



PASSION PAINTED
in a
LADY'S HEART
HENRIETTA
HARDING

Passion Painted in a Lady's Heart

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

HENRIETTA HARDING

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Passion Painted in a Lady's Heart

Introduction

In the opulent ballrooms of the ton, Rosalind Fairchild, daughter of the Duke of Lonsdale, embarks on her sparkling first season. However, the more her parents press her towards a union with an insipid Duke, the more Rosalind seeks refuge in the inviting world of art. As her emotive paintings provoke passion in every brushstroke, a masked stranger who shares her yearning for art, crosses her path, igniting a flame of desire that burns hotter than any portrait could capture.

Will Rosalind dare to dream that her paintings' passion could become her reality?

Sebastian Sinclair, the seductive Earl of Southbourne, is a man of wealth and privilege. Yet, beneath his noble façade, a dark spectre looms; the ominous Southbourne curse, which has plagued generations of his family with the threat of madness. With his past haunting him, Sebastian vows not to fall in love for fear of this curse, but destiny has other plans. His world is turned upside down when he meets the tempting Rosalind.

Will he be able to resist the magnetic pull of their lust?

Surrounded by the world of art, Rosalind and Sebastian are lost in the alluring ideals of love, passion, and romance that their painted fantasies portray. However, as their burning liaison grows stronger, horrifying secrets threaten to tear them apart. Will they find their own place within the canvas of life or will they remain forever captive in the brush strokes of a masterpiece waiting to be unveiled?

Chapter 1

London, England, Spring, 1813.

“Oh, Rosalind, there you are. Why weren’t you at luncheon?” Rosalind Fairchild’s mother, Lillian, Duchess of Lonsdale, asked, peering at her daughter, who hastily hid the book she was carrying behind her back.

“I... well... I wasn’t hungry. I ate so much at luncheon; the turbot was delicious. I just didn’t feel like eating anything else,” Rosalind lied.

She had missed luncheon because she had lost track of time, perusing the shelves in her father’s library, and looking at all the books neither of her parents approved of. The duchess looked at her and raised her eyebrows.

“I had to entertain Lady Tilly alone. She’s hard work, and your father’s no good at making small talk. If you intend to miss dinner, inform me, Rosalind. We live in the same house. It would take only a moment,” the duchess said, and Rosalind nodded.

“I will, mother,” she said, edging along the wall in the hallway beneath a portrait of her father, whom she could not help but feel was really watching her from behind.

“What’s that you’ve got there?” her mother asked.

“Oh... nothing, just... a book. Actually, mother, I feel a slight megrim coming on. I think I’ll go up to my bedroom and lie down. I won’t dine tonight, either. I’ll ask Molly to bring up a tray,” she said, hoping to distract her mother, who sighed.

“Rosalind, you’re becoming something of a recluse. You’ve just had your debut. You’re out in society. Retreating now won’t do you any favors—a young lady not noticed in her first season becomes a wallflower in the second. This is your chance and mine, too. We must seize it,” the duchess said.

Rosalind nodded. She knew her mother had been disappointed by her debut at the Hayton Lodge ball. It had been something of a disaster. She had not wanted to dance with anyone and found herself left on the wall, much to the duchess' horror.

Rosalind had tried her best, but the atmosphere had been stifling with its heightened expectations. She had wanted only to retreat into herself rather than blossom, as was the expectation.

“I know that, mother. It's only been two weeks. I don't think any woman receives an offer of marriage after two weeks,” Rosalind said, and her mother tutted.

“The Earl of Brancaster's daughter was betrothed the day after her debut,” she said, citing a story the ton had marveled over the previous season.

But Rosalind was not the daughter of the Earl of Brancaster, nor did she possess aspirations to marry the first eligible bachelor presented to her. Rosalind was in no hurry to marry,

and she was more than happy to pursue her own passions, rather than be caught up in the passions of anyone else.

“Yes, well... I’m sure she was possessed of estimable qualities I find myself lacking in, mother,” Rosalind replied.

Her mother was forever comparing her to the daughters of other aristocrats. She was not as pretty as the daughter of Lord and Lady Sotherby or as vivacious as Charlotte Pilkington, daughter of the Marchioness of Hetton. Her hair was not as long, her eyes not as blue, her French not as pronounced. The list went on.

“Oh, Rosalind, you’ve got many estimable qualities. It’s just that... well, you don’t always make them clear for others to see,” her mother replied.

Rosalind sighed. She was not the sort of person to push herself forward or make herself the center of attention. If others saw her qualities, so be it, but as for forcing them to the fore...

“I’m going to lie down, Mother. I’ll come down later,” she said.

Her mother nodded.

“And no more painting, Rosalind; don’t waste yourself on painting. It’s a pursuit for the nursery, and a watercolor can be an idle distraction. As for these ideas about displays and exhibitions... it’s not going to get you a husband,” she said.

Rosalind forced a smile, and still with the book behind her back, she edged along the wall to the stairs, making a swift pirouette, and burying the volume in her skirts before hurrying up to the landing. It was not until she was back in her bedroom she breathed a sigh of relief, taking out the book and looking at it with a smile.

“Europe’s Masterpieces,” she read, opening the book to reveal colored prints of the masterpieces of the great European painters. Caravaggio, Raphael, Michelangelo, Giotto, Botticelli.

Rosalind was a painter, not an idle sketcher or watercolor enthusiast, but a real painter, who painted real portraits. Her parents did not approve, actively discouraging her, particularly in light of her subjects. Rosalind painted lovers, despite never having had a lover herself. She was fascinated by the subject of love... of passions entwined, of lips pressed together, of forbidden romances.

She painted classical scenes. Myths and legends of the ancient world as a backdrop for the paintings now hidden beneath her bed. Her latest work is a depiction of the love between Ariadne and Dionysus.

It was half finished, and taking it out, she gazed down at the depiction of the lovers. The god, Dionysus, presenting the naked Ariadne with the crown he would eventually turn into a star.

“If I can ever get it right,” Rosalind thought to herself.

She had painted over the canvas half a dozen times, and now she hoped the book she had taken from her father's library would provide the key to finishing the painting. It depicted many of the paintings Rosalind had taken for inspiration, and she hoped to copy some of the techniques, particularly when it came to the figure of Ariadne herself.

"I just find the faces so difficult," she said to herself, setting the painting on her easel and taking out her paints.

Her bedroom was a hidden studio, where canvases and frames were concealed behind large pieces of furniture, and paints and acrylics hidden in the draws beneath her clothes. When Rosalind had tentatively revealed the beginnings of her passion for painting, her parents had been horrified, telling her it was a pursuit for penniless Italians who painted baroque ceilings for the papists.

"And why must everyone be without their clothes?" her father had demanded, when Rosalind had spoken of her fondness for such scenes.

"It's artistic, father," Rosalind had said, but her father had only raised his eyebrows and made a comment about continental

excesses.

Her mother had expressed similar sentiments, and Rosalind had been left with little choice but to keep her passion a secret. But the more she painted, the more she was convinced it was her true calling. To see the figures in her mind emerge on the canvas, to bring them to life; it was exhilarating.

“Something more... in the face: the eyes aren’t right,” Rosalind said to herself, peering into Ariadne’s eyes and wondering what the daughter of King Minos must have felt when she and Dionysus were wedded.

She had painted Dionysus pointing into the heavens, where the constellation Corona was emerging in the night sky. This was Ariadne’s crown, and she was pointing upwards, as their lips met in a kiss. Rosalind liked to imagine herself in the paintings, and now she closed her eyes, allowing Dionysus to take her by the hand and bring his lips to hers.

She envisioned him whispering, “I would bring down the stars for you,” while his hands slip around her waist.

Rosalind breathed a deep sigh, arching her back, as she imagined Dionysus tracing a trail of kisses down her neck. She had painted Ariadne in the nude, her breasts pert and pale, a trail of silk covering her lower half. Rosalind imagined the god's hands caressing her body, taken within the pleasure of his touch. A knock at the door caused her to jump. Opening her eyes, she scrambled to conceal the painting and her paints.

"One moment," she called out.

"It's just me, my Lady," her maid, Molly, called out. Rosalind breathed a sigh of relief, calling out for her to enter, as she rose to her feet, blushing at the thought of what had just gone through her mind.

"Oh, Molly, I thought you were mother," Rosalind said, for her maid knew all about her passion for painting.

"No, my Lady. Your mother told me you weren't feeling well. I thought you might like a cup of chamomile tea. Lady Elizabeth's just arrived, too. She's speaking to your mother in

the drawing room. Will you receive her, or should I tell her you're not well?" Molly asked.

Molly had been Rosalind's maid since she was fifteen and deemed old enough to require someone other than a nanny or governess to see to her needs. She was fiercely loyal, and the only other person, apart from Lady Elizabeth, Rosalind trusted to know about her secrets.

"I'm not unwell. I just wanted an excuse to get away from her," Rosalind said. Her maid smiled.

"It's very good, my Lady," she said, glancing at the half-finished painting on the easel.

"I can't get the eyes right." Rosalind complained, taking the painting off the easel, and tilting it to one side.

"Shall I tell Lady Elizabeth to come up, my Lady, or will you go down?" Molly asked.

“Ask her to come up. She can advise me on the eyes,”
Rosalind replied.

A few moments later, her friend, Lady Elizabeth Thornton, entered the room. She was a pretty creature, dressed in a yellow dress, and wrapped in a shawl. She greeted Rosalind with a smile.

“Your mother tells me you’ve got a terrible megrim. She’s worried you won’t make it to the masquerade ball. I’m to talk some sense into you,” she said, and Rosalind laughed.

Elizabeth, the daughter of the Marquess of Thornton, was always told to talk sense into her. Rosalind’s mother held Elizabeth as a paradigm of everything Rosalind was not. The two of them found amusement in the comparison. They had been the closest of friends since childhood, though Elizabeth was a year older, and they shared all their secrets.

“Oh, that... well, what choice do I have? Even I can't prolong a megrim for three days,” Rosalind said.

She was not looking forward to the Graystone masquerade, even though Graystone Manor itself was home to an impressive art collection. But the Marchioness of Graystone was a close friend of Rosalind's mother, and the masquerade ball was to be a highlight of the season. There could be no getting out of it.

“Oh, it'll be fun, Rosalind. Don't you think so?” Elizabeth said.

Rosalind raised her eyebrows, though she had to admit it would provide a modicum of entertainment, particularly the prospect of seeing the art her mother had once described as “vulgar.” Rosalind had painted her own mask and Elizabeth's. Now she took them out of the wardrobe, much to the delight of her friend.

“Do you like them, Elizabeth?” Rosalind asked.

She had taken her inspiration from a book on the Venetian carnival she had found in her father's library. The prints depicted brightly colored masks in red and gold, and Rosalind had made two matching masks, decorated with peacock feathers, and held up to the face by ornately decorated sticks.

"They're wonderful, Rosalind; you're so talented," Elizabeth exclaimed. She held up the mask Rosalind had made her, disappearing behind the expanse of painted papier-mâché and feathers.

"I hope they'll be all right. We don't want to be recognized," Rosalind said, and Elizabeth looked out from behind her mask and smiled.

"Everyone's going to be masked; we'll not know who anyone is. Even your mother's going to wear one. She told me so, though I don't know who's going to make hers," Elizabeth said.

Rosalind smiled. This was to be her first masquerade ball, and she was looking forward to it, even as she felt somewhat

nervous at the thought of once more being left on the wall. Her mother had such high hopes for her, and while she was possessed of an independent spirit, she also knew her parents were impatient for her to make a match.

“Well, she hasn’t asked me to. You know what she thinks of my painting. She’s hardly going to ask me to make her something like this,” Rosalind said, holding up her own mask and laughing.

A long mirror hung on the bedroom wall and the two friends stood next to one another, laughing at the sight of themselves obscured behind the papier-mâché and feathers. Rosalind was pleased with her attempts, even as she feared the masks might be somewhat over the top.

“I think we’ll be the talk of the ton, Rosalind,” Elizabeth said as Rosalind replaced the masks in the wardrobe.

“Or it’s scandal,” Rosalind replied, for she was unsure what others would make of the masks she had made, even as Elizabeth assured her they were perfect.

“I’ll see you at the masquerade. I’m going to the modiste this afternoon. I want my orange dress altered. Why don’t you come with me?” Elizabeth said, but Rosalind shook her head.

She had a megrim, or so she had told her mother, and she knew she would only get into trouble if it was discovered she had slipped out. Besides, she wanted to remain at home to finish Ariadne’s eyes. After having seen her own eyes reflected in the mirror through the slits in the eyes of her mask, she felt she knew better how to finish that most important part of the painting.

She would make Ariadne’s eyes her own. That way, she could see what the heroine of her painting was seeing. The loving expression of her lover, Dionysus, who had cast her crown into the heavens to make the constellation Corona.

“I dare not... if we get seen... you go. I’ve got a dress to wear. If there’s one thing I’m not in need of, it’s haberdashery. My mother insisted on planning the entire season. I’ve got a dress for every occasion. I’m wearing peacock blue at the masquerade,” Rosalind said.

Elizabeth smiled.

“All right. You’ll bring the masks, won’t you? I’ll wait for you outside. We can go in together. It’ll be fun. I’ll see you then, and I’ll tell your mother you’re still not well when I go back downstairs. I can see you’re eager to get on with your painting,” Elizabeth said.

She embraced Rosalind, kissing her on the cheek, before taking her leave. Molly, who had been waiting outside, now returned.

“Can I bring you anything, my Lady?” she asked, but Rosalind shook her head.

“No, thank you, Molly. I’m just going to get on with my painting. I think I know how to finish Ariadne’s eyes,” she said. Setting the half-finished painting on the easel, she set about doing so, basing the god’s eyes on her own, and imagining herself staring back into the eyes of her lover, the eyes of the man who loved Ariadne so much, he gave her the stars.

Chapter 2

“Well, my Lord, it’s not possible. You can’t believe that. It’s madness,” the man said, peering at Sebastian Sinclair, his head cocked to one side.

“But it’s true, the curse. You know about it. The male line, it catches up with each of us. My grandfather, my father, and now... I know it. Why don’t you believe me? Why don’t you see it? But no, you don’t see it because you’re not real. You’re not really there,” Sebastian exclaimed, staring at the man, who smiled back at him.

Who was he? A stranger dressed in court dress with a ruff at his neck? He looked out of place staring at Sebastian amid the maze of hedges they were standing in. Every turn blocked by a wall of box hedge rising into the blue sky above. It was always the same, the maze, the impossibility of finding his way out, the mysterious companion.

“But you’re not mad,” the man said.

“Then who are you? Tell me your name? Let me understand,” Sebastian implored him, turning to run, and finding himself caught between the ever-growing fences. The sky now blotted out.

“Just follow me, my Lord. You’ll be quite all right. There’s no need to worry about madness,” the man said, but Sebastian had heard enough.

He wanted to get away, and now he threw himself towards the hedge, trying to push his way through. But the hedge was now a wall, redbrick, obscuring everything. With a cry, he tried to climb it, his hands scratching desperately at the grooves, cutting into his fingers. The man was gone; the walls towering above him, and he let out a cry, consumed by his fears.

“My Lord, won’t you wake up? You’re having a terrible dream, it seems,” a voice above him said, and Sebastian opened his eyes with a start.

The wall was gone, replaced by that of the books in his library, and standing over him was the butler, Langton, peering down at him with a worried look on his face.

“Oh... I... what happened? I’ve been asleep. I didn’t mean to go to sleep. What time is it? I came in here after luncheon, and...” Sebastian exclaimed, glancing the half-finished glass of brandy on the table at his side.

He was sitting in an armchair by the hearth, the memory of the dream still lingering. It was a familiar one; always the same. The maze, the hedges turning to walls; the stranger telling him he was not mad, even as he was convinced he was so. It was his greatest fear, and glancing up at the portrait above the hearth, his eyes met those of his grandfather. Wild eyes, seized with the madness Sebastian feared above all else.

“It’s three O’clock, my Lord. I heard you cry out, and when I came in, I found you asleep,” the butler said.

Sebastian finished the glass of brandy in one, hoping it would do something to alleviate his fears and steady his nerves. It was always the same, and now breathed a deep sigh, rising to

his feet, and knowing he would suffer thoughts of his recurring dream for the rest of the day.

“Thank you, Langton. You can go now. I’ll be all right,” Sebastian said.

The butler raised his eyebrows. Sebastian knew the servants talked about him. They knew about his dreams, and his fears. He glanced again at the portrait of his grandfather, remembering the cries of agony he had so often heard in childhood, when the old earl had been seized by bouts of the madness Sebastian feared in himself.

“Very good, my Lord. Please ring if you need anything,” the butler said, and with a curt bow, he retreated from the library, leaving Sebastian alone.

The earl crossed to the window, looking out over the gardens of Southbourne House, before closing his eyes and trying to calm the thoughts overwhelming him. It was always the same when he awoke from the dream, the fear of what was to come gripping him with a terror he found it hard to rid himself of.

“It hasn’t happened yet,” he told himself, though he knew his father had first been seized with the symptoms when he was in his late twenties.

Sebastian was twenty-six and had inherited the title of the Earl of Southbourne a year ago, following his father’s death. His own mother had died some years ago, leaving Sebastian with his stepmother, Victoria, and an uncle, Julian, on his father’s side, whom he rarely saw. His father’s end had been an unpleasant one, and Sebastian had watched as the same madness had seized him as it had seized his own father before him.

“But it’s going to. It’ll take you like it took them. It’s only a matter of time,” Sebastian told himself.

There was no cure for the madness, even as Sebastian had done everything he could possibly think of to lessen its advance. He had consulted the best doctors, taken tonics and pills, read endless books on the matter of madness, and even gone so far as to experiment with his own treatments.

He tried cold water cures and heat treatments, exotic plants and hallucinogens, and even talismans and long forgotten herbal remedies. But there were no guarantees, and just as madness had seized King George, so, too, did Sebastian fear it would seize him, too.

“The dream proves it, my father suffered from terrible dreams,” Sebastian thought to himself, remembering his father’s end, when agonized cries echoed through the house at night.

It made him shudder to remember it, but as he was about to pour himself another glass of brandy to steady his nerves, the library door opened, and his stepmother entered the room. She was a haughty woman, quite tall, with long, red hair, combed into ringlets, and wearing a black dress, for she was still in mourning for Sebastian’s father. She never bothered to knock, and now she looked at him questioningly as Sebastian slumped into a chair by the hearth.

“Another dream?” she asked, and he nodded.

“I’m getting them more frequently lately, even during the day. It’s always the same, the maze and the high wall,” he replied, for he made no secret of his fears about the onset of the illness his father had succumbed to.

There was no point in hiding the fact. It impacted everything he did, and everything to come. While Sebastian knew it was his duty to further the line, the thought of doing so filled him with dread. How could he bring a child into the world, knowing it would suffer what he, and those before him, had suffered, too? Then there was the question of a wife, certain to be made widow very young. His stepmother looked at him sympathetically.

“You should speak to the doctor about it again and get him to come and visit you. Get the one who treats the king,” she said, but Sebastian shook his head.

“It’s inevitable. I know what’s going to happen. You know what’s going to happen,” he said, but his stepmother shook head.

“No one knows what’s going to happen, Sebastian. But you can’t live your whole life in fear. Try to think about something

else. There's the masquerade ball to plan for. You've not forgotten, have you?" she said, and Sebastian's eyes grew wide.

He had entirely forgotten about the Marchioness of Graystone's masquerade. It was a highlight of the season but had entirely slipped his mind. The fact of his forgetfulness brought with it a panic. If he could forget something as anticipated as the masquerade ball, what else was he forgetting? Sebastian had considerable responsibilities, people who depended on him, and duties to perform. But if he was growing forgetful, was this the first sign of the madness setting in?

"I... yes, the masquerade ball. I remember now, but I'd forgotten. I don't know why I'd forgotten. It's this very week, isn't it? I'll wear the same mask as last year. It's upstairs in my wardrobe, but how could I forget it?" he replied, as much questioning himself as asking his stepmother's opinion.

She looked at him and shrugged.

"We all forget things, and I've reminded you now," she said, for his stepmother did not always take seriously the facts of his

heritage.

But she had seen his father in the last throes of madness. She knew what was coming. Surely it filled her with dread?

“I think I need some fresh air. I’m going to walk in the garden,” Sebastian said, remembering what one of the doctors had said about clearing the mind with new air.

His stepmother nodded, taking a book for herself from the shelves and following Sebastian into the hallway. He was about to step out into the garden when the sounds of a carriage drawing up caused him to look out of the windows at the front of the house. His friend, Lord Cuthbert, John, was just climbing down, and Sebastian was relieved to think he would have some company.

“As long as he doesn’t come bearing news of something else I’ve forgotten,” Sebastian thought to himself, waiting in the hallway as the butler came to answer the door.

John was in good spirits, he always was. They had been the closest of friends since childhood, but they could not have been more different. While Sebastian was forever concerned about the future state of his mind, John was the sort of man who took everything in stride. Sebastian had never heard his friend express a worry about the future.

“It’s good of you to come. I was just going to walk in the garden,” Sebastian said.

“I was worried about you when I heard you talking last night at Boodles,” John replied, shaking Sebastian by the hand.

The two of them had been at their gentlemen’s club the evening before, and Sebastian had again expressed his fears as to the future. Awakening from his dream had done little to allay such fears, and now his anxiety was rising once again.

“It’s kind of you to say so, John. I, well, I had the dream again, the one I told you about with the high walls and hedges. The dream where the man is telling me I’m not mad,” Sebastian

admitted. They made their way outside into the garden at the back of the house.

Southbourne House was an ancient pile, home to the Earls of Southbourne for six generations, but its parkland had been encroached on by the city surrounding it, and in the middle of his madness, Sebastian's grandfather had sold much of the estate for development. But to walk in the gardens was still pleasant, and Sebastian found them to be a sanctuary in moments such as this, the borders in full bloom, and the sweet scent of lavender and roses hanging in the air.

“Perhaps you should believe him, Sebastian. Isn't he telling you what we're all telling you?” John replied.

“But I know it's not true. I know he's trying to make me think it to lull me into a false sense of security. I'll say I'm not going mad, and then I will. But if I remain vigilant...” Sebastian replied, for he had convinced himself what he had to do to prevent the madness setting in. He had to believe in it.

By believing in it, even as those around him denied it, Sebastian could defeat its effects. He felt certain of it, even as

he knew it was a dangerous game to play. John raised his eyebrows.

“Then you mean to embrace it?” he asked.

Sebastian shook his head.

“No, but I can’t deny it’s happening, either. My stepmother had to remind me about the masquerade ball. I’d completely forgotten about it. If she hadn’t told me, I’d be oblivious to it. Isn’t that terrifying?” Sebastian said, but John shook his head.

“It just means you forgot it. I forget things. Everyone does. It doesn’t mean you’re going mad. And it doesn’t mean you’ll end up going the way of your father or your grandfather. I wish you’d stop worrying about it,” John said.

But with the passing of time, Sebastian was growing increasingly worried. The thought of the madness preoccupied him, even in his dreams.

He could simply not rid himself of the thought he had just a few year years, perhaps even just a few months, before he was gripped by the same symptoms his father and grandfather had experienced; symptoms he knew would be terrible to endure. Forgetting the masquerade ball was only the beginning.

“But I do worry about it, John. I worry about it all the time. I fear, well, you know what I fear,” Sebastian said, and his friend sighed.

“Try not to think about it. You’ll enjoy the masquerade ball. We both will. It’s always such fun, isn’t it? The music, the dancing, the refreshments,” he said.

Sebastian had to admit he did enjoy the masquerade. It was a highlight of the social season, and the Marchioness of Graystone was an excellent host. Sebastian’s mask was hung up in his bedroom. It was a gaudy creation in green and purple, purchased two years ago. He was looking forward to donning it alongside John, whose mask was equally ostentatious.

“It is, yes. I don’t begrudge it. I just... well, you’re right, I should try not to think about it. But I can’t help it,” he said, and John paused, turning to Sebastian as they stood together on the lawn.

He put his hand on Sebastian’s shoulder and smiled.

“You’re not alone in this, Sebastian, I promise you. You don’t have to face it on your own. These things are far better understood now. The king, his madness. It’s all helped our understanding. You’ve got the best doctors in the country examining your case,” he said.

Sebastian was grateful to John for his words. He knew he would not be alone, and his friend could always be relied on in as a listening ear when Sebastian’s anxiety overwhelmed him. But in his own mind, in his own thoughts, he was alone, and no one else could shoulder the feelings he was experiencing or help to lessen the load. This was his fight, and ultimately, he would face it alone.

“I know it’s just difficult,” he said, and his friend smiled.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of. I’m sure a lot of people don’t ever speak of it. But you do, and that means you can be helped,” he said.

They walked back towards the house now, and Sebastian was grateful to John for his visit.

“Do you believe in the Sinclair curse? Do you believe it’s passed down from generation to generation? I fear marrying because of it. I fear what might be if a child was brought into the world,” Sebastian said.

His friend pondered for a moment.

“I don’t know, Sebastian. But I hope it won’t stop you from seeking the companionship you deserve. Don’t let fear hold you back. If you meet a woman, a young lady at the

masquerade, why shouldn't you pursue romance?" he asked, even as Sebastian shook his head.

It would hardly be fair to fall in love, or lead a woman to think there might be the chance of a long and happy marriage, when there may not be a chance.

"I don't know, John; it hardly seems fair," Sebastian replied, for his mind was already made up, and as much as he might have desired the companionship of a woman, he knew it would not be right to seek it, when such a terrible curse hung over him.

Chapter 3

“You can’t hide yourself away tonight, Rosalind. We’ve got a guest,” Rosalind’s mother said, as they sat at breakfast the following morning.

Rosalind looked up from her toast and marmalade in surprise. Her mother had mentioned nothing about a guest, even as Rosalind suspected there was an ulterior motive; there usually was. She had no chance of making an excuse, for there could be no reason for her to avoid dining with her parents that evening, having already assured them her megrim was gone.

“Oh, yes?” she asked, fearing it would be some dull aunt or distant cousin.

Her parents exchanged glances.

“The Duke of Northridge,” her father said, and Rosalind groaned.

Richard Stratton was a longstanding acquaintance of her parents. He was an arrogant man, possessed of considerable wealth, who believed he could use his wealth to further his position in whatever manner he wished, including securing the attentions of young ladies.

He was a rake, and having returned from travels on the continent, he had set about securing a match, even as he had been rejected on several occasions. His attentions had been recently turned to Rosalind, her debut appearing to be something of an attraction, the flowering of innocence being his own particular penchant.

“Oh, mother, no,” she said, but her mother was adamant.

“It’s all arranged, Rosalind. He’s coming here this evening, he’ll dine, and you’ll behave yourself,” she said.

Rosalind sighed. She knew she had no choice in the matter. Her mother wanted her to make a match, and if she did not do so herself, her parents would make it for her. Rosalind knew how it worked. She had seen it in the lives of many young women with whom she was acquainted. Arrangements were made for good or ill, and the woman in question had little choice but to agree.

“But you don’t seriously expect me to marry him, do you? It’s my first season. Aren’t I allowed a few mistakes?” Rosalind said, hoping to buy herself sometime.

Other women had time. They were not expected to make an immediate decision or accept the first proposal they received. Other women waited. But Rosalind’s parents were impatient. She had no siblings, no sisters to share the burden of expectation, and no brothers to provide security should the worst occur and her father die. A husband was necessary, and Rosalind knew her parents were already impatient.

“He’s been a friend of the family for many years,” her mother said, as though that gave the duke the right to expect some reward in exchange.

Rosalind looked at her mother angrily. She was her mirror image, though older, of course, with vibrant red curls and deep hazel eyes. She had a fair complexion, but there was a weariness in her expression, and Rosalind often wondered if there was not some illness she was concealing behind her now angry looking façade.

“That doesn’t mean I have to marry him, mother. He must be twenty years older than me,” she said, and her mother tutted.

“He’s thirty-six,” she replied, and Rosalind laughed.

“Then that makes all the difference. He’s only twice my age,” she retorted.

“He’s coming to dinner, and that’s that,” the duke said, returning to his periodical, as Rosalind rose to her feet.

“I’ll be polite to him. But I won’t marry him,” she said, and before either of her parents could retort, she left the dining room, slamming the door angrily behind her.

Upstairs, Rosalind locked herself in her bedroom and took out the portrait of Ariadne and Dionysus, looking at it with a sigh.

“You had a difficult life, didn’t you? Helping Theseus escape the Minotaur, then being left by him on Naxos. I suppose I should be grateful,” she said out loud, taking up her paints and beginning to fill in some details in the background.

