingham after his father's death, he put his inheritance in a trust to cover his mother's expenses. But Mrs. Catherine Carroway lived frugally, insisting on doing her own housework and cooking, despite Alex having secured a housekeeper and caretaker years ago. The woman was deeply proud and even more stubborn, qualities Alex inherited in spades.

The wooden door, its frame also badly in need of repair, opened before he had the opportunity to knock. Alex embraced his mother's petite frame, noticing she seemed sligher than when he saw her in Oxford last Christmas, her shoulder blades prominent under her light wool dress. Her dark brown hair, streaked heavily with silver, was pulled back under a linen cap, allowing Alex to see her brilliant blue eyes, etched by deep lines. *It's been far too long*, he scolded himself.

Wordlessly she led him into the kitchen. The Carroways were not a particularly garrulous bunch, and neither spoke until they were seated at a scarred table with strong tea and biscuits in front of them. "It's been too long, Alex," Catherine said with a wan smile.

Alex's smile felt awkward from lack of use. While he strongly resembled his father, his mother joked that he shared her brain. "It has, Mum. I'm sorry."

"There's no need to be sorry. You've been busy and I'm getting along well." Alex gazed at the bookcases lining the walls opposite the cabinets. When their family expanded out of the apartment above the print shop, their library expanded as well, spilling past its designated walls and onto shelves in the bedrooms, kitchen, and even the pantry. The classic novels his father favored were completely untouched, as though they served as a memorial to his life.

"How is Mrs. Bell working out?"

Catherine raised and dropped one shoulder as she sipped her tea. "I give her the afternoons off, and the weekends. I don't

need much and she has a grandson at home now to look after.”

Alex sighed. “But I pay her to stay all day during the week, and Saturday. She should be cleaning and cooking for you.”

“But I don’t need it,” she insisted. “Without the shop, I need something to fill my days.”

“Mum, you do not need to work anymore.”

“But I like to.” Deep lines creased the edges of her mouth, evidence of many years of smiling and perhaps the recent years of tears. Alex had been away so long, he could not be certain.

“There are other things you can do with the money, then. Travel, enjoy fine meals, indulge yourself for once.”

“I have no need for any of those things, they won’t bring me joy.” Only his father had brought her joy, and nothing would bring him back now. “I could visit you. Do you know where you will be?”

His mother had already arrived at the question he had been unable to answer for himself since he left Oxford, desperate to escape Fern and the wreckage she left behind. He had stopped by his room at Pembroke only long enough to put together a bag before fleeing to the train station, his body ready to break down in sobs as he pushed through throngs of students leaving town. Oxford was too full of her. In weeks, she had painted her memory over every inch of campus, and the memories were too much to bear, the potential of what they could have shared and how it all fell apart.

“I’m not certain yet, Mum,” he said. His mother had put too much sugar in his tea, as usual. He found he rather enjoyed the comfort at the moment. “My hope is still London, but I’m waiting to see if a recommendation will come through. It may not.”

Alex did not wait for a response to his letter to Lord Redborne, explaining why he would no longer be courting Rose and how he understood if the viscount would not provide a recommendation. Professor Whitehurst would certainly try to assist, but Alex had put too much hope in Lord Redborne’s connection to Strathmore. He had allowed Fern and her family to consume his entire future.

“If not London, what will you do?” His mother was kind to ignore the uncertainty in his voice. “Oxford still? Cambridge?”

“There’s no money to be had in an academic life.” During the long train journey north, passing fields and industrial towns, pastures and villages, he tried to envision his future and found it completely empty. He could see no purpose anymore, no reason for striving or achieving. What was the purpose of anything he had done? One woman had destroyed him, pulled his heart open and buried herself inside, then left him to make order from the broken pieces of his soul.

Of course he had considered what Fern said about being a teacher, especially since the School of Economics may not be an option. But had her suggestion all been part of her game, an effort to manipulate him? He could trust nothing she said.

Everything was tainted now. “I may enjoy teaching, but it’s not what I planned.”

“Plans exist to be changed, Alex,” she said, passing her son a biscuit. “You’ve worked so hard to be in a position where you have choices.”

“I’m not the only one who worked, though.” Alex turned towards his mother, his shoulders slumped. “You and father gave up everything for me to go to school. You worked far harder than you should have so I never would have to. Until the day he died, he—”

Alex stopped when his voice broke. *An apoplexy*, the doctor had said when Alex rushed to his father’s bedside. *Was your father under a lot of stress?* He hadn’t replied. His mother didn’t speak, only stared out the window, watching as a pair of birds flitted about, picking branches for their nest, the home they built together.

“Your father loved providing for you,” she said, bringing him back to the present. “He spoke of you constantly. You were the driving force behind all his efforts. The shop was a success because he wanted to make it so, for you.”

“And I didn’t want it.” *Ungrateful bastard*. “He worked so hard to provide for me, and I didn’t want what he had to offer.”

“Of course you didn’t. We never expected you to take the shop. Once you went off to school, we knew you wouldn’t be back.” She refilled his cup and added two spoonfuls of sugar,

fingers bent with the rheumatism that had plagued her for years now. “You were an inspiration for him, not a burden.”

Alex said nothing, turning his cup in his hands. The tea set had belonged to his family since childhood, and it graced nearly every one of his early memories. The cup he held had a tiny chip on the rim, reminding him of when he was gesturing wildly describing the antics of one of his schoolmates and sent it tumbling over on the table. He had been horrified to see the damage, but his father had merely laughed. *It suits us better this way, it was too perfect otherwise.*

“I’m sorry I haven’t been back much since...” Alex stumbled over his words. He hadn’t been back at all, had not yet set foot in the place where his father died. He set out for Oxford after the funeral and never looked back, hiring the caretaker and housekeeper by correspondence and seeing his mother only once, last Christmas, after sending her a train ticket to visit him.

“It must be hard for you to be back here,” Catherine mused. “All the memories...enough time has passed for me to view them fondly.”

Despite the passage of time, the memories were still too fresh, too raw. As though he had thrown a cover over them before burying himself in his work, and now had to face the emotional scars he had ignored for three years.

The business with Fern had left him too vulnerable, coupled with the loss of the safe and predictable outlet of his studies. Everything was on the surface like an exposed wound.

“I made up your room,” his mother said, standing and smoothing her skirts before clearing the tray. “Don’t rush to bed if you don’t wish to, but you look awfully tired.”

He smiled. She said it every time he visited. Perhaps it was true. “I think I would like to turn in early, thank you.”

They exchanged an embrace, and he trod the familiar stairs up to his bedroom. His mind was hazy, a whirling tempest of emotions and memories, pain and regrets. He expected to lie awake for hours, attempting to sort it all out. But when he closed his eyes, the world fell away, and his mind gave way to sleep.



It took a week for Alex to discover he did not miss his studies. For the first day or two, he was restless, feeling useless unless he had a book in his hands. His mother recognized his unease for what it was and instead of pressing him to talk, slapped a hammer in his hands and set him to work fixing up the door frame.

His father had taught him the basic skills needed to maintain a home, and every visit to Birmingham was met with conversations over some form of repair. Alex and his father could never verbalize their thoughts face to face, they needed some form of labor to act as conversational lubricant. His father’s absence loomed somehow larger when Alex worked,

but he began to experience some closure, knowing his father would be proud of the man he had become.

When the frame was repaired and painted, Alex set his sights on the porch, then the roof shingles leaking in slow drips into the attic. He stopped falling asleep with a book in his hand, instead collapsing into bed, back aching, too weary to dwell on the real reason he was in Birmingham.

Two weeks after his arrival, his mother had new window boxes and raised garden beds. Three weeks had the front door restored to its brilliant daffodil yellow, and new matching shutters put in over the windows. Neighbors asked Mrs. Carroway if her caretaker was available to do work on their houses and he numbly obliged, grateful for the distraction.

Alex felt his relationship with his mother healing during his stay. Like the house, he had let it drift into benign neglect, knowing it was still standing but falling into disrepair. He told her about his studies and dissertation, and she proudly introduced him as an Oxford doctor when they went into town to shop or simply walk. She spoke of her friends and activities at church. They attended services on Sundays, and Alex found the rhythm and routine of sermons interspersed with prayers and hymns meditative and at times profound.

His mother had built a new world for herself, a circle of friends and confidants, a new rhythm to her life after losing her husband. She had not filled the void he left, but simply found new sources of strength. New people to serve as her family. He watched her with a deep sense of pride and more

than a bit of envy. He could not imagine how he would ever survive the loss of Fern, how he could ever rebuild. Yet his mother had done so with grace and courage.

They shared memories of his father, his love of rare books and his perpetually ink-stained hands, his habit of enjoying a pipe and a glass of whisky after dinner. Of his unabashed love for his wife and son, his willingness to give everything he had to make their lives a bit easier.

He never mentioned Fern. He came close, on so many occasions, to baring his soul, sharing the pain of her betrayal. But his mother had felt enough pain to last her a lifetime. He did not need to burden her with any more.

Summer heat had finally driven away the brisk feel of spring. Verdant foliage replaced the brilliant flowers, all dulled by the mask of industrial haze. Four weeks passed since he left Oxford and Alex knew it was time to go back. He had business to attend to, primarily deciding how he would spend the rest of his life.

“I hate to leave you, Mum,” he said as they sat on the newly built and painted bench in her back garden at dusk, sipping his father’s favorite spirit. The fragrance of her lingering flowers, lilacs and gardenias, was powerful enough to mask some of the fetid cloud of coal dust hanging heavy over the city.

“I hate to see you go, but you can’t hide here forever.” She wrapped her slim shoulders in a tartan shawl, one he recognized as a gift from his father.

Alex dropped his head. “Why do you think I’m hiding?”

“You’ve been here for nearly a month and haven’t posted or received a single letter. You’re working yourself to exhaustion, and...” She placed a comforting hand on his forearm. “Your eyes, darling, they show everything. This pain goes deeper than only your father’s passing.”

Alex said nothing. With his body exhausted, his mind couldn’t think. The thoughts keeping him up at night were not related to his career. Work would always find him, and his skills would be in demand somewhere. The family solicitor surprised him with the news that Alex had more than enough money in trust to live comfortably for at least a year without employment of any sort.

It was Fern haunting his dreams. Memories of her soft skin, how she came alive in the lantern light of the rotunda. The sensation of his body lost in hers, possessing her completely while he gave himself to her. How he felt like more of a man in her presence, like he had found a kindred spirit in the quirky woman from the library. Fern had unbound him, had allowed him the freedom to enjoy his life, to see a future where he could actually be happy instead of merely accomplished.

He remembered the pain when he awoke, the treachery she had committed. He could not forgive her but he could not forget her either.

“Are you going to tell me about her?” his mother asked.

Alex let out a humorless laugh. “You know me too well, Mum.”

She shrugged, taking a dainty sip of whisky. “You also talk in your sleep, dear. It’s a small house.”

He laughed, the sound echoing off the close-set houses ringing the garden. *So much for my dignity*, he thought wryly.

“She’s a mathematician.” His mother’s face softened when he finally spoke. “Brilliant, and kind.” He let out a low chuckle. “She’s terribly awkward, and funny. She made me happy, made me want to be a better person. And then she destroyed me,” he said, his breath hitching. “I loved her, I thought she loved me.”

“How do you know you were wrong?”

“She *lied*.” He leaned on the word, the ferocity of the pain enough to make his stomach twist angrily around the whisky. “She lied to me from the very start.”

“And you fell in love with her because of this lie?”

Alex hesitated. “No, I think I fell in love with her despite it.”

An owl called over the neat gardens of Shard End as the lazy sounds of crickets mixed with distant voices calling in the street. “Your father and I used to argue about who you most favored,” Catherine said. “You looked just like him, the spitting image of your father. But you think like I do. You have my mind, for better or for worse.”

“Certainly for the better,” he said with a half smile. His mother was undoubtedly a brilliant woman. Had she been born in a different time and under different circumstances, he could

see her studying at Oxford. His heart twisted seeing how his mother was not terribly unlike Fern.

“*And* for the worse,” she said. “Your father always hated how stubborn I was, how quick to place blame and reluctant to forgive. I fear you carry the same traits.”

“Mum, I know where you’re going with this—”

“You always wanted everything to be black and white, the solution there if you worked hard enough. You never accepted anything that wasn’t absolute and had a keen sense of right and wrong. Mathematics was such a perfect field for you, after all. You hated the gray space in between. But life exists in the in-between, all those messy, indistinct places with no easy solution.”

Alex sighed and shook his head. “I wish it were so simple —”

“You never knew about Hutchinson and his printing press, did you?” Catherine interrupted as though Alex had not even spoken. “You had just started at Oxford, you were so busy.” She pursed her lips tight then bolted the remnants of her whisky. “Gerald Hutchinson was closing his shop and offered to sell your father his press at a discount. Your father was thrilled. He had visions of expanding the business because of the new capacity. I didn’t trust Hutchinson, but Matthew convinced me it was the best thing for our family. We took out our meager savings and planned to buy the press.

“Weeks went by and I never heard more about it. When I asked how the sale was coming along, your father was

evasive, wouldn't answer my questions. He stopped coming home after work, wouldn't let me come by the shop, was out all sorts of hours." She sighed. "He stopped sleeping in my bed, and wouldn't even look at me. I found notes in his pockets, addresses I did not recognize, requests for meetings late in the evening. I was certain he was having an affair."

Alex was thunderstruck. His father, the man who loved his mother more than anything on the earth, worshiped the ground she walked on—he had been *unfaithful*? The notion was incomprehensible.

"I confronted him," Catherine continued. "He was angry, I was livid, shouted horrible things...then he began to cry. I was certain he was going to leave me." She looked up and met his blue eyes with her own. "He told me he had lied. Hutchinson had cheated him, he had already sold the press to another man but took our money and skipped town before your father could catch him out. He was humiliated and didn't have the heart to tell me what happened. I had warned against the deal, mind you, so he expected me to be angry. So he lied.

"He took one-off jobs wherever he could to make up the money, hence the notes and strange hours. He couldn't sleep for fear of being found out." Her voice shook. "When he told me the truth I was furious. I thought I'd never forgive him, not just for the lie but for the stress, the pain he caused me. It took ages for me to stop being so stubborn and forgive him."

"You had been together for years," Alex said, his voice low. "You had decades of shared trust, you didn't *start* with a lie."

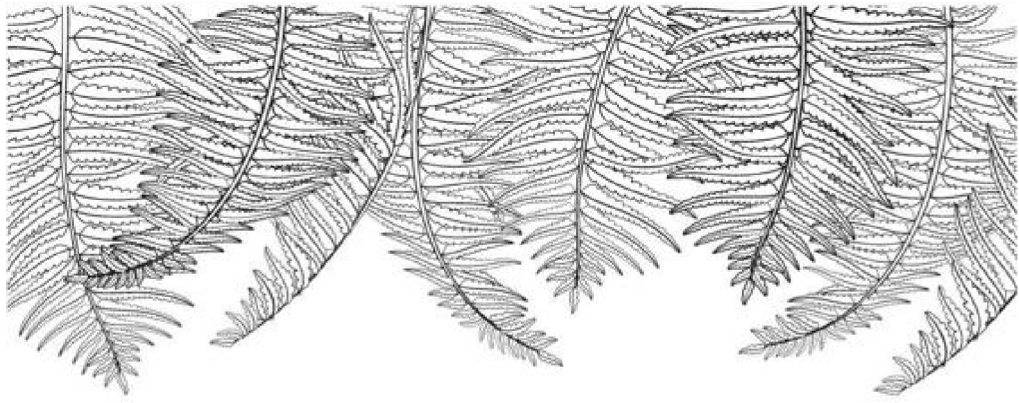
“Alex, your father died a year after I forgave him.” The air hung thick around them, weighted by her words. “I wasted the last years of our time together angry, keeping him away because he was trying, in his own misguided way, to protect me. Every day, when I wake up to see the bed empty beside me, when I wish to hear his voice or see his smile... I wish I had forgiven him earlier. I wish I had been strong enough to accept he wasn’t perfect and loved him anyway.”

Alex hadn’t noticed he was crying until his mother pushed the tear from his cheek.

“You love her, you say?”

“I thought I did,” he choked out. “But this pain... I can’t let her hurt me again.”

“She made a mistake, Alex. A serious one indeed, but you have to decide if that’s enough to throw away what you could have together.”



Chapter 32

GRAINS OF BLEACHED SAND fell from Fern's fingers as she sat on the beach overlooking the Solent strait towards the Isle of Wight. When the last one fell, she filled her palm again, letting gravity pull each grain from her hand until she was empty again. Wind buffeted her face, slapping loose strands of her hair against her pink cheeks. The wind was a welcome respite from the oppressive heat that settled over Hampshire in the past week. On a clear day she could see all the way across the Channel to the coast of Cherbourg-en-Cotentin, but today she would have to make do with the picturesque island. Small boats, their sails a patchwork of blazing whites against the blue-gray sea, were the only indications of human existence as far as Fern could see.

She had come to crave the bite of the wind. It was the only thing that could pierce the shell she had grown over her heart in the past weeks. She moved from a state of wrenching, all-encompassing pain to numbness, a state of nothingness allowing her to get through the day.

Prior to meeting Alex, Fern craved solitude. A day alone was a day of bliss, with only her books to keep her company. But since meeting Alex and tumbling helplessly in love with him, she ached from longing. Despite years of self-imposed isolation, she had never felt truly *alone* before now. She had given him a piece of herself, its absence a presence itself.

Fern closed her eyes against a gust of wind. They were constantly itchy from lack of sleep, and while she was certain she had no further tears to shed, she consistently woke before dawn with her pillow soaked with tears. Her clothing hung loose on her body. Nothing tasted good, and even the cook's efforts to appeal to her sweet tooth failed to bring out Fern's appetite. She felt as though she was wasting away and welcomed it. Perhaps if there was less of her she would hurt less.

Standing to dust the sand off her tan muslin skirt, Fern secured her bonnet back over her hair and began the long walk back to Exbury, her great-aunt's "cottage," in reality a fifteen-room Tudor estate boasting twenty house staff and over one hundred acres of green pastureland. She entered the house through the kitchen gardens, stopping briefly to refuse the scone offered by the cook before slipping down the hallways toward her room.

"Back so soon?" a familiar voice called as she passed the library.

Fern backtracked and entered the library, forcing a pleasant expression on her face. "Good morning, Aunt Margaret," she

said. The elderly woman rested across a velvet settee in her dressing gown, strands of her white hair falling loose, a copy of *Pride and Prejudice* in her hand.

“I simply hate all of this longing and pining,” she said, tossing the leather volume to her lap and wrinkling her nose. “I don’t understand why Elizabeth won’t simply say what’s on her mind. It would save several hundred pages of wasted print.”

Fern sighed and selected another book from the shelves. The organizational system of her aunt’s library resembled that of Boar’s Hill as the most frequently accessed books sat piled on any available surface to ensure easy access. She handed *Ivanhoe* to her great aunt and then resumed her seat. Margaret scowled at the title but did not discard it outright. “You’re back early from your walk today. Do you have plans?”

Of course not, Fern thought. The life of a companion is dreadfully dull when your ward never wants to leave the house during the summer for fear of insects and freckling. “It was windy,” she said, hoping her simple answer would suffice.

It would not. “You must do something to fill your time. You’re becoming an annoyance.” Fern flinched and dug her toe into the rug, tracing a swirl on the oriental rug with the tip of her shoe. Her aunt was right. She could not keep her concentration long enough to read and her piano playing was sloppy at best. She had no purpose, nothing to fill her days except her thoughts.

She had not heard a word from Rose. She did not expect to hear from Alex, but the lack of resolution stung nonetheless. Fern started dozens of letters, some pages long and others just a name, but all were crumpled and tossed into the fire.

“I was thinking of taking my watercolor set into the garden,” Fern offered. She was dreadful at watercolors. They lacked the precision of the pen and pencil, and everything became irreparably smudged and blurry. She preferred everything, including color, in its place.

“I received another letter from your father,” Margaret replied, ignoring Fern’s remark. Fern’s stomach dropped and dread settled in her bones. “He wants me to send you back to Oxford.”

Swallowing hard, Fern shifted in her seat. Margaret did not know what had come to pass with Rose and Alex, nor did Fern want to share it. “Did he give a reason why?”

“You’ve been here nearly a month and you look like you’ve been gutted. I assume it is to face whatever fool thing you did before hopping in a carriage to come here.”

Fern blinked several times, staring at her aunt’s placid visage. “I—did you—did he—“

“He told me nothing, but you must have done something foolish because you have barely said a word since you arrived, can’t finish a book, and moon about on the beaches all day like a lovelorn ninny.” Margaret sat up with a grunt and smoothed her magenta dressing gown over her legs. “Does it have something to do with the young man from dinner?”

Fern stiffened, and Margaret nodded at her change in posture. “I thought as much. Did you try to steal him away from Rose?”

“No!” Fern cried, then curled her shoulders inward. “I didn’t *try* to, exactly, but it...happened.”

Margaret gave her a knowing half-smile. “You threw yourself at him then.” Fern’s cheeks felt so hot she wondered if she might spontaneously combust. “What happened then? Did he reject you?”

“No, he... We had a beautiful night, but just one,” she confessed. There was little point in being coy.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” Margaret replied. “Every woman deserves the memory of one toe-curling interlude to keep her warm at night.”

She squeezed her eyes shut, the pain coming back so forcefully she felt her chest caving in. “I lied to him, and Rose, and it all came out at once. He wants nothing to do with me, and Rose won’t speak to me either.”

“What was the lie? Something small, I hope.”

Fern gave a mirthless laugh. “Huge.” She drew in a large breath. “I pretended to be Rose at Papa’s party. I wanted to be someone else, to see what it was like to be her. I met Alex there and...it was perfect.” Memories of their night, how it felt to be in his arms, flooded back. “He thought I was Rose, though, and wanted to court her.”

“I thought something was off about the party, but after enough champagne, all of you girls start to look the same.” Aunt Margaret shook her head. “Why didn’t you tell him right away? Surely he would have discovered the truth when Rose did not know him.”

“Rose helped me deceive him,” Fern said, her voice cold. “I wanted him to help me get into Oxford, so I made him promise to help me and I would help him court Rose. Except Rose fell for him, and so did I.”

“You did your sister a favor, then, saving her from a loveless marriage. Does he love you?”

She nodded, the fist around her heart clenching tighter. “He did,” she replied. “But not anymore.”

Aunt Margaret was silent for a long time, watching her niece with narrowed eyes before finally speaking. “Well, you’ve certainly made a hash of it, haven’t you?”

Something broke deep inside Fern and she laughed, letting out tears and cries of pain and sorrow amid the laughter. Margaret handed her a handkerchief. Excessive emotion was not something she tolerated. “Forget the boy, what about your work? Oxford?”

“What about it?” Fern asked, wiping her nose indelicately.

Margaret heaved an exasperated sigh. “Are you going to Oxford? If so, I haven’t heard about it.”

“No.” Her voice was cold again, as dead as her dreams. “I missed my chance. The professor who was to see my work

canceled our meeting. Alex was my connection for the meeting in the first place, so without him, there is no hope.”