Her thoughts were absorbed in the painting, and for a few hours she was able to lose herself in the myth of Ariadne and her lover, imagining herself to be the one he had fallen in love with. But the prospect of the dinner still loomed, and when the dressing gong sounded, Rosalind knew she had no choice but to act as a lady, and leave the land of myth and legend behind.

“You wouldn’t marry him, though, would you, my Lady?” Molly asked, and Rosalind shook her head.

“I certainly wouldn’t. I don’t know what my mother’s thinking. It’s as though she’s desperate for my betrothal, whatever the cost. It’s not as though I’m some ancient spinster nobody wants. I’m eighteen years old, I’ve attended one ball since my debut. I’m hardly a wallflower yet, am I?” Rosalind said.

Her maid looked at her sympathetically.

“Not at all, my Lady. Be firm with your mother. If you don’t want to marry him, you don’t have to. Besides, you can always put him off,” Molly said.

Rosalind smiled. She had been thinking the very same thing. Sabotage was a perfectly acceptable means of avoidance, and if the duke did not actually want to marry her, then all the better.

“You know my mother, Molly. She won’t give up. But perhaps you’re right. I’ll have to persuade him of my lack of merit,” Rosalind replied.

Before her debut, the duke had treated her merely as the daughter of a friend, but in the weeks since her coming out, Rosalind had sensed a change. He was interested in her, and the dinner was surely only an excuse to get to know her better. As she finished dressing, Rosalind was resigned to an evening of boredom, even as she knew she had to be on her best behavior.

“But I can still put him off by being dull,” she said to herself, as she made her way downstairs.

Her parents liked to spend the season in London. They had an estate near Bath. It is a rambling pile built by a distant ancestor, surrounded by glorious parkland with vistas stretching for miles on every side. It was there Rosalind’s first inspiration for painting had come, even as she now relied on classical scenes from books in her father’s library to inspire her.

The London house was a pleasant dwelling, but Rosalind preferred the countryside, and she was looking forward to the end of the season, and a chance to return to the rural landscapes of her childhood. As she came down the stairs, Rosalind could hear the sound of voices in the drawing room, and taking a deep breath, she opened the door.

“Ah, Rosalind, there you are,” her mother said, beckoning her into the room.

The Duke of Northridge was already there, holding a glass of sherry, but he put it down on a nearby table and hurried to greet Rosalind, taking his hands in hers and raising it to his lips.

“The belle of the season,” he said, glancing up at her with a smile.

He was a man who might once have been handsome, but his graying hair and protruding stomach spoke of the autumn of life, rather than the spring. His cheeks were ruddy, his nose somewhat large, and, by his own admission, he suffered

terribly with gout, causing him significant pain as he had crossed the drawing room.

“Your Grace,” Rosalind said, curtsying as best she could, while the duke continued to hold her hand in his.

“Don’t you look pretty, my dear,” he said, looking Rosalind up and down and smiling.

Rosalind glanced at her mother, the expression on the duchess’ face imploring her to make an effort.

“That’s very kind of you, I’m sure,” Rosalind replied.

The duke took up his sherry glass again, raising it in a toast, and smiling at Rosalind, who now stood awkwardly next to her mother. She wanted to be back in her bedroom, surrounded by half-finished pictures and with the smell of the paint hanging in the air. Rosalind had always dreamed of being an artist, even as her parents had entirely forbidden it.

“Women aren’t artists. Rosalind,” her mother had said, and that had been the end of the conversation.

But Rosalind longed to talk about her art. It was her passion, and if ever she found herself in conversation with someone who shared her passion, she came alive. But the duke had no interest in art. His interests lay in business and horses, neither of which Rosalind could summon any enthusiasm for, even as the duke and her father made both the sole topic of conversation throughout the dinner.

“And personally, I don’t think the Regent has a chance at the steeplechase on Saturday. He’s running two horses, Zeus and Emperor, but neither of them have form,” the duke was saying, as the final dish, a Charlotte Russe, was placed on the table.

Rosalind liked Charlotte Russe, but she was so bored of the conversation. She hardly noticed its arrival, her mind preoccupied with thoughts of finishing Ariadne’s eyes. Modeling them on her own had been a boon, and it would take just a few more brushstrokes to complete the work.

“I favor the Earl of Southbourne’s horse, Pegasus. He’s had some success, though I don’t think he has much to do with the training. He’s one of those who lets a trainer deal with his stable. Nevertheless, they say he’s a fine horse,” Rosalind’s father said.

“Oh, the Earl of Southbourne, Sebastian, yes, a funny business with his father, wasn’t it? He went quite mad. Just like his father before him. One wonders if it’s catching,” the duke said.

Rosalind looked up from her musings with interest. A mad earl was far more likely to catch her attention than the form of a horse.

“Mad?” she said, and the duke nodded.

“Quite mad, yes. Both of them. It’s a family curse, I suppose. Imagine knowing you were going to go quite mad. One should feel sorry for him, I suppose,” he said, as the Charlotte Russe was served.

Talk now returned to the horses and Rosalind lost interest, but she could not help but continue thinking about the mad earl and his lineage. She imagined painting a man with such an affliction and thought back to paintings she had seen depicting madness in the classical world. The writhing in the torments of hell, the gnashing of teeth, the open-mouthed demons crying out...

“Rosalind.” her mother said, and Rosalind looked up in surprise.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Mother.” she said, realizing her portion of Charlotte Russe had been placed in front of her.

“The duke was just talking about the masquerade ball. We’re going, aren’t we?” the duchess said, and Rosalind nodded.

“Oh, yes, we’ll be there. Though I suppose we won’t know who else will be there; they’ll all be wearing masks. That’s the

point, isn't it?" she said, and the duke smiled.

"A person can be unmasked, though, can't they?" he said, raising his eyebrows.

Rosalind smiled. The point of the masquerade was to dance with those with whom one might not necessarily dance. In the Venetian tradition, a carnival brought together rich and poor alike, so that the dauphin might dance with the poorest street urchin, each of them caught up in the spectacle and exuberance of the festival.

But for the ton, only the well-to-do were brought together for the masquerade, even as one might find oneself dancing with those whom one would never otherwise have chosen.

"Oh, but that's not the point, is it? My mask is on a stick, to hold up to my face, but I've attached ribbons, too. I can tie it, you see, and keep both hands free to dance. I won't be taking it off until the very end," Rosalind replied.

Her mother raised her eyebrows, but Rosalind was not about to wholeheartedly agree with every word the duke said. For a moment, he looked disappointed.

“But how am I to know I’m dancing with you?” he asked.

Rosalind shrugged.

“But isn’t that the point? You won’t. I’ll dance with whoever asks me to dance, and you’ll do the same. It defeats the object to know with whom one’s dancing. I hope I’ll dance with all sorts of people,” Rosalind replied, knowing the duke would not like to hear this.

“Rosalind, don’t be difficult. You can take your mask off for a moment, I’m sure,” her mother said, but Rosalind was adamant, and the dinner ended on a sour note, with the duke expressing his disappointment at not having the guarantee of her attentions at the masquerade.

On her part, Rosalind was far from disappointed. She was not the duke's personal property, a possession to be paraded at will. They were not even courting, and having only just made her debut, Rosalind had no intention of giving in to the demands of her parents, or the expectations of their friend.

"Well, I hope to see you at the masquerade," the duke said, as he wished them goodnight.

Rosalind's mother gave her an angry glance, but Rosalind merely smiled and nodded.

"I'm sure, if fate decides," she said, leaving the matter hanging.

But when the duke had left, her mother turned on her angrily.

"Rosalind, what were you thinking? He wants to dance with you. Why do you think he came to dinner tonight, if not to get

to know you? And now he's leaving believing you've got no interest in dancing with him, or any interest in him at all," she exclaimed.

This had been Rosalind's intention the whole time, and she felt somewhat pleased with herself for having dissuaded the duke without resorting to rudeness or poor behavior.

"I didn't say that. I only explained what happens at a masquerade. One doesn't take one's mask off. I've seen it plenty of times before," she said, recalling the masquerades she had attended before her coming out.

Her mother looked at her angrily.

"That's not what I mean. If you'd wanted to, you could've made an effort. He's the Duke of Northridge, he's rich, he's the perfect match for you, Rosalind," her mother said, shaking her head.

Rosalind's father, too, looked at her angrily. But Rosalind was unperturbed. She was not about to marry a man based solely on the preference of her parents, nor was she willing to lie as to her feelings towards the duke.

“But I don't think he is. It's your opinion, mother. Not mine. I'm going to bed. If I happen to dance with him at the masquerade, so be it. If not, well that's all very well and good,” she replied.

The duchess threw her hands up in the air in exasperation, and the duke cursed Rosalind under his breath. But her mind was made up, and calling out a goodnight, she made her way upstairs, smiling to herself at having achieved a minor victory, even as she knew the greater battles were still to come.

Chapter 4

“Another stroke, another brush, another line,” Sebastian said out loud, drawing the brush across the canvas with a flourish.

He stood back breathlessly, examining his handiwork and smiling. The painting before him was unconventional. There was no real form to it. It was merely a series of brush strokes and vivid colors he had just applied standing out against a dark backdrop. This was Sebastian’s escape. A remedy for the illness he believed was even now coursing through veins, the madness of his father and grandfather.

“A portrait of the mind,” he said, taking the canvas from the easel and hanging it on a hook he had banged into the wall.

It hung among a dozen others, each of them born of the same frantic brushstrokes and vivid colors. Sebastian believed the paintings were an insight into his mind, and that by examining them, he might see something of a pattern or explanation as to what was happening inside his head.

“The strokes are the same here and here, and these colors, too. Red... but why red? The color of passion? Of fear? Of anger? Am I angry? And then these shades of blue, lighter and becoming less pronounced. Perhaps a sign of hope? Yes, blue,” he said, still speaking out loud to himself, even as he stood in an empty room at the top of the house.

This was his studio, a refuge from the outside world. He kept the door firmly locked, whether he was present or absent, and no one, not even John, was permitted into this hallowed sanctum. It was here, on the canvases, Sebastian believed he was best represented.

He painted with his eyes closed, and in doing so, he gave vent to the passions welling up inside him. It had been one of the many doctors he had consulted who had made the suggestion of painting his thoughts, but his mother, too, had encouraged him in his artistic endeavors.

“Painting helps us express our feelings, Seb,” she had often told him.

She was the only person who had ever called him “Seb” and when he painted, Sebastian would picture his mother at her easel in the drawing room, or, on sunny days, out on the lawn. She was an accomplished painter, and several of her pictures and portraits lined the walls.

Sebastian’s stepmother had gotten rid of many of those in other parts of the house, but Sebastian had made sure they were preserved, hiding them in the attics in readiness for the day he could hang them proudly once again.

“And I will hang them again,” he said, glancing at a self-portrait of his mother, her smiling face looking down at him, and bringing a tear to his eyes.

He missed her terribly and would often sit in front of the self-portrait and talk to her, sharing his fears and secrets, and imagining her responses.

“She won’t get away with it. I know what she’s like. I know what she wants. I could send her away. But oh, she’s like a

snake in the grass,” Sebastian said, shaking his head at the thought of his stepmother.

She had caught the attention of Sebastian’s father soon after the death of Sebastian’s mother, and it had not been long before the earl had married her. Sebastian had been old enough to take care of his own affairs, and Victoria had never represented for him the archetype of a wicked stepmother.

Nonetheless, she was a woman he had never trusted, and though they remained on civil terms, with Victoria even managing to be sympathetic at times, Sebastian could not help but feel she often had ulterior motives.

“Though I suppose I’m going mad, aren’t I?” he said, pulling at his hair in frustration. He spun around to look up at the paintings of his thoughts with streaks of vivid color, black backgrounds, and the contrast between light and shade.

With a sigh, he sat down in the middle of the room, cross-legged, before lying on his back and gazing up at the ceiling. It was impossible to know what madness felt like. There was no comparison or contrast. He could not ask his father or

grandfather what it had been like for them. It was too late for that, and as for asking anyone else...

“We’re all different. The madness of the king isn’t my madness, but am I even mad? I just don’t know,” he exclaimed, banging his fists on the floorboards.

The more he dwelt on it, the more confusing it seemed, and Sebastian could do nothing but hope for clarity, even as the paintings gave little by way of an answer. Later that afternoon, after beginning another canvas covered with red and yellow stripes, he made his way downstairs where he found his stepmother in the drawing room, busy with her embroidery.

“Oh, there you are, Sebastian,” she said, for she never gave any deference to his rank or position.

“I was just seeing to some business,” Sebastian replied, for he had hoped to have the drawing room to himself.

Victoria looked at him and raised her eyebrows.

“Are you feeling all right? You’re not still worrying about all this curse of the Sinclairs business, are you?” she asked.

Sebastian nodded.

“Did you have any idea about my father? What signs did you see in him? How did he know what was happening?” Sebastian asked.

He had seen some of the signs for himself, but his father had kept his condition hidden as best he could and had not admitted to any of the early signs Sebastian now feared. But the duke wanted to know about his father’s condition, to learn as much as he could, and to know if what he feared was really going to come true.

“He wasn’t afraid of it like you are. I suppose he assumed your grandfather’s illness to be his own, rather than a curse on the

family. But there were signs. He'd grow agitated and frustrated when he forgot simple things," she said,

"Like the masquerade ball," Sebastian replied.

His stepmother looked at him and smiled.

"That was one thing, Sebastian. It doesn't matter. Your father was always forgetting things. He forgot himself in the end, as tragic as it was. He forgot me, too, and you, and the memory of your mother. He was just a shell, and it was kinder for the good Lord to take him," she said.

Her words were very matter-of-fact, and Sebastian could not recall seeing her shed a single tear for his father, even as his death had been prolonged and agonizing.

"And you don't see those signs in me?" Sebastian asked, but his stepmother shook her head.

“Not yet, no,” she replied.

Her words were not particularly reassuring, but Sebastian could only nod and thank her before leaving the drawing room and making his way out onto the terrace. He wanted to be alone with his thoughts, even as his mind crowded with worries and fear he'd suffer from madness, neglect his duty, question the line of succession.

“It's all too much,” he thought to himself, fearing he might not cope with such anxieties hanging over him, even as he reminded himself he was not yet mad, and might not necessarily become so.

“You're not your father, Sebastian,” his mother had once told him, and in this, at least, Sebastian could only hope she was right.

“Well, at least you look pretty this evening, Rosalind, though I’m still not sure about your mask. Couldn’t you have chosen something less ostentatious?” Rosalind’s mother asked, as they rode together with the duke to Graystone Manor, where the masquerade ball was to take place.

The duchess’ own mask barely covered her face. It was made of silk, and tied with a ribbon, but there was there no mistaking her features, while Rosalind’s mask entirely covered her face.

“It’s a masquerade, Mother. It’s supposed to be ostentatious,” Rosalind replied. She was tired of arguing with her mother over petty things.

They had been at odds ever since the dinner with the Duke of Northridge, and the duchess had had spared no opportunity to remind Rosalind of the necessity of making a good match.

“I don’t want a repeat of your debut, Rosalind,” she had said, and Rosalind had promised to do better, even as she had no

intention of changing her behavior.

But the masquerade was different by its nature. Men and women danced freely, and the rules of invitation and acceptance were different. A masked woman could invite a masked man to dance, in the same way a masked man invited a masked woman to do so, and Rosalind was pleased to think she had a modicum of control over what was to come, even as she knew her mother would still try to interfere.

“Look at all these people,” Rosalind exclaimed, as the carriage drew up outside Graystone Manor.

They had traveled a little way out of the city center, following the course of the Thames to the estate at Richmond, where the house was surrounded by pleasant parkland, and approached along a tree-lined drive. Half a dozen carriages were pulled up, and liveried footmen stood stiffly at the bottom of the steps leading up to the main doors of the house.

“Now, we must look out for the Duke of Northridge,” Rosalind’s mother said, though Rosalind knew it would be impossible to distinguish anyone among the throng of masked revelers.

The only person she would recognize was Elizabeth, whose own mask was on the compartment seat next to Rosalind, the matching pair to her own. As the carriage drew up, Rosalind spotted her friend standing next to one of the stone lions flanking the steps, and she waved to her, not waiting for the compartment door to be opened, before clambering out and hurrying over to her.

“Quickly, you mustn’t be seen,” Rosalind exclaimed, thrusting the mask into her friend’s hand.

Elizabeth smiled, raising the mask to her face, and disappearing behind its ornate façade.

“Yours looks wonderful, Rosalind. Let’s go in. I presume you want to escape from your parents?” she asked, lowering her voice, as Rosalind glanced back towards the carriage.

It was exactly what she wanted to do, and not bothering to wait for her mother and father to emerge from the compartment, the two of them hurried up the steps, joining the masked throng entering the manor house.

Unlike a normal ball, there was to be no formal introductions, and no master of ceremonies announcing their presence. Rosalind had her invitation, and she handed it to the steward, who bid her enter the ballroom, where a quartet of musicians were playing, and the guests already helping themselves from the refreshment table.

“It’s so much better than a normal ball, don’t you think? No one’s examining anyone else or judging them by who their father is or where their money comes from,” Rosalind said, glancing around her at the striking array of masks on display.

Her own was far from the most ostentatious, while others had chosen more reserved designs, such as that of her mother. There were feathers and ribbons, silk headdresses, and trailing veils. Everyone had made an effort, and there were many compliments on the different designs and creations.

“I’m being looked at,” Elizabeth whispered, and she nodded across the ballroom to a tall person wearing a midnight blue frock coat and a mask designed to look like the face of an eagle or some other bird of prey.

Rosalind smiled.

“And you’re looking back, Elizabeth. You could dance with him. There’s nothing to hold you back,” she said, urging her friend forward.

Elizabeth laughed.

“Oh, but we’ve only just got here. The dancing hasn’t even started yet,” she said, even as the gentleman in question approached her.

“Might I have the first dance?” he asked, offering Elizabeth his arm, but not revealing his face.

Rosalind was curious why he had chosen Elizabeth and not her, but she was not about to feel jealous. She was pleased for her friend, and as Elizabeth and the masked stranger went off arm in arm, she looked around her for a possible dancing partner. The other guests were pairing off. Masked women and men laughing with one another at the fun of dancing with faces unseen.

“Isn’t it jolly?” a woman to Rosalind’s left said, and Rosalind nodded.

“It certainly is,” she replied, even as she herself had no one to dance with yet.

The musicians now struck up a waltz, and the guests danced as best they could, some of the holding sticks of their masks up to their faces, while others had tied ribbons around the back of their heads. Rosalind stepped back, standing by a column, and examining the ballroom more carefully by way of appearing distracted, rather than left out.

Graystone Manor, the home of the Marchioness of Graystone, was an interesting dwelling. The marquess had been an art lover, and the walls were covered with items from his collection. Those on display in the ballroom were of a tasteful nature, but Rosalind remembered her mother talking in scandalized tones about the “other” works of art the marquess had collected.

“Nudes. As though the human form should be something to display and ogle at,” the duchess had once said, tutting and shaking her head.

Rosalind had been intrigued, and she had a mind to seek out some of these paintings for herself. She could see her mother across the room, her mask barely concealing her face, and the duke sitting next to her. They would want her to dance with Richard, but since Rosalind had no way of knowing where he was, and he had no way of knowing where she was, she felt confident in the prospect of avoiding him for the evening.

“And slipping away from here, too,” she said to herself, intent on seeing the marquess’ paintings for herself, and perhaps gaining some inspiration, too.

Chapter 5

“And I doubt we’ll see Lord and Lady Hestermann, not after what happened between her and the stable boy. Though I suppose she’ll be behind a mask, won’t she? I wouldn’t dare. And then there’re the Scruton sisters. They spent an entire season courting the same man, and neither of them realized it. The shock must’ve been terrible.” Sebastian’s stepmother said as they rode together in their carriage towards Graystone Manor.

But Sebastian was not really listening. His mind was preoccupied. He was thinking about his father, still wondering when the first signs of madness had gripped him, and whether he had even realized it.

“I’m sure they were very surprised,” he said absentmindedly.

“And one wonders about the scandals tonight. A masquerade allows for any amount of debauchery,” Victoria continued.

His stepmother was always interested in the affairs of others. She held a salon every Saturday, where women of equal scandal ridden interest gathered to discuss the latest gossip of the ton. Sebastian despised the thought of it, particularly as he knew how easily he, himself, could become the object of such scandalous gossip and rumor.

He made no secret of his fears, but that did not mean the ton would not twist the facts and make a scandalous example of him. The mad earl, driven to insanity by a family curse. It sounded like a gothic horror, a cheap, penny novel, where the coming of the full moon brought with it untold acts of barbarity. Sebastian sighed.

“That’s why they have the masks, isn’t it?” he said, and his stepmother raised her eyebrows.

“Are you still dwelling on your father? Try to put him out of your mind, Sebastian,” she said, but Sebastian could not put that matter out of his mind, even as their carriage now drew up outside the manor house.

The forecourt was busy, and half a dozen other carriages were disgorging their occupants amid much laughter and excitement. The masquerade was a spectacular sight, and the outfits and masks were a riot of color and carnival. Sebastian now put on his own mask, covering the worried expression on his face, and preparing to enter a world of fantasy and fiction, where the normal rules of society no longer applied.

“I’ll see you later,” Sebastian said, as the compartment door was opened.

“I wonder who I’ll dance with,” his stepmother said, following him out onto the forecourt before disappearing into the throng.

Sebastian knew John would be there somewhere, but where?

“Welcome, sir. Your invitation, please, though we don’t announce your name,” a steward said, greeting Sebastian at the door.

Around him, a throng of masked revelers were entering the manor house, and there was much laughter and excitement as masks were compared, and identities guessed at.

“Oh, I think that’s the Baron of Totley. He wore the same mask last year,” one woman said, sweeping past Sebastian in a flowing peacock blue dress.

“Or he’s just swapped with someone else. We could do the same, Maisy,” her companion replied, and these same conversations were repeated all around him as Sebastian made his way into the ballroom.

There was no denying it was a spectacular sight. The marbled columns, the imposing portraits, the candle lit chandeliers, and the large windows looking out over the gardens where the evening sun was turning everything a shade of pink. Musicians were playing a waltz, and many of the guests were dancing, while others stood at the refreshment table sipping punch, or helping themselves to form the plates of dainty morsels.

“I shouldn’t have come,” Sebastian thought to himself, for he was hardly in the mood to dance or make merry.

A somber mood hung over him, and had it not been for his mask, others would surely have noticed his expression and passed comment. But no one could see his face, and thus, his mood went unnoticed, as those around him reveled in the freedom of the masquerade.

He felt anxious to maintain a mask of normality. His forgetfulness was worrying him. What if he drew blank at a familiar face or confused a past event or person? He felt like an outcast, unable to participate in a world he would soon forget.

“Won’t you come and dance?” a woman wearing a fish mask asked, seizing Sebastian’s hand.

Reluctantly, he was drawn into her embrace, her hands around his waist as she jostled him into the throng of dancers caught up in a waltz. Sebastian had never been a very good dancer, and several times he trod on the woman’s toes.

“I’m sorry,” he said, but she only laughed.

“It’s quite all right. I can’t really see a thing, anyway. This was my sister’s mask. She’s married now and thinks these occasions are quite frivolous. I like them, though. There’s such an air of mystery about it. I could be dancing with anyone; even the regent himself,” she exclaimed, as they bumped into another couple, who laughed off the encounter with similar words.

When the waltz came to an end, the woman clung to Sebastian, and it seemed she would gladly have continued the evening in his company, even as he now made his excuses.

“I’m going to take the air. My mask is quite stifling,” he said, not wishing to upset her, but also not wishing to prolong their encounter.

She sounded disappointed, but told him to come and find her when he returned.

“I don’t think anyone else is wearing a fish mask,” she said, and Sebastian smiled.

“No. I don’t think they are,” he said, giving a curt bow before slipping away, and hoping the woman had not taken enough notice of his mask to recognize him later.

He was thinking about going home. There was no sign of John, and the evening was starting to drag. Making his way out onto the terrace, Sebastian took the air for a few moments, watching as the sun set over the horizon. It was a beautiful evening, very still, and the pleasant scent of early summer flowers was rising from the garden below, perfuming the air. Sebastian sighed.

“I’ll be driven mad by the worry of the madness,” he thought to himself, trying to put the matter out of his mind.

He remembered the late Marquess of Graystone. He had been an art lover and wondered if there might be something of interest to view in another part of the house. He felt churlish for slipping away from the ballroom and its revelries, but he

knew he would not be missed. One mask was the same as another, and there could be no telling who was who among the mass of disguises.

Sebastian now returned inside, slipping behind the columns and along a gallery leading off from the ballroom, interested in seeing what treasures the house contained, and thinking of his mother, who would certainly have done just the same.

The sounds of the revelry were now distant, and Rosalind gazed around her with interest, looking up at the display of artworks hanging on the walls. She had found herself in an unusually shaped room. It was round, with a dome, and the ceiling depicted a night sky full of stars and a moon.

The walls were hung with a set of paintings, all of which appeared to be by the same artist. They showed a series of landscapes; rural idylls with depictions of country life. The subjects were not particularly interesting, but the skill of the painter was evident, and Rosalind marveled at the techniques, longing for her own abilities to match those of the unknown painter.

“It’s quite extraordinary” she thought to herself, leaning forward to examine the nearest picture, hung on what appeared to be the outside of a cupboard, made to look like a portion of the wall.

She was just examining it more closely, when a sudden sound startled her, and the door itself flew open, revealing two masked people, a man and a woman. They stumbled out, shrieking with laughter, knocking Rosalind back as they did so. One of them was holding a bottle of wine, and the contents now flew out of the top, spattering Rosalind’s dress, as the two revelers collapsed in a fit of hysterics.

“Oh, we couldn’t stay in there any longer, it was stifling,” the woman exclaimed, as Rosalind picked herself up from the floor, looking down at her dress, now stained with red wine.

“But it was fun, wasn’t it?” the man said, pinching the woman’s bottom and causing her to shriek with laughter.

“Oh, you naughty thing. If it weren’t for your mask, I wouldn’t let you get away with it,” she exclaimed, and they went off hand in hand, offering no words of apology as Rosalind sighed, closing the open cupboard, and looking again at the painting hanging on the concealed door.

She had lost interest now, knowing her mother would have something to say about a wine-stained dress, but not wishing to return to the ballroom, she wandered further into the house, looking up at the paintings on the walls.

There were landscapes and portraits, classical scenes, renaissance sketches, works by the great masters Rosalind had read so much about. The house was a treasure trove, and Rosalind could not believe she had not known the extent of the collection before.

“It’s remarkable,” she thought to herself, coming now to a small room. Through its open door where windows that overlooked the garden, and on the walls, a number of extraordinary paintings were displayed.

They were not portraits in the usual sense, but showed half a dozen couples in what could only be described as the act of

love. Rosalind was captivated by them, staring in astonishment at the canvases, where the bodies of men and women were entwined, their lips pressed together, their hands clasped.

“I’ve never seen anything like it in my whole life,” she said to herself, peering closer at the paintings, her heart skipping a beat as she imagined herself in the female gaze.

It was one thing to paint her own portraits, to cast herself in the moment she was depicting. But to see that depicted by another was quite extraordinary, and Rosalind could only marvel at the daring of a painter who drew such remarkable scenes.

The nudes held little back from the imagination, and Rosalind could not recall ever having seen such scenes depicted in any other painting she had seen. Her heart was beating fast, and she could only feel a sense of the risqué in allowing her gaze to remain fixed on what she was seeing.

“Just imagine it, being caught up in such a scene; his arms around me, his lips pressed against mine. What would it feel like? To be so close to another, his hands running down my back,” Rosalind thought to herself, closing her eyes and

imagining herself as the subject of one of the paintings, given over to the passions so evident on the faces of those depicted.

She could almost feel the touch of the man, the men depicted in each scene showing a different act of lovemaking. It was extraordinary, and Rosalind knew her mother would be scandalized by the very knowledge of such paintings, let alone seeing them for real. Opening her eyes, she smiled, gazing around her, and wondering if she, too, could paint such pictures.

“But I’d need a subject. I couldn’t just paint from my imagination alone,” she thought to herself, even as the thought of doing so was tantalizing.

Rosalind had a way of imagining herself into the paintings. She could be the subject, and in being the subject, she was able to see everything around her. But for this, she always needed a spark of inspiration. Ariadne had come from a book of Greek myths.

She had been depicted amid the stars and constellations, and Rosalind’s inspiration for other paintings. This was something different. Never before had Rosalind known the tender touch

of a man, and it felt as though she could not paint such a scene when she had no true appreciation of what it would mean to be part of it.