“Why do young women think the only way to get what they want is to have a man do it for them?” Margaret spat out, her words full of ire. Fern sat up and tilted her head. She had never seen her great-aunt express any emotion beyond annoyance or disdain, so this level of passion was unprecedented.

“You are an extremely clever girl, a quality I like to think came from me,” she continued. “Read the writing on the wall. It will be many years before women are recognized for the work they do, but has that stopped them from creating?”

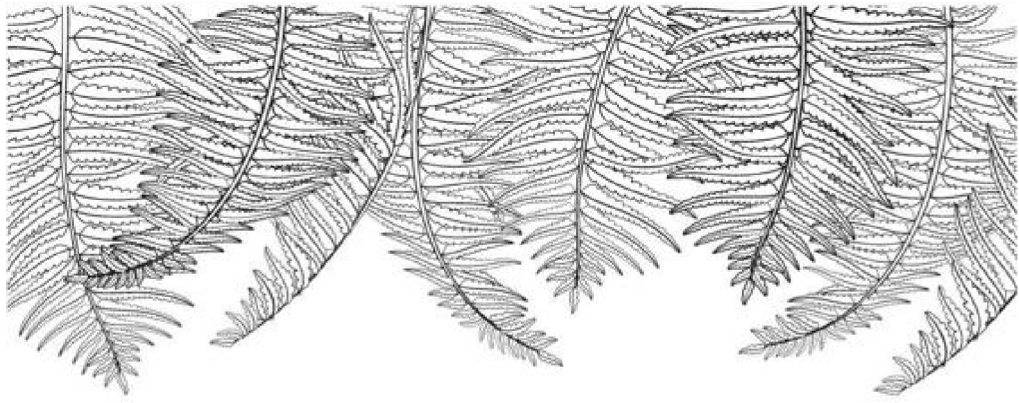
Fern shook her head dumbly.

“Of *course* not!” Aunt Margaret was on the edge of her seat now, her eyes sparkling. “You must decide for yourself what is important—the recognition, or contributing to the world of mathematics?”

“I—I want to...” What did she want? *Oxford, to be a scholar and recognized for her brilliance, to see her name in print.* But her name... She had lied about her name before, what if she were to do it again? “What about an alias?”

Margaret’s wrinkled face lit in a mischievous grin. “That’s my girl. Look at George Eliot, she made a name for herself as a novelist, you can do the same.”

Fern’s mind was racing, but it did not take long for her to decide on her course of action. “I think I have a perfect idea. It might be *brilliant*.”



Chapter 33

ALEX SPENT AN ENTIRE week, a glorious seven days, wasting time. He justified it to himself as an opportunity to take the trips he had always wanted to take but never had the time, stopping at Gloucester, Bristol, and Bath, studiously ignoring the need to face his future when he returned to campus. By the time he made it to the Cotswolds to visit Henry at his family's country home, the impending decision sat heavily on his shoulders. For the first time he could remember, Alex had no idea what to do next.

"Bloody hell," Henry said, taking in Alex's bloodshot eyes and disheveled appearance. "You look awful."

Alex sat beside him in a heap, absently admiring the sprawling gardens in the waning daylight. Henry nodded for the footman to pour them both a healthy share of whisky then dismissed him. "I've felt better." Alex took a sip, allowing the dark liquid to soothe him from the inside as he told Henry the tale of Fern and her deception.

"I've never seen you all pulled to pieces over a woman like this." Henry released a low chuckle. "Well, two women, as it

were.”

Alex threw back his drink, coughed in what he hoped was a dignified manner, then leaned his elbows on his knees. “I can’t imagine why she would do such a thing. Why would she *lie* to me, to *everyone* like that?”

“You’ve never told a lie?”

“Not one like this, no.”

“This one does certainly seem a bit excessive.” Henry topped off Alex’s glass once more. “Did Finley tell you why she did it?”

“Fern, she’s Fern.” Alex released a guttural groan. “She wanted to go to Oxford and thought I would help her. She strung me—and her sister—along, so she could get what she wanted.”

“And you’ve never used people to get what you wanted?” The cross tone in Henry’s normally nonchalant voice made Alex look up with a furrowed brow.

“No,” Alex replied resolutely.

Henry scoffed. “How about using my horse and my punt so you could court the sister?”

“That’s different. I never lied to you about it, and you’re my *friend*.”

“Or the recommendation from her father? Were you not using that relationship to help your career?”

Alex's cheeks warmed as an unpleasant chill ran down his spine. "I never lied, Henry. I wouldn't have been so cruel."

"Not even when you were desperate?" Henry looked more intense than Alex had ever seen him. "You don't remember what happened our first year, do you?"

Alex stiffened. "What are you talking about?"

Henry shook his head and scratched the back of his neck. "You stole my pin money."

A wave of nausea washed over him. He did remember. His father had fallen and he had just received the letter from his mother. *Nothing to worry about, but he will be in bed for quite some time...* He recalled the feeling of helplessness, the dread when he realized he did not have enough money for a train ticket home, knowing Henry kept several bills on his dressing table. *He won't notice it's gone*, Alex had justified the action to himself. Walking out of the room, the bills crinkling in his pocket, he ran directly into Henry. Alex was a terrible liar and Henry immediately suspected something was amiss.

"You lied to me, Alex." Henry's voice was low and intense. "You looked straight into my eyes and told me nothing was wrong. Even when I saw the money was missing and I *knew* it was you, you still lied."

Alex clenched his jaw, the thick mantle of shame draping over him. "I hated myself for it."

"But you were desperate. There was something you wanted so badly but you couldn't get it on your own."

“Would you have forgiven me? If I’d told you the truth?” Alex felt the little control he had maintained slipping away.

“Of course,” Henry replied without pretense. “You’re my *friend*. Yes, I wish to this day you had been honest with me from the start, but I forgave you.”

“I don’t deserve your forgiveness.”

Henry jumped to his feet, his whisky sloshing from the glass and splattering on the terrace. “Stop being such a bloody martyr, Alex!” Alex gaped at his best friend. “You are allowed to make mistakes, and be *happy* for once in your life. You say she used you when you used her sister the same way. You deserve her forgiveness as much as she deserves yours. So stop punishing yourself and stop punishing poor Francine.”

“Fern.” Saying her name aloud felt like stripping away the last layer of resistance.

“Her too,” Henry said, falling back into his seat. “You both made mistakes, and if you love her, you’ll forgive her. And she’ll forgive you. Don’t punish yourselves by staying away.”

“But what if I can’t trust her?”

Henry swirled the whisky in his glass. “It’s the risk that makes life worth living, Alex.”



The pigeonhole mailbox assigned to *Carroway, A.* overflowed with graduation notices, congratulations from

former professors, a final invoice for his room at Pembroke, and a large envelope, most likely containing a bound manuscript of his thesis. He had stuffed his meager belongings, an obscene number of books and relatively few articles of clothing, into a trunk and loaded it onto a post coach bound for Birmingham. The mathematics building was his last destination before he would return home, a final sanctuary before the time came for him to close this chapter and begin a new one.

“Mr. Carroway.” He flinched as he recognized the voice, turning with a stiff smile.

“Professor Sylvester, how are you?”

“Very well, my boy,” the man said as he approached, leaning heavily on his cane. Alex was again impressed by the mathematician, topping eighty years of age and still sharp as a tack and deeply intimidating. “Although Paris is a swamp this time of year, simply ghastly. I was expecting you would make another appointment to meet with me, about your protege.”

Alex exhaled. “I’m sorry, sir, but I am no longer working with her.”

Sylvester eyed him critically. “That’s a shame. Because I was surprised to find a manuscript, containing nearly identical research to what you described, awaiting me in my office when I returned, with you credited as co-author.”

“Me?” Alex gaped.

Sylvester raised one bushy eyebrow. “It was a thorough review of your work with a gentleman by the name of Eliot Dickinson.”

Suppressing a laugh, Alex shook his head. She was clever, indeed.

“It needs quite a bit of work, but the potential is there. If Mr. Dickinson cannot be found, I wonder if you would like to continue the research in his place?”

“With you, sir?”

“Yes, Mr. Carroway. You are a gifted mathematician, and you have made that quite clear. If you decide against going to the School of Economics, I would be delighted if you would join our faculty next year.”

For a moment, Alex wondered if the old man was joking. It has been weeks since he had felt any hope, any joy at all, not since Fern—

She was the one who put the idea of teaching into his head and made him want something different. “Sir, I’m honored. I will certainly consider it, but I need a bit of time—”

“Say no more. Working for Strathmore is a more appealing offer than working for a curmudgeon like me.”

“Thank you, sir, but I do not think I will be recommended to work with Strathmore.”

Sylvester’s wrinkled forehead developed more creases. “You’re mistaken, young man. My understanding is you’ve already been accepted.”

Alex blinked hard, breath rushing from his body. How was this possible?

“You have choices now, a remarkable luxury for anyone, particularly in academia,” Sylvester said. “If you’re interested in working with me, let me know by the first of the month. But if there is anything I can do to assist you, will you let me know?”

Alex nodded, feeling dazed as the professor stepped past him towards the courtyard. He sat on a bench, inadvertently dropping his mail to the floor. The large envelope landed with a *thud*, and he saw his name scrawled across the front in a painfully familiar hand.

Fingers trembling, he broke the seal and withdrew the bound papers.

*Prosody in Translated Verse, by Alexander M.
Carroway, D.Phil., and Mr. Eliot Dickinson*

The following pages were set in exquisite typeface, the translations from Latin and Greek accompanied by markings of meter and relevant mathematical analysis. His heart clenched when he saw her illustrations of the poetic imagery amidst the annotations in the margins.

She created art, he thought wistfully. She took mathematics and made it art.

When he turned the last page, a slim envelope fell into his hand. Extracting the letter, Alex’s heart squeezed tight.

Dear Alex,

Sylvester should know this work is just as much yours as it is mine. You deserve recognition for your brilliance. I hope this is not too late for you to decide your future for yourself.

With love, F

He opened the enclosed page and quickly scanned the text. “Bloody hell,” he muttered. The words written on the stationary of the viscount swam before him. *Mr. Carroway is a remarkable talent...would proudly serve his King and Country...my heartiest recommendation...* A handwritten postscript from Redborne caught his eye.

*For your records. Original sent to the Hon. A.
Strathmore, London School of Economics*

Laughter bubbled from his throat, low, then stronger until he felt himself bordering on hysteria. She had done it. That brilliant, stubborn woman had ensured he would have the future he wanted, free of any encumbrance.

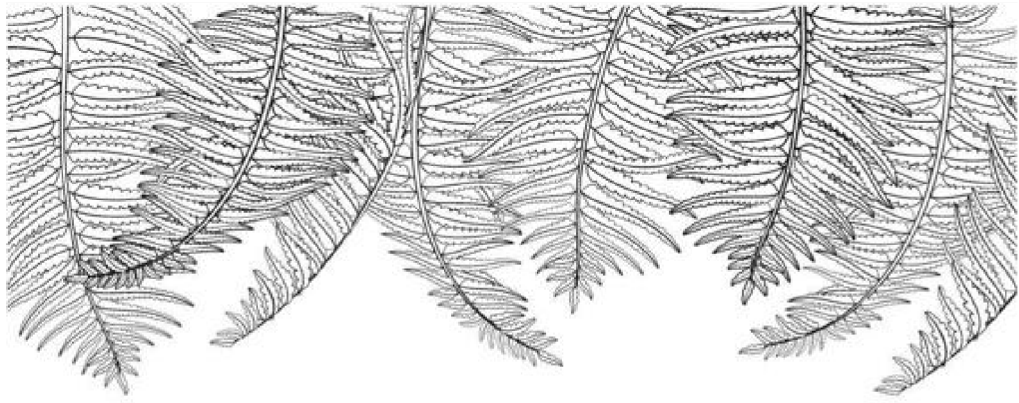
He sat back and laughed, then squeezed his eyes shut as tears threatened to push their way past his defenses. Alex wanted so badly to be angry, to blame her for everything, all the pain he had experienced. But in that moment he wanted to

hold her, to see her face when she discussed her work, to feel the thrill of discovery by her side. He simply wanted *her*.

Fern had given him everything, seen to every eventuality. But she had also cut herself out of his decision. Their futures were no longer entwined.

Unless he wanted them to be.

“Professor,” Alex called, jumping to his feet and jogging down the hall and into the courtyard. When the man turned, Alex took a deep breath. “Actually, sir, there is something you can do for me.”



Chapter 34

ON FERN AND ROSE'S tenth birthday, Lord Redborne gifted Rose with a pony. It was butter yellow with a white mane and Rose took to it immediately, riding around the meadows behind the estate as though she had been born on horseback. Lady Redborne worried that, despite Fern's aversion to horses, she might be jealous of her sister's lavish gift. Her husband had simply smiled and responded, "You needn't worry, I have just the thing for my Fern."

It was an atlas, a giant text so heavy Fern could not hold it in her hands but had to lay it over one of the massive oak tables in their library. Every inch of the known world was spread out before her in intricate detail. Within a day she had memorized each country in Asia and Africa before setting out to learn every capital of the world. In the evening, her father sat on the carpet in front of the fire, Fern on his lap and the atlas spread out before them, as he told her stories of his travels and the far-off worlds filling her dreams at night. Together they could understand the entire world, no mysteries would remain unsolved.

Before she had even descended from Aunt Margaret's carriage, Salisbury informed Fern that Lord Redborne insisted upon seeing her immediately in the library. As she waited for his arrival, Fern's eyes darted over to the atlas, still spread on the oak table as it had been for the last eleven years. For a moment she longed to be a little girl again when everything she needed to understand existed in the pages of the books in this room.

Redborne entered without looking at her. Expecting a stern dressing down, shouting and raging until the windows shook, Fern stiffened her spine in preparation. Instead, her father leaned on the table and sighed. Suddenly she could see his age, the lines on his weathered face, the pervasive weariness. When had her father become an old man?

"I don't know who you are anymore, Fern." His words were forlorn and weak.

Fern's head tilted. "Wh—what do you mean?"

"I wrote the recommendation as you asked, but I had no idea the mess you caused until Rose told me. And you ran off to Hampshire to escape the consequences?" He shook his head and slumped his shoulders, as though weighted down by her actions. "I didn't believe you were capable of such deception, such duplicity. I had to speak to you to understand why you would do such a thing."

Fern nodded grimly, even as she struggled to meet his gaze. "I wanted to study maths at Oxford."

Redborne's jaw tightened. "We've had this conversation, and you know how I feel. You can study poetry, classics, but maths is—"

"Purely the domain of men, yes, I know," she spat out, no longer concerned with staying in her father's good graces. No longer caring about anything, really. "It was my dream, and Alex—Mr. Carroway, he helped me."

"And you stole him from your sister," he replied, his normally placid voice laced with anger.

Fern set her jaw as she narrowed her gaze. "Alex had a role in it as well."

His hazel eyes, so keenly intelligent, bored into hers as though she was a puzzle needing to be solved. He had never looked at her with such a lack of comprehension before. Fern and her father were kindred spirits, intellectuals in the world of fools, as he liked to call it. She felt remarkably alone knowing she had lost him too.

Fern trembled from the weight of his disappointment. "I'm sorry I couldn't be what you and Mama wanted. I'm sorry I'm not like Rose, but I won't apologize for having dreams of my own."

"I never wanted you to be like Rose." The old man pinched the bridge of his nose. "You have always been different, and difficult at times, but I *never* wanted you to change."

Fern swallowed against the lump in her throat. "You didn't?"

“I didn’t want you to study at Oxford because it would have torn you apart. The women studying there are treated terribly. They’re not respected like the other students, not even by their professors. And maths?” He gave her a look so full of affection it made Fern’s desiccated heart swell in her chest. “They would be cruel. I couldn’t bear the thought of you suffering like that.”

“But it should have been my choice. I’m an adult and I deserve to have a chance. If you had listened, I wouldn’t have had to go behind your back.”

Her father reached out and took her hand. “You must understand, Fern. For the past thirty years, half of my life, I have spent every waking moment worried about you girls. I wanted nothing more in my life than to protect you, keep you safe from harm and see you happy. You are my last little girl, Fern. Happiness for you looks so different from what your sisters wanted, and I was at a loss.” He pushed a loose tendril of hair behind her ear. “I held you too close. But I’m so afraid to see you hurt.”

“I have to take chances, Papa.” Tears pinched behind her eyes. “I have to find my own way.”

“It seems as though you already have, my dear.” Her father considered her carefully. “You’re in love with the boy, aren’t you?”

She nodded, pushing her eyes shut to prevent the tears from falling. “But it’s over, Papa. I can accept it, but it will take some time.”

Her father squeezed her hand. “You’ve always been stronger than I gave you credit for. You’ll find your way. If you want to go to Oxford, I’ll see what I can do—”

“No,” she interrupted. “Oxford is not the place for me.” Even if Alex was gone from the university, it would always belong to him in her heart.

He nodded. “Then somewhere else. Your gift will shine once you find the right place. And as for your sister... Have you spoken to her?”

Fern winced. “She won’t be alone with me. Even if I could get her to listen, she has no reason to forgive me.”

“She’s your sister,” he replied. “She loves you, and you love her. Give her time, and space. You’ll find your way back to each other. And as for your young man...” He sighed. “I should have known how he felt about you after the night we had him to dinner.”

Fern quirked her head. “Why is that?”

Her father gave her a loving, if sad, smile. “He couldn’t stop looking at you the entire night. He turned to you like you were the sun itself.”



Describing the atmosphere of Boar’s Hill following Fern’s arrival as tense was a significant understatement. The servants moved through the house as though walking on eggshells,

refusing to make eye contact with either of the twins and lingering only for a moment before disappearing downstairs. Lord Redborne kept to his study, only venturing out to share a silent dinner with his daughters. Lady Redborne and Violet had fled the situation entirely, finding a sudden need to visit a cousin in Yorkshire.

Rose did not accompany them. She had claimed Boar's Hill as her territory and Fern was an unwelcome interloper. Fern could not help but marvel at her twin's ability to avoid being alone with her for an entire week before being cornered in her mother's dressing room.

"Is this where you've been hiding?" Fern asked, slipping into the room and closing the door behind her.

Rose sat up from her position on the silk divan, smoothed her skirts, and set her sister with a glare so cold Fern shivered. "You shouldn't be in here, and I have nothing to say to you."

Fern stood with her back to the door, knees trembling. She took a fortifying breath before continuing to speak. "You don't have to say anything to me, but I need to say something to you." She wrung her hands together, squeezing until her knuckles turned white. "I'm not here to apologize to you."

Rose gaped, her words acerbic. "Excuse me?"

Fern flinched. "I mean, I am here to apologize, but I don't expect you to accept it. What I did was terrible. I lied to Alex, and to you, and everything became so out of control. I tried to tell you—"

“You could have told me,” Rose spat out. “There were many times when you could have told me you were having a liaison with the man I hoped to marry *before* I set my heart on it.”

“You’re right.” Fern stood straighter, dropping her hands to her side. “I could have, but I was frightened. I should say I was trying to protect your feelings, and that was part of it, but not the entirety. I wanted to keep Alex close so he could help me get into Oxford.”

Rose’s jaw tightened. “This was about Oxford? For God’s sake, you caused all of this so you could study maths?”

“Yes.” Fern swallowed around the knot in her throat. “I did. It’s my dream, and I know it is irrational and impossible, but it’s what I wanted, and I thought pushing you and Alex together would help me reach it. It was foolish, and all for nothing.”

Rose’s head dipped for a moment before she pressed her lips into a firm line. “It’s for the best. It would have been an embarrassment for the family if you had attempted such a ridiculous thing.”

“And that’s why I’m here. I’ve been a burden to this family for too long, and I wanted to tell you in person. I will continue to be Aunt Margaret’s companion. She wants to spend the next several years traveling the continent, and I will accompany her. By the time I return, you will certainly be married and settled into your new life. You will have no reason to see me anymore.”

“For God’s sake, Fern.” Rose got to her feet, her book clenched in her hand at her side. “We’re not children anymore.” She huffed as her temper flared, her perfect features twisted in a grimace. “If you want to go hide with Aunt Margaret, fine, do so, but you won’t be happy and you know it.”

“Maybe I don’t deserve to be happy after what I did.”

“That’s just stupid,” Rose said, crossing the room until she was only a few steps from Fern. “Part of the blame for this lies with me, not all, but certainly a small part of it. I knew your plan was foolish, and you admitted how you felt about him.”

Fern opened her mouth to respond, but Rose was not finished. “We can’t go back to how things were when we were girls. We have our own lives, and we certainly won’t agree on the choices we make in them.”

“I know, but...” Fern closed her eyes as memories washed over her. All the years in which they were inseparable flashed before her, holding hands, sharing a bed, crying and laughing and living together. Like one soul, shared over two bodies. “But you’re my sister.”

Rose nodded and swallowed hard. When she spoke, her voice trembled. “You’ll always be my sister, but you will have to find someone else to be your other half. I need some time to be myself.”

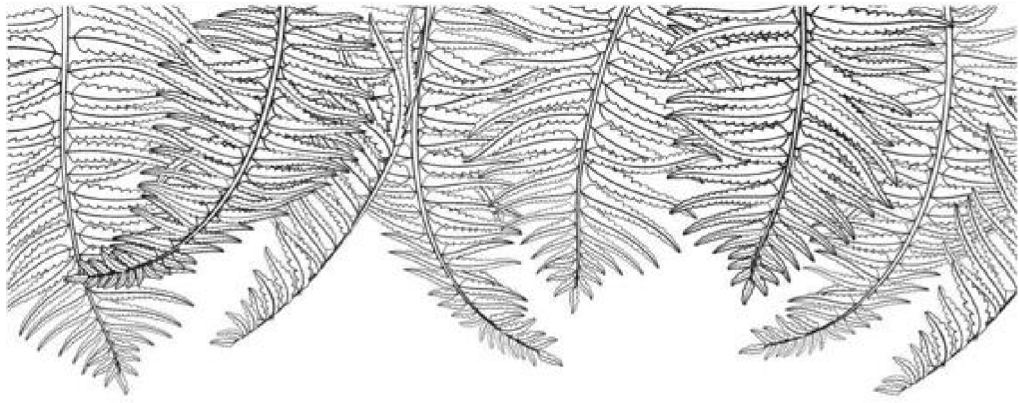
Fern bit her lip as Rose settled back into the divan and opened her novel, noting her sister’s sniffle as she began scanning her eyes over the text. All the breath rushed from

Fern's body as she exited the dressing room and closed the door softly. Walking down the hall in a daze, she felt uprooted, the foundation providing stability in her life torn out and exposed. She could not repair what had been destroyed between them. For as long as Rose had been ignoring her, Fern was able to deny the reality. Her sister, her twin, would no longer be a meaningful part of her life.

Fern was wholly, utterly alone.

Her breath came in short gasps as she reached the bottom of the stairs and pushed through the front doors, down the stairs and onto the gravel driveway, her vision blurring as tears swamped her eyes. Sensations overwhelmed her. The stones pressed into her feet, her blood rushed in her ears as her body screamed at her to run, to freeze, to do *something*.