“I don’t think I could paint it, I don’t think I could be the subject,” she told herself, feeling disappointed, for the paintings had aroused unexpected feelings in her.

She could not take her eyes off them, and closing her eyes only brought a heightened sense of imagination, as she gave herself over to the pleasures depicted. A shiver ran down her spine, and she sighed, allowing herself to be held by each of the men.

The painter obscured their faces, but that of the woman plain to see. In each depiction, she was in the throes of ecstasy, brought to heightened pleasure by the touch of the man, who muscular arms embraced her. But there was a sense of the woman’s power.

The faces were those of women who knew just what they desired and were getting it. Rosalind wondered if the unknown painter was a woman herself, and despite her misgivings as to

her own abilities, she was resolved to paint something in approximation to what she was looking at.

“Why couldn’t Ariadne and Dionysus be making love?” she asked herself, for she had depicted the lovers in the first throes of their passion, rather than in the fullness of their desires.

But there was no reason to hold back. No one would see her work, her parents would ensure that. Rosalind now felt determined to paint as she wished, even as a subject such as this would be scandalous to behold. The thought of it excited her, even as she had no point of reference by which to make a comparison. Could she really paint such a scene without having first experienced it for herself?

“Excuse me,” a voice behind her said, and Rosalind let out a cry, startled from her musings, and turning to find a masked figure standing behind her.

Chapter 6

He was wearing a gaudy looking green and purple mask, obscuring his entire face, and dressed in a red frock coat, black breeches, and a shirt. Rosalind had not noticed him earlier in the evening. Though there were so many guests, it was hardly surprising. Was he angry with her? Had she found her way into a part of the house forbidden to the guests?

“I’m sorry, I was just looking at the paintings,” she stammered.

“So am I. Quite remarkable, aren’t they?” he said, and his tone certainly did not sound angry, even as Rosalind remained wary, knowing what her mother would say if she knew she was talking to a man unchaperoned.

“Do you like them?” Rosalind ventured, for she could not imagine the paintings would be to most people’s taste.

“I think they’re wonderful, yes. Though I doubt most of the ton would agree. I’m sure they all think they’re behaving quite scandalously this evening, but this—” he said, pointing up to the nearest painting, where a woman was in full throes of her ecstasy.

Rosalind was pleased to have found a fellow art lover. Especially one who appreciated a different kind of art.

“I’ve never seen anything like it before,” Rosalind replied, relaxing a little in the man’s presence, as now he peered more closely at the picture.

“She’s beautiful, isn’t she? And the way he holds her, firm, and yet...” he said, and Rosalind laughed.

“But she’s in control. He might be holding her firmly, but it’s her face we see. She’s the one allowing him to have his pleasure,” she said.

The masked man turned to her and nodded.

“Yes, an interesting appreciation. Are you something of a critic?” he asked.

Rosalind blushed, though of course the man could not see her do so. She was no critic, but she knew what she liked, and she was not afraid to venture an opinion.

“Oh, yes. I think we misunderstand a lot of paintings by not seeing them from the feminine perspective. Take depictions of classical myths. The Greeks had a very different view of how women might behave. The women depicted were powerful creatures; goddesses,” she said, and the man nodded.

“I’m inclined to agree with you. And it seems we’ve both grown tired of masquerading,” he said, taking a step back, so they stood together in front of the portrait.

It felt strange to be discussing such things with a man... with a stranger. Rosalind rather liked it, though she knew just what her mother would say if she knew what was happening. To look at nude pictures alone was one thing. But to view them in the company of a man, to be alone and view them in the company of a man... a shiver ran through her, and she smiled to herself, feeling suddenly rebellious.

“I can’t stand it. My parents forced me to come. I don’t want to be here. I want to be at home with my easel and paints,” she said.

He turned to her and nodded his approval.

“You’re a painter, too, are you? Do you paint nudes like this?” he asked.

Rosalind shook her head, though she had every intention of doing so now.

“I don’t, no. But I paint classical scenes, with lovers, and romance. I could paint something like this, though,” she said, imagining Ariadne in the throes of Dionysian ecstasy.

Again, the man nodded his approval, but now his attentions seemed drawn by her dress, and Rosalind suddenly remembered she was covered in wine stains.

“Did you have an accident?” he asked.

“I...I...” Rosalind stammered, embarrassed by what had happened.

But to her surprise, he drew out a handkerchief, offering it to her, and pointing to the stains.

“Here, let me help you,” he said, but as he leaned forward, his hand brushed against her breast, causing her to gasp.

It had been the briefest of touches, but with her senses heightened by the allure of the pictures, Rosalind's heart skipped a beat, as now she took the handkerchief from the stranger's hand and dabbed at her stained dress. But there was really nothing to be done.

The stain was set, and the peacock blue dress was irreparably damaged. But it was not the dress she was now preoccupied with, but the stranger's touch, its memory lingering, her desires aroused.

"I think I'll need a new dress," Rosalind said, as she handed the handkerchief back to the man, who was still to introduce himself.

But a masquerade ball invited mystery. There were no introductions, no dance cards, only the allure of what lay behind the mask, and Rosalind, her mind used to creating pictures out of nothing, now pictured the man standing before her. She could see his hair, dark and disheveled, and just the slightest outline of his face, a chiseled jaw, and a high neck.

He was well built, and she imagined his muscled torso beneath his shirt, like something of a Greek god. He was of average height, but strongly built, and he could easily have been any of the men in the paintings on the walls around them.

“It’s a pretty dress. Perhaps your maid could do something with it,” he said, and Rosalind laughed.

Molly was a loyal and faithful friend, but her skills were often lacking when it came to the finer points of service. Wine stains were notorious, and Rosalind feared there was little hope of salvaging the damaged dress.

“I suppose I should be getting back,” Rosalind said, glancing towards the door.

But her gaze was held by the paintings, and the man now pointed out another, exclaiming as to the quality of the brushstrokes.

“Don’t you feel you could just reach out and touch the flesh?” he said.

A shiver ran through Rosalind, and she nodded, holding out her hand, and allowing her fingers to caress the torso of the man depicted. For a moment, she was there again, held in his embrace. Except now she imagined, not just any stranger, but the stranger standing by her side. It made her blush as she recalled the brief touch of his hand against her breast. Had it been an accident?

“It feels like it. Yes, as though you could climb into the painting and be a part of it,” she said, turning to the stranger, who nodded.

“And would you like to?” he asked, placing his own hand on the picture, where his fingers traced a trail along the woman’s cheek.

It was as though he was touching Rosalind, and she stifled a gasp, hoping he would not notice her surprise at this remarkable question.

“I...well, I like the thought of it, yes. I do it with any painting I see. It’s how I paint, too. I imagine myself as the subject, or there in the landscape, seeing what I’m painting,” she said, knowing what he would surely think of her words.

“And you think the woman’s the subject here? She’s in control?” he said, and Rosalind nodded.

It was just what she thought. She gazed at the woman’s face, imagining what she was feeling, what she was thinking.

“Don’t you? Do you imagine yourself in the painting?” Rosalind asked.

The stranger pondered for a moment, nodding, as he removed his hand from the woman’s painted cheek.

“I’m not sure I have such a vivid imagination. But she’s very beautiful, isn’t she?” he said, and Rosalind nodded.

The woman was beautiful. All the women depicted in the portraits around the room were beautiful. The artist had been sympathetic to their forms, and while they were naked, there was nothing distasteful about their poses. It was entirely natural. Even Rosalind knew her mother would never agree.

“I think she’s remarkable,” she said, and the man nodded.

“And I’m sure it takes a remarkable woman to say so,” he replied.

But before Rosalind could say anything further, a gong sounded in the distance. It was the audible sign the masquerade would end after the final dance. The masks would be removed, and there would be a great deal of chatter and excitement as to who had danced with who.

The evening was drawing in, and though the days were long at this time of year, the shadows were lengthening. There were no candles burning in the room with the portraits and taking a final look at the faces of the women, Rosalind suggested they return to the ballroom.

“We don’t want to be missed,” she said, and he gave a curt bow.

“Might I have the last dance with you?” he asked, and Rosalind nodded.

The ending of the last dance would be the moment when the masks were lifted, and she was curious to know who it was she had been talking to, and who it was who shared her passion for art.

“But we should return separately. It wouldn’t do to be seen together,” she said, and he nodded.

“You’re right. I’ll wait a moment, then join you in the throng. I won’t miss you. Your mask is that of an artist,” he said, and Rosalind blushed beneath it.

Reluctantly, she left the portrait room behind, making her way through the house and returning to the ballroom, where the couples were assembling for the last dance. Rosalind spotted her mother and father by the refreshment table, and hoped they had not noticed her absence, even as the stranger now appeared at her side.

“Oh, I do so love this music,” Rosalind said, as now they joined the throng.

The man slipped his arm around her waist, guiding her effortlessly in the dance. He had poise and direction, a talent many men lacked, and, as they whirled and twirled across the dance floor, Rosalind was entirely caught up in the moment they now shared. She had never imagined she would meet a man who appreciated art in the same way as she, who was not shocked by the thought of being taken up in the painting itself, and seeing what the subjects themselves could see; however passionate it might be.

“You dance very well,” he said, and Rosalind smiled, returning his compliment, as the music came to an end.

This was the anticipated moment, and around them, the couples stood back from one another, as the gong was sounded again. Ribbons were pulled, sticks lowered, and faces revealed. Rosalind removed her mask and found herself face to face with a man she had never seen before. She had half expected to be disappointed and find an old or unattractive man staring back at her.

But this man was exactly as might have hoped. He had a handsome face, piercing green eyes, and smiling lips.

“I...oh, we meet at last,” Rosalind said, and the man gave a curt bow, as he took his hand in hers and raised it to his lips.

“I must say, I wasn’t expecting to meet a woman like you this evening, Miss...” he began, but before Rosalind could introduce herself, a shrill voice behind caused her to startle.

“Rosalind, come away. It’s time to leave. The Duke of Northridge wants to wish you goodnight. Hurry now,” Rosalind’s mother said, seizing Rosalind by the hand and pulling her away.

“But Mother, I...” she stammered, glancing back at the stranger, who was still smiling at her; though now with some bemusement.

“No, Rosalind. I’ve been looking for you all evening. I despair of you at times. Come along. I think we’ve had quite enough excitement for one evening,” the duchess said, nodding to the stranger, before dragging Rosalind away.

Rosalind lost sight of him now, and she sighed, wondering what he would think of her, and feeling certain she would never see him again. But her mother would not listen to reason. She would not listen to anything. She pulled Rosalind to the side of the ballroom, chastising her for her disappearance.

“Mother, I didn’t want to dance with the Duke of Northridge. Why do you think I disappeared?” she demanded, and her mother gave an exasperated cry.

“Rosalind, what are you talking about? He was expecting you to dance with him. Look, there he is, talking to your father. Go apologize to him at once, and we might just save this sorry situation,” she exclaimed, tutting and shaking her head.

Rosalind sighed, glancing hopefully back towards the throng of guests, all now unmasked. But there was no sign of the stranger, even as Rosalind could picture him vividly in her mind. Her thoughts lingered on his touch, on the paintings, on the possibility of their...

“There you are, Rosalind. I was looking everywhere for you. I thought you promised to dance with me,” the duke said, looking at Rosalind with a sulky expression on his face.

Rosalind felt exasperated. Was he a child? He was certainly behaving like one, with his arms folded and a scowl on his lips.

“I didn’t promise anything,” Rosalind replied, even as her mother gave her an angry look.

“Rosalind, really,” she hissed, but the duke continued to sulk, even as Rosalind’s father promised him a further audience in the coming days.

“Call on us whenever you wish,” he said, but the duke appeared put off, giving a vague promise of doing so, before calling for a carriage to be summoned to take him home.

“What were you thinking, Rosalind?” her mother exclaimed, as they rode home in their own carriage a little later.

On her part, Rosalind could only feel pleased to think of how the evening had transpired, though she could not help but feel a touch of sadness as to the cutting short of her encounter with the art loving stranger.

She had avoided the Duke of Northridge and discovered an acquaintance in a man possessed of the same love of art as herself. But how she wished she had caught his name, and now she wondered if there was not some way of discovering it.

“The man I danced with, do you know him, mother?” she asked, trying to change the subject.

Her mother looked at her angrily across the candlelit compartment of their carriage, her features extenuated by the flickering shadows.

“No, Rosalind, I don’t know him, and I don’t wish to know him. What I want is for you to take the matter of your betrothal seriously,” her mother retorted.

Rosalind was under no illusions as to the seriousness of the matter. She took the question of betrothal very seriously, and she was not about to find herself betrothed to the Duke of Northridge. He was a man for whom she could summon nothing but thinly veiled contempt.

His sulky reaction to her not having danced with him at the ball was proof enough she was right to hold such an opinion. Her parents only insisted on the match because he was their friend, giving no thought to Rosalind's own happiness, or her opinion.

"I take it very seriously, mother. But I don't want to marry him, and that's that," Rosalind replied.

Her mother's eyes narrowed.

"Where were you all evening? And who was the man you danced with? Did he proposition you? Did he make advances? Tell me, Rosalind," she said, as now the duke, too, fixed his gaze on Rosalind, who folded her arms and stared back at them defiantly.

"We looked at the paintings together. The Marquess of Graystone was a collector of fine art, and this gentleman, whoever he is, was a collector, too. We appreciated the art together," Rosalind said.

There was no scandal in it; not at face value, at least. A woman at a masquerade could admire a set of paintings. Her mother tutted.

“And why didn’t he introduce himself?” she asked.

“It was a masquerade, mother. We waited for the right moment, and then you dragged me away to speak to that man, who was nothing but a sulk and a bore,” Rosalind replied.

The carriage had just pulled up outside their London townhouse, and Rosalind was relieved to think the argument could now wait until the morning, even as she knew she had not heard the last of it.

“It all sounds very exciting, my Lady,” Molly said, as she helped Rosalind get ready for bed a short while later.

“Oh, it was,” Rosalind said, even as she feared the chance of making any further connection with the strange was gone.

But as she lay in bed, her mind swirled with thoughts of the stranger and what might have been had her mother not dragged her away.

“I wonder who he is?” she asked herself, caught up in the memory of his brief touch, and the feelings it had given rise to.

Chapter 7

“Who was the woman you were dancing with tonight, Sebastian?” Victoria asked, as the two of them rode home together in their carriage after the masquerade had come to an end.

Sebastian looked up, distracted by his thoughts of the very woman his stepmother now mentioned. He, too, was wondering who she was and whether he would ever see her again. He knew he had been carried away by a fantasy, but the illusion of the masquerade, its hidden nature allowed him to think of the real possibility of romance.

“I don’t know. Her mother dragged her away. I think her name is Rosalind. But, I really don’t know for certain,” Sebastian admitted as much as he wished he did.

“You certainly seemed keen on one another. How did you come to dance with her?” Victoria asked, persisting in her interrogation.

This was another of her bad habits. She liked to extract information through relentless questioning. Sebastian sighed.

“We were talking about the art...but with our masks still on. The marquess was an art collector. The manor’s full of paintings and portraits. We found ourselves appreciating the same paintings,” Sebastian replied, smiling to himself at the thought of which paintings they had appreciated.

Sebastian had been surprised by Rosalind’s reaction to the nudes. Most women were prudish about such things, taking offence at the merest hint of flesh or exposure. But Rosalind had delighted in such depictions, and it was clear her knowledge of art was extensive. The revelation, too, of her own abilities, had only served to heighten Sebastian’s interest in her, even as he now feared their encounter had been short-lived. Would he ever see her again?

“Rosalind? Now, let me think. I only caught a glimpse of her, but I feel as though I recognized her mother. That’s the problem with London, though. It’s not like provinces, where everyone knows everyone, and society consists of the residents of a big house, a clergyman, and a retired colonel. I wonder if

it could be the Duke of Lonsdale's girl? She's Rosalind, but I don't recall ever seeing her," Sebastian's stepmother said.

Sebastian shrugged. It hardly mattered. The evening had been unexpectedly pleasant, but as for its continuation, or something more, Sebastian knew there was little point in wishful thinking. Behind his mask, Sebastian had been able to forget a little of who he was.

He was not the maddening earl, but a man who could be whoever he chose. That was what wearing a mask meant, and in Rosalind, Sebastian had found a woman with whom he felt a remarkable affinity, even with a mask on.

"Well, it doesn't matter, does it? I won't see her again. It seemed her mother didn't approve, and I saw another man keeping a close eye on her," Sebastian replied.

"The Duke of Northridge, I believe. Perhaps they're betrothed," Victoria replied.

Sebastian shrugged. It hardly mattered if they were or not. He himself had no intention of betrothal, and while Rosalind had provided an interesting distraction, it was time to put the matter behind him. Sebastian had vowed never to marry. He could not bring himself to do so, knowing the fear that stalked him. It was one thing to dance with a pretty woman, but quite another to subject her to what was certain to be a life of unhappiness.

“Well, if they are, good luck to them,” Sebastian replied, as the carriage pulled up at Southbourne House.

Sebastian was surprised to find himself sad at the thought of the evening being over. He had not particularly wanted to attend the masquerade, and had done so out of duty, rather than with intent.

But in meeting Rosalind he had, for a short while, forgotten something of his troubles, and behind his mask he had been a different person, caught up in the fantasy of what might have been had circumstances been different.

“She was certainly a pretty creature,” he thought to himself, even as he felt certain he would never see her again, and dismissing such idle thoughts, Sebastian made his way to bed.

The paintings stood out vividly, their features extenuated, limbs clasping, lips pressing, hands searching. Rosalind gazed around her. It was as though the paintings had come alive in a frenzy of passion. She gasped, turning this way and that, surrounded on all sides by the paintings, no longer imprisoned by their frames and canvas, but given life, and thrusting her among them.

“They’re rather fine, aren’t they?” a voice behind her said, and Rosalind turned to find a masked figure watching her from behind.

She gasped, not knowing where she was or what she was doing there, even as the paintings became even more alive. She could hear their whispered passions, the sounds of their lovemaking, and now the strange stepped forward.

“I don’t understand,” she replied, realizing she, too, was wearing a mask.

“You don’t have to understand. But I think when you do the paintings, you’re part of them. You said so yourself,” he replied.

Rosalind knew she recognized him, even as she felt unsure why she did. There was something in his voice, in his physique, in his mannerisms. It was...

“You’re the man from the ball. I didn’t realize,” she said, as he slipped his arm around her and drew her into his embrace.

“It doesn’t matter who I am. You couldn’t see the faces in the paintings, could you?” he said, as he slipped his arm around her.

Suddenly, the scene changed. Rosalind was no longer surrounded by the paintings. Their figures caught up in the act of love, but in the center of the ballroom, dancing with the stranger. Music was playing, but no one else was dancing. They were alone, twirling and whirling in a waltz, their bodies moving as one.

“I’ve never danced like this before,” Rosalind exclaimed, and now the masked man drew her closer into his embrace, his hands on the small of her back, their foreheads almost touching.

“That’s because you’ve never danced in a painting, in your own imagination,” he whispered, as now it seemed the background disappeared, and all that remained was the two of them, dancing to the music coming from unseen musicians.

“But can’t I see you? Can’t we take off our masks?” Rosalind asked, for she wanted to see his face, she wanted more than his arms around her, thinking back to the paintings and the passions they depicted.

The stranger paused, the music softening, and he stepped back, his hand still clasped in hers. Now, he raised his hand to his

mask, removing it and tossing it to one side to reveal the face of the same man Rosalind had danced with at the masquerade.

“And won’t you take yours off, too?” he asked.

Rosalind did so, staring into the stranger’s eyes as he smiled at her.

“There, now, we’re no longer strangers,” he said, and drawing her towards him, he leaned down and kissed her.

Rosalind did not feel surprised. She had desired it, and now she pulled him closer into her embrace, their lips pressed together, her back arched as she gave in to the very same pleasure she had seen depicted in the paintings. As their lips parted, she desired more, clinging to him, even as his image began to fade.

“Where are you going?” she asked, for it was as though the colors in his face, on his outfit, on everything, were fading.

“We’re strangers,” he whispered, and now he disappeared from sight, leaving Rosalind standing alone, clutching at nothing but the empty space in front of her.

“Oh...but won’t you come back?” she asked.

With a start, she opened her eyes, sitting up in bed and looking around her in confusion. Light was coming through a crack in the curtains, and pulling back the blankets, Rosalind sat on the edge of the bed, still caught up in the memory of the vivid dream she had just experienced. A knock now came at the door.

“Good morning, my Lady,” Molly’s voice came from outside, and the door was opened by the maid, who came bearing a tray of morning tea.

“Good morning, Molly,” Rosalind sitting, struggling to compose herself, as she thought back to the dreamed kiss she

had shared with the stranger.

But the events of the dream had mirrored the occasion of the masquerade. They had met amid the paintings, dancing, before revealing their faces. The kiss had been imagined, but the identity of the stranger had remained a mystery. Who was he? And why was Rosalind now so consumed by thoughts of him?

“Can I help you dress, my Lady? Will you go down for breakfast?” Molly asked, but Rosalind shook her head.

She had a different idea and taking the cup of tea the maid had brought her; she took a sip, knowing what she was now going to do.

“No, I want to paint. I was inspired by the masquerade,” Rosalind replied.

The evening before, she had told Molly about the stranger, though she had avoided the specific details of the nude

paintings. Molly was no prude, but even she would not necessarily approve of such blatant displays of nudity and passion, most people would not.

“By the man you met, my Lady? And you still have no idea who he might be?” Molly asked, busying herself now with folding Rosalind’s clothes.

“I don’t know who he could be, Molly. An aristocrat, I suppose, but I don’t know anything more than that. I didn’t catch his name, and now he’s swallowed up in the metropolis. I’ll never see him again,” Rosalind said, lamenting the thought, even as she knew there was little she could do about it.

Enquiries could be made, but Rosalind knew her parents would stand in the way, and without a loyal brother or a sympathetic older sister, Rosalind was at a loss to know who could make such enquiries on her behalf.

“But you’d like to know, my Lady?” Molly replied.

Rosalind nodded. She would like to know. She could picture the stranger's face vividly, the removing of his mask, the smile on his handsome features. The thought of his touch sent a shiver running through her, as again she imagined his lips pressed against hers in the passion of a kiss.

"I would, yes. I suppose I could ask Elizabeth to make some enquiries. Oh, it's hopeless. My parents won't allow it, and the Duke of Northridge...well, he wouldn't, either," Rosalind said, shaking her head, as Molly looked at her sympathetically.

"You don't have to marry him, my Lady. Didn't he realize your lack of interest last night? If you didn't dance with him, it means you didn't want to, and that surely means you don't want to marry him, either," Molly said.

Rosalind wished it was that simple. But a man like the Duke of Northridge was the sort of man who did not take no for an answer. He believed she was already his own, to do with as he wished, and was behaving accordingly.

Her parents, too, supported this idea, and it would take a miracle for them to change their mind. But Rosalind's own mind was made up, and she felt determined to stand up for herself, even as the possibility of another encounter with the stranger seemed remote.

"I don't want to marry him, no, and I won't," Rosalind replied.

After Molly had helped her dress, and having sent the maid downstairs with an excuse why she would not be at breakfast, Rosalind took out the painting of Ariadne and Dionysus from beneath her bed. Ariadne's eyes were now finished, and Rosalind was satisfied as to the depiction, but Dionysus was still not finished.

She had modeled the figure on another painting by a renaissance master, taking her inspiration from a book in her father's library. But now, with her thoughts turned to the stranger, Rosalind decided to make a change.

"I'll paint him as the man I danced with at the ball," she said to herself, knowing she did not need a model, for the image in her mind was so vivid.

Taking her paints and a fine scraper, Rosalind set about removing the face she had already painted, while Ariadne looked on in silent contemplation. Rosalind wanted to capture the moment her eyes had met those of the stranger, and as she painted in the features of Dionysus, it was as though she was looking straight into the man's eyes.

"His forehead was a little higher, wasn't it? And the eyes closer together, but not too close. And green, piercing green. He really looked at me," she said to herself, looking down at her palette and trying to match the exact color of the stranger's eyes.

The more she thought about him, the more she was caught up in the romance of their encounter. It had been entirely unexpected, a chance meeting leading to the entirely unexpected. He was handsome, but there was a great deal more to their encounter than the pleasantness of physical attraction.

He had really listened to her and valued her opinion. Too many men were possessed only of their own thoughts, and certainly those of a woman did not count. But last night had

been different. He had been different, and Rosalind was caught up in the desire of seeing him again, and as the portrait took shape, she did see him again.

“Unmistakably so,” she said to herself, pleased with her own efforts, as she stood back to admire her work.

The face was still without the finer details, but the stranger was there in the form of Dionysus, gazing into Ariadne’s eyes, just as he had done at the masquerade ball. Rosalind smiled to herself, nodding, as she set down her palette.

“It’s just right. Just as he should be,” she thought to herself, knowing she would always see the stranger whenever she looked at the painting of Ariadne and Dionysus.

Rosalind did not have a crown for the stranger to turn into a constellation, but there was no doubting the passionate feelings she had felt for the stranger whose face was now immortalized before her. He had seemed a kindred spirit, someone who truly understood her, even as she knew nothing about him, save the fact of his appreciation for art. That was the spark between them, and it had ignited a flame in Rosalind’s heart.

“How I wish I could see him again,” she thought to herself, knowing she could dream of him, even see him in the portrait, but desiring to have him stand before her and take up from the moment they had parted.

Chapter 8

Sebastian had passed a restless night. His thoughts turned to the woman he had met at the masquerade, even as he had tried to dismiss such thoughts as idle fantasy. The masquerade had been unexpectedly delightful, but it, too, had been a fantasy. Behind his mask, Sebastian had not been the Earl of Southbourne. He had been a man without a curse, a man who could fall in love without thought to some unknown future fear.

“But without the mask, what choice do I have when it comes to love?” he asked himself as he made his way down to breakfast.

He had hoped his stepmother would sleep late, demanding her breakfast be brought up to her bedroom. But to Sebastian’s disappointment, he found her already in the dining room, helping herself from the tureens on the sideboard. The smell of deviled kidneys and sausages hung in the air, but Sebastian found himself with little appetite, nodding to the footman to pour him a cup of coffee as he sat down heavily at the table.

“I trust you slept well?” his stepmother said, and Sebastian nodded, taking a sip of the bitter coffee, and making a face.

“Sugar,” he said, beckoning for the pot to be brought to him.

“I was up early. I want to start organizing things for the music room,” Victoria continued, and Sebastian looked up at her in surprise.

He knew nothing about a music room. There were empty rooms in the house, but neither he nor his father had played a musical instrument, and Sebastian did not recall his stepmother doing so, either. His own mother had played the pianoforte, but her own instrument had remained silent ever since, and was now stored in a distant attic.

“The music room?” he replied, and Victoria nodded.

“Yes, don’t you remember? We discussed the matter a few weeks ago. We’re going to open up what was once a sitting

room in the east wing and make it into a music room. I'd like to learn to play something...the pianoforte, perhaps. You agreed to it," she said.

Sebastian nodded, even as he had no recollection of their discussion, or of agreeing to anything. The subject of a music room was blank in his mind, and a fresh wave of fear now gripped him. Had he entirely forgotten? He glanced at his stepmother, whose expression suggested she knew what he was thinking.

"Yes, the music room. That's right. I'm sure it'll be an asset to the house," Sebastian said, even as he did not like the thought of being reminded of his mother playing the pianoforte.

Those had been such happy days, when Sebastian had sat with his mother while she painted, or played and sang to him. He could picture the scene vividly, her smiling face; the sunlight coming through the windows of the morning room, her voice, soft and gentle.

"I'm going to decorate it with an oriental wallpaper. The one I showed you the sample of," Victoria said.

Again, Sebastian could not recall the wallpaper, its pattern, or its color. His mind was a blank, but he nodded, fearing what she would say if he admitted to having no recollection at all.

“I’m sure it’ll be very nice,” Sebastian said.

“Wait until it’s finished before you see it. I want it to be a surprise for you,” his stepmother said, and Sebastian nodded.

It would certainly be a surprise. The whole thing was a surprise. Sebastian feared just what other things he had forgotten in the course of the previous few days. It seemed he was drawing a blank over so many things. He found himself forgetting conversations, events, perhaps even people. That was the trouble with forgetfulness. He did not know what he was forgetting.

“Yes, I will. I’m sure you’ve got it all planned,” Sebastian said, fearing his stepmother had already explained her plans to

him in detail.

His stepmother smiled.

“That’s right, I have, just as we discussed. I suppose you’ll be enjoying a leisurely day. I’ll retire after luncheon for a few hours. We’ve got Lady Clarissa’s ball this evening,” she said.