The sound of her pulse was so intense Fern barely registered the sounds of gravel skittering under pounding hoofbeats, or the shrill cry of a coach driver as she looked up to see a carriage barrelling straight towards her, showing no sign of stopping.



Chapter 35

FERN SLAPPED HER HANDS to her ringing ears and dropped into a crouch, unable to convince her body to move out of the way. Hooves thundered by her sides as displaced pebbles pinged off her arms and legs. For a moment, she wondered if this would be her end, and how ironic a blasted *horse* would be what did her in. At least her fear of the beasts would be justified.

But the impact never came. Instead, she heard the whinny of horses and the slam of a coach door, then strong hands closed over her upper arms, pulling her away from the giant animals on either side of her. She clutched one arm around her knees while she swung the other frantically towards the hands holding her in place.

“I’m here, Fern, you’re safe.”

Now Fern was certain she was dead, or at least unconscious and dreaming. There was no other explanation for seeing Alex in front of her. “Are you hurt?”

She shook her head, trying to clear the fog. Her body shook with tremors, her teeth chattering as he guided her to her feet.

“No,” she croaked. “I’m—I’m not, I’m fine.”

Alex held one of her arms while digging in his pocket to extract coins for the coach driver, who was sending a string of expletives in Fern’s direction. “Blimey, wild girl comes running into the drive, how was I supposed to—”

“Stop.” Alex’s commanding voice startled both listeners. Fern watched as the man sat up straight on the bench as Alex pressed the coins into his hand. “Never speak to her or any lady like that again.”

The man glared at Fern and whipped his horses into motion once more, sending more gravel sailing across the drive. Alex turned back to face Fern as her breathing slowed. As though finally recognizing their contact, he dropped her arm and stepped back. Tension hung thick between them while Fern’s stomach turned somersaults, her mind finally calming enough to recognize his presence for what it was. *He’s here.* Her heart thudded erratically. *Even if he’s here to scold me, to scream and dismiss me, at least he’s here.*

Alex stepped forward and then froze, his hands clenched at his sides. A muscle in his jaw twitched as he glanced toward the facade of Boar’s Hill. “Is there somewhere we can speak, privately?”

Wordlessly Fern led him around the side of the house, down a path winding past carefully pruned hedges and fountains, through a wrought-iron fence, and beyond aging stone walls. She did not stop until she entered a sunken garden, the ground soft with moss, ivy crawling up the weeping willows hanging

overhead and sheltering them from the sun. The short walk gave her time to think, to restore her senses before she turned to face him.

“Why were you running?” Alex asked, his brow furrowed.

Fern gulped. “I—Rose hasn’t spoken to me in weeks. We’ve never gone so long without speaking. I finally got her to talk to me, but—” Her voice broke on the last word, the ache in her chest so intense she could hardly breathe. How could she possibly survive this?

“She will forgive you,” Alex said, his voice cautious. “It may take time, but she will.”

But will you ever forgive me? “Why are you here?”

Alex considered her carefully. “I hoped to see you.”

His simple words broke her. The scab she had developed over these past weeks was torn open by seeing his eyes again, by feeling his hands, however briefly, touch her again. “Why?” she whispered, uncertain if she even wanted to hear the answer.

“I saw your manuscript and the letter from your father. Sylvester spoke to me about it.”

Her work. It always came back to her studies, to *maths*. “He saw it, didn’t he? And he read it?”

Alex nodded. “He did, he said it showed potential.” He shuffled his feet, avoiding her gaze. “He offered me a position teaching.”

A glow spread through Fern's chest, displacing the pain residing there just a moment before. "He did? Oh, that's wonderful. I'm so relieved."

"But what about you? You know Sylvester won't credit you for your work."

"I don't care if he uses it. At least the world will read it if he does."

Alex ran his hand roughly through his hair, looking down before meeting her eyes once more. "Does that mean you're giving up?"

Fern nodded. She expected to feel a profound loss in admitting her defeat, but it seemed so insignificant compared to what she had lost in her sister. In Alex.

"I thought I wanted to be known as a mathematician, to stand out as an academic," she said. "I wanted to be seen, to be valued for who I am, to have something wonderful said about me. But you gave me all of those things, and I believe them now." Fern paused for long enough to suck in a shuddering breath. "Thank you. Thank you for giving that to me."

"But it's not enough," Alex insisted. "Fern, you're too talented to give up."

"I won't," she replied. "But it won't be at Oxford, and I accept it. I'll find my place, and I won't regret trying. And I know my value now. You made me feel wanted, like I am worthwhile. And I spoiled it, all of it, but for a short time I knew what it was like to be special to someone."

Alex rubbed the back of his neck and met her gaze with a pained expression. “I overreacted, Fern. Everything in my life had a plan. I had a goal, and when you came along—” His breath caught and he paused. “I was scared. I thought I understood everything, knew what to expect, and when I found out you had lied... It was too much.”

“I don’t expect you to forgive me for what I did to you.”

“But I owe you an apology as well.”

Fern froze. “You—you do?”

“I do. I never gave you a chance to explain, and I owed you that much. I understand what it feels like to feel desperate, like you don’t belong. I judged you too harshly, and you deserved better from me. It was a mistake, and I’m so sorry, Fern.”

They stood in silence, wrapped in the sounds of the spring day, the earthy scents of moss and sweet peas filling the air.

“I can’t stop wondering what would have happened if I had just been honest with you from the start,” Fern said, her voice low. “Would you have wanted me after all?” She bit her lower lip, willing the tears to recede from her eyes. Alex watched her so closely with his intense blue gaze that she wanted to fall into them and drown in the crystal pools.

Alex pressed his lips together tightly. “I don’t know,” he said, his voice husky. “I can’t decide when I fell in love with you. There was no singular moment when you became the only person I wanted to see, when I forgot what it was like to *not* have you in my life. And when you were gone—” He

stopped, his gaze drifting over her face. “I felt gutted, like a piece of me had been wrenched out. I can’t go through that again.”

That was it, it was over. Alex was giving up on her, on *them*. Fern nodded stiffly, rubbing one hand over her eyes. “I understand,” she said, her tone flat and lifeless. “I hope Professor Sylvester and my father’s recommendation will give you options, let you choose your future.”

“They will, and I can’t tell you how grateful I am for what you did. You gave me everything I thought I wanted.” Alex stepped closer until the tips of their shoes brushed on the soft ground. “But the problem is, I can’t imagine my future without you in it.”

Suddenly it came back, the glimmer of hope burning deep in her belly. The possibility that perhaps, in time, Alex could forgive her.

He flexed his hands until his fingers brushed against her knuckles. Her chest heaved as his first finger caught hers and held tight. Fern’s eyelids dropped as a sob escaped her throat. “Alex, I’m so sorry.”

“I already forgave you, Fern.” He brushed his lips against her forehead. “I’m still hurt though, God, it hurt so badly. I thought I knew everything, and there was no problem I couldn’t solve and...I lost faith in myself for a while.”

“I wish I could take the pain away,” Fern murmured, wavering towards him. Alex released her finger and wrapped his hands around her back, allowing her to fall against his

chest. The comfort was instantaneous, as though she had fallen into a pool of sunlight.

“It took me too long to see what you did for me, Fern.” Alex took a lock of hair in his fingers, twisting it gently before tucking it behind her ear. “With you, I’m finally happy with myself, exactly as I am.”

“You deserve to be happy.” She squeezed his hand. “You deserve everything.”

“Will you forgive me?” he whispered against her temple. “For acting so unfairly?”

She turned her head into his neck, listening to his pulse. “I do forgive you, Alex.”

They stood together for a long moment, Fern’s head tucked into the space between his shoulder and neck, Alex’s lips brushing the top of her head. Fern’s heart slowed, as though merely being in her presence was enough to calm both of them, bring them back to center.

“How do we fix this?” Fern pulled back to meet his eyes. “Is there a chance for us?”

“There is. But I need time, Fern,” he said. “I’m still raw. I have to know I can trust you.”

“How long do you have until you need to decide between working for Sylvester or Strathmore?” Fern asked, placing her palm against his jacket.

Alex leaned back to meet her eyes. “Sylvester wants me to start on the first of July, and Strathmore a week later.”

“So we have three weeks,” Fern said, pressing her hand against his heart.

Three weeks in which Alex had to decide how he would spend his life, what path he would take, and whether Fern would be a part of it. It felt like all the time in the world and no time at all.

“Give us those three weeks,” Fern said, feeling a rush of determination flowing through her. “We can start over, with only the truth, no deception, so we can decide if this is worth saving.”

The corner of his lips lifted, showing a hint of his dimple. “I don’t want to start over.”

Her throat closed, the hope that had been slowly growing dying in a wash of cold. “You don’t,” she echoed.

“We can’t start over,” he said, brushing his thumb over her cheek. “We can’t pretend all of this didn’t happen, and we’re not broken.” He pressed his forehead against hers as he released a low laugh. “Do you know what my mother had me do when I built the bookshelf that collapsed in front of the entire neighborhood?”

A small smile pulled at the corner of her lip. “What did she do?”

“She made me rebuild it. I learned from my mistakes and tried until I got it right.” He took her hands and laced his fingers into hers. “I want to stand in the rubble with you and learn from our mistakes until we build something stronger.”

The glimmer of hope turned into a glow, warm and bright.
“You’re willing to do that?”

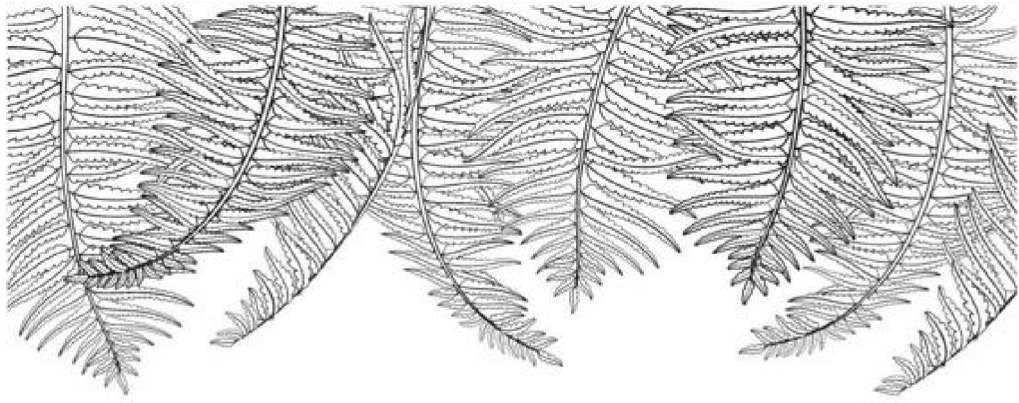
“You’ll remember, I’m an excellent carpenter.”

Fern fought the grin threatening to split her open as joy rushed through her. She fell into his outstretched arms, melting against his chest. For a moment they stood together, reveling in the intense relief flowing through them both.

“Fern,” Alex said, his voice low and husky. “May I kiss you?”

Fern smirked. “I would like that.”

When their lips met, Fern felt as though her heart had finally started beating again and the world was not so bleak. He was giving them a chance, the opportunity to rebuild what had broken. To find what they could share together.



Chapter 36

LATE JUNE WAS A magical time in Oxford. The rush and bustle of the academic year had passed and most people associated with the university left town to travel, visit summer homes, or simply enjoy a respite from the hectic pace of the past ten months. The portion of the Thames snaking through Oxford, packed to the gills weeks earlier, was delightfully deserted.

Alex took a belated liking to punting. Once he became accustomed to the mechanics of keeping balance while maneuvering the craft, he found it relaxing, even meditative. The breeze off the river was particularly pleasant on the humid summer day. Alex took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves to feel the breeze.

“They are not long, the weeping and the laughter,” Fern read from her position on the front of the punt, leaning back on one elbow and holding the book in front of her. *“Love and desire and hate: I think they have no portion in us after/ We pass the gate.”*

Fern dropped the book and looked at Alex, her eyes narrowed. "It's awfully full of ennui, don't you think?"

"Dowson is known for his lack of jollity. Is that all?"

"They are not long, the days of wine and roses: / Out of a misty dream / Our path emerges for a while, then closes / Within a dream. So we are to enjoy the pleasant times we have, for they are short-lived?"

Alex shrugged, momentarily distracted by Fern's calves. Since they were alone on the water, she had discarded her shoes and stockings in the summer heat and pulled her skirts up to her knees. He cleared his throat. "Life is short and beautiful, so let's have a picnic."

Fern grinned and leaned back on the deck of the prow, draping the open book over her eyes to block the sun. One hand dropped off the side of the boat, her fingers creating ripples as they glided through the water. Alex attempted to ignore the way her breasts pushed against the linen of her blouse. It had been a delightful, but chaste, three weeks. Alex insisted on doing everything properly, calling on her surprisingly accommodating father to ask permission to see her and keeping their physical contact limited to holding hands and brief kisses on the cheek. And despite the uncomfortable longing he felt for her, Alex was certain he was acting as a gentleman would.

Alex purchased a copy of *The Poems and Prose of Ernest Dowson* for Fern's birthday the previous week. It had been a difficult day, the first birthday Fern did not celebrate with her

twin at her side. Rose spent the day with her mother in London, and Fern's letters to her sister had gone unanswered. *Healing takes time*, Alex reminded her again and again. He was healing as well. Each day spent in Fern's presence reminded him of how special she was, how whole she made him feel.

"This is where you need to close your eyes," he said, using the pole to guide the punt towards the riverbank.

Fern gave a noncommittal grunt. "My eyes are closed," she said from beneath the book.

"Good," he replied with a smile, excitement bubbling in his chest. A moment later the punt pulled onto shore and Alex jumped off, tying a rope from the front of the boat to a tree. "Keep your eyes closed," he said as he took out an overloaded picnic basket and helped Fern to her feet, leading her off the boat and to his side.

"Can I open my eyes yet?" Alex smiled as he looked at her, her face adorably squished up. Her nose and cheeks had a smattering of freckles that developed from their days in the sunlight, like golden flakes sprinkled on her skin. He wanted to memorize each one of them, to map every inch of her body.

He discovered so much about her during the last three weeks, like her habit of gasping and giggling aloud while they read novels in the gardens, or her deeply competitive streak when they played chess. Alex taught her to fish in the lake on her family's property and even convinced her to ride alone on

a docile mare, although they did not stray far from the paddock.

“Not yet,” he said, putting his arms around her waist and pulling her flush against him. He met her lips with his, gently caressing, his tongue gliding against the seam. He felt her gasp as she opened to him, meeting his tongue hungrily with hers before he pulled away.

Fern blinked at him, her eyes dazed. Alex gave her a sly grin and took her hand. “Follow me.”

In only a few steps they reached their destination, a small isthmus of land pushing out into the currents of the Thames. “Do you recognize where we are?” he asked as he set down the basket and spread out a flannel blanket.

Fern groaned. “This is where I got stuck, isn’t it?”

“It is indeed.” Alex placed a quick peck on her forehead.

“Did you have to remind me?” Fern laughed, giving him a playful shove on the chest.

Alex caught her hand and kissed her palm. “Looking back, I think I fell in love with you that day. I saw your kindness, your humor, all of you. I should be grateful for the mud.”

She placed her palms against his chest. “I think I was already in love with you, but maybe it was just because you saved me from a watery death.” Alex smirked as he opened the basket. The pair settled in for their meal, sharing fresh bread and cheese and tart raspberries. They talked and laughed

as they watched dragonflies flit across the water, dipping their toes in the gentle current.

Fern settled her head on Alex's lap, his fingers tracing languidly over her cheeks and through her loose hair. "I wanted to ask you something," Alex asked, feeling his pulse speed up.

Fern sat up with a start. "Oh," she said, her voice tense. She caught her hands on her lap and looked at him. "What is it?"

"You know how Professor Sylvester taught in America before he came back to Oxford?"

Fern's face fell and Alex immediately felt remorseful. Clearly she had expected a different question. "I did know that," she said, her voice husky.

He pushed the momentary guilt aside and hoped she would forgive him once she heard what he had to say. "Right. Well, an acquaintance of his is currently the president of Radcliffe College in Boston, Mrs. Agassiz. She is expanding the programming there to include graduate studies, starting next year. It's the first program of its kind for women in the country."

"My goodness," Fern said, her eyes brightening. "How wonderful for them."

"Sylvester wrote to her, about you and your work," Alex said, drawing an envelope from his pocket. It was wrinkled and crumpled, but the red crest with two horizontal black slashes was unmistakable. "She wrote back. Sylvester must

have sent your work because you can skip undergraduate courses altogether. She wants you to be part of the first group of women to study graduate mathematics at Radcliffe.”

Fern opened the envelope with shaking fingers. Alex watched as her eyes darted over the page, color rising in her cheeks. “I could attend university?” she gasped. “In Boston?”

He nodded, taking her hand. “You can, if you want it.”

Setting the letter down on her lap, Fern shook her head. “I couldn’t though, my mother would never allow me to go, not so far away and for so long. My father would be a wreck. They don’t think I could do this alone.”

“What if you didn’t have to go alone?”

Fern’s eyes raised from her lap to meet Alex’s gaze. “What are you saying?”

“What if I came with you?” His pulse was thrumming wildly as he waited for her response. When he asked Sylvester to find a place for her to study, he never thought it would be in America. The thought of Fern thousands of miles away caused his chest to ache like it had never before, even during the month they were apart. He couldn’t stomach the idea of her leaving, to the point where, for a desperate passing moment, he considered not telling her about the offer to attend Radcliffe. But then he had a better idea.

“You can’t come with me,” Fern said. “Where would you work?”

“Boston has dozens of schools, good ones. With word from Sylvester, I can find a teaching position.”

“What about London, government service?”

“It’s not my dream,” he said, feeling more confident in his decision than he had ever felt before. Simply looking at Fern reassured him he was making the right choice. “You were right, I want to teach.”

“You can’t come with me, we would have to be—” Fern cut herself off and brought her hand to her lips. Alex sat up on one knee before her. He held up his grandmother’s ring, a modest silver circle with a sliver of emerald. He found it tucked in this bag after he left Birmingham, with a note from his mother saying simply, *just in case*.

“Fern,” he said, and heard her exhale a whimper. “I told you I couldn’t imagine my future without you, and I meant it. I want to be a part of your life, wherever it may be. Please, will you do me the honor of calling me your husband?”

Fern stared at him, her eyes full of hope and disbelief, joy and even fear. “That’s—you truly want me?” she whispered.

“Of course.” He dropped to both knees and took her hands, pulling her until their bodies were flush. “It could never be anyone but you.”

She pressed her lips to his, laughter escaping as he felt the moisture of her tears on his cheeks. “Yes,” she whispered. “Of course, a million times yes.”

Alex pressed his palm against the back of her neck, his fingers lacing in her hair as he deepened their kiss. They leaned back together against the blanket, Alex's body pressing into hers.

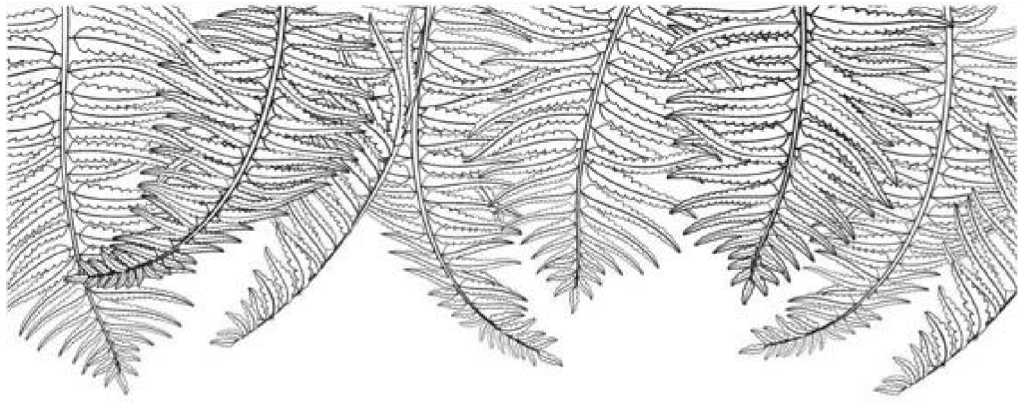
"When can we marry?" she asked, running her hands through his hair.

He laughed. "As soon as you would like. In a month?"

"How quickly can your mother be here?" Fern replied, calculations running through her mind.

Alex pressed his lips to hers, never wanting to be separated from her again. "Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow, then," she said, her face split into a smile. "I can't wait."



Chapter 37

Southampton, August 1899

THE THIN GOLD BAND on her left hand spun easily under Fern's thumb. Glancing down, she stared at the two rings circling her finger, the tiny emerald set in silver Alex gave her on the riverbank, and the gold band she had worn every day for the past two weeks. She was not yet accustomed to their presence, nor to her new name.

Mrs. Carroway, the porter had called her when he came to collect her trunk, full of the possessions she found worthy enough to tote across the Atlantic to start her new life. The weight of what she was leaving behind felt much heavier.

The enormous ocean liner and dock sprawling before them was a hub of activity as passengers lined up to board, and dock workers hauled luggage and supplies onto cargo holds. The pungent odor of decaying fish and the cries of gulls overhead nauseated her, and she wavered on her feet.

"You're doing it again." Alex caught her hand in his, raising it to kiss her fingers. "You'll spin them right off if you keep it up."

Fern rested her head against his shoulder. "I'm sorry. I'm a bit nervous."

"You have every right to be," Alex replied. "But," he said, drawing a notebook from his jacket pocket, "it probably won't surprise you I've been doing some research on Boston."

Fern pressed her lips together, unable to fight her smile. "And what did you learn?"

He studied his list. "Did you know Boston is famous for its beans?"

Her eyes widened. "*Beans?* You must be joking."

He shook his head, the picture of solemnity. "It is the site of numerous important events in the American Revolution. Also baseball. We'll have to learn if we are going to be true Bostonians."

Fern wrinkled her nose. "I'll leave that to you while I find the nearest library and museum." She glanced behind her and scanned the crowd. "Do you think she'll come?"

Alex put his arm around her and squeezed. "I don't know." He kissed the top of her head. "You can always visit, we will save for tickets."

The passengers around them shuffled forward towards the ramps as the second-class passengers were cleared to board. Their transatlantic passage had been a wedding present from Fern's father. Her mother and sisters did not attend the small service held in the morning room of Boar's Hill. It was hard to

fully experience the joy of marrying Alex when someone so important was missing.

Alex sighed and held out his arm for her. “Shall we?” His light tone was forced, and Fern struggled to fight the tears pricking at her eyes. She couldn’t just leave, not with so much left unsaid.

“Fern!”

She spun quickly, standing on her toes to scan the crowd. In the distance she could see a wide-brimmed white hat bobbing among the sea of faces, pushing its way toward the edge of the dock where they stood. “Fern, wait!”

Fern released a sob as Alex pushed forward, parting the crowd in front of them. She tripped over a discarded valise and stumbled, nearly colliding with a willowy figure in a pale dress. Fern’s stomach jolted when she saw her sister.