For a moment, Sebastian tried to focus his mind, attempting to recall not only Lady Clarissa but also the ball to which he was invited.

“Ah... yes, Lady Clarissa,” he said, suddenly seizing on the thought of who his stepmother meant.

He had not forgotten, though he had not entirely remembered, either. Lady Clarissa Barrington was a socialite, whose salon was among the most fashionable in the ton. She would spend the season in the capital at her estate in Devon. The ball was

an annual occasion attended by the elite, and Sebastian's stepmother counted herself among them.

"It'll be the usual offering, but pleasant enough," his stepmother said, and Sebastian nodded.

He had not forgotten, and he reminded himself of this, as he finished his cup of coffee, thinking over the things he could remember, even as he feared there were things he had still forgotten.

"I'll have to think about the ball. I don't know if I want to go to it or not," he said, for his thoughts were distracted by memories of the previous evening, even as his stepmother raised her eyebrows.

"But it's expected of you, Sebastian. You're the Earl of Southbourne, and you know what Lady Clarissa's like. She likes to invite only those who meet her standards. That's why we're invited," Victoria said, and Sebastian rolled his eyes.

“And what if she doesn’t meet our standards?” he replied, for Sebastian had never put much store in rank and position, even as the ton existed only because of class and division.

“The woman you danced with last night might be there,” his stepmother said, and Sebastian smiled, shaking his head, for he had no intention of pursuing a match with the fear of the family curse hanging over him.

“I don’t think so. Besides, she wouldn’t be interested now. I’m sure she knows who I am. She’ll hear the rumors, she’ll know I am... as I am,” Sebastian said, for he had now convinced himself of his madness, and felt certain it would only get worse.

Forgetfulness was surely the first sign, and Sebastian shuddered to think what would come next. His father had been forgetful, but he had also been delusional, replacing those things he had forgotten with ideas of what was not, and believing in them, too.

“But you don’t know that, Sebastian. Not yet,” his stepmother said, but Sebastian was not willing to find out, nor was he willing to risk the possibility of humiliation at the hands of the ton.

He would go to the ball under duress and hoping to encounter Rosalind again. He reminded himself what would happen if he did. Even though his heart was torn, an unexpected feeling of desire for her arose.

“Oh, there you are, Rosalind. Where have you been all morning?” the duchess asked, as Rosalind entered the morning room to find her mother sitting with Lady Tilly, her godmother, and several other women taking tea.

“I had a slight megrim,” Rosalind replied, not wishing to be questioned, even as her mother raised her eyebrows.

“It’s those masks, isn’t it? They’re terrible. I always have to lie down the following day after a masquerade. I’m glad I wasn’t there,” Lady Tilly said, tutting and shaking her head.

Rosalind had not realized her mother had company, but there could be no retreat now she had entered the morning room, and she was forced to sit and listen as the events of the previous evening were dissected.

“It’s always a gamble who one dances with. I’m always fearful when they remove their mask,” one of the women said.

At these words, Rosalind smiled, thinking the same might be said of the man unfortunate enough to dance with her. The duchess’ friends were a mixture of society ladies, each of them with their own peculiarities, but they all shared one thing in common: far too much time on their hands.

This leisure was translated into idle gossip, and the entire purpose of the gathering was to share whatever information they might have with one another, each of them hoping to outdo the others with their accounts of scandal.

“Oh, I feel the same way, Petunia. I’ve danced with some ghastly men in my time,” Lady Tilly, herself a spinster, replied.

More tea was poured, and the conversation continued in a similar vein.

“Anyway, it’ll be far easier at Lady Clarissa’s tonight. There’ll be no second guessing,” one of the women said.

The others nodded.

“Yes, I much prefer a dinner ball to a masquerade,” Lady Tilly said.

“Did you dance with anyone of interest last night, Rosalind?” another of the women asked, and Rosalind blushed, glancing

at her mother, who answered the question for her.

“She was to dance with the Duke of Northridge, but managed to avoid him for most of the evening. Isn’t that true, Rosalind?” the duchess said.

All eyes were fixed on Rosalind, who now sighed and shrugged.

“It’s not easy knowing who’s who at a masquerade,” she said, and her mother tutted.

“You could’ve sought him out, couldn’t you? He was with your father for half the evening, but you were off gallivanting about the art,” she said, and Rosalind’s anger was inflamed.

Her mother was humiliating her in front of her friends, and for no other reason than her desire to see Rosalind married to the man she favored over others. But if she thought her tactic would work, it merely served to drive home Rosalind’s

stubbornness. She would not marry the Duke of Northridge, and that was final.

“The art was far more interesting, mother,” Rosalind retorted.

She no longer cared for decorum. The other women were listening in fascination, and Rosalind knew this exchange would soon be the talk of every salon in London.

“Or the man. Yes, I know who he is, Rosalind. Sebastian, the Earl of Southbourne. I couldn’t place him at first, but now I remember. The mad earl; that’s what they say. A cursed family,” she said, and the other women nodded.

Rosalind was taken aback. She recalled her father mentioning the earl in relation to a horse, but she had never expected to meet him.

The thought was intriguing, though. It seemed her mother would go to any lengths to prevent her from showing interest

in anyone other than the Duke of Northridge and would not be happy until the betrothal was announced and the wedding ceremony enacted. A mad earl? It seemed utter nonsense. There had been nothing of madness about the man she had danced with and shared such a fine conversation with regarding the paintings.

“He wasn’t mad. He was quite charming. We talked about art. He appreciated what I had to say, as I appreciated what he had to say, too,” Rosalind replied, for she would not be swayed in her opinions of a man whom she had nothing but the desire to see again.

Her Godmother looked worried.

“It’s true what your mother says. They all went mad. Two generations back and probably before. Seized by a madness, just like the king. One wonders if these things can be carried on the air and caught like a cold,” she said, looking suddenly fearful.

Rosalind rolled her eyes. They were nothing but a group of silly women with nothing better to do than gossip over nonsense. What difference did it make if the earl’s father and

grandfather had gone mad? That did not mean he would, too, and if anything, it made Rosalind all the more determined to see him again. She knew his name now, and it would not be difficult to find an earl among the London aristocracy; especially one with a reputation for madness.

“We talked, I danced with him. That’s all. There’s nothing more to it than that. I don’t see what the fuss is all about,” Rosalind said, shaking her head and wishing she was anywhere but in the company of her mother and her mother’s friends, all of whom seemed to be of the same opinion as the duchess.

“It’s the impression it makes, Rosalind. You’re a young woman, you’re allowed to make mistakes, but you should allow yourself to be guided, too,” her mother replied, adopting a softer tone, and looking at Rosalind with what might be construed as sympathy.

But Rosalind knew she was only making a pretense in front of the others. Her mind was made up. She was not guiding her with a gentle hand but forcing her by way of threats and cajolment.

“You should listen to your mother, Rosalind,” Lady Tilly said, and the other women nodded.

Rosalind sighed. There was no point in continuing the argument. They had reached a stalemate. Her parents favored the Duke of Northridge, and Rosalind favored anyone but him. But now, knowing the name of the stranger she had danced with and shared the intimacies of their appreciation for the scandalous paintings, a glimmer of hope rose in her heart.

If she could find the earl, perhaps her fortunes could change. Rosalind had always had a rebellious spirit, and now that same spirit came to the fore in a determination to see her fortunes changed.

“I’ve certainly listened,” Rosalind said, as the butler entered the room.

“The Duke of Northridge, your Grace,” he said, addressing Rosalind’s mother, who clapped her hands together in delight.

“Oh, how wonderful!” she exclaimed, as Rosalind stifled a groan. Did this man never give up?

The party rose as one, and as the duke entered the room, a rustle of skirts met him as the group of women curtsied. Rosalind gave only a token bending of the knee, even as the duke hurried forward to seize her by the hand.

“My darling, Rosalind, how happy I am to see you,” he exclaimed, as a footman now entered the room, bearing an enormous bouquet of red roses.

The scent was overbearing, heady, and pungent. It was much like the duke’s presence. Rosalind was presented with the flowers as the other women gushed.

“Oh, aren’t they beautiful?” Lady Tilly exclaimed.

Rosalind did not particularly care for roses. As pretty as they were, they had thorns, and now she cut her finger on one of the stems, smarting with pain as the duke gushed over her.

“Do you like them?” he asked. With her mother watching like a hawk, Rosalind could only say, “yes.”

Chapter 9

“An estate in Herefordshire, the townhouse here in London, a modest pile outside Bath—only about a hundred acres, and the Scottish acquisitions, too. My great-great-grandfather married the first daughter of the Duke of Argyll.

A substantial estate was bequeathed as part of the dowry. I don't go up there much. It's all grouse moors and mountains, but pleasant enough,” the Duke of Northridge said. The women in the morning room hanging on his every word. All of them, except Rosalind.

Richard had a boastful streak to him, one she found unappealing, and she had already heard more than enough about his estates and property, even as her mother clapped her hands together in delight.

“Oh, can you imagine it, Rosalind? Life amid the heathers. You'll wear a tartan sash, and dance the jig with the ghillie,” she said, and Lady Tilly let out a cry of delight.

“Oh, yes, just like in one of Sir Walter Scott’s novellas, how delightful,” she said.

They were speaking as though the match between Rosalind and the duke was decided, even as, in Rosalind’s mind, it was far from so. She felt trapped, unable to express her true opinion, with the duke sitting at her side, uncomfortably close.

“Would you like to go to Scotland, Rosalind?” Richard asked, turning to her, and Rosalind forced a smile onto her face through gritted teeth.

“Yes. I’m sure I would,” she replied, even though she had no intention of doing so with him.

His purpose in coming to the house that morning was obvious. He wanted to assert his position, and he had done so before the Earl of Southbourne had even had the opportunity of doing so.

“If he ever was going to do so,” Rosalind thought to herself.

Her Godmother’s words about the earl were far from being off-putting and had given rise to an intriguing question. Was the earl really mad? Rosalind had no experience of madness. She did not know what it looked like, though her father often spoke disparagingly of the king and favorably of his incarceration at Windsor on the orders of the regent.

But if the Earl of Southbourne was mad, he had shown no signs of it at the masquerade ball. He had been the very model of charm and wit, and Rosalind had found herself very much attracted to him.

“We can visit the Scottish estate, though I’m considering an extended grand tour after the wedding, you see,” Richard said, addressing Rosalind’s mother, who clapped her hands together in delight.

“Oh, the renaissance masterpieces, the ancient ruins, the romance of the Venetian canals,” she exclaimed, seeming not to question the duke’s assumptions.

Rosalind rolled her eyes. She had made it clear she did not want to marry the Duke of Northridge, and the thought of sharing the romance of Venice with him turned her stomach. He had no appreciation for the things she found inspiring. What would he know of art and painting?

He had never once asked her about her interests, and yet at the masquerade, she had felt herself to be the very center of the Earl of Southbourne's attentions. He had wanted to know what she thought of the paintings, and there had been no sense of embarrassment in sharing such an intimate view.

"Yes, we'll see it all. I've done the tour myself, of course. But I'm sure Rosalind will delight in it," the duke said, turning again to Rosalind, who could do nothing but nod and agree.

He had such a patronizing way about him, as though he was only interested in Rosalind when she was listening to him or agreeing with him. Rosalind decided to create some amusement.

“Yes. I’ve always wanted to see the ecstasy of Saint Teresa, the Bernini sculpture in Rome. It shows her heart being pierced by the lance of an angel. It’s ever so sensuous if the drawings I’ve seen of it are to be believed,” she said, knowing her mother would be horrified by the mention of such an explicit piece of religious art.

The other women looked uncomfortable, and the duke shifted awkwardly in his place next to Rosalind.

“Yes... well... I’m sure it’s very continental,” her mother said, blushing, as she took a sip of tea.

“The Roman religion,” the duke said, waving his hand dismissively, and Rosalind could not help but smile as she imagined the sculpture of Saint Teresa’s ecstasy, on which she had based several of her own paintings.

“Rosalind, why don’t you play the pianoforte for us?” her mother asked, and the other women nodded.

“Oh, yes, we must hear you play, Rosalind,” Lady Tilly exclaimed, seemingly glad to have the subject changed.

Rosalind did not like playing in front of other people. She was never allowed to play the sort of music she favored, like the bold baroque pieces of Scarlatti and Vivaldi. She was forever commanded to indulge her mother’s love of Bach, whom she found interminably dull.

“I’m eager to hear you play, too, Rosalind,” Richard said, and Rosalind had no choice but to cross to the pianoforte, where her mother came to stand behind her.

“Play something pleasant, Rosalind. And stop embarrassing yourself,” she whispered, placing her hand forcibly on Rosalind’s shoulder.

Rosalind sighed, arranging the music, and beginning to play. It was a dull piece, melancholic and without feeling. But her mother nodded, smiling, as the small audience in the morning room listened approvingly. When her performance came to an

end, they clapped politely, congratulating Rosalind for her poise and style.

“How delightfully elegant,” Lady Tilly said, and the others expressed similar sentiments.

“Play something else, Rosalind,” her mother said, and Rosalind was now forced to perform a concert of pieces, each of her mother’s choosing, and each as dull as the last.

“I do so like Beethoven,” Lady Tilly said, when at last Rosalind was allowed to stop.

“It was Bach,” she said, and Lady Tilly looked embarrassed.

“Ah...yes. That’s right, Bach. Yes, how foolish of me,” she said, as the duke nodded approvingly.

“How delightful, Rosalind. I’m sure you’ll be marvelous at entertaining guests when we dine with the great and the good,” he said.

Rosalind gave another forced smile, rising to her feet, as the duke did the same.

“I’m sure,” she said.

“Well, ladies, I must take my leave. It’s been a delightful morning. How glad I am to have joined you,” he said, as the other women rose for his departure.

“You’ll call on us very soon, I hope, your Grace,” Rosalind’s mother said, and the duke took her hand in his and raised it to his lips.

“It’ll be my pleasure to do so, duchess,” Richard replied, before turning to Rosalind, who curtsied.

All she wanted was for him to leave, even as she feared it would not be long before he returned. His arrogance knew no bounds, and it seemed he already considered himself to be the one whom she would marry.

“Goodbye, your Grace, Rosalind said, as he took her hand in his and raised it to his lips.

“Goodbye, dear Rosalind. When the scent of the roses fills the air, think of the one who brought them,” he said, before taking his leave.

Rosalind rolled her eyes. He was insufferable, even as her mother was full of praise for him.

“Isn’t he marvelous? The perfect match for you, Rosalind,” she said, smiling at the other guests, all of whom nodded.

“If one could imagine the perfect husband, it would be him,” Lady Tilly remarked, and the others said the same.

Rosalind had heard enough, and excusing herself, she returned to her bedroom, closing the door behind her with a sigh. She had awoken that morning with a vague hope of seeing the mysterious man from the masquerade again.

She had imagined him calling on her, the two of them walking in the garden, perhaps even sharing a kiss beneath the boughs of the weeping willow at the bottom of the garden, where one could be hidden from the observations of the house. But the earl had not come, and Rosalind could only assume he had no interest in her, despite the obvious connection they had shared at the masquerade.

“Surely I’m not like all those other women,” she thought to herself. She could not imagine her mother’s friends showing any interest in the sorts of paintings she and the earl had admired the previous evening. Shock and horror would be their reaction.

From beneath her bed, Rosalind drew out the painting of Ariadne and Dionysus. There was the earl's face, immortalized on the canvas, and her own, that of Dionysus, looking back at him. She smiled, reaching out to touch his handsome features, the features she herself had painted from memory.

A shiver ran through her as she imagined that same touch against her skin, his fingers tracing a trail across her cheek. Leaning forward, she kissed the canvas, her lips against his, before drawing back with a smile. There was something rebellious in her thoughts, as though in her attraction to the earl. She was snubbing the duke, and her mother, too.

“He really is very handsome,” she thought to herself, and in his face, and in her recollections, she could detect no signs of madness.

It was surely nonsense, and to suggest a man would go mad because his father had been mad before him was madness itself. The earl was not mad, and if he was, he had disguised it as skillfully as he had disguised his face with the mask.

But unlike his face, there had been no revelation of the truth of madness; not even a glimmer. He had been witty and

charming, erudite and intelligent. His speech was not that of a madman, nor his opinions, either, and if Rosalind's mother believed she would turn Rosalind against the earl by making up such stories, she was strongly mistaken.

“Will you wear the red, my Lady?” Molly asked, holding up one of Rosalind's dresses for her to see.

“No, I don't think so. I'll wear the peacock blue. It hardly matters, does it?” Rosalind replied.

She had resigned herself to attending Lady Clarissa's ball that evening. There would be a dinner, followed by dancing, and though Rosalind had a vague hope, she might again encounter the Earl of Southbourne. That hope was tempered by the certain knowledge of the Duke of Northridge's attendance. Without the masks, there could be no hiding, and she would be forced to dance with the duke, as the earl looked on.

“And that'll be the end of that,” she had told herself, knowing the duke would make it his business to ensure she received no attention from the earl or any other gentleman, either.

“But you want to look nice, my Lady,” Molly replied, rummaging in the wardrobe to bring out Rosalind’s peacock blue dress.

“What I want is to paint. I want to stay here. But it’s far easier to do what my mother tells me,” Rosalind replied, shaking her head sadly.

She was resigned to a dull evening with more of the same conversation she had endured that morning. Even if the Earl of Southbourne was in attendance, Rosalind felt certain he had already made up his mind she was of no interest to him, and with this in mind, she feared she would be embarrassed, as well as bored.

“You can’t hide here your whole life, my Lady. Let’s get you dressed, and then you can choose your jewelry,” Molly said, ever practical in her instructions.

Rosalind did as she was told, dressing in the peacock blue dress before selecting jewelry left to her by her grandmother; a

sapphire brooch with a matching necklace and tiara. Glancing at herself in the mirror, she imagined the earl as Dionysus, snatching the jewelry from her and flinging it into the heavens to make the constellation.

“I’ve been too hasty, haven’t I?” she said, and her maid looked at her with a confused expression.

“What do you mean, my Lady?” she asked, reaching up to adjust the necklace around Rosalind’s neck.

“The Earl of Southbourne. I got carried away with my thoughts over him. I thought he might’ve called on me after we met last night,” Rosalind said, for she had felt disappointed not to receive a visit from the earl, even as he had made no promise to do so.

In truth, Rosalind knew she was possessed of a certain naivety. She was eighteen years old, in the flush of her first season, and forever taken up with romantic notions of what a man should be like. But having studied the history of art through the books in her father’s library, Rosalind knew the course of true love never ran smoothly.

The depictions of Pygmalion, who fell in love with his own statue, only for Aphrodite to turn her into a living being or Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection in a pool of water, before being consumed by his own desire and drowning.

“Don’t fret, my Lady. I’m sure you’ll see the earl again. If not... well, he doesn’t know what he’s lost by not pursuing you,” Molly replied.

Rosalind nodded. It was not so much the earl himself. She hardly knew him. It was what he represented. She did not want to find herself betrothed before she had had a chance to live. There was still so much for her to experience. In her studies of art, she had found herself gazing through windows into numerous other worlds, ones she desired to explore and experience for herself.

Why should she not be someone’s lover? Why should she not be caught up in adventure and excitement? Why should she not be the one to dream of something more?

“I’d like to see him again, but...I don’t know...I don’t want to make a fool of myself,” she said, wondering what the earl would say if he knew himself immortalized in the painting of Ariadne and Dionysus.

“You won’t, my Lady. Trust me. You’re allowed a few dalliances. And as for the Duke of Northridge...well, he needs to realize he has to fight for your affections, not expect them as a matter of course,” Molly replied.

Rosalind smiled. Molly always spoke her mind, and she knew the maid did not approve of the Duke of Northridge anymore than she did. As she made her way downstairs, where her parents were waiting, Rosalind wondered what would happen if she saw the Earl of Southbourne again. Would he appear mad? Would he ignore her? A sudden anxiousness came over her, even as her mother chastised her.

“We’re going to be late, Rosalind,” she said, tutting and shaking her head.

“What if I see the Earl of Southbourne again?” Rosalind asked, and her mother groaned.

“I don’t want to hear any more nonsense about the Earl of Southbourne,” she exclaimed, hurrying Rosalind out of the house and into a waiting carriage.

But as they drove towards the home of Lady Clarissa Barrington, Rosalind could not rid herself of both the fear of encountering the man who had previously been a stranger, and a desire to know more about the man she now knew as the Earl of Southbourne.

Chapter 10

“These cakes are delicious. Have you tried one? And the sugared fruits are also delectable. Oh, and look, dainty little ices! This is why I’ve come,” Elizabeth exclaimed, attacking the dessert table with gusto.

Rosalind was standing at her side, being somewhat more reserved in her appreciation of the lavish fare presented. Lady Clarissa’s dinner ball was an elaborate affair. They had enjoyed a dozen courses, served by liveried footmen in the dining room, where the table had been covered with fine silverware and crystal glass. The wine had flowed freely, and many of the guests had not survived the course of the service, making the mistake of gluttony too early, and finding themselves unable to continue the pursuit.

“You can have mine and everyone else’s, too,” Rosalind replied, smiling at the sight of her friend, who had always been possessed of a sweet tooth.

“It’s delicious, Rosalind. Quite heavenly,” Elizabeth exclaimed, reminding Rosalind of the Ecstasy of Saint Teresa

she had spoken of in her mother's drawing room the day before.

Elizabeth certainly took pleasure in her food, just as Rosalind took pleasure in her art. They were both sensuous creatures, though their pleasures were somewhat different. The dinner itself was as elaborate an affair as it was dull.

The seating plan had been carefully designed. Rosalind had suspected her mother's influence in finding herself sitting between her godmother and the Duke of Northridge. He had done nothing but speak about himself, though the lack of expectation in an answer had offered Rosalind ample time to observe the other guests.

"Did you see the Earl of Southbourne at dinner?" Rosalind asked, as Elizabeth took two strawberry ices from a rapidly melting display.

"No. I was too busy concentrating on the turbot. Or was it the lamb? It was all so delicious," Elizabeth said, and Rosalind rolled her eyes.

“He was there. He caught my eye several times,” she said, for there had been no doubt the earl had noticed her.

He, too, had looked bored, sitting next to a woman whom her Godmother had informed her was Sebastian’s stepmother, and a man she knew to be Lord John Cuthbert, a wealthy viscount and businessman.

“Oh, but Rosalind, you know it’s not a good idea. He’s mad, isn’t he?” Elizabeth said, and Rosalind rolled her eyes.

“Oh, Elizabeth, what nonsense. Does he look mad? Did he charge across Lady Clarissa’s table, kicking the glasses off? Did he rant and rave? Did he tell us he was God incarnate?” she asked, feeling somewhat exasperated at this general assumption of Sebastian’s state of mind, even as she herself had seen no evidence to suggest any truth in it.

The Earl of Southbourne had conducted himself entirely within the bounds of social norms. He had used his cutlery correctly, eaten with moderation, conversed in a low and

respectable tone. Rosalind knew all of this because she had been observing him closely, even as she pretended to be listening to Richard, whose incessant talk had been nothing but an irritating background noise.

In the several hours they had been sitting at table, not one action or word from the Earl of Southbourne had given Rosalind cause to consider him mad.

“No. But you can’t always tell,” her friend replied, with a tone of authority Rosalind knew she did not possess.

“And you’re an expert in madness, are you?” Rosalind replied, raising her eyebrows, as Elizabeth’s gaze was drawn by a plate of dainty meringues at the far end of the dessert table.

“No, but one reads of the king’s illness. He can be entirely lucid, they say, and then...well...he goes quite mad. He rants and raves. It’s worse at night, they say,” she replied.

Again, Elizabeth was uncertain who was meant by the mysterious “they” whose expertise could be translated into universal norms. The opinion of the ton was a collective one, and often based merely on widespread opinion. But Rosalind preferred to make up her own mind, and she would not be forced into making an assumption about the earl until she could know it for certain herself.

“I’m sure it is. And I’m sure you’re right. The earl’s completely mad. That’s why I find him alluring,” Rosalind replied, and Elizabeth’s eyes grew wide with horror.

“Oh Rosalind, no,” she said, but Rosalind’s mind was made up.

She had been nervous at first, but curiosity now got the better of her. At the masquerade ball, Rosalind had found herself alone with the earl in a room full of scandalous portraits. He had done nothing to scare her or threaten her. If he was mad, there was a benevolence in his madness, and Rosalind was not afraid.

“He’s friends with Lord Cuthbert. You and he were dancing at the masquerade, weren’t you? Well, why not seek them out

together?" Rosalind said.

She knew her mother and the Duke of Northridge would be angry with her, and her father would tell her she was being foolish, but Rosalind no longer cared. She wanted to speak to the earl. And if that meant defying social convention, so be it.

"I did dance with John. Er, Lord Cuthbert, I mean, but I don't think he was interested in me," Elizabeth said, reaching out to take one of the meringues, but Rosalind slapped her hand back.

"Look, they're over there. Now's our chance," she said, taking Elizabeth reluctantly by the arm.

But as she did so, a voice behind her made her shudder. Turning, she found the Duke of Northridge standing before her.

“They’re going to begin the dancing soon. Come along, Rosalind. You can leave Elizabeth by the dessert table,” he said, raising his eyebrows as Elizabeth blushed.

“I... I don’t want...” Rosalind stammered, glancing over her shoulder and catching sight of Sebastian, who was watching her from across the room.

“Nonsense. We’re going to dance. It’s expected of us, Rosalind. Come along now,” he said, and Rosalind had no choice but to do as he said.

He took her by the arm, somewhat forcefully, leading her into the throng of dancers and slipping his hand around her waist. There was nothing romantic about his actions. Not once had Richard tried to seduce her or make himself an attractive proposition.

He was a middle-aged man, far too old for her, possessed of graying hair and a growing paunch around his stomach. His dress clothes were ill-fitting. They were those of a man unwilling to accept the changes of the passing years. It was clear he had consumed too much wine and brandy for his own good.

“Just one dance, I’m feeling…” Rosalind stammered, trying to release herself from his grasp.

“As many dances as I wish, Rosalind. It’s not up to you to decide. We’re to be married, and we’re to be seen, too. Don’t you understand what that means?” he asked, and Rosalind sighed.

“I don’t want to dance,” she replied, but he ignored her, and now the waltz picked up its pace, and the dancers whirled and twirled in a throng.

As the music came to an end, Rosalind caught sight of the earl. He was watching her from across the dance floor, standing with Lord Cuthbert by a marble column. She wondered what he was thinking. Was he angry with her for having led him on?

Now he knew she was as good as betrothed? She could not take her eyes off him, imagining his face as that of Dionysus,

their lips almost touching in the painting. The thought of his madness did not scare her. She found it alluring, somehow. There was a mystery about him, one she wanted to discover more about.

“We’ll dance again when the music resumes,” Richard said, and Rosalind sighed, wishing there was some way she could get away from him. If only the earl would make an advance.

She imagined herself in his arms, the gentleness of his touch, the movement of their bodies as one. Rosalind would like to dance with him, to feel his arms around her, his lips pressed against hers, just like in the paintings.

“I need to go to the powder room,” Rosalind replied, pulling herself away from the duke’s hold.

He rolled his eyes and muttered something under his breath, but he made no attempt to stop her. And hurrying off in the direction of the powder room, Rosalind hid herself behind one of the marble pillars lining the far side of the ballroom. She knew she would not be able to hide for long, and her only hope was for someone else to ask her to dance, even as she knew it would only serve to anger the duke further.

Richard wanted her all for himself. He was a jealous man, who already believed he possessed her, even as Rosalind had given him no reason to think so. His assumptions were arrogant, and Rosalind wanted only to show him she was not interested.

“Oh, there you are, Rosalind. You managed to escape from him then?” Elizabeth said, finding Rosalind loitering behind the column.

“I’ll have to go back in a few moments. I just needed a respite from him. He’s quite awful,” Rosalind replied, annoyed with Elizabeth for having made no progress in approaching Lord Cuthbert.

He was her opportunity to approach Sebastian. The earl and his friend were still standing in the same position. Rosalind could see them from her vantage point, and as she had headed in the direction of the powder room, she had felt certain the earl was watching her. She had hoped he was, even as he had made no attempt to speak to her. What was he waiting for?

“Do you think he’ll invite you to dance?” Elizabeth asked, peering cautiously around the pillar.

“He might do, if you’d only talk to his friend, too,” Rosalind replied, feeling somewhat exasperated with Elizabeth, who was a free agent and could talk with whomsoever she wished.

“Oh, but I don’t know what to say to him,” Elizabeth replied, and Rosalind gave a wry smile.

“You could tell him how delicious the meringues are,” she replied, and Elizabeth blushed.

“I only had three,” she replied, glancing across at the dessert table, where several footmen were even now replenishing the plates.

Rosalind knew she could not hide behind the pillar for the rest of the evening. She felt like a wild animal hiding from its

hunter. To break cover was a terrible risk. If Richard saw her, he would demand she dance with him. But if Sebastian was to catch sight of her first, perhaps he would be persuaded to invite her to dance.

Staying behind the pillar would only ensure her eventual discovery. To break cover or remain would likely rouse the duke's anger. He wanted her for himself. There could be no compromise, and even the invitation of another man would be seen as a threat.

“Oh, come on, let's get this over with. We'll go together. We'll walk into the middle of the throng, and if the earl and Lord Cuthbert notice us, perhaps we'll be fortunate in our invitations,” Rosalind said.

It was a bold plan, and likely to fail or elicit the wrath of both her mother and the Duke of Northridge. But Rosalind was willing to take the risk, even as she did not know whether Sebastian had the intention of asking her to dance.

“And if they don't?” Elizabeth asked.

Rosalind looked at her friend and smiled.

“Well, at least I’ll have tried,” she replied, taking Elizabeth by the arm and leading her into the throng.

Chapter 11

Sebastian was curious about Rosalind. He had watched her dancing with the Duke of Northridge, wondering why a young lady like her should be mixed up with an old man like him. He did not know the duke personally, but John had assured him he was a dull and self-entitled man, who spent most of his time boasting of his wealth and privilege.

“Hardly the sort of man I’d want my daughter to marry,” John had said, as they had watched Rosalind extract herself from the duke’s arms and hurry off towards the powder room.

“No, but he’s rich, I suppose, and what woman wouldn’t want to be a duchess?” Sebastian had replied.

He knew how fickle the ton could be, even as he had sensed something different in Rosalind. During the course of the dinner, he had found his gaze increasingly drawn to her, thinking back to the moment of intimacy they had shared in the room of sensuous paintings at the masquerade.

Nothing improper had occurred there, of course, but Sebastian had felt a sense of possibility, and had thought of little else but Rosalind since the night before. But longings were forever tempered by his fears, and by now, Rosalind was certain to know of the family curse, and its rumor spread across the ton.

“I wonder where she’s gone? I’ve lost Elizabeth, too. They’re great friends, you know,” John said, as Sebastian looked around the room for any sign of Rosalind and her friend.

“You like her, do you?” Sebastian asked, and John nodded.

“She’s a charming young lady, yes. We found much in common at the masquerade. I’d like to talk to her again,” John replied.

Sebastian smiled at him. He was happy for his friend. There had been times when he had feared John might gain the reputation of a rake, but to hear him speak of settling down pleased Sebastian, even as his own fortunes seemed less certain.

“Then seek her out. Ask her to dance,” Sebastian replied.

“And will you do the same with Rosalind?” John replied.

This was the question Sebastian had already asked himself. He did not know what to do. He had enjoyed their encounter at the masquerade, and there was no doubting the things they had in common. But Sebastian was fearful. He was fearful of falling in love and fearful of the madness he felt certain would soon possess him.

It would not be fair, even as he knew it was an arrogance to assume Rosalind might feel the same. Behind his mask, Sebastian had felt a sense of possibility. A mask disguised the truth, but he could not hide behind a mask forever, and if there was to be any possibility of something more with Rosalind, Sebastian knew he would have to tell the truth.

“I doubt she’s given me a second thought,” he replied, but John shook his head.

“Nonsense. She’s been looking at you all evening. And you’ve been looking at her, too. Don’t deny it,” he said, raising his eyebrows at Sebastian, who blushed.

He had been thinking about Rosalind, and he had been looking at her during dinner. She was wearing a peacock blue dress and sapphire jewelry, her hair curled in ringlets after the latest fashion, and looking truly the prettiest young lady in the room.

But it was not only her looks he found attractive. Most of the women in the room were pretty, but Rosalind stood out among them. But it was the memory of their first encounter, the depth of their conversation, the intimacies of shared passions. Sebastian did want to know her better, even as he was scared of what it might lead to.

“I suppose so, but...” Sebastian began, sighing, as John interrupted him.

“Stop being such a fool, Sebastian. You’re not mad. Whatever your stepmother tells you,” he said.

Sebastian looked at him in surprise.

“What does my stepmother have to do with it?” he asked, for it seemed a curious thing for his friend to say.

John returned his look pointedly.

“She encourages it. I’ve heard her. She’s forever making you out to be an invalid, forgetful, in need of reminding. The more she does it, the more you’ll believe it,” he said.

Sebastian was about to reply, but now he caught sight of Rosalind and her friend, Elizabeth, emerging from behind a pillar, arm in arm. He glanced over to where the Duke of Northridge was in conversation with Rosalind’s father, the Duke of Lonsdale, knowing he had to make his move

immediately, or see Rosalind subjected to another dance with the man whom she so clearly detested.

“There they are,” he said, and John turned, catching Elizabeth’s eye and making straight for her.

Sebastian had no choice but to follow, even as he caught sight of the Duke of Northridge doing the same. As he approached Rosalind, she smiled at him, falling into a slight curtsy, as Sebastian bowed.

“My Lord,” she said, offering him her hand.

“Lady Rosalind. I’m sorry we haven’t had a chance to speak yet. You were otherwise engaged,” Sebastian said, feeling suddenly embarrassed for having been so reticent in his approach.

There was surely no harm in a dance, a flirtation, a dalliance. He was not asking her to marry him.

“Did you enjoy the dinner?” she asked, as John and Elizabeth now stepped away arm in arm.

“I did, though I’m no gastronome, unlike my friend,” he said, and Rosalind laughed.

“Then he and Elizabeth will get on very well. I’m the same, though. Food doesn’t really interest me. But you know that. You know what interests me,” Rosalind replied, glancing across the room, to where a set of portraits hung at the far end.

They were a set by the Spanish painter, Zurbaran. Sebastian had earlier admired the portraits of three sisters, hung in individual frames, and acquired by Lady Clarissa’s husband during their grand tour.

“Do you like them?” Sebastian asked, but Rosalind shook her head.

“I don’t like the shadowing of the faces. When I paint, I like the face to be prominent, and the background shadowy and suggestive. I want to really know the person I’m looking at. Don’t you think so? I mean, it’s the eyes that draw you, isn’t it?” she said, looking up into Sebastian’s eyes, as his heart skipped a beat.

It was her eyes. Her deep hazel eyes and their gaze locked. He smiled at her.

“Eyes are the windows to the soul,” he said, and she nodded.

“And isn’t a painting so often a glimpse of the soul? Of a moment captured?” she asked.

He was about to reply when Rosalind’s gaze was distracted by something behind him. Turning, he found the Duke of Northridge looking angrily at him. But Sebastian was not about to be intimidated by another man, not when he was enjoying his conversation with Rosalind so much.

“Might I have this dance?” he asked, addressing Rosalind, who nodded.

“You may,” she replied, and the duke gave an angry exclamation.

“Rosalind.” he snarled, but there was nothing he could do.

A woman had every right to decide with whom she would dance, and Sebastian had asked first. He offered her his arm, and she took it, before he led her off into the throng, the musicians now striking up their next waltz.

Across the ballroom, Sebastian saw the duke returning to Rosalind’s mother, who had fixed Sebastian with an angry gaze, the two of them muttering to one another, as Rosalind slipped her arm around Sebastian’s waist, and they began to dance.

“I don’t think your mother’s too happy with me,” Sebastian said, and Rosalind laughed.

“She’s never happy with anything, not really. They want me to marry him. I don’t have much choice in the matter,” Rosalind said, and Sebastian looked at her sympathetically.

She was still so young, flushed with the innocence of her debut. It seemed terribly wrong for a man liked the Duke of Northridge to seize on her as he had done. There was jealousy in his look, and Sebastian felt a sudden protectiveness towards Rosalind, fearing she was to be forced into a life of misery, with no choice but to do as she was told.

“But you should do...you’re...everything he’s not. Does he even know of your interests? Your talents? Have you shown him your artworks? I’ve been thinking about what you said to me about your paintings,” Sebastian said, stammering over his words, as Rosalind sighed.

“He wouldn’t be interested. I don’t really tell anyone about my painting. I tried to once. My mother even encouraged it for a while. But young ladies are supposed to paint landscapes and the occasional dog or horse. When I started painting more interesting scenes, she forbade me from continuing. I paint in my bedroom with the door locked.

My maid brings me the things I need, and I hide everything under the bed. I dream of an exhibition, of others seeing my work. But it won’t ever happen,” Rosalind replied.

Sebastian felt terribly sorry for her. She was trapped, and he, too, knew just how it felt to be trapped.

“You shouldn’t have to feel like that. These arranged marriages, it’s wicked,” he said, as the dance came to an end, and they stepped out of the throng.

Sebastian had purposefully led her to the far end of the ballroom, where the three Zurbaran paintings hung, away from the sight of her mother and the Duke of Northridge. He had no doubt the duke would be looking for her, and he wanted to give her the chance to feel she could be herself. Rosalind smiled at him.

“It’s all right for men. They don’t have the same expectations placed on them. I’ve only just made my debut. It’s my first season. I should be allowed to dance with who I like, to make a few mistakes. But...oh, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be speaking like this. We hardly know one another,” she said, but Sebastian shook his head.

It was true, they hardly knew one another, and yet he already felt a sense of intimacy between them. The knowledge of a shared passion, and the ease with which their conversation flowed, solidified his feelings. He wanted to know more about her, even as he felt torn as to his own fears for the future.

He, too, was trapped. Not by the expectations of society, but by the certainty of a future he could do nothing to prevent. Like Rosalind, he faced the prospect of a life dictated by something he could not control, a madness waiting to strike; a madness already creeping over him.

“But we can know one another. We’re getting to know one another. Look up at the paintings. What do you see? I want to know. I want to hear what you think of them,” Sebastian said, determined to make Rosalind realize she was worthy of true

attention, and not just the superficial self-entitlement of the Duke of Northridge.

Rosalind blushed, looking up at the paintings of the three sisters, whose imperious gazes met at a point at the other end of the ballroom.

“I’d say the three of them are miserable. Perhaps they’re spinsters, none of them married. The three separate frames suggest a separation. They’re similar, but it’s as though they’re distant from one another. There’s nothing sensual about them. Their clothes are drab and dull, their faces shadowed. I told you I often imagine myself in the paintings I see, but I wouldn’t want to in this case. I don’t like any of them,” Rosalind said, and Sebastian smiled.

“Did you imagine yourself in the paintings at the masquerade ball?” he asked.

Rosalind blushed, glancing at him and smiling.

“Perhaps I did... they were... alluring,” she said, and Sebastian laughed.

He did not have her imagination. When he looked at a painting, he could not immediately imagine himself entering its frame or being part of the scene depicted. But the paintings at the masquerade ball had been alluring, and he had found the thought of Rosalind as the subject of one quite something.

“They certainly were. It’s strange, isn’t it? In classical scenes, it seems perfectly acceptable to paint the nude, to depict the orgies of Bacchus or the romantic excesses of Eros, but to place such scenes in a contemporary setting would be the cause of scandal,” Sebastian said.

Rosalind nodded.

“You’re absolutely right. One can look at such scenes from mythology without blushing. They hang in every aristocratic home, but those like the ones we saw at the masquerade, they’d be accused of offending morals,” she said, shaking her head.

Sebastian knew it was rare to find a woman of such enlightened opinion. Scandal was something to be avoided, rather than courted, and the thought of paintings such as those they had viewed together at the masquerade would have elicited cries of protest from most of those gathered for the ball that evening. But Rosalind was a kindred spirit. She understood what art meant, and in this, and so many other ways, she was different from any woman Sebastian had known before.

“Absolutely. It’s quite extraordinary. I paint a little myself. I might’ve mentioned it, but nothing of the skill you suggest of yourself. I’d so very much like to see,” Sebastian said, and Rosalind sighed.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get to see my work displayed in an exhibition. My mother wouldn’t allow it. She’d accuse me of offending morals, and I’m sure the Duke of Northridge would have something to say about it, too,” she said.

“But you can’t let them hold back your talents. Perhaps there’s a way the paintings could be smuggled out of the house, exhibited under another name. A lot of women authors do the

same, don't they? A different name to disguise the fact of their sex," Sebastian said.

It seemed a tragedy to think Rosalind's talents would go unrecognized, even as Sebastian knew it was folly to think otherwise. A woman was not an artist, or a writer, or a poet. Not one that is taken seriously, at least.

Her opinions were not even welcome, and no woman ever made a living from such pursuits, as far as he knew. He felt sorry for Rosalind. He knew her lot was to follow the course laid out for her and marry the Duke of Northridge and give up any pretension at self-betterment.

"I don't know... I don't know if my paintings are even any good. Elizabeth says they are, so does my maid. But until someone who really knows, tell me," she said, looking up at Sebastian, who smiled.

"I'd like the chance to. What are you working on at the moment? You told me, perhaps, but I can't remember," he said.

“I don’t think I did. I’m painting Ariadne and Dionysus, from the mythology. Dionysus flung Ariadne’s jewels into the sky to make the constellation Corona. It seemed such a beautiful image. I wanted to paint it for myself,” she said, and Sebastian smiled.

He had seen similar depictions of Ariadne and Dionysus on the continent, and the story of the jewels was one he found quite beautiful to behold. He looked down at the sapphire necklace Rosalind was wearing, and imagined what it might be like to slip his arms around her neck, unclasping it and holding it up to the light.

“How beautiful,” he replied, speaking as much of her as of the image of the painting.

“It’s taken me some time to get the figures right. I can’t very well criticize others and get it wrong myself. I’ve painted over Ariadne a dozen times. But I think I’ve got it right now,” she said, and Sebastian smiled.

“Did you model them after your own eyes?” he asked, and Rosalind blushed.

“I did, actually. I realized I had a model in myself. I could look in the mirror and paint my own eyes. It was far easier than copying those from a book of prints. One has to be able to see the eyes, the movement, the light, the depth,” she said, and Sebastian nodded, uncertain whether to ask the question now playing on his mind.

“I... but what about Dionysus? Wouldn't you need a man's eyes to model his after? You can't have used your own, surely?” he asked, and she smiled.

“I had an image in mind. They were eyes I'd seen very clearly, very vividly. I had trouble at first, but then I saw the eyes I wanted to gaze into. Ariadne's, I mean,” she said. Sebastian's heart skipped a beat as he imagined those eyes, the eyes of Ariadne and Dionysus, as those of his own, and Rosalind.

“I'm glad you found the eyes you wanted,” he said, and she nodded.

He wanted to hold her gaze; the same gaze he imagined in the painting. She was so beautiful, and, like a true masterpiece, whenever he looked at her, he saw something more. He saw further detail in her beauty in the depths of her eyes and the softness of her skin. She was a work of art.

“I did, but...oh, look, Richard’s coming now. I’ll go to the powder room. Perhaps we can avoid him? Another dance or a walk out on the terrace, perhaps?” Rosalind said. Sebastian was brought back to his senses, looking up to find the Duke of Northridge coming towards them through the throng.

He nodded, and Rosalind hurried off, leaving Sebastian standing below the paintings of the three sisters. Sebastian had been lost in the moment. While around them, the ball had continued, and the musicians had struck up another waltz. But the arrival of the duke had brought them both back to their senses, and now Sebastian was faced with an encounter he would rather not have.

“Where did she go?” the Duke of Northridge said, not acknowledging Sebastian, but speaking in a demanding tone.

Sebastian resisted the urge to suggest Rosalind had gone as far away from the duke as was possible, and instead merely shrugged his shoulders.

“We danced, that was that,” he replied, for he was not about to reveal any of the intimacies they had shared or suggest he and Rosalind had done anything more than continue a casual acquaintance.

The duke scowled at him.

“She’s mine, you know. My betrothed,” he said, and turning on his heels, he marched back off across the ballroom, leaving Sebastian shaking his head.

But he would not be cowed by the duke. Rosalind belonged to no one. She was a remarkable young woman, and despite his fears, Sebastian could not help but feel himself ever more enamored with her. He wanted to see her again; he wanted to be with her, and now he hoped it would not be too long before she returned from the powder room.

Chapter 12

Rosalind had not told the earl about Dionysus, even though she felt certain he would not have minded. Perhaps he would have even been flattered. She had been so caught up in their conversation it was as though nothing else had mattered.

He had really listened to her, and Rosalind could not imagine the Duke of Northridge, or her mother or father doing the same. Rosalind was not used to being listened to, to being taken seriously. But Sebastian was different. He had listened to her.

“Dionysus to my Ariadne,” she thought to herself, smiling at the thought, as she hurried towards the powder room.

Richard’s approach had cut short the conversation, and while Rosalind knew she would be in trouble with her mother for ignoring the duke, the thrill of doing so was alluring. Entering the powder room, she was hit by the strong scent of perfume, the air heavy with talc and fragrance, and a babble of voices coming from every side.

“Did you see the Marquess of Weston dancing with that slip of a girl, Annie Lester? Yes, I could tell you some tales about Annie Lester. She was a lady’s maid, but seduced the husband. He left her everything. Her poor mistress was reduced to... well, I won’t say it here,” one woman was saying, tutting, and shaking her head, while others shared similar stories of scandal.

Rosalind sat down on a plush stool in front of one of the mirrors, opening her small handbag and taking out her powder. Her back was turned, and she was sitting behind an oriental screen, on the other side of which two women were deep in conversation.

“He’s so forgetful, Helena. I had to remind him about the masquerade, and I’m certain he’d forgotten about tonight, too,” a voice was saying.

Rosalind was curious and allowing a cloud of powder to form around her. She glanced back through a gap in the screen at its fold, catching sight of none other than Sebastian’s stepmother, Lady Victoria Sinclair. Rosalind had seen her sitting next to Sebastian at dinner, and she recognized the other woman as Lady Helena Bonham, a socialite and irrepressible gossip.

“It must be terrible for you, Victoria. And to think his father and grandfather were the same. It obviously runs in the family along the male line. How fortunate you and your late husband didn’t have any children,” Lady Helena replied.

Rosalind was listening with interest. They were talking about Sebastian, and she was curious to learn more about the apparent madness others had mentioned.

“Yes, I do count it a blessing, but I can only fear when the madness seizes him. It starts with forgetfulness. His father was the same. He’d forget this and that, but I didn’t I think anything was wrong at first. It came on so suddenly.

I’m refurbishing part of the house at the moment to create a music room. We discussed it weeks ago. He’s completely forgotten. Small things don’t matter, but how can he discharge his duties as earl with such a memory?” Sebastian’s stepmother continued.

“You can only do your best, Victoria. I know it must be difficult. He’s such a delightful man, too. It’s such a pity. And the inevitability of it, too. He can’t possibly marry or have children, living with such a fear,” Lady Helena said.

Rosalind’s eyes grew wide and fearful. She had not realized the extent of Sebastian’s condition, even as she had seen no evidence of it for herself. During their conversation, there had been no look of madness in his eyes. It had not even occurred to her to think of it. Yet here was Lady Southbourne, telling her friend the terrible extent of what she feared. Sebastian would not marry for fear of passing the inheritance he believed was his.

“Well, I don’t know, but it seems unlikely, doesn’t it? I’ll manage as best I can, but it’s a terrible worry, Helena,” she said, as the two women now emerged from behind the screen.

Rosalind turned back to the mirror, pretending to be engrossed in her powdering, even as she felt a terrible sense of sorrow at what she had heard. Was Sebastian really mad? It seemed a cruel fate for a man of such obvious intelligence, and her heart went out to him, even as she knew there was little she could do to help him. If the madness was hereditary, it was only a matter of time, and if Lady Southbourne was to be believed, that time had come.

“Lady Rosalind, I’m here. The duke’s talking to your parents. We could slip out onto the terrace,” Sebastian’s voice came from the shadows, and Rosalind turned to find him concealed behind one of the marble columns.

It was growing dark now, though the ball was far from over. Stewards and footmen were hurrying back and forth with tapers, lighting the candelabras, their flickering glow illuminating the ballroom in a low light, and casting shadows into the corners. Rosalind smiled, glad to have encountered him again, despite what she had overheard in the powder room.

“I was hoping you’d be here,” she said, for she had walked slowly back to the ballroom, fearing he might have already left or been warned off by Richard.

“I didn’t want to see you with him,” Sebastian replied, emerging from the shadows, and offering her his arm.

She smiled at him, not wishing to believe there could be any hint of madness behind his smile. She would not mention what she had heard, nor did it matter. All that mattered was the moment they found themselves in. It was like a painting, frozen in time.

He led her out onto the terrace, where the silvery moonlight picked out the marble flagstones, and the sounds of revelers from the shrubbery below suggested they were not the only couple taking advantage of the growing darkness.

“Isn’t it beautiful? The moonlight on the garden. It bathes everything in silver. But there’s still such warmth in the air. How I love midsummer,” Rosalind said, as they leaned next to one another on the terrace.

Sebastian smiled at her, his features illuminated in the moonlight, as the scent of the garden roses and lavender perfumed the surrounding air.

“It’s a truly beautiful night. It makes me think of some lines from Shelley, ‘Art thou pale for weariness of climbing heaven and gazing on the earth, wandering companionless among the stars that have a different birth, - and ever changing, like a

joyless eye that finds no object worth its constancy?’ Do you know them?’ Sebastian asked.

Rosalind smiled. She had not realized Sebastian was a lover of poetry, too. Rosalind devoured the works of the romantics, though she knew only of Shelley by reputation. The words were beautiful, and looking up at the moon, Rosalind imagined it listening to the words and nodding sadly, for they were certainly true.

“I’ve never heard them before, but they’re beautiful. I know by heart about the moon, I mean. It’s by Byron. ‘So, we’ll go no more a roving so late into the night, though the heart be still as loving, and the moon be still as bright. For the sword outwears its sheath, and the soul wears out the breast, and the heart must pause to breathe, and love itself have rest.

Though the night was made for loving, and the day returns too soon, yet we’ll go no more a roving by the light of the moon.’ I think it’s very beautiful, though I’m never really sure what it means,” Rosalind said, and Sebastian smiled.

“It’s very beautiful, too, I suppose. Does love ever rest?” he asked.

This was a question Rosalind, too, had pondered. She did not think so. If a person was in love, there would be no cause to rest. “Perhaps, like the moon, love waxes and wanes. But I don’t like to think it does. If one falls in love, why would it need rest? Isn’t love the thing that allows us so often to continue in our troubles, knowing we’re loved?” Rosalind replied.

She knew she was speaking from a position of naivety. She had never been in love. The poems she loved to read were just the same as the paintings she loved to look at. She could read the words or see the picture, but to truly know what was being conveyed.

“And was the night made for loving?” Sebastian asked, drawing a little closer to her and smiling.

Rosalind blushed.

“I don’t see why there should be a change. I really don’t understand the poem. Why not go roving by the light of the moon? Wouldn’t it be a pleasure? Can you imagine it? Setting off across a moonlight meadow, the way lit only by the starry sky and the waxy moon.

Have you ever seen a harvest moon? When it hangs low, it’s as though you could reach out and touch it. Why wouldn’t you go a roving, as Byron puts it? No, I don’t think love ever rests. Not when you’ve found it. It doesn’t need to. Or perhaps that’s the point. When you’ve found true love, you don’t need to keep on searching,” Rosalind said.

There was such a sense of ease in their conversation. They had discovered another shared passion, and Rosalind could hardly believe she had found a man with whom she could converse so freely. Sebastian was the very opposite of every other man she had ever known, even as her experiences with men were limited.

She could not imagine having such a conversation with Richard. He would merely give his opinion and assume she would agree with it. But Sebastian was different, and Rosalind could not help but feel at ease in his company. He nodded, looking up at the moon once again and smiling.

“I suppose we’ll always be fascinated by the heavens. We look up and see something so familiar, yet so distant. We know the moon and the stars, but we don’t, not at all. It’s no wonder the poets write so eloquently of it. They’ve thought the same thoughts. Do you ever write poems?” he asked.

Rosalind blushed. She had often attempted compositions of her own, but unlike painting, Rosalind did not believe her talents lay in the poetic arts. Her verses were often stilted, failing to communicate the images in her mind. With the brush, the matter was different, but Rosalind had never shared her poetry with anyone else before.

“I...well, I’ve tried, yes. But they never seem quite right. With a painting, one keeps altering it in the detail, but with a poem, it’s as though it becomes harder the more changes one makes. I write, then change, then write something else, do you?” she asked, tentatively, for he had mentioned his own paintings, and she was curious to know if he had written poetry, too.

He nodded, but also looked embarrassed, even as he could not very well refuse to answer the question he had just asked of her.

“Well...I do write a little poetry, but mainly to help...well, it doesn't matter. I try to write my thoughts into verse. It helps me, but I can't say it's any good,” he replied.

“Would you let me hear something you've written? If I was able to show you one of my paintings?” Rosalind asked.

It seemed a fair exchange. An artist was always reticent in revealing their craft. While others might see perfection, they themselves would only see faults, a final missed brushstroke or a missing word in a verse. It was the nature of an artist to forever see the need for something more. The earl nodded.

“I could read one to you, if you'd like me to. But don't ask me to remember one off the top of my head. I can recall poetry. Other people's, at least. But with my own, I'm forever changing the words,” he said, and Rosalind smiled.

She would not force the matter, though she was certainly curious to hear what he had written. Rosalind had no doubt as to his talents, and she could not help but feel attracted to a man

who had such hidden depths. There was surely no truth in what she had overheard in the powder room. Sebastian was not mad.

He had not forgotten the things that mattered, and perhaps that was the point. It was easy to forget those things one had no care for, but there was no sign Sebastian had forgotten such things as mattered to him, his love of art and poetry, and his ability to converse in such depth.

“I’d like that. I’d like you to see my paintings, though I can’t promise they’re any good,” she said.

“I was wondering...who did you base Dionysus on?” he asked, and Rosalind laughed.

“It was you, actually. Your eyes...I could recall them, after last night, seeing them through your mask. They were perfect,” she said, no longer feeling shy in telling him, even as he seemed somewhat taken aback.

“Then I certainly want to see it,” he said, and she nodded.

“You will, though I’m not entirely sure how,” she replied, glancing over her shoulder, just as a call came from across the terrace.

“Rosalind, are you out here?” her mother said, and Rosalind could see the duchess’ outline silhouetted in the doorway.

She felt angry at this interruption, for she would gladly have remained in Sebastian’s company the whole evening long.

“You should go. I could wait here for you,” Sebastian said.

Rosalind’s heart skipped a beat. She wanted to stay, even as she knew her mother would be relentless in her search. No doubt the duke was demanding her company, but if she was to dance with him again, perhaps she might be able to slip away once more. The draw of returning to the earl’s company was

enough for her to take the risk. And she nodded, smiling at him, as her mother's voice called across the terrace once again.

"I'll be as quick as I can," Rosalind whispered, and leaving Sebastian's side, she hurried across the terrace, calling to her mother, who gave an exasperated cry.

"Oh, Rosalind. What have you been doing?" she exclaimed, and Rosalind smiled.

"I was just taking the air, mother," she replied, hoping it would not be long before she could return to the terrace and the company of the man whose eyes she had immortalized for Ariadne, and whose gaze had captivated her, too.

Chapter 13

Sebastian watched Rosalind disappear across the now dark terrace, her footsteps echoing on the marble, as her mother's shrill voice called out to her. He smiled, watching her for as long as he could, until she disappeared in a silhouette at the door.

He sighed, turning back to look out over the moonlit garden beyond. From the shrubbery below, he could hear giggling and the whispers of couples. He sighed, wondering if Rosalind would return and knowing, even if she did, the limitations of her doing so.

“Why can't it just be simple?” he asked himself. He was doing the one thing he had promised himself he would not do; fall in love.

But it was always the same for Sebastian. His feelings got carried away. He felt things more intensely than other men, or so it seemed. He had known those who could seduce a woman, then forget her the very next day, leaving her devastated at the apparent void in their emotions. Sebastian was not like that.

The thought of simply casting off a woman with whom he had developed a bond was unthinkable, and in Rosalind, that bond had already been created. He had never expected to find a woman who shared his passion for art and poetry, a woman as beautiful and vivacious, so filled with life and charm. She was everything he might have dreamed of, and yet.

“How could she feel the same about a madman?” he asked himself.

His passionate edge was surely a symptom of his greatest fear. The artists, poets, and philosophers were all possessed of a madness. It was the creative genius, and Sebastian reminded himself not to fall into the trap of comparison.

He was not a genius, nor was his art anything great to speak of. But he was so often consumed by passionate outbursts, in which his creativity gave rise to canvases covered in paint, or paper covered in words.

“But none of it means anything, does it? I’m no artist. She’ll soon discover that,” he told himself, fearing Rosalind might think him to be something he was not, and expect great things of him, when all he had to offer was himself.

She was the artist. There was no doubting her talent. The way she spoke, her evident passion, and Sebastian felt sorry for her that she was unable to realize her talent. Her mother would not allow her to exhibit, and if she married the Duke of Northridge, that talent would be extinguished, along with everything else she was and could be. It was a terrible thought, one Sebastian felt angry contemplating.

For a moment, he allowed himself to imagine what it would be like to read one of his poems to her, or to gaze at the painting of Ariadne and Dionysus. It seemed extraordinary to think Rosalind had chosen him as her model.

He thought back to the dances they had shared, to the depth of her eyes, imagining what it would be to hold her in his arms, to bring his lips to hers. Ariadne and Dionysus were lovers. Did that mean Rosalind had imagined the same for her and Sebastian?

“Ah, there you are, Sebastian. I was wondering where you’d got to. I just saw Rosalind with her mother. Did she catch you in the act?” a voice behind him said, and Sebastian turned to find John grinning at him in the moonlight.

“Oh, don’t. It wasn’t like that. We danced, we came out here, we talked. Then her mother came calling. Where have you been? Aren’t you with Elizabeth?” Sebastian asked.

He would have preferred to have been left alone with his thoughts, but his friend now lit a cigar, drawing in the smoke and blowing it out, before offering one to Sebastian.

He took it, though he did not make a habit of such things, preferring snuff, though the scent of the cigar was pleasing, and wreathed in smoke, the two of them leaned on the terrace, as shadowy figures moved together in the garden below.

“She went to the powder room. You know what these women are like. But she’s an utter delight. We haven’t stopped talking. I’ve invited her on a picnic by the river tomorrow. I know a spot along the Thames, where a glade of weeping willows sweeps down to the water’s edge, perfect for a picnic, and...”

John said, his words trailing off, before he drew in a puff of smoke.

Sebastian smiled.

“I hope you’re not going to cause a scandal,” he said, and John laughed.

“Not at all. She’s entirely respectable, as am I now. I know what you think, but I do want to settle down. It’s time, don’t you think? She’s a delight. We share so many common interests. I’d like to think something might come of it. But what about you and Rosalind? You didn’t just come out here to take the air, did you?” John asked, and Sebastian shook his head.

“We came out here because the Duke of Northridge was looking for her. He’s got her completely in his thrall. He thinks she’s his property,” Sebastian replied.

He was angry on Rosalind's behalf, even as he knew there was little he could do to change the course laid out for her.

Had he not been so reticent in his own feelings, perhaps Sebastian might have imagined himself a worthy alternative, but even if the Duke of Northridge could be persuaded to renounce his claim, it seemed unlikely Rosalind's parents would agree to their only daughter marrying a man who was expected to succumb to madness at any moment.

Sebastian knew what the ton said about him, even as they did not know the full extent of his anguish.

"Then he needs to realize she isn't, doesn't he?" John replied.

"Yes. Well, I doubt he'll do so. Oh...it's too awful," Sebastian exclaimed, cursing under his breath.

His friend placed his hand on Sebastian's shoulder.

“There’s no harm in a little fun, Sebastian. She likes you, that’s clear enough. Elizabeth told me so. If she’s promised to come back, I’m sure she will,” he said, and nodding to Sebastian, he returned to the ballroom, tossing the butt of his cigar over the side of the terrace as he did so.

Sebastian took a long drag on the remainder of his, savoring the sweet smoke, before doing the same. He was about to return inside, but the thought of Rosalind kept him leaning against the parapet, hoping she might just return.

“He’s not happy, Rosalind, and a woman should always seek to please the man she’s going to marry,” Rosalind’s mother hissed, seizing her by the wrist and dragging her firmly across the ballroom to where her father and the Duke of Northridge were waiting.

“Ah, Rosalind. I’ve been waiting for you,” the duke said, fixing Rosalind with an angry glare.

“I told you I went to the powder room,” Rosalind replied.

It was not a complete lie. She had gone to the powder room, but that had been over an hour ago, and a great deal had happened in the interval. She had not wanted to leave Sebastian on the terrace, caught up as she had been in their conversation about poetry.

No other man had roused her passions in the same way as he, and she had felt no inhibition in sharing what was on her heart with such a kindred spirit. Richard was the very opposite. He would not quote poetry or discuss the merits of Zurbaran. She doubted he had ever read a single poem in all his life, or taken a moment to appreciate a work of art.

“For an hour? What do women do in such places?” the duke demanded, and Rosalind’s mother tutted.

“She’s being foolish, aren’t you, Rosalind? A megrim, that’s all. But it won’t stop you dancing, will it?” her mother said.

Rosalind knew what her mother was doing. She was making excuses where there were none. All of them knew the reason why Rosalind had been away so long, even as none of them would admit it.

“I’m sure it won’t, Mother,” Rosalind replied, as the call came for the next dance to begin.

The duke looked at her expectantly. It was as though to dance was a sign of her commitment, and as he took her by the arm, he leaned forward to whisper in her ear.

“You humiliated me by dancing with him, Rosalind. What were you thinking? You’re lucky I don’t make your name mud, and that of your parents, too,” he said, his voice soft and menacing.

“He asked me to dance,” Rosalind replied, trying not to let the emotion show in her voice.

“You didn’t have to accept, though, did you?” he replied, leading her into the throng.

Slipping his arm tightly around her, he drew her into his embrace. Rosalind remained stiff, not wishing to give in to his advances. This was surely not how any reasonable man behaved. The duke was seized with a vicious jealousy, and if a single dance was enough to elicit his rage, what would life be like they were married?

“I wanted to accept. He was kind to me,” Rosalind said, her eyes filling with tears, even as she fought back her emotions.

“And I’m not? Think of what I’ve done for you, Rosalind,” the duke snarled.

“You’ve done nothing for me except make me your property,” Rosalind exclaimed.

She had heard enough. He was nothing but a wicked man, intent on taking everything she was away from her. She hated him, and she hated what she was becoming because of him. His grip became tighter, and he drew her further into his embrace, bringing his lips close to her ear so his whispered words would not be overheard.

“I won’t tell you again, Rosalind. If you ever humiliate me like that—” he said, but Rosalind had heard enough.

She pushed him away, causing him to stumble, as she turned and pushed her way through the throng. He cursed her, but she had no care for his words, and disappearing behind the marble columns, she hurried towards the doors leading out onto the terrace. Tears were running down her cheeks, and she could think only of Sebastian, and the solace of his company.

The sweet scent of cigar smoke hung in the air, and for a moment, Rosalind feared she might find the earl in the company of other men. But he was alone, standing at the far end of the terrace, in the very place she had left him. As she approached, drying her eyes on a handkerchief, he turned to her with a smile.

“I didn’t know if you’d return,” he said, and she sighed.

“I...there was a disagreement. The duke and I...oh, it doesn’t matter. Can we go down into the garden? I don’t want them finding me out here,” she said, and Sebastian offered her his arm.

The evening was still, the stars bright in the sky, the moon of which they had spoken so poetically, hanging large and waxy above them. They made their way down the terrace steps, finding themselves on the lawn, the shrubbery still filled with the muffled giggles and whispers of courting couples, a pair of whom emerged right in front of them, as they walked along a paved path towards a fountain at the far end of the garden.

“Don’t tell anyone, will you?” the woman exclaimed, shrieking with laughter, as the man pulled her back into the shrubbery.

“Was he very cruel to you? The duke, I mean,” Sebastian asked, and Rosalind sighed.

“Yes, he was, but I don’t know what that means. I feel so foolish. Are all men like that?” she asked.

She had known the answer before asking the question. All men were not like the Duke of Northridge. Sebastian was proof of that, and he shook his head and smiled at her.

“I think you’ll know if he was. Did it feel so?” he asked, and Rosalind nodded.

“He told me I’d humiliated him by dancing with you,” she said, feeling ashamed to admit it.

“You probably did. But if he was a good and honorable man, you’d have had no reason to do so. A man like that deserves to be humiliated. He’s not used to it, of course, but he deserves it. I hope you don’t feel guilty,” Sebastian said.

They had reached the fountain, now, where a marbled cherub spouted forth a stream of water into the open mouth of a large fish, wrought in the same stone. They sat down on a seat at the edge, and Rosalind traced a trail with her fingers across the water.

“I don’t know how I feel. I don’t feel guilty, no. I just wish things were different, that’s all,” she said, glancing up at him.

His gaze reminded her of Dionysus. It was the same look she had given him, the deep, thoughtful eyes. What was he thinking now? To her surprise, he took her hand in hers. There was something reassuring in his touch, and now he edged a little closer to her, leaning forward, just as it was in her painting.

“They could be different. You don’t have to be enthralled to him, Rosalind. You’re still so young. I hate to think...oh, it’s a wickedness, it truly is,” he exclaimed, shaking his head.

“You don’t need to feel sorry for me,” Rosalind said, but now he reached up and brushed the hair back from her face, tracing a trail with his fingers across her cheek.

A shiver ran through her, but she did not withdraw from his touch or pull her hand away. There was comfort in this moment. She felt safe with him, even as she knew the scandal it could bring forth. She edged closer to him along the marble seat, the gaze of the cherub fixed on them. As Sebastian drew her into his embrace, their lips meeting in a kiss.

“But I do feel sorry for you, and if I can do something, anything for you, I will,” he whispered, as their lips parted, their foreheads resting against one another’s.

A sudden and unexpected passion seized Rosalind. She clung to him, smothering him in kisses, their lips pressed together in the surprise of a newly discovered desire. He represented everything she would never have: a man who understood her, who could care for her, who could love her. Rosalind did not feel loved.

Her parents could be cold, and Richard had never once uttered such words or made a show of romance. Her friendship with Elizabeth meant a great deal to her, and she cared deeply for Molly, too. But it was not the same as knowing what she desired. She had feelings for Sebastian she had never known.

“I’m sorry,” she gasped. Realizing the imposition of her touch only drew her further into his embrace. And as their lips met again, Rosalind pictured the portrait of Ariadne and Dionysus.

She had painted them in the guise and gaze of lovers, their lips about to meet. But in the painting, they were forever frozen in the moment of anticipation. She had often imagined that moment for herself, but experiencing it now was different to her imaginings.

There had been no chance to think, only the overwhelming desire to do, and as their lips parted, Rosalind breathed a deep sigh, fearing she would never know such a touch again.

“It’s I who should be sorry,” Sebastian replied, even as he smiled at her, their hands clasped together, each breathless from the suddenness of their passionate exertion.

“It’s... I’ve never...” Rosalind stammered, and Sebastian nodded.

“It doesn’t matter. There has to be a first time for everything, doesn’t there?” he replied.

How often Rosalind had imagined this moment. She remembered the first time she had seen a kiss. It was in the depiction of a painting, and her mother had hurriedly ushered her past it. It hung in the salon of some grand woman with whom they had gone to take tea. She had only been seven years old, but the memory had stayed with her.

She had wanted to ask what they were doing, but her mother had told her it was not proper, and still Rosalind had been fascinated. She had asked one of the maids, demonstrating the action on the palm of her hand. The maid had blushed and told her the couple in the painting were probably kissing. Ever since that moment, Rosalind, too, had wondered what it would be like to share a kiss.

“It’s very different to a painting,” Rosalind said, as Sebastian raised her hand to his lips and smiled.

“A painting only shows a moment in time. It can’t show movement. The skilled artist can communicate the passion of two people and their love for one another. But they have to choose one single moment to depict. Real life isn’t like that. We aren’t a moment, we’re continual,” he said, and Rosalind smiled.

He was right. A painting could only capture a moment, but what they had shared was far more than a moment. But what would happen now? Had their kiss meant something? Dionysus had cast Ariadne’s jewels into the sky to make the constellation Corona as an everlasting symbol of their love.

But there could be no enduring of this unexpected pleasure, and it made her sad to think so. She would return to the ballroom, to her mother’s chastisement and the anger of the Duke of Northridge. She would step out of the painting, and that would be that.

“And how do we continue?” she asked, but before he could answer, footsteps along the path caused them to startle, and a familiar voice called out through the darkness.

Chapter 14

“Rosalind? Are you out here? It’s Elizabeth? I’ve been looking everywhere for you,” her friend called out, and Rosalind glanced at Sebastian anxiously, fearing they would be discovered.

With a smile, he kissed Rosalind’s hand a final time, before slipping off into the shadows, leaving her under the watchful eye of the cherubim, next to the fountain.

“I’m here.” Rosalind replied, hoping she did not look too disheveled after her unexpected dalliance with Sebastian.

Her heart was beating fast, her thoughts filled with all that had occurred, as Elizabeth now came hurrying over.

“Oh, there you are. I was beginning to worry. Your mother’s looking everywhere for you. She even accused me of hiding

you,” Elizabeth said, seating herself next to Rosalind, where just a few moments previously, she and Sebastian had shared their kiss.

“I just needed some air. It gets so stifling in a ballroom towards the end of an evening, don’t you think?” Rosalind replied.

“It does, but I’ve had the most wonderful night, Rosalind. John...he’s so very different from the others. I’ve never felt so...well, he understands me,” Elizabeth said, and Rosalind smiled.

She was pleased for Elizabeth. Her friend had had her share of disasters when it came to men. She was a year older and had made her debut the previous season. But her parents were far more reasonable in matters of matrimony, and Elizabeth had always been given free rein when it came to making a match.

“I’m glad. You deserve to be happy, Elizabeth,” Rosalind replied, slipping her hand into her friend’s.

“We both do. John and I were just saying the way Richard treats you...it isn't right. He's a wicked man. You're far too good for him. You're far too good for any of these men,” Elizabeth exclaimed, expressing the frustration Rosalind herself was feeling.

“Let's not dwell on it,” Rosalind replied.

She was thinking about Sebastian, feeling sad at the thought their moment had ended. The kiss they had shared was a lingering memory. Like a painting, it was immortalized, but it could not be repeated. The moment had passed, the brush strokes made, and Rosalind's future was no different. There had been no hint of madness in his actions, only the tender touch of a man with whom she was rapidly falling in love with.

“We should go back inside, Rosalind. It's getting chilly out here. They'll be wondering where we are. Listen, I think I can hear the final waltz. I'd like to find John. He wants to say goodbye,” Elizabeth said.

Rosalind rose to her feet, glancing into the shrubbery and wondering where Sebastian had gone. Would she see him again before the night was ended? The giggles and whispers of courting couples could still be heard all around them, and Elizabeth tutted as they walked arm in arm across the lawn towards the terrace.

“What are you tutting about?” Rosalind asked, and her friend laughed.

“Well, you and I are always so prim and proper, aren’t we? We don’t have a choice. But some of these women behave disgracefully, and the men encourage it. I just wonder sometimes what it would be like to defy convention. I’d like to run away with John tonight if I could. And you don’t want to marry that horrible man. What about the earl? Did you see him again?” Elizabeth asked.

They had reached the steps leading up onto the terrace, and Rosalind glanced behind her, trying to catch a glimpse of Sebastian, whom she felt certain was nearby.

“No. I didn’t see him again. Though I’d like to,” she said, hoping the earl would hear her, and hoping the possibility of

seeing him again would come true.

Sebastian had followed Rosalind and Elizabeth at a distance, listening to their conversation. He was hiding in the shrubbery, having disturbed the pleasures of two couples as he made his progress parallel to the path. At these final words of Rosalind, he sighed, watching as she and Elizabeth made their way up the steps onto the terrace.

How dearly he would like to see her again, even as his fears held him back. He had not meant to kiss her as he had. There had been no ulterior motive to his walking with her across the lawn, but in the moment, in the moonlight, in sorrow for her fate, he had wanted to show something of the feelings she had roused in him.

“You crossed a line,” he told himself, for he had not meant to kiss her.

A kiss meant something to Sebastian, at least. It meant the expression of feelings he had tried to keep hidden. Other men kissed women without thought of the consequences. A kiss could mean nothing, or it could mean everything. To

Sebastian, it meant the sharing of a possibility, one he had not meant to reveal.

“There can’t be anything more to it. I can’t...oh, but why? Why shouldn’t I fall in love?” he demanded of himself, torn between heart and mind.

His feelings for Rosalind were confused. She was everything he had ever imagined a woman to be, and yet he himself was surely not what any woman would imagine a man to be. The possibility of madness, the certainty of it, gripped him, and though he was becoming enamored with Rosalind, he knew it was just an empty dream.

“I’ve been such a fool,” he said to himself, waiting for an opportune moment to reenter the house across the terrace.

The courting couples were dispersing with furtive whispers and promises of future liaisons, and Sebastian hurried up the terrace steps, concealing himself in the shadows, before slipping back into the ballroom.

The last waltz had come to an end, and he spied Rosalind being chastised by her mother, as the Duke of Northridge stood at her side, shaking his head. It was a sorry scene, though Sebastian could not help but feel a little guilty for causing Rosalind to get into trouble, even as he did not regret the kiss itself. But he had been reckless with the dance, the terrace, and the kiss.

“And what can I promise her? Nothing, that’s what. I can hardly sweep her away and marry her, can I?” he said to himself, watching as Rosalind was led away on the arm of the duke.

At the door of the ballroom, she glanced back, and Sebastian caught her eye, but only for a moment. But in that gaze was found everything they had shared, and a lump rose in Sebastian’s throat, as he realized there could be no going back. He was falling in love with her. Her beauty, her wit, her charm. She was perfect.

“What a fool I’ve been,” he told himself, watching as Rosalind was led away.

“Oh, there you are, Sebastian. I’ve been looking for you. I think it’s time to go. I’m getting tired,” a voice behind him said, and Sebastian turned to find his stepmother and another woman, whom he recognized as Lady Helena Bonham, standing behind him.

“Yes. I suppose so,” Sebastian replied.

“I haven’t seen you all evening, Sebastian. Where have you been?” Lady Southbourne asked him, and Sebastian sighed.

“You know I don’t really care for these occasions,” he replied, glancing again towards the ballroom door, and wondering what Rosalind was thinking.

Had she been surprised at his kissing her? It had not been planned, and he suddenly wondered whether he had overstepped the mark. A kiss meant something to him, and he hoped it had to her, too, even as nothing could surely come of it. The matter would be forgotten, or rather, the opportunity would pass.

Sebastian had no doubt as to the Duke of Northridge's intentions. He would want to marry before the season was out, and that would be that. With her vows taken, Rosalind would be gone. Another young woman lost to the vagaries of an older man. It was a tragedy.

"Victoria tells me you're to have a music room at Southbourne House," Lady Helena said, as they left the ballroom a few moments later.

"Oh yes, that's right," Sebastian replied.

He had given the matter little thought, though he had not forgotten it, as perhaps he might have feared.

"I think it's a wonderful idea. We'll have some delightful soirees," Lady Helena said.

Sebastian nodded. He was not interested in music rooms or soirees. His stepmother could do as she wished. His mind was preoccupied with Rosalind, and as they stepped out onto the forecourt, where their host, Lady Clarissa, was wishing her guests goodbye, Sebastian looked around hopefully for one last glimpse of the woman who had so captured his heart.

“Victoria, how good of you to come, and my Lord, we’ve been honored by your presence,” Lady Clarissa gushed.

Sebastian nodded, thanking his host for a pleasant evening, even as he still hoped for another sight of Rosalind. But she was gone, and the only familiar face remaining was that of John, who had just bid Elizabeth and her parents goodbye.

“I’m going to call on her tomorrow,” John said, catching Sebastian as he finished thanking Lady Clarissa for her hospitality.

His stepmother and Lady Helena were still discussing the plans for the music room, and Sebastian and John stepped aside, each with a story to tell.

“You’re certain she’s the one, then?” Sebastian said, and John nodded.

“Absolutely. The more I know of her, the more I desire her. Truly. I’ve never felt this way before,” he said, and Sebastian smiled.

“I kissed Rosalind,” he whispered, for he knew he had to tell someone, even as his friend’s eyes grew wide.

“But Sebastian, she’s the Duke of Northridge’s betrothed,” he exclaimed.

Sebastian rolled his eyes.

“Don’t judge me, John. You’ve kissed enough betrothed women in your time, I’m sure,” he said, feeling angry his

friend should appear so moralizing as to his behavior.

But John shook his head.

“I’m not judging you, Sebastian. I’m glad. She deserves someone far better than him. But it’s dangerous, and you could ruin her. That’s not what you want, is it?” he said, and Sebastian shook his head.

“No, of course I don’t. But she’s so extraordinary. I couldn’t help myself. When I’m with her, it’s as though I don’t fear the madness. I don’t even think about it. It’s like a painting,” he said, and John raised his eyebrows.

“I don’t understand,” he said, and Sebastian sighed.

That was the problem. No one understood except Rosalind. In her company, it was as though nothing else mattered. They were figures in a painting, entirely caught up in the scene they were experiencing together.

There was nothing beyond them, and nothing else mattered but the moment they found themselves in. Sebastian had never experienced anything like it, and now he understood better the reason he had kissed her. It was to capture the moment, a moment he would never forget.

“When I’m with her, I don’t believe the inevitability of what I fear,” Sebastian replied.

John sighed.

“But what can you do, Sebastian? You can’t fall in love with her. You know that,” he said, and Sebastian nodded.

“I know, but I think it’s too late for that,” he replied, and returning home that night, Sebastian could think of nothing else but Rosalind, and the kiss they had shared.

Chapter 15

The cherub suddenly came alive, fluttering up into a sky of artist's clouds, their fluffy white trails picked out by the pastel pink sky beyond. The gentle sound of the tinkling water of the fountain was mixed with birdsong, and Rosalind found herself in a beautiful forest glade, the sort of which she often imagined in her paintings.

This was surely Arcadia, and looking around her, she gasped to see dryads, nymphs, and satyrs dancing in a festival of revelry through the trees. They were drinking wine, and a piper was playing a tune, as a procession now formed with a remarkable figure at its head.

“Dionysus,” Rosalind exclaimed, watching as the figure was lifted on the shoulders of his attendants and carried amid the revelry.

Looking down at herself, she realized she was dressed all in white, and reaching up, she felt a crown of laurels on her head.

“Goodness, diamonds,” she exclaimed, taking off the laurel leaf crown, to find it woven with beautiful jewels.

The procession was coming closer now, and Dionysus was laughing, holding up a cup of wine, as the music grew louder.

“Ariadne comes to Naxos, awake fair maiden from thy sleep, and find the love thou didst seek,” he called out, and to Rosalind’s astonishment, she realized it was not Dionysus who spoke, but Sebastian.

There he was, carried naked, save for a woven loin cloth, and laughing. The procession halted, the piping ceased, and Dionysus, or Sebastian, was lowered to the ground. He stepped forward, offering Rosalind his hand, as now the dryads, nymphs, and satyrs dispersed and six women, all of them dressed in white, hurried forward.

“Let us prepare fair Ariadne for her lover,” they exclaimed, pointing towards the fountain, whose deep, clear waters now seemed suddenly inviting.

Rosalind did not know what to say, even as the women hurried forward, divesting her of her robes, so she stood naked before Dionysus, who smiled at her.

“And when thou art prepared, fair Ariadne, thou shalt know thy true reward,” he said.

The waters of the fountain were warm and fragrant, and Rosalind slipped beneath the surface, emerging refreshed, as the women laughed.

“Purified, thou art ready,” they said, lifting Rosalind from the fountain to the soft grass of the forest glade, where she found herself immediately dry.

The sound of the pipes struck up, but the rest of the characters disappeared as Dionysus stepped forward. Rosalind was wearing nothing but the laurel leaves on her head, and now he

put his arms around her, holding her close and looking down at her with a smile.

“Art thou ready?” he asked, and Rosalind nodded, her arms around him, as now he took the laurel leaves from her head and tossed them into the heavens above.

Immediately it was night, and the sky was filled with a million stars, their silvery glint casting an ethereal light across the forest glade, where the two of them stood alone.

“Is it done?” she asked, and Dionysus nodded.

“Look, thou brightest star, thy jewels a corona now they are, to sit amongst the heavenly dance, for love no more is left to chance,” he said, and looking down at her, he kissed her.

Rosalind awoke with a start, sitting up in bed, still believing she was in Arcadia, even as she looked around her and sighed.

She was lying in bed, a thin stream of sunlight coming through a gap in the curtains, and now a gentle tap came at the door.

“It’s just me, my Lady. I’ve brought you your morning tea,” Molly called out.

“Oh. Yes, thank you, Molly,” Rosalind said, rubbing her eyes, and smiling to herself at the thought of the dream.

She had been Ariadne, and Sebastian had been Dionysus. It was just like the painting, and she allowed the thought of their kiss to linger as Molly entered the room.

“I left you to sleep a little later this morning, my Lady. But your parents are waiting for you downstairs. You’re to join them for breakfast,” the maid said, and Rosalind groaned.

She and her mother had barely exchanged a word during the carriage ride home the previous evening, but the duchess’ disapproval had been clear. She had chastised Rosalind at the

ball for disappearing and had apologized to the Duke of Northridge for her daughter's behavior.

Rosalind had remained silent, even as she had wanted nothing more than to tell her mother just how she was feeling. Back home, they had parted with a curt goodnight, and Rosalind had intended to remain in her bedroom that day, finishing her portrait of Ariadne and Dionysus, the dream of which had given her fresh inspiration.

“Really? But why? What do they want?” she asked, and the maid shook her head.

“I don't know, my Lady. But those were my instructions,” she said, and Rosalind nodded.

She would have no choice but to do as she was told, and Molly now helped her get ready. It was half an hour later when Rosalind made her way downstairs to the dining room, where the scent of deviled kidneys did little to encourage her to enter. She knew her parents were angry, and as she entered the dining room, her mother looked up at her disapprovingly.

“So...” she said, as Rosalind’s father raised his eyebrows.

“Sit down, Rosalind,” he said, as one of the footmen hurried to pull out Rosalind’s usual chair.

“I know you’re cross with me, mother. But I’ll say it again. I don’t want to marry the Duke of Northridge. If you’d just listen to me,” Rosalind said, as tears rose in her eyes.

Richard had been nothing but beastly to her. He had threatened her, and Rosalind wanted nothing more to do with him, even as she knew her parents would not say the same.

“Listen to you? We’re your parents, Rosalind. We know what’s best for you, and it certainly isn’t a madman,” her mother exclaimed, almost knocking over the coffeepot as she raised her hand in an angry gesture.

“What your mother says is right, Rosalind. I was very worried when I saw you dancing with Sebastian Sinclair,” Rosalind’s father said.

This was a two-pronged attack. Her mother was easily swayed by her emotions, but her father was a rational man who spent most of his time in his library. If both emotion and reason were brought into play, Rosalind knew the matter was decided.

“But why? He’s not mad. We danced. We spoke. He’s interested in the same things as I am, like painting, poetry, and the arts,” Rosalind said, and her father raised his eyebrows.

“Poets and artists; all of them are mad. The creative genius, perhaps, but not in that family. His father was mad, his grandfather was mad, and he’ll go mad, too. Mark my words. And I won’t have my daughter courted, or worse, married to a madman,” he said.

Rosalind’s mother now began to sob, and Rosalind sighed, shaking her head, as she reached out to place her hand on her mother’s arm. They rarely saw eye to eye, but Rosalind did not want to hurt her mother. She loved her, and she knew her mother loved her, too. Her concern, though misdirected, was

born out of love, and Rosalind knew she was trying to do her best for Rosalind, even as she wished her mother would listen to reason other than that of the duke.

“But don’t you see? If I married a man like Sebastian, I’d be happy,” Rosalind said.

She did not say “Sebastian,” but rather “like Sebastian,” for she really did not know how Sebastian felt. They had shared a kiss, but many men and women shared kisses. That did not mean they would marry or even court. But the possibility was there, and it was one Rosalind would cling to, even as her mother looked up at her sternly.

“I forbid it, Rosalind. Listen to your father if you won’t listen to me,” she said.

Rosalind glanced at her father, who was now attacking a dish of deviled kidneys a footman had just placed in front of him. It would play havoc with his gout, and Rosalind knew the duke would only grow grumpier as the pain set in later in the day.

“But father, don’t you see how unhappy he makes me? Richard, I mean. We’re not a match. We’ve got nothing in common,” she said, but her father looked up at her angrily.

“You’ve got plenty in common. Aristocratic blood for one. That’s what matters. For our two families to become one. I don’t have an heir, and I won’t see my estate and title pass to a man I don’t approve of, certainly not to a madman,” he replied.

“But he isn’t mad,” Rosalind exclaimed.

Both her parents were now being unreasonable. They could not see past their prejudices or that of the ton. It was always the same. A collective opinion, disseminated through the drawing rooms and salons, taking on an authority of scriptural proportions. Where these rumors arose, and who decided on their truth, was a mystery. But once propagated, they were unstoppable.

“You don’t know that, Rosalind. I’m sure he’s very good at hiding it. But I’m your Father, and I’ve got a duty to protect

you,” the duke said, banging his fist down angrily on the table.

“Then protect me from the Duke of Northridge, Father. That’s who you should be protecting me from. What gives him the right to assume I’m his to do with as he pleases? He assumes our betrothal, but he’s not once expressed any form of affection for me. It’s as though I’m his property to do with as he pleases,” Rosalind exclaimed, her anger inflamed at the thought of how the duke had treated her.

“I forbid it, Rosalind. You’re going to marry the duke, and that’s final,” her father exclaimed, but Rosalind was adamant she would not, and folding her arms, she turned away from her father in defiance.

“Then you’ll have to drag me down the aisle, father,” she replied.

The sound of her mother’s sobs now filled the dining room, and Rosalind could only sigh, despairing of the stalemate they had reached. It was clear her parents had acted on immediacy, believing her thoughts regarding Sebastian were in their infancy.

But the force of her feelings for the earl had surprised her, and Rosalind could think of nothing but the kiss they had shared, knowing the horror her mother would feel if ever she discovered the truth.

“I just wanted... Why must you cause me such distress, Rosalind? Why can't you be more like Elizabeth?” her mother exclaimed.

Rosalind rose to her feet. It was always the same. The moment of comparison had come.

“Because I'm not Elizabeth, mother. And I never will be. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going upstairs. I won't be down for luncheon. And I'm not at home to visitors,” she said, turning on her heels, and marching out of the dining room.

They had reached a stalemate, and while Rosalind knew her parents would always have the upper hand, she, too, could be

as stubborn. They were too much alike. She had her mother's emotional side, along with her father's reasoning and intellect. But both her heart and her head told her she was doing the right thing, even as it meant defying the expectations of her parents.

"I won't marry him, I just won't." Rosalind told herself, as now she made her way upstairs, shutting herself in her bedroom and locking the door.

From beneath her bed, Rosalind took out the portrait of Ariadne and Dionysus. The figures were complete, their gaze fixed, and there was no doubting the moment they shared. Rosalind thought back to that same moment in her dream, when Dionysus had gazed down at her before casting her jewels into the heavens above.

But now there was more to include, a whole background, and the story leading up to that moment. She pictured the procession of dryads, nymphs, and satyrs, and the women, too.

"I'll paint them all, but fading into the background, just as they did before," she said to herself, closing her eyes and thinking back to the kiss she had shared with Sebastian.

She could feel his arms around her, and his lips pressed against hers. She raised the palm of her hand to her lips, trying to recreate the feeling, and sighing as she opened her eyes. It would never feel the same. The moment passed, though the memory lingered.

“Never to be repeated,” she told herself, for she felt certain there was no hope of anything more.

What had happened at the ball had been a pleasant diversion, like looking at a painting. But as with all art, it was not real. What had happened in the dining room that morning was real. That was Rosalind’s lot. She was destined to marry the Duke of Northridge, and it was folly to think otherwise.

Romantic notions, dreams of Ariadne and Dionysus all of it was as nothing. She looked at the painting, half-tempted to paint over the figures and begin again. Every time she looked at it, Rosalind would be reminded of what she could not have. These feelings were a myth; a distant dream, out of reach, and pointless to dwell on.

“He won’t remember me. It was all very pleasant, but he won’t remember me,” she told herself, taking up her paints and beginning to detail in the background figures.

But as she worked, Rosalind’s gaze was forever drawn back to Dionysus, and try as she might, she could only see Sebastian there, the memory of their kiss lingering, and the hope of seeing him again remaining.

Chapter 16

Sebastian passed a restless night, tossing and turning, his thoughts preoccupied by Rosalind and the kiss they had shared by the fountain the previous evening. He could not rid himself of her image, and eventually, he stopped trying to sleep, rising from his bed, and dressing hurriedly. It was early morning, and padding through the house. He went to his study, intending to smoke a cigar in an armchair and attempt to fall asleep again.

“Where are they, damn it?” he exclaimed, hunting over his desk for the box of cigars he felt certain he had left there the day before.

He was certain they were there somewhere, but despite having cleared the entire surface of books and papers, the box remained elusive. Sighing, he sat down in the armchair and closed his eyes. Immediately, the image of Rosalind returned. He pictured her by the fountain, her hair flowing down her back, neck arched, a smile on her face.

“If only I could kiss her again,” he thought to himself, imagining his hands running over her body, the sweet scent of

her perfume, intoxicating, the touch of his lips against her neck.

There was no doubting the power of the kiss they had shared. Sebastian was no stranger to the lips of women. There had been dalliances, affairs, even the hope of something more. But no woman had ever matched his expectations or been the sort of woman whom Sebastian could have imagined spending the rest of his life with.

“Don’t flatter yourself. They left because they thought you’d go matter. It wasn’t your choice,” he reminded himself, even as he preferred the narrative as he wanted to remember it.

But the truth was simple: no woman had ever wanted more from Sebastian than the casual acquaintance of a ballroom, or the hurried intimacies of a secret liaison. His reputation was enough to ensure he was always cast aside, deemed an unsatisfactory match by whichever father or guardian had the final say.

The same would be said for Rosalind, even without the complications of the Duke of Northridge. With a sigh, Sebastian poured himself a glass of brandy from a decanter on

his desk. Remembering it was not yet seven o'clock in the morning, he set it aside, ringing the bell in the hope of a cup of coffee.

“I should forget the whole thing. It never happened,” he told himself, as the door of the study opened.

But to his surprise, it was not one of the servants who appeared, but his stepmother, and he looked at her curiously as she smiled at him.

“I heard you ring. You're up very early,” she said, and Sebastian nodded.

“I couldn't sleep. I wanted some coffee. If there's a servant to bring it, that is,” he said, raising his eyebrows.

The servants at Southbourne House were not the most efficient of staff, and only a few days previously, Sebastian had had cause to reprimand the butler, Langton, for allowing several of

his shirts to come back from being laundered with tears in the seams. Laziness was rife, and Sebastian had even considered firing the whole lot of them, even as his stepmother persuaded him not to.

“It’s all right, Sebastian. I’ll bring you some coffee from the dining room. They’re just setting out breakfast, now. Will you take it in here?” his stepmother asked.

Sebastian nodded. He and his stepmother had not always seen eye to eye, but lately, she had been making something of an effort to be kind to him, and he was grateful to her for it. It was one less thing to concern himself with.

“That’s very kind of you, thank you. I’ve lost my cigar case. I could’ve sworn I left it in here on the desk. But I can’t find it anywhere,” Sebastian said, glancing around the room, as though hoping the box might appear by chance.

He did not want to admit he himself might have mislaid it. It could be anywhere in the house, and perhaps he had simply forgotten where it was.

“Oh, dear. I wonder where it could be. I’ll speak to Langton. He can ask the servants to look out for it. Unless...do you suspect theft?” she asked.

Sebastian did not wish to accuse anyone of theft. He may well have mislaid the cigarette box, forgetting where he had put it, and the missing case may turn up. But in his mind, he was certain he had smoked the day before. It had been before going to the dinner ball. He left the box on his desk where it would be ready for when he wished to indulge.

“I don’t know. It doesn’t matter,” Sebastian said.

But it did matter. It mattered a great deal. If the box had been stolen, the matter needed to be dealt with, and if Sebastian had mislaid it, the fact of his forgetting was also a cause for concern. Either way, he was worried, and as his stepmother went to fetch his coffee, Sebastian sighed, wondering what else he might have forgotten or mislaid.

“Am I really going mad?” he asked himself, even as he did not know what going mad was meant to feel like.

Above the mantelpiece was a portrait of his father. They shared the same disheveled black hair and piercing green eyes. Sebastian looked up at the portrait, studying his father’s face. It had been painted around the time when his father was the same age as Sebastian was now, and looking into his father’s eyes, Sebastian could see no hint of madness staring back.

“But what does it look like? Madness, I mean,” he asked himself, reminded of Rosalind’s words about a picture capturing a single moment in time.

His father looked every bit the aristocratic earl, yet in a few years, that same man was reduced to a madness such as that of the king himself. There had been no hint or promise of it, and if there had been, his father had hidden it well. But Sebastian did not want to hide it. He wanted to know for certain, even as the best doctors in the country had been unable to fathom the cause and possibility of what was to come.

“You may have many years ahead of you, my Lord,” one of them had said, which was really no comfort at all.

Sebastian was forced to live with the possibility of insanity gripping him without warning. It could come at any time, like a thief in the night, though no guard or protection could prevent it.

“I might just wake up mad, or worse, I might not know,” he thought to himself, imagining himself to already be mad, and for those around him to be acting their part accordingly.

When his stepmother returned, bearing a sweet-smelling cup of coffee, along with slithers of toast and jam on a plate, he fixed her with a determined expression.

“Am I mad?” he asked, as she set the tray down on his desk.

Lady Southbourne looked at him and smiled.

“Mislaying a cigar case isn’t madness, Sebastian. Your mind’s full of more important things. It’s no wonder,” she said. Sebastian interrupted her.

“Yes, but I could’ve sworn it was there. I knew it was there, oh...damn my head,” he exclaimed, clutching at his brow, for he was suddenly seized by a terrible pain in his temple.

His stepmother took him by the arm, leading him to a chair by the hearth.

“You mustn’t overdo it, Sebastian. Sit down, drink your coffee, and have something to eat. I’ll speak to Langton and see if the cigar case can be found. You’ve probably left it somewhere in the house. Your studio, perhaps? It’ll turn up. Let’s not accuse the servants just yet,” she said, patting Sebastian’s arm, before retreating from the room.

The pain had been sudden, but it eased somewhat as Sebastian took the first few sips of coffee, and he sighed, leaning back in the chair, and looking up at the ceiling.

“Perhaps I’m not mad, or perhaps I am. Perhaps it’s all a dream,” he thought to himself, taking one of the slithers of toast and eating it hungrily.

The sudden pain in his temple had concerned him, and he considered calling for a doctor, even as he felt a fool for contemplating it. No doctor so far had been able to offer a satisfactory diagnosis. They had prodded and poked him, asked endless questions about his diet and habits, and even taken a strange interest in his waters, but to no avail.

But of these tests and examinations, no definite conclusions had been drawn. Not one of the doctors had declared him mad, but not one of them had declared him sane, either, and without knowing the truth, Sebastian could only feel himself trapped in limbo.

“I just wish I knew,” he thought to himself, trying to distract his thoughts by summoning the image of Rosalind’s smiling face.

He wondered what she was thinking, what she was doing, what she was hoping for. Had the happy course of their meeting meant anything to her? They had shared so much: art, poetry, a kiss. It had meant something to Sebastian, and now he wondered what it had meant to Rosalind?

“Ariadne and Dionysus,” he said to himself, smiling at the comparison Rosalind had offered.

It was an image he lingered over, picturing the scene when Dionysus flung Ariadne’s jewels into the heavens. Rosalind had been wearing sapphires, and they had made her look even more beautiful than she already was. She, too, was a shining star, and if Sebastian could have plucked her from the heavens, he would have done so.

“But not before the Duke of Northridge extinguishes her light forever,” he told himself, feeling suddenly angry at the thought of Rosalind’s fate.

At that moment, a knock came at the door, and the butler entered, looking apologetic.

“My Lord, her ladyship tells me you’re missing your cigar case. I’ve asked the other servants, but no one’s seen it since yesterday. Elsie was the last one to dust here yesterday morning. She swears she saw the cigar case on your desk,” the butler said.

“I smoked later on. It’s gone missing overnight,” Sebastian replied.

He was beginning to wish he had never mentioned the matter of the missing cigar case. Now, the whole household would see it as a sign of madness. Servants were terrible gossips, and it was not unheard of for a maid or footman to share the goings on in one house with those in another. They practically encouraged it. He could hear the chattering tongues in the drawing rooms and salons.

“Well, if he can forget his cigar case, what else is he forgetting?” they would say, fanning the flames of speculation.

It was not the cigar case itself that mattered. It held no sentimental value and could easily be replaced. But losing it was yet another sign of his forgetfulness. The music room, the ball, the cigar case...what else had he forgotten?

“Shall I question Elsie again?” the butler asked, but Sebastian shook his head.

“I don’t care about the damn cigar case, Langton. But if I find more things missing...” Sebastian replied, allowing the threat to linger in the air.

The butler nodded.

“Very good, my Lord,” he said, retreating from the room with a bow.

Sebastian finished his coffee, before pouring the glass of brandy he had earlier forbidden himself. He saw it as medicinal, downing it in one, before returning to the chair by

the hearth and closing his eyes. He was just drifting off to sleep, when another knock at the door startled him, and opening his eyes, he found John entering the room without invitation.

“Ah, here you are. A little too much punch last night?” he asked, and Sebastian scowled at him.

“I’m quite all right, thank you,” he said, hiding the brandy glass behind a large aspidistra plant as John crossed to the window.

“I’ve just called on Elizabeth. We both agreed it was a wonderful occasion last night,” he said, turning to Sebastian, who nodded.

“It was enjoyable, yes,” he replied, and his friend raised his eyebrows.

“Are you having regrets? Are you feeling guilty about kissing Rosalind?” he asked.

Sebastian shook his head. The one thing he did not feel was guilty. Had Richard been a man of honor, a man who had treated Rosalind well, a man he was on friendly terms with, the matter might have been different. But Sebastian felt no guilt in having kissed a woman who wanted nothing to do with a man like the Duke of Northridge.

“No. But I fear it was a mistake to do so. You can call that a regret, if you wish,” he replied, and John smiled.

“We all make mistakes, Sebastian. I’m sure it doesn’t matter,” John replied.

But to Sebastian, it did matter. He did not regret kissing Rosalind. The memory of that delightful encounter would remain with him, as would that of their conversations, too. The mistake had been to allow himself the possibility of something more. He had imagined what it would be like to court her, to hold her in his arms again, to marry her. But such thoughts were idle fantasy for a man with a destiny such as his.

“I don’t know. I just feel there’s such an injustice in her being forced to marry that man. Don’t you think? Her hopes and dreams, her ambitions, all she is and could be, crushed beneath the indifference of a man who only wants a pretty girl on his arm,” Sebastian replied.

John was silent for a moment, and he sighed, shaking his head as Sebastian sat brooding by the hearth.

“I’m sure there’s still hope. Perhaps you could talk to her father. You could make an offer,” he said, but Sebastian shook his head.

“Haven’t you forgotten something? I’m mad, aren’t I? I’ll forget everything soon enough,” he replied.

His friend rolled his eyes.

“Oh, come now, Sebastian. What nonsense. You’re not mad, and you’re not going mad. But you will do if you keep brooding on the matter. You need something else to think about, and I’ve got just the thing. An art exhibition,” John said.

Sebastian looked at him curiously.

“An art exhibition?” he asked, and his friend nodded enthusiastically.

“That’s right, at Somerset House. It’s going to be quite spectacular, they say. It’s an open exhibition, and anyone can submit to it, though in practice it’ll only be a select number of artists. Why don’t you come? It’ll do you good,” John said.

Sebastian smiled. He knew his friend was only trying to help, and he was grateful to John for attempting to do so. The thought of an art exhibition was far more conducive than that of a ball or a soiree. Sebastian loved art, and to wander through a gallery, admiring the paintings, would be a relief from his present worries.

“Very well, I’ll come. I’m sure it’ll be a fine occasion. I’ve been to exhibitions at Somerset House before. They always put on a good show,” Sebastian replied, and John smiled.

“Excellent. I’m glad to hear it. I’m going to invite Elizabeth, too. I hope you don’t mind,” he said, and Sebastian shook his head.

“Not at all. I’m pleased for the two of you,” he said, and further arrangements were now made.

But when Sebastian was again left alone with his thoughts, he could not help but think back to the missing cigar case, confused as to what had really happened to it.

“I can’t have mislaid it. I use it all the time,” he said to himself, even as his mind lingered on the possibility of where it had gone and what might have happened to it.

Wanting to distract himself, he made his way upstairs to his studio, shutting himself in and setting up a blank canvas by the window. Sunlight was streaming through the glass, casting rainbows across the bare floorboards, where Sebastian now stood with his palette of paints, waiting for inspiration. He wanted to draw his feelings and the confusion he felt at his apparent forgetfulness. But it was another image he had in mind, one he could not rid himself of, even as he feared committing it with the brush.

“I shouldn’t,” he told himself, closing his eyes, as the image became ever more vivid in his mind.

With a sharp intake of breath, he made a broad brushstroke on the canvas, keeping his eyes closed, and allowing himself to imagine the painting into being. Seized by a sudden frenzy, he gave in to his emotions, only opening his eyes at the moment he felt certain something tangible had appeared.

And there it was, the outline of a form. It was her. It was Rosalind. But this was no formal portrait, no posed image, no respectable outline. She was naked, her head cocked to one side, the hint of a smile playing over her face, her hands cupped to her breasts, her legs cross, sitting, inviting.

“What have I done?” he asked himself, gazing into Rosalind’s eyes, and wanting only to accept her invitation.

Chapter 17

Rosalind was tired of fighting with her parents. She had no desire to be continually at odds with them, and while she could avoid her father easily enough, the company of her mother was less easily evaded. Having refused to go down to breakfast that morning, Rosalind sent Molly to convey to her mother the fact of a megrim, intending to make herself scarce at the first opportunity.

“Oh, my Lady, must I be your go between?” Molly said, after Rosalind had flatly refused to speak to her mother herself.

“You must for now, yes. We can’t speak to one another without an argument ensuing. We’re at a stalemate. I won’t marry the Duke of Northridge, and she won’t let me have anything to do with the Earl of Southbourne,” Rosalind replied.

It was a succinct account of the household’s dilemma, and Rosalind could see no happy solution. At least, not without disappointing one of the parties involved. If she refused to

marry Richard, her parents would surely disown her, and if she did marry him, her life would be ruined.

Her dalliance with the earl in the gardens at Lady Clarissa's ball was not enough to convince her to entirely give herself up to fate, but it had been enough to convince her there was another way, one she had to at least consider if she was not to be subjected to a life of misery.

But one false move could create a scandal, and if she was not certain about Sebastian, Rosalind could easily find herself on the wrong side of the wagging tongues of the ton.

"Then what are you going to do, my Lady?" Molly asked, sighing, as she folded Rosalind's nightgown.

"I'm going to see Elizabeth. I need a distraction," Rosalind replied, for she was tired of thinking solely matters of matrimony, and having ensured her mother believed she was resting with a megrim and not be disturbed, Rosalind slipped out into the garden, escaping by the back gate, and hurried in the direction of her friend's house.

“He sent me nineteen red roses, one for every year, and a white one too,” Elizabeth said, showing off the bouquet Lord Cuthbert had sent her.

It was displayed in a large oriental vase Elizabeth had placed on a table in the window of her private sitting room, and the fragrance of the blooms filled the air with a heady scent. They were very beautiful, and Rosalind was pleased to think her friend had found happiness after the failures of her first season, when she had lamented at the thought of forever being left on the wall.

“But what’s the white one for?” Rosalind asked as Elizabeth swooned.

“Oh, it’s the sweetest thing! He wrote a card telling me the white rose was for the coming year still to be dyed with the color of what was to come,” she replied.

Rosalind raised her eyebrows. Elizabeth had always been possessed of a romantic streak. When they were children, they would play at weddings with her cousins, dressing up the younger boys in oversized frock-coats and parading down a makeshift aisle in the nursery. Elizabeth always took the part of the bride, while Rosalind played the role of the minister pronouncing the vows.

“How delightful,” Rosalind replied, and despite her cynicism, she could not help but feel a twinge of sadness that her own apparent suitor had never bothered to send her roses, or anything she could construe as a romantic gift.

“He’s so thoughtful. Really, he is. And the flowers came with an invitation, too,” Elizabeth said, taking out a stiff piece of card from her pocket and handing it to Rosalind who read it out loud.

“The Patrons of Somerset House invite the bearer and accompanied guests to an open exhibition of art,” she read, and Elizabeth clapped her hands together.

“Won’t it be wonderful, Rosalind?” she said, and Rosalind nodded.

“I’m sure you’ll enjoy it,” she said, and her friend tutted.

“It’s for both the bearer and the accompanied guests. John wrote to say I’m to invite you, too. He thought you’d like to come. You will, won’t you?” Elizabeth asked, looking at Rosalind imploringly.

Rosalind was pleased to have been invited. An art exhibition would be a welcome distraction from her troubles, and she nodded.

“I’d be pleased to,” she said, and Elizabeth clapped her hands together in delight.

“Oh, how wonderful! I was worried I wouldn’t be able to go. I’d need a chaperone, and we can act as one another’s chaperone, can’t we?” she said.

Rosalind smiled. At the very least, her mother would not refuse her permission to go if she knew Elizabeth would be accompanying her. Elizabeth was held up to be a paradigm of virtue, and trust in her was absolute. The two women now took tea together, and Rosalind was questioned as to her feelings for Sebastian, even as she was not about to reveal the extent of their relations.

“It’s not going to be easy for you, Rosalind,” Elizabeth said, after Rosalind had given her a brief appraisal of events at Lady Clarissa’s ball.

“I know that. But I don’t even know what he intends,” Rosalind replied, referring to Sebastian, and this much was true.

A dance, sharing a conversation, an intimate kiss, none of it really meant anything without further declaration of intent. Rosalind feared her association with the Duke of Northridge was enough to prevent Sebastian from making any movement

forward with a relationship with her. Any man would feel that way. And despite her own feelings towards him, it seemed as though she would be left with no choice but to forget the matter and await her fate.

“You can find out at the exhibition, perhaps,” Elizabeth replied, and Rosalind looked at her in surprise.

“Will he be there?” she asked, realizing there was perhaps more to the invitation than mere politeness.

“I’m sure he will. He’s John’s closest friend, isn’t he? He worries about him dealing with all this business over the family curse. The madness,” Elizabeth said.

There was a dismissiveness in her voice, as though the matter was of little importance, even as Rosalind sighed.

“He’s not mad,” she said, and Elizabeth shrugged.

“I don’t know. No one thought the king was mad, either, did they?” she said.

That much was true. When they parted ways, promising to meet on the steps of Somerset House the following day at ten o’clock, Rosalind found herself preoccupied with the thought of Sebastian’s madness. The thought she tried hard to push aside. If he was mad, she would not know until it was too late, and to marry a madman was surely as bad as marrying a man like the Duke of Northridge.

“But aren’t we all a little mad?” she asked herself, as she hurried home, hoping to avoid her mother and slip in through the kitchen door.

But the thought now plagued her, and try as she might, she remained doubtful as to her true impressions of the man she had kissed in the garden, the man on whom she had set her hopes, the man she really knew so little of.

“They said they’d be inside,” Elizabeth said, as Rosalind looked around her for a sign of Sebastian or John.

A considerable crowd had gathered outside the handsome neo-classical façade of Somerset House on The Strand, and Rosalind and Elizabeth were being jostled inside, caught up in a queue of people, many of whom were not yet in possession of tickets for the exhibition.

“There’s a steward here,” Rosalind said, taking hold of Elizabeth’s hand and pulling her through the throng.

The steward was a young, flustered looking man in a blue uniform. He took their tickets and ushered them beyond a barrier. There it wasn’t as crowded and a wide flight of steps led up to a gallery above where everything was marble. Here the onlookers spoke in hushed whispers, which was a marked contrast to the shouts and cries coming from outside.

“They’re like a pack of wild animals and all to see a few paintings,” another steward said, shaking his head, as he took the invitation from Elizabeth and pointed them along the gallery to a set of open doors at the far end.

“Has Lord Cuthbert arrived yet?” Elizabeth asked, and the steward nodded.

“And the Earl of Southbourne, too,” he replied, pointing again along the gallery.

At the mention of the earl, Rosalind’s heart skipped a beat, and she was under no illusion as to the intention of Lord Cuthbert in issuing the invitation. Her mother had agreed to it on the basis of Elizabeth’s accompaniment, even as she had made her feelings about art exhibitions clear.

“They attract a certain type of person, Rosalind. A type of person I don’t approve of,” her mother had said, though she had not elaborated further on just what that type was.

“This way, Rosalind. Let’s find them,” Elizabeth said, beckoning Rosalind to follow her.

The doors at the far end of the gallery opened into a large hall, with an ornately painted ceiling, around the edge of which were windows to let in the sunlight. The carpet was a plush oriental design, and benches were dispersed at intervals in a circular arrangement. But the paintings covering the walls drew the crowd’s attention. Every space was taken up with large frames, small frames, long frames, and portraits arranged as though in a great puzzle to fit together and cover every surface.

“Goodness, look at it,” Rosalind exclaimed, for it was a truly remarkable sight.

The subjects of the paintings ranged from mythical scenes to stiff portraiture. Men and women, gods and goddesses, animals, landscapes. There were depictions of Biblical parables next to the fading glories of ancient Rome, while mischievous looking children smiled from the backs of horses, and an underwater scene showed Poseidon in a watery lair.

The only thing missing, much to Rosalind's disappointment, was anything in the nude. The paintings were all tasteful depictions, and loin cloths covered every opportunity for revelation.

"It's remarkable," Elizabeth said, staring around her, as Lord Cuthbert now approached them.

"Ah, ladies, you're here. I'm sorry I couldn't meet you outside. I had to be here early. I'm one of the patrons, you see. It's all rather splendid, isn't it?" he said, slipping his arm into Elizabeth's.

She nodded, looking up at him and blushing.

"It's so kind of you to invite us, John," she replied, and he gazed at her adoringly.

Rosalind felt she was intruding, and stepping away from them, she glanced again around the walls, admiring the art, even as

she could find nothing to fit her tastes entirely. She imagined her own paintings displayed here. Ariadne and Dionysus, herself and Sebastian. Was he here?

She glanced around her, trying to make him out amid the throng. She wondered what it would be like to see him again after what passed between them in the garden at Lady Clarissa's ball. Did Lord Cuthbert know of it? Had he encouraged it?

A moment later, she saw the earl admiring a painting depicting Icarus jumping from the tower and flying too close to the sun. For a moment, she watched him, recalling the sensation of his lips pressed against hers, the feel of his embrace.

"I wonder what he's thinking?" she asked herself.

Again, Rosalind could see no evidence of madness on the earl's face. He was absorbed in the painting, looking up at it with a studied expression, his chin cupped in his hand. His face was that of Dionysus. Rosalind had captured him perfectly, and she smiled to herself at the thought of his being hidden under her bed, gazing into Ariadne's eyes.

As she studied him, she imagined painting him again, the contours of his body transposed to the canvas. Knowing what they had shared, Rosalind knew she could paint a very different painting now. His lips, his hands, his arms. She knew them all intimately. She was fixated on him, and now he turned, perhaps realizing himself watched. Rosalind blushed as he caught her eye.

“What do I say?” she thought to herself, as now he approached her with a smile.

“I think this was planned,” he said, raising his eyebrows and glancing across to where Lord Cuthbert and Elizabeth were admiring a painting of a horse.

“If it was, I don’t mind,” Rosalind replied, and he smiled.

“There’s another room of paintings, but they don’t seem as popular. These are all very nice, but I think we both know

what we prefer,” he said, and Rosalind smiled.

“I have to admit, I was disappointed by the loincloths,” she said, and the earl laughed.

“Yes, like Clement XIII and the fig leaves,” he replied, nodding towards a velvet curtain to their left.

A steward was standing there, and as they approached, he stepped in front of the curtain to bar their way.

“These paintings aren’t suitable for the fairer sex, my Lord,” he said, but Sebastian waved his hand dismissively.

“Oh, please, what nonsense. This lady knows more about art than any of the chattering philistines here,” Sebastian said, and pulling back the curtain, he ushered Rosalind through the door.

Chapter 18

Beyond the plush velvet curtain, Rosalind stepped into a smaller room, hung in the same way as the larger, but with a decidedly more select curation. Only a handful of men were admiring the paintings, while several stewards stood stiffly by observing the proceedings with judgmental gazes.

At the sight of Rosalind and Sebastian entering the room, several of the men looked askance, but Rosalind was used to the judgement of others, and gazing around her, she let out an exclamation of delight.

“Isn’t it wonderful? Look at the way the figures are painted. The beauty of the forms, the sensuous looks, the touch and caress,” she exclaimed, stepping forward to examine the nearest nude with Sebastian at her side.

While the motivations of some of the men viewing these works might be suspect, Rosalind’s own appreciation was entirely artistic. She imagined herself caught up in the poses and passions of the canvases. She longed to paint such things,

to depict the beauty of the human form without embarrassment or scandal. This was art, and it was beautiful.

“I’m glad you like them. I thought you would,” Sebastian said, as they gazed up at a painting of two lovers entwined together in a nude embrace.

The man’s hands covered the woman’s breasts, her neck arched back as he kissed her. Sebastian was standing behind Rosalind, and she imagined the same pose between them, his hands cupping her, his lips pressed to her skin, the scent of his cologne, the feel of their bodies pressed together.

“Who paints such works? And who are the models?” Rosalind asked, turning to Sebastian, who smiled.

“I suppose they’re lovers, aren’t they? The artist paints the woman he loves. It’s often the case, even in clothed portraiture. Artists, on the whole, want to paint beauty, and when they see it in the woman they love, they want to depict it. I should think most of these scenes are based on real life,” he said.

“I don’t understand why people are so scandalized by such works. Isn’t it natural? The male and female form in the act of love,” Rosalind said.

She knew her own naivety, but her imagination was more than capable of transporting her into the passions depicted. It seemed odd to think of the repression of such desire, given the obvious pleasures it engendered. The expressions on the faces of those depicted in the portraits were entirely of mutual delight. There was nothing forced about the poses. They depicted love, and love was beautiful.

“Entirely natural, but our puritanical society doesn’t see it that way. They hide such things behind the veil,” he said, nodding towards the velvet curtain, through which another gentleman had just been ushered.

“I think it’s very sad,” Rosalind said, pausing in front of another nude, this one depicting a woman lying on a chaise lounge, her breasts exposed, with a mischievous smile on her face, as sunlight poured through an open window.

Rosalind imagined herself lying there. What would she see? She pictured the artist at his easel, felt the warm breeze coming through the window, heard the chatter of voices on the street below.

“What are you thinking?” Sebastian asked, and Rosalind was brought back to her senses.

“I was just...I can picture myself there,” she said, blushing. She knew there was no reason to feel embarrassed telling him she enjoyed imagining herself the subject of such paintings; he already knew. He smiled at her and nodded.

“I can picture you there, too. What about the others? Do you see yourself there?” he asked, holding his hand out to the other paintings, where lovers were entwined together in acts of passion.

“I can,” Rosalind admitted, and the Earl held her gaze, just as Dionysus had held that of Ariadne in the picture Rosalind herself had painted.

Her heart skipped a beat, his piercing green eyes fixed on her, as now he reached up and brushed the curls of her hair back from her face.

“I think you’re as much a portrait as any of them,” he said, and Rosalind blushed.

“Oh...but I’m not...I could never model for such...these women are...” she stammered, but he shook his head, his fingers still lightly touching her cheek.

“You are. Truly, you are,” he said, just as a steward cleared his throat.

“Keep moving, sir, others want to see the portraits,” he said, and Rosalind was brought back to her senses as Sebastian looked suddenly embarrassed.

“Yes, very well,” he said, and now they continued around the room, admiring the other nudes and sharing their criticisms and appreciations.

As they stepped out from behind the velvet curtain into the main gallery, Rosalind caught sight of Elizabeth and John at the far side of the room. They were admiring a painting of King Charles II, and Rosalind hoped her friend had not noticed her absence, given the subject matter hung in the room behind her.

“Oh, Rosalind, there you are,” Elizabeth exclaimed, as Rosalind and Sebastian came up behind where she and John were admiring the portrait of the beheaded monarch.

“I was just saying to Elizabeth, I think it’s time we headed for Gunter’s, don’t you? A little iced treat to end the day?” John said, and Elizabeth looked up at him and swooned.

“You do have the best ideas, John,” she said.

Rosalind and Sebastian exchanged glances, smiling at one another, as John and Elizabeth led the way arm in arm. There was no doubt they were in love, and Rosalind was pleased for her friend, as it seemed Sebastian was for him, too.

“They make a lovely couple,” Rosalind whispered, as she and Sebastian walked a few paces behind.

They did not walk arm in arm, though Rosalind would not have minded if they had done. At the gallery, she felt they were just like any other courting couple, even if the truth was very different. It had been a moment to savor, and Rosalind could not help but feel happy to be in the company of the earl, who had displayed nothing of the apparent madness for which he was rumored to suffer.

“They do, don’t they? I’m pleased for John. He’s been unfairly judged as a rake in the past. But he’s really not. I can assure you of that. He’ll make an excellent match for your charming friend,” Sebastian said, as they walked along The Strand towards Gunter’s.

As they walked, Rosalind thought back to the moment they had shared beneath the nudes, imagining herself to be the subject of the painting, and having Sebastian as her lover. She was happy for Elizabeth, but in this moment, caught up in the fantasy of her and Sebastian being together, Rosalind could not help but feel sorry it could not last.

“Here we are at Gunter’s. Look at the wonderful displays in the windows,” John called out.

Gunter’s Tea Shop, on Berkley Square, was a fashionable place to gather, frequented by elegant young ladies and handsomely dressed gentlemen. It was a haunt for courting couples, a place to be seen and to see others. In the windows, spectacular creations in sugar were displayed, this one depicting an alpine mountain scene, complete with a village of sugar houses, dusted with snow.

Rosalind had a sweet tooth, and if her mother was feeling indulgent, she would bring her to Gunter’s, where dozens of flavored ices were available to savor, along with sugared fruits, syrups, daintily iced biscuits, elaborate cakes, and delicate sugar spun delights.

“Oh, I do love Gunter’s! I wonder if they’re still making the rose and lavender flavored ice we had last time we were here, Rosalind,” Elizabeth said, as John held open the door for them, and the party filed inside.

The tea room was a sea of bonnets, as chattering women giggled and gossiped with one another, while their gentleman companions sat hanging on their every word. A waistcoated waiter came to greet them, ushering them to a table on a raised platform at the far end of the room.

As they passed by, Rosalind recognized several women she knew. These women were friends of her mother’s, and she knew it would not be long before her parents discovered where she had been that afternoon.

“We’ll all have ices, won’t we? I suggest two flavors each: jasmine, orange, elderflower, violet, the list goes on,” John said, as Rosalind and Elizabeth examined the menus.

Rosalind glanced at Sebastian, smiling at him. He smiled back at her, and to her surprise, she felt the touch of his hand against her leg. The table was covered in a large white cloth, its edges hanging down to the floor, and his touch was

concealed from sight, even as its sensation caused a shiver to run through her. Rosalind felt the blush rise in her cheeks, and she glanced down at the menu, distracted, even as Elizabeth asked her what she would have.

“I...oh, jasmine, and...elderflower,” she said, still feeling the gentles caress of Sebastian’s hand against her leg.

“How delicious. I’m going to have orange and lemon, I think,” Elizabeth said, setting down her menu as a waiter came to take their order.

Rosalind glanced at Sebastian, his touch now firmer against her leg, and she smiled, not knowing how to respond, even as she found the sensation to be pleasurable. Moving her foot, she found his. At least, she hoped it was his.

“And two of the strawberry fancies with the spun sugar for the ladies,” John was saying, concluding their order.

The waiter hurried off towards the counter, and John smiled, oblivious to the goings on beneath the table, as Rosalind's foot became entwined with Sebastian's.

“Did you see the horse paintings, Rosalind? John was saying they reminded him of Sebastian's horse, Pegasus,” Elizabeth said.

Rosalind could hardly concentrate, her heart beating fast at the earl's touch, but she forced a smile and shook her head.

“No, I didn't get a chance to see them, unfortunately,” she replied.

“Yes, just like Pegasus,” John said, glancing at Sebastian, who nodded.

“Ah...yes. Dear Pegasus...his racing days are nearly over, I fear,” Sebastian replied, as now he edged his hand a little further up Rosalind's thigh.

“Horses... yes, I don't know much about horses,” Rosalind said, sitting up stiffly, and having to raise her handkerchief to her mouth to prevent herself gasping at the touch of Sebastian's hand beneath the table.

“I'm sure Sebastian can teach you a great deal,” John said, and Rosalind nodded.

“Yes. I'm sure he can,” Rosalind replied, as Sebastian's hand was now so far moved along her thigh as to be almost scandalous.

But at that moment, he withdrew, straightening up, as Lady Helena Bonham approached. Rosalind recognized her from the powder room at Lady Clarissa's ball.

“Sebastian, how nice to see you?” she exclaimed, as Sebastian and John rose to their feet respectfully.

She was with another woman Rosalind recognized as a friend of her mother's. She glanced at Rosalind, smiling and nodding.

"Lady Helena, were you at Somerset House for the exhibition this morning?" Sebastian asked, taking his seat again.

Lady Helena nodded.

"I was, yes, though I'm not much of an art lover. I wanted to buy a few pieces for a townhouse in Bath I've just purchased," she said, smiling at Rosalind, who was thinking back to the conversation she had overheard between Lady Helena and Sebastian's stepmother.

In the powder room, she had been keen to know the details of Sebastian's apparent illness and had almost delighted in speculating as to his descent into madness. Rosalind did not like her. She had no evidence of Lady Helena's intention other than to garner gossip.

“And did you find anything?” John asked.

“A few pieces, yes. It’s so difficult furnishing an empty house. But I want it ready for next season. They say Bath has quite the alternative draw to London. It’s where everyone’s going,” she said, glancing again at Rosalind with a smile.

“I’ve never been there before,” Rosalind replied, and Lady Helena laughed.

“I’m sure you will. Doesn’t the Duke of Northridge have an estate near there?” she asked.

Rosalind drew a sharp intake of breath at these calculated words, but she was not about to give Lady Helena the satisfaction of having caught her out.

“Yes, he does, I believe. But I prefer London. There’s so much more happening here than in the provinces. Though I suppose a quieter pace of life suits one in older age,” she replied, raising her eyebrows, as Lady Helena sniffed indignantly.

“Yes...well...perhaps it does. Anyway, I’m surprised to see you here, Sebastian. Your stepmother tells me you haven’t been well lately. I’m so very sorry to hear it,” she said.

Sebastian looked uncomfortable, and Rosalind felt indignant on his behalf. What right did Lady Helena have to embarrass him in such a way?

“I’m quite all right, thank you,” Sebastian replied, but he looked terribly embarrassed and humiliated by her words.

“Oh, but your stepmother was very concerned. You’re forgetting things and mislaying things. She says it was the same for your father, too. Aren’t there any doctors who could help you? I know a specialist in Bath,” Lady Helena said, glancing again at Rosalind, who held her gaze defiantly.

“I’m sure I’ll be all right,” Sebastian replied, and to Rosalind’s relief, the waiter arrived with a tray bearing their ices and sweet treats.

Lady Helena said goodbye, but the damage was done, and the happy atmosphere of earlier was replaced by a cloud. Sebastian looked angry, sitting stony faced as the ices were placed in front of him, while John tried to lighten the mood.

“Don’t they look delicious?” he said, and Elizabeth nodded.

“The colors are so vibrant. Look at mine, orange and yellow, and it tastes exquisite,” she exclaimed, tasting the two flavors in turn.

“I’m sorry,” Rosalind whispered, turning to Sebastian, as Elizabeth and John tried one another’s ices.

“It doesn’t matter. She’s probably right,” Sebastian replied, shaking his head.

Rosalind put her hand on his, and he looked up at her and gave a weak smile.

“I don’t think it’s true,” she said, and he sighed.

“You’re very kind to say so, but I fear it is,” he replied, and for the rest of their time at Gunter’s, he seemed lost in a deep melancholy.

Rosalind felt terribly sorry for him, and angry, too, at the way he was treated. It was assumed he would be afflicted by a condition he had no symptoms of. It was as though he was being shunned as a leper, before the symptoms showed themselves, and Rosalind had no doubt as to Lady Helena’s ability to spread rumor across the ton.

“It’s all so unfair, he’s so very sweet,” she said to herself, as she and Elizabeth returned home together, knowing the afternoon she had spent with Sebastian at the art gallery would not be one she would forget.

Chapter 19

“Cheer up, Sebastian, it’s not so bad, is it? Lady Helena was only asking after your health,” John said, as he and Sebastian walked back to Southbourne House.

Sebastian looked up at his friend and sighed. He had been lost in thought, his mind on Lady Helena’s remarks and what Rosalind must have thought of them. Her words had sunk him into a deep depression, the happiness of that carefree day replaced by the reminder of his imminent descent into madness.

He had been a fool to show his flirtatious side, acting as though the possibility of a courtship between himself and Rosalind was a real possibility. But it was not precisely for the reasons Lady Helena’s words had reminded him of.

“Of my health? Yes, but it’s hardly a broken leg, is it, John? One’s mind can’t be splintered and set like a bone. Once it’s gone, it’s gone,” Sebastian replied, shaking his head sadly.

His friend looked at him with a concerned expression.

“You’re dwelling on this far too much, Sebastian. It’s not good for you. You seemed happy at Somerset House. Happy in the company of Lady Rosalind. And now...” John said, shaking his head.

“Because I was happy. I could pretend to be. I could forget my troubles and my worries. The moment was sublime,” he said, thinking back to touching Rosalind’s face, brushing back her hair, gazing into her eyes.

It had been a perfect moment, one Sebastian would never forget. But now, reminded of what was to come, Sebastian could only feel a deep and devastating sadness. He would soon lose everything, even as he had clung to the possibility of something.

“And it still can be. There’s no certainty in anything Lady Helena or anyone else says. You’re not mad,” John said.

His tone was definite, as though he was pronouncing a medical fact rather than a personal opinion. They arrived back at Southbourne House, and after parting ways, Sebastian made his way up the short drive. While looking up at the house, the scene of his father's and his grandfather's madness flooded his thoughts.

"And now it will be my madness," he told himself, shaking his head as he made his way up the steps. S the front door.Langton, the butler, opened for him it. But as Sebastian stepped over the threshold, a sudden pain gripped him in the stomach and he stumbled, leaning on the doorpost and gasping for breath.

"My Lord?" the butler exclaimed, catching Sebastian by the arm, as he groaned, hardly able to stand. The pain was so intense.

"A chair...help me," Sebastian exclaimed, his eyes watering, as the sharp stabbing pain continued.

The butler called for help, and two of the footmen came running, taking Sebastian under his arms, and practically carrying him into the drawing room, his legs feeling like the melting ices he had just consumed. They laid him on a chaise lounge by the window, and water was brought, along with smelling salts, to revive him.

“I’ll send for a doctor, my Lord,” the butler said, but Sebastian shook his head.

“No. I don’t need a doctor. I’ll be all right. Just bring me some chamomile tea,” he said.

He feared the arrival of a doctor, and what would be said. How would he be diagnosed? Was this the madness taking hold more vehemently? The butler looked concerned, but he did as he was told, sending one of the footmen to fetch a cup of chamomile tea. The pain was subsiding, but Sebastian feared trying to move, lest it return. He tried to sit up, gesturing for the window to be opened. The room was stifling, and his head was spinning. What was wrong with him?

“Sebastian, what’s happened?” his stepmother said, entering the room a few moments later.

The butler had summoned her, even as Sebastian had hoped to avoid her knowing of this new and unsettling turn of events.

“It’s nothing. A stitch, perhaps. I’ll be all right. They’re bringing me some chamomile tea,” Sebastian said, trying to sit up, even as another stabbing pain shot through him.

“Don’t try to move. Just lie there. We’ll send for the doctor,” she said, and Sebastian protested.

He did not want a doctor. He just wanted to be left alone. The pain would pass, but his stepmother was insistent.

“I don’t need a doctor,” he said, but she shook her head.

“You do. I won’t hear any objections. Besides, I don’t want your uncle thinking I don’t care, do I?” she said.

Sebastian stared at her in astonishment, thinking for a moment he had misheard her. His Uncle Julian, his father’s brother, had not been seen at Southbourne House in years. The two brothers were estranged in their youth, and not even the death of the former earl had brought Julian back to the ancestral home.

Forgetting the pain for a moment, Sebastian sat up, watching as his stepmother opened the drawing-room door. To Sebastian’s utmost surprise, his uncle now entered the room. There could be no mistaking him. He had the same furrowed brow, the same narrow eyes, the same hawk-like nose.

“I’m sorry to hear you’re suffering, Sebastian,” his uncle said, stepping forward, as Sebastian struggled to rise to his feet.

He had not seen his uncle since he was fifteen years old, and now he could not help but wonder why he should return after all these years. The dispute with Sebastian’s father had been

over money, and Sebastian could only imagine his uncle had returned for the same purpose.

“It’s just...it’s nothing. I’ve been out walking this morning,” Sebastian said, though it was a pitiful excuse, his stomach still aching from unexplained pain.

His uncle did not look convinced.

“Your stepmother tells me you’ve not been well. Are you sure you should be out of bed?” he said.

Sebastian furrowed his brow, confused why his uncle had come to Southbourne House that day. There had been no invitation, and Sebastian would rather have continued to pretend he did not have an uncle. His father had always spoken of his brother as a troublemaker, but the exact details of their falling out had never become fully clear.

“I’m all right,” Sebastian said, glancing at his stepmother, who smiled sympathetically at him.

“I’ve been worried about you, Sebastian. I asked your uncle to come here in the hope of reconciliation. You need help,” she said.

Sebastian had no wish for reconciliation. The last he had heard of his uncle, he was pursuing business ventures in the colonies, and his return was nothing if not unsettling. Sebastian did not want his business discussed in such a way, and certainly not by his stepmother, who had already caused him problems with Lady Helena.

“I don’t need help, Victoria,” he replied, snapping at her, even as he tried to control his temper.

“It’s all right, Sebastian. I only want to help. That’s all. I know you’re worried about what happened to your father. I watched my own father suffer the madness he inherited. I know what’s coming,” he said.

Sebastian stared at him in astonishment. Was he convinced of what was to come? The footman now brought in the cup of chamomile tea, but Sebastian wanted something stronger, and he poured himself a glass of brandy from a decanter on the sideboard.

“No one knows what’s coming,” Sebastian said, shaking his head, even as he himself had had the same thoughts.

He feared the worst, and the pain in his stomach was surely another symptom of what was to come. His forgetfulness, the way his passions were so suddenly seized, his fear of the future...all of it pointed to one thing. Madness.

“But you must be prepared, Sebastian. I can help you. There’re things we can do to stem the inevitable tide,” his uncle said, as Sebastian poured himself another brandy.

“I just want to be left alone. That’s all. There’s nothing else to be done. I don’t need you here,” Sebastian said, even as he knew he was being churlish and rude.

But to hear nothing from his uncle for years, then suddenly to be faced with him there in the drawing room, was too much.

“I never trusted my brother,” Sebastian’s father had once said, and Sebastian did not trust him now, either.

“Julian, I’m sorry. He’s not himself. I’m sure it won’t be long before the doctor arrives,” Sebastian’s stepmother said, but his uncle waved his hand dismissively.

“It’s quite all right, Victoria. I didn’t expect to be welcome with open arms. But I hope the two of us can approach a reconciliation, Sebastian. I’ve stayed away out of respect for your father’s memory. But the quarrel was never ours, was it?” he said, and Sebastian was forced to admit it was not.

But Sebastian knew his own father to be an excellent judge of character, and he and Sebastian’s uncle would not have fallen out had it not been over a serious matter.

“I’m sorry. I just want to be alone for a while,” Sebastian said, and his uncle nodded.

“I understand. I’m not going far. I’ve got lodgings at an inn near Saint Paul’s,” he said, but at these words, Sebastian’s stepmother tutted.

“We won’t hear of it, will we, Sebastian? You’ll stay here, Julian. I’ll have the housekeeper make up a room for you,” she said, and despite a somewhat lackluster protest from Sebastian’s uncle, the matter was settled.

Sebastian had no choice to agree. But he wanted to be alone, and after excusing himself, he went upstairs to his studio. To his surprise, he found the door unlocked. But he was certain he locked it when last he had been there; he always locked it.

“How curious,” he thought to himself, stepping inside and looking around at the paintings covering the walls.

There were his thoughts, his feelings, and passions covering the canvases with trails of paint in every color of the rainbow. But it was the painting on the easel his eyes were drawn to. This was the picture of Rosalind, her naked form like those they had seen at Somerset House. It was still half finished, the outline roughly sketched, her form taking shape.

Sebastian stepped forward, running his fingers along the lines, tracing Rosalind's outline. Suddenly, he drew back, staring at the face. The eyes, they were different somehow.

"It isn't her," he said to himself, but who else could it be?

Something was wrong. The eyes had been altered, and as he looked at the face, he saw changes there, too. The cheekbones were not as he would have painted them, and the nose was too long. Her forehead was different, too. It was a different face, and Sebastian's eyes grew wide and fearful at the unfamiliar figure staring back at him.

He had wanted to see Rosalind, to be comforted by her familiar figure, to gaze into those same eyes he had found refuge in that very day. But this was a stranger. It was a different painting, and Sebastian could not understand how it had come to be.

“But it has to be me. No one else could...I did this,” he told himself, even as he had no recollection of having done so.

Try as he might, he simply could not remember painting the face. It seemed like a dream, and staring at the unfamiliar eyes, Sebastian was suddenly seized with dread.

“It’s a nightmare,” he said to himself, knowing it was one there could be no awaking from.

If he could paint a face and not remember it, anything was possible. Paranoia seized him, and he felt terrified at the thought of the things he might have done, and the things he might have forgotten doing. It was all a blur. His memory was possibility mixing together a terrible confusion of truth and falsity.

There was no telling what was what, and glancing again at the unfamiliar eyes of the painting, Sebastian turned and fled. He clattered down the stairs from his studio, calling for the butler, and demanding to know if anyone had been in his studio.

“Who was there? I demand to know who’s been into my studio. Has someone been in there? One of the maids? A footman? They’ve no business being in there. I found the door unlocked. Someone’s been there,” Sebastian cried, as the astonished looking butler shook his head.

“My Lord, you’re the only one with a key to the studio. The servants never go there. I’ve never been inside myself,” the butler protested, but Sebastian shook his head.

“No, you’re lying, Langton. Someone’s been in there,” Sebastian replied.

The commotion now brought his stepmother and uncle from the drawing room, and Lady Southbourne stared at Sebastian

in astonishment as he pointed accusingly at the butler, who continued to deny any involvement.

“Sebastian, what’s wrong? What’s happened?” she exclaimed, as Sebastian took a deep breath, a sudden pain shooting through his stomach.

“My...the studio. Someone’s been in my studio. They’ve changed my painting. It’s different: the eyes, the nose, the cheekbones. They’re all different. It’s a different face staring back at me,” he cried, but his stepmother shook his head.

“How could anyone have gone in there, Sebastian? You keep the key around your neck,” she replied, adopting a calm and sympathetic tone.

Sebastian’s eyes grew wide, and his hand went to his neck. The key was there, and he clasped at it, pulling it out of his shirt. Terror gripped him. His stepmother was right. He always kept the key around his neck. He alone was responsible, even as he had no recollection of altering the picture as it now appeared. He looked at his stepmother in disbelief, fighting back the tears now welling up in his eyes.

“But I can’t remember,” he said, as the butler sighed and shook his head.

“It doesn’t matter, Sebastian. Come and sit down in the drawing room. I’m sure the doctor won’t be long,” Lady Southbourne said, and she took Sebastian by the hand and led him into the drawing room, urging him to lie down on the chaise lounge by the window.

He could hear his uncle talking in low and apologetic tones to the butler, and a moment later, he, too, entered the room. He looked worried, and poured himself a brandy, before coming to sit next to Sebastian by the window.

“It’s very worrying, Sebastian. But you mustn’t worry. Your stepmother and I will do everything we can to help you,” he said, glancing at Lady Southbourne, who nodded.

“Absolutely we will,” she said, smiling reassuringly at Sebastian, who could do nothing but lie there, knowing he was surely in the first throes of a worsening madness, one from which he could never hope to recover.

As they waited for the doctor, Sebastian tried desperately to remember, willing himself to recall even the smallest detail to prove other than the facts appeared. He remembered painting Rosalind’s outline on the canvas after he lost the cigar case. He had gone to bed late, rising only in time for the exhibition at Somerset House. Only the hours of sleep were unaccounted for, but it was surely then he had made the alterations.

“I can’t remember,” he said, and his stepmother looked at him sympathetically.

“It’s all right, Sebastian. You don’t have to. You’ve got us to remember for you,” she said, kneeling at his side and taking her hand in his, still with that same reassuring look on her face.

Chapter 20

Sebastian was asleep when the doctor arrived, and he awoke to the sound of hushed voices in the far corner of the drawing room. It was getting dark now, the evening drawing in, and he could see three figures outlined against the flickering light of the fire, now lit in the hearth.

Candles, too, had been set around the room, the curtains closed, and the atmosphere of a sick room pervading. Sebastian felt powerless, like an invalid now at the wills and whims of others. As he sat up, still with a slight pain in his stomach, his stepmother came hurrying over.

“Oh, thankgoodness, you’re awake. You drank a little coffee and went straight to sleep,” she said, as the doctor, too, now approached.

To his surprise, Sebastian did not recognize him. He thought he knew every notable doctor in London, after having consulted so many of the city’s physicians on his future state of health. The doctor was an elderly man, short, and with a

few wisps of gray hair remaining on his otherwise balding head.

He had not even bothered to cover it with a wig. He looked down at Sebastian, narrowing his eyes, as though in a concentrated examination.

“How are you feeling, my Lord?” he asked, and Sebastian sat up properly, feeling tired and still in pain.

“I don’t know. I don’t know how I feel. I don’t know anything,” he replied, and the doctor nodded.

“Yes, a common symptom,” he said, turning to Sebastian’s stepmother, who shook her head sadly.

Sebastian did not understand what the doctor was diagnosing, or what he meant by a “common symptom.” He felt confused and tried to think back again to the portrait and its changes.

Sebastian was certain he had not altered it, and yet the evidence was clear to see.

“I don’t understand,” Sebastian replied.

“Your stepmother’s told me some of your symptoms, my Lord such as the forgetfulness, memory loss, and emotional outbursts. You’re experiencing pains in your stomach and restlessness, is that right? May I?” he said, leaning over to examine Sebastian, who lay back on the chaise lounge with a sigh, allowing the doctor to conduct his examination.

He had not even introduced himself, and now Sebastian’s stepmother leaned over the doctor’s shoulder with a worried look on her face.

“We only want what’s best for you, Sebastian,” she said.

His uncle was standing by the fireside, a shadowy figure in the flickering light. Sebastian still did not understand why he had

come, or what he wanted. His behavior was hawkish and veiled in sympathy. Like a bird of prey, he had waited for Sebastian's weakness to show, and now he hovered, waiting to strike.

"What's wrong with me?" Sebastian asked, and the doctor sighed, glancing at Sebastian's stepmother, who shook her head.

"We'll take care of him, doctor, whatever he needs. We'll take care of him," she said, as the doctor straightened up.

"His symptoms suggest madness. The disease itself is a mystery, as we don't fully understand the workings of the mind. One only has to think of His Majesty's condition to realize the varied effects of such conditions. But I'm fairly certain his symptoms show a progressive disease.

There may be long periods of lucidity, but a sudden outburst could lead to the possibility of a complete breakdown at any moment," he said, glancing down at Sebastian, who felt powerless to suggest otherwise.

Forgetfulness, passionate outbursts, and now the pain. It all pointed to what the doctor was saying. He had seen it in his father, as had his stepmother, and if anyone knew the pain of seeing a loved one succumb to such a dreadful fate, it was her. But in his mind, in himself, Sebastian was not yet ready to admit defeat. He was not mad.

A madman was one without control, without reason, without autonomy. Sebastian had all of those things. He was entirely within his faculties, save for the strange notion of there being things he could not remember doing or being part of.

It was as though periods of time had passed without his having been aware of them, and to recall them was an impossibility, even as the evidence of them having occurred existed all around him.

“What can I do?” Sebastian asked.

The doctor pondered for a moment.

“The greatest specialists in the land haven’t found a cure for the king’s madness. There’ve been attempts, of course. Francis Willis had some success. His sanitorium in Lincolnshire was famous for treating those of a wrongheaded disposition. But as for definite results, I can only wonder what might be done. A herbal remedy or a calming tonic might slow the advance,” the doctor said, and Sebastian’s stepmother nodded.

“Yes. Certainly, doctor. Whatever you think might help. We’ll do what we can, but I won’t send Sebastian away,” she said.

Sebastian looked at her in astonishment. They were talking about him as though he was not there, even as he himself had no intention of being confined to a sanitorium.

“I’m not mad,” he exclaimed, and the doctor looked at him sympathetically.

“Unfortunately, my Lord, that’s what others in your place had said, too. Afflictions of the mind