“You’re here,” Fern gasped.

Violet collected herself, straightening her hat and smoothing the sleeves of her dress, then clamped her hands around her reticule. “I thought it was wrong to send you off without saying goodbye.” She looked over to Alex and eyed him warily before returning her gaze to Fern. “You’re married now.”

Fern fought to keep her voice from trembling. “I am. You weren’t—”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t at your wedding. That I wasn’t around for...any of what happened.” She paused, pursing her lips.

“Rose is still angry, you know. Mama too.”

Fern winced. She felt Alex move to her side, but she waved him away with a gentle movement of her hand. “I know,” Fern said. “I had hoped they would come, but—”

“Rose will forgive you, I think,” Violet interrupted. “I don’t think she expected this of you.”

“I didn’t expect it of myself.” Fern swallowed hard against the lump developing in her throat.

The crowd began shifting as one as the passengers began boarding, trunks and valises competing with families as they loaded up the gangways. Fern’s eyes darted behind her and back to her sister. “I don’t know when I’ll be back. My classes start in a few weeks, and Alex starts teaching in the winter term.” She hesitated. “Will I be welcome home?”

Violet gave a stiff nod. “You will, but not yet.”

The sisters stared at each other for a long moment. It seemed as though an entire universe existed between them, the distance insurmountable. Then Violet reached forward and took Fern’s hand in hers. “I love you, Fern,” she said, her voice trembling. “I want you to be happy.”

“I love you,” Fern replied, squeezing her sister’s hand as tears blurred her vision. Her voice broke as she tried to speak. “Will you make sure Rose is all right? And she’s happy?”

Violet shrugged. “She will find her own happily ever after. So will I. This one is yours.” She leaned in to kiss her sister on the cheek, and then fixed her gaze on Alex. “Take care of her.”

He smiled and nodded. "I promise I will."

With one last squeeze of her sister's hand, Violet turned and disappeared into the crowd.

Alex had Fern in his arms before she could take a full breath, holding her tight as she shuddered with sobs. The other passengers fanned around them, jostling and bumping the couple as they strained toward the gangway.

Raising her head, Fern pushed the tears from her cheeks. "We have to board now, don't we?"

Alex touched her cheek. "We don't have to do anything. If you don't want to go, we won't. We can figure something out here, with your family. You can take the time you need, make amends."

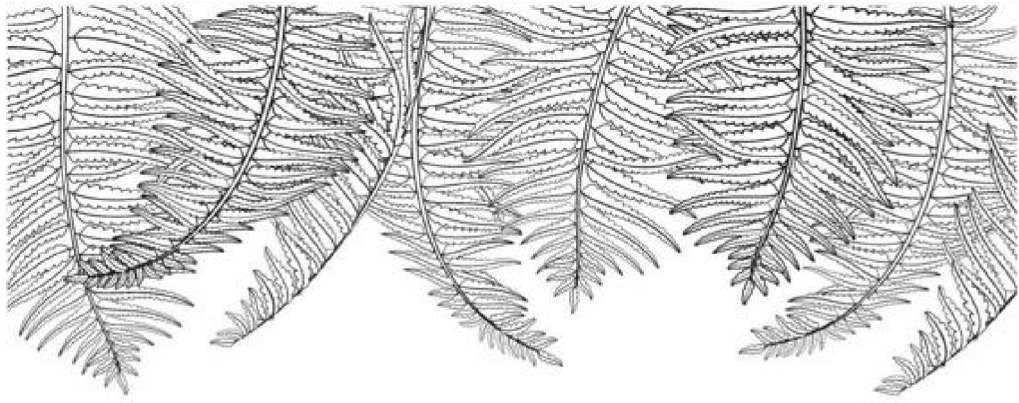
She stared at him wide-eyed and shifted to avoid a porter dragging an oversized trunk toward the ramps. "After all you've done to make this happen, you'd be willing to walk away?"

"I might be a little disappointed." He shrugged. "I will admit I am excited about the beans."

Fern smiled despite herself. "And I could be persuaded to enjoy baseball." She pressed her hands to his cheeks. "Are you certain I can do this? That I can be a scholar and have a life in America?"

"I've never been more certain of anything in my life." Alex smiled, dropping his mouth to kiss her. "Except you. I love you."

Fern took his hand and pulled him toward the gangway, now teeming with passengers. “Then we should probably get on board.”



Epilogue

Boston, Massachusetts, 1909

FERN STRETCHED IN THE early morning sunlight, attempting to ignore the rumbling of her stomach and the fluttering nerves in her belly.

She began to roll to her side when a strong arm covered her breast and pulled her back. “It’s not morning yet,” Alex murmured sleepily. “I’m not ready to leave.”

She groaned. “It’s the first day of classes,” she replied. “I need to make a good impression.” Today she started her fourth year as an adjunct professor at Radcliffe College. After completing her doctoral studies, she stayed on in a teaching capacity, quickly earning a reputation as a demanding but compassionate educator. Educating young women was thrilling, far more fulfilling than she had imagined when she took the post.

Smiling, Fern pushed her body back against him, feeling his arousal pressing against her lower back. “You’re such a distraction,” she said with a sly smile.

“Well,” he said, rolling her onto her back and kissing her tenderly on her temple. “Emily is most certainly already

awake and reading.” Fern rolled her eyes. Their seven-year-old daughter spent the majority of her time in the small library on the first floor, and considered time spent sleeping a wasted opportunity for learning.

“And as best I can tell,” Alex continued, “we have approximately—” He squinted at his pocket watch on the nightstand. “—thirteen minutes until little Henry comes bounding in here to see his mummy.”

“Thirteen minutes is not much time.”

“Thirteen minutes is plenty, my dear,” Alex said, positioning himself between her thighs and sliding into her.

When they had each found their release, Fern curled herself into Alex’s body, gently stroking the hair on his forearms. “Are you meeting with your teaching assistants today?”

Alex nodded, kissing Fern’s hair and stroking her collarbone. “I am. I taught most of them before, but it’s a new role for them.” He started teaching graduate-level mathematics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology the previous year, excelling in his role as a classroom teacher.

His palm settled on her curved lower abdomen and stroked gently. “You’re starting to show now.”

Fern sighed. “I’m happy the illness has gone away. It would set a poor first impression if I cast up my accounts on the first day of classes.”

He chuckled and bent down to kiss her growing stomach. “You know, you could be having twins.”

Her eyes widened in horror, and she pinched his cheek. “Oh, you bite your tongue.”

Alex feigned a scowl and kissed her again. “I’m proud of you, you know.”

She smiled serenely. “I know you are.” Fern barely had time to kiss him before their door opened and a small strawberry blond head popped around the corner.

“Mummy? Papa? You ‘wake?”

Fern grinned. “We are, my darling.” Henry, named for his godfather, crossed the room in a flash and jumped on the bed, giving his father just enough time to pull on his robe and wink at his wife. She pulled her covers high as she sprinkled kisses over the boy’s chubby face.

“Before you go, will you respond to Rose about Christmas? I want to make sure we book on the same voyage.”

Alex nodded and placed a tender kiss on his wife’s forehead, noting her apprehension. The relationship between Fern and her twin had evolved significantly over the past decade. Despite finding themselves both living in America, they had seen each other only twice, although they corresponded often. They planned to travel together with their families to visit Boar’s Hill for the holidays, marking the first time they would sleep under the same roof since she left England ten years ago.

“Can I play with the globe, Papa?” Henry was already spinning the globe on his father’s dresser with abandon, the

entire apparatus teetering wildly. Deciding a moment of distraction was worth the object's potential destruction, Fern and Alex took the moment to put on their robes and sneak one last kiss.

A knock on the door interrupted them. "Is Henry in here?"

Alex sighed. "Yes, Mum. He's currently bent on world destruction." When Fern and Alex welcomed their daughter Emily during her second year of studies, Mrs. Carroway gladly left Birmingham to assist her son and daughter-in-law. Fern had developed a fast camaraderie with his mother, finding a kindred spirit in the book-loving woman.

"We will never have a peaceful morning again, will we?" Fern remarked as she hoisted Henry onto her hip and carried him downstairs. They purchased their brownstone on Observatory Hill three years prior, when John Joseph Sylvester's *Prosody in Verse Vol. II* was published posthumously. His will indicated the proceeds from its sales be distributed to its contributors. An account established in the name of Eliot Dickinson and Alexander Carroway was replenished monthly as royalties came in.

"I can't imagine spending a chaotic morning with anyone else," Alex said, grunting as Emily threw herself into his legs and launched into a recitation of Anne's most recent adventures in Green Gables.

A few hours later, the children successfully settled in with their tutors and Mrs. Carroway, Alex walked Fern to the gates of Radcliffe College, as was their tradition on the first day of

classes. He straightened the lapel of her forest green jacket and kissed her gently. “Go change the world, my love,” he said with a proud smile.

She grinned in return. “I shall.”

Afterword

If you enjoyed Fern and Alex's story, please consider writing a review on Amazon and GoodReads! Reviews can be just a sentence and go a long way to helping independent authors like me.

Did you love Lord Henry? Read this except from *Where You Are*, coming summer 2023.

As a writer, I am inspired by interesting historical stories and locations. While traveling in 2015, I visited Oxford University and happened upon a display about the history of women at the university. Women were first allowed to attend classes at Oxford in 1878 but were often barred from lecture halls and particular areas of studies at the professors' discretion. As a result, often the first female scholars learned in private parlors and in back rooms of local businesses. Women were not officially admitted until 1920 when 130 students matriculated in the divinity school. By 1940, only five women were studying mathematics at Oxford.

John Joseph Sylvester served as the Savilian Chair of Geometry at Oxford University until his death in 1897 (I took a bit of artistic license and extended his life by two years). A scholar who faced prejudice because of his background, I would like to think he would have supported Fern's dreams.

I am incredibly grateful to my team of critique buddies and supporters. For Sarah, Lisa, Wally, Dee, and Shay for their sharp eyes and developmental assistance, for Cara and her aid in bringing Fern and Alex to emotional highs I never would have achieved on my own, and Sharon for her critique and encouragement. And of course to my real-life romance hero for encouraging me to "publish the damn thing." Love you all.

An excerpt from Where You Are

PROLOGUE

July 10, 1902

Bristol Channel

“I’m not letting you get off this boat until you agree to marry me.”

Nausea gripped Henry’s gut, not entirely unrelated to the rocking of the ship around him. He reached for Ellie’s hand, his fingers trembling, but she pulled away, giving him her back.

“Marry me,” he repeated, his voice cracking.

Ellie didn’t look at him when she spoke, her voice low and icy. “You know why I won’t. Why I *can’t*.”

The coastline of Cardiff approached behind her, its cathedral spires and smoke stacks mocking him like a harbinger of doom. *Everything will change once we get back.*

“You’re wrong.” He caught her hand this time, felt her jolt at his touch, and dropped it, the slight cutting him to his core.

“It won’t be like before. Everything will be different. Everything *is* different for us.”

She turned then, her silver eyes, usually bubbling with warmth, flashed cold as steel. The winds had pulled several curls from her careful chignon and they danced around her cheeks, tempting him to reach out and touch her. “And why exactly would it be different?”

“Because I love you,” he blurted, loud enough to draw stares from the other passengers on the deck. “And you love me, and we’d be foolish to try to live separate lives again when we know what we can be together.”

“I will. Not. Marry. *You*.” She spat out each word and they struck him individually, like bullets to his heart. But he wouldn’t be a coward, not this time, not with so much at stake.

“Christ, El.” He ran his hand roughly through his hair, squeezing his eyes shut for a moment before capturing her gaze. “We can do this. Why would you throw away what we could have?”

“Because none of this was real!” she cried, her eyes suddenly blazing and cheeks flushed. “All of those times, when I needed you, when I *wanted* you...” A single tear fell from her eye and she dashed it away as if she didn’t want him to see it. “You made me believe I was special to you, but I was wrong, horribly, painfully wrong.”

The heavy weight on his chest pressed harder, pushing the air from his lungs. “I was an idiot—”

“But I’m not,” Ellie interrupted. “Perhaps I was an idiot, pining for you for so long, but I won’t any longer. I’m putting myself first. I can’t let you hurt me again.” She stepped back from him and removed her glove.

She pulled the band from her left hand, and Henry’s heart jumped to his throat. “No,” he said, his voice breaking. “Please don’t—”

“I’m sorry, Henry,” she whispered before taking his hand and pressing the ring into his palm.



Chapter 1

Six years and seven months earlier
Fensworth Hall
Mayfair, London
22 December 1895

“This is why they refer to such events as a crush, isn’t it?” Henry shouted to his cousin William Tottle, Marquess of Hillgate, mere inches from him. The cacophony from the hundreds of guests pressed into the ballroom at Fensworth Manor made normal conversation impossible. Every horizontal surface in the room was covered in garland, giving the impression that an entire pine forest had sacrificed its existence to be beribboned and flung upon the walls. The orchestra stuffed in the corner alternated between carols and

waltzes, while the air was thick with the scent of spiced wine and overly applied perfumes.

Henry's mother, the Countess Fensworth, had outdone herself this year, turning her annual Christmas fete into the social event of the season by inviting everyone of consequence who had not fled to the country for the holiday. Having just received the news that he would not in fact be graduating from Oxford in the spring alongside his classmates, Henry was grateful to have his parents distracted by the event.

William no sooner raised his glass in a mock toast when he was bumped by a passing guest and slopped most of his wine down his waistcoat and over Henry's sleeve. Both men sighed. "A waste of a perfectly good drink," William said as he wiped it off with his handkerchief.

"I wouldn't call it perfectly good," Henry said with a smirk. "Anything of interest out there tonight?"

William huffed. "The standard boring debutantes and desperate mamas, but this time wearing festive colors."

Henry had enough experience in ballrooms to recognize the wide-eyed innocence of the novices of the social circuit, as well as the pinched lips and tight shoulders of the mothers shepherding their daughters through their third seasons. The entire charade screamed of leading livestock to auction, and it seemed that the birth of their savior would not be enough to distract the matchmakers from their mission.

Henry's stomach churned as he watched a young woman, clearly terrified, being pushed towards a gentleman a few

paces away. *Lord Fairleigh*, Henry thought, suppressing the urge to groan. A veritable prick. Approaching the age of forty, the man had spent the majority of his life wasting away his fortune in gaming hells and brothels. When his brother died unexpectedly and he inherited the barony, Fairleigh was suddenly on the hunt for a wife whose dowry could fill the rapidly depleting family coffers.

Henry felt a jolt of sympathy. *Poor girl, she'll most certainly catch a disease just shaking his hand.*

Surely this girl's mother must know Fairleigh's reputation, but the woman persisted, placing her hand on her daughter's back to edge her forward. Fairleigh turned up his nose at the girl, and Henry could see why, even if his transparent method repulsed him.

The girl was heavy, endowed with more curves than were considered stylish. She was rather short. Barely over five feet tall, she was gifted with heavy breasts and generous hips constrained in a pale pink satin dress abounding with fripperies that only seemed to call attention to what she was most likely attempting to hide. Henry enjoyed a woman with curves, but only when she was confident in them, and as this girl was attempting to blend into the scenery, he doubted she had the ego to carry her generous figure. She was pretty enough, with a delicate nose, a rosebud mouth set in a heart-shaped face, and raven black hair slicked back into a tight knot studded with pearls.

The girl's mother looked away to chat with another matron passing by. Henry couldn't take his eyes off of the girl, an unexpected protective surge rising in his chest.

Fairleigh gifted the girl's mother with a half-hearted smile before escorting the young lady onto the dance floor. Henry's eyes tracked their movement, watching her sparkling eyes attempt to catch his as they spun across the floor. The girl attempted to draw her partner into conversation but Fairleigh's eyes darted around the room. After a moment, he made eye contact with Henry, opening them wide before rolling them towards the ceiling in a gesture of such exaggerated dismay that Henry felt himself recoil. He stopped, bowing to her before leaving her stranded, alone in the middle of the dance floor with pink rising in her cheeks.

In four quick strides, Henry was at Fairleigh's side. "What are you doing?"

Fairleigh chuckled. "What a nightmare, that one. Her father is an old friend of mine, so I took pity on her. At least she'll get one dance tonight."

Bile rose in Henry's throat. "You shouldn't have done that. She's humiliated."

Fairleigh raised one eyebrow in a gesture so pompous that Henry felt the nearly uncontrollable urge to rip it directly off the man's forehead. "Since when have you been the protector of young women?"

Henry winced. He had earned his reputation as a scoundrel from an early age, learning to place bets when he was barely

out of the nursery and chasing women like a dog after a fox. He may be a scoundrel, but he took pains to preserve the dignity of any woman who crossed his path.

Didn't he?

Fairleigh clapped his hand on Henry's shoulder. "I'm headed to White's after this. I assume you'll be joining me?"

Henry gave him a terse nod. His rounds through London's finest gentleman's establishments would not stop simply to observe the birth of the savior. Henry could not help it if he needed distraction, seeking comfort in the arms of the willing women who seemed to gravitate towards him. A fresh-faced innocent was of no interest to him, a ball merely an excuse to drink to excess and potentially discover a willing young widow to warm his bed.

This poor girl should never have caught his eye, but somehow he couldn't tear his gaze away.

Henry finally turned back to the girl. Her chest heaved as she watched Fairleigh's retreat, pressing against the fabric of her gown, as she blinked repeatedly. A horrid tightness built in Henry's chest; how many times had he left a girl nearly in tears on the dance floor? More than once he had rejected a lady for being too young, too homely, too innocent... He had never held still for long enough to see the aftermath before but had been gone before the pain hit their eyes. He didn't want to see it now, but hadn't turned away in time. Shame rose inside him, enflaming his cheeks.

As though she felt his thoughts, the girl turned and met his eyes. Henry froze. They were liquid silver, the grey of water crashing on the rocks in the dead of winter. She held his gaze for a long beat, and in that moment he saw no shame, no sadness, only steely resolve.

Then she turned and walked onto the terrace.

His feet were moving before he recognized what he was doing. By the time he reached the terrace, the young woman with the haunting silver eyes was nowhere to be seen. A dusting of snow had fallen over the stone terrace like the cook had spread powdered sugar over the rows of hedges and statues of the gardens spreading behind the home. He scanned the space searching for her, as though apologizing to her could help him atone for his past sins.

A flash of pink caught the periphery of his vision, moving past the hedges in the garden below. No debutante would be caught alone in the gardens unless she was escaping the party. *Could she be there?*

Henry walked swiftly along the path, the cold biting at his cheeks as he peered around every corner until he came up on a bench next to a frozen-over birdbath. He was momentarily stunned upon seeing her, her back to him and her hands braced on a bench. Her shoulders heaved as though she were sobbing, but he couldn't hear a sound.

“Miss,” he said, and she whirled around. Henry gasped.

Her silver eyes were wide and panicked, her cheeks ghostly pale, lips tinged blue as her breath came in raspy puffs. She

clutched at her gown, pulling at the fabric constraining her breasts.

“Can you breathe?” he asked, taking her hands away. They were clammy and cold.

She shook her head violently, then nodded. “It’s—I—”, she stammered, tears beginning to stream from her eyes. He could see how tightly she was laced into her gown, the stays and corset pulled in an unholy amount.

“You need to breathe, miss,” he said, his voice low and soothing.

Again, she shook her head, several curls falling loose and whipping about her cheeks. “My heart—it’s too fast—”

Henry took her hands in his and stroked his thumbs over her palms. “Take deep breaths—”

“I can’t with this bloody dress!” she cried, yanking her hands away and pulling at the bodice of her gown.

Henry was temporarily frozen. He was alone in a garden with a marriageable young lady as she pawed at her dress. This could end in a one-way trip to the vicar if he wasn’t careful.

But the fear in her eyes was too much for him to bear. “Is your dress too tight?”

“God, yes,” she exclaimed.

Yet another phrase he had heard more than once in a garden, but under different circumstances. “Can I loosen the laces for

you?”

She nodded furiously and turned to give him her back, momentarily stunning him with her unabashed trust in him. He began to tug at the ties, but they were so strained he couldn't pull the strings apart. “You have to hold still, I can't—I can't get them undone.”

His words only caused her breaths to come harder, pulling against the lacing and making it more difficult to release. “Please, it's too much,” she groaned.

Henry continued to pull and fumble. Somehow all of his experience in undressing a woman was failing him now, when a literal life depended on it. “I can't get it, I don't know what to do—”

She released a low whine, a keening sound of desperation, and Henry's heart lurched, desperate to help her. He spun her around and looked directly into her eyes. “Hold still, don't move,” he ordered. And incredibly, she did.

Henry drew a small folding knife from his boot and her eyes widened. Enough encounters with ruffians in alleyways after too much drink required him to be armed, although he had certainly never expected the knife to be useful at a ball. *There is a first for everything*, he supposed.

“I'm going to have to cut the stays so you can breathe, all right?”

She once again gave her his back. He swiftly brought the knife to the ties, undoing one after the other as efficiently as

possible without touching her skin. She drew in a deep, ragged breath on a sob, clutching the fabric to her chest. Henry caught her shoulders and led her to the bench, helping her to her feet and holding her steady.

After a few moments, she brought her gaze up to meet his.

Those eyes. Like liquid mercury, like starlight contained in her irises.

And then she vomited.

Where You Are will be available in paperback, eBook, and on Kindle Unlimited in Summer 2023

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About the Author

Ginny was the kid who loved kissing scenes in movies and always rooted for Mulder and Scully to hook up. Her first piece of writing was a horrendous fanfic romance based on *The Three Musketeers* when she was thirteen that will never see the light of day.

Ginny started writing romance with purpose in 2021 to avoid doom-scrolling social media and has never stopped. To pay the bills, she is a middle school assistant principal and has been in education for fifteen years. She has earned two master's degrees, one in secondary education and another in school leadership. Most of her writing is done on her phone or in the parking lot of her kids' extracurricular activities.

When she is not writing, Ginny is a very slow long-distance runner or making a dent in her endless "to be read" list. She is the mother of three kids, two exceptionally stupid dogs, two codependent cats, and the grandmother to a hermit crab.

While she started writing during the pandemic, she has found it to be a new lifeline and form of self-care and has already planned her next five books in the series. If you enjoy

reading about Fern and Alex in *Adding Up to Love*, you'll love *Our Path to the Stars* (Violet's story) and *Where You Are* (Lord Henry's story), both coming in 2023. *Finding North*, (Rose's Story) is coming in the spring of 2024, and Lily and Marigold will have stories later next year.

Ginny can be found on Instagram, Facebook, and her website.

Also By Ginny B. Moore

The Flower Sisters Series

What Happened in the Garden

Clara and Benedict's Story

A Flower Sisters Prequel Novella

Available exclusively to newsletter subscribers

Adding Up to Love

Fern and Alex's Story

February 2023

Where You Are

Eleanor and Henry's Story

Coming Summer 2023

Our Path to the Stars

Violet and Cormac's Story

Coming Fall 2023

Finding North

Rose and Ben's Story

Coming 2024

Marigold and Lily's stories in development

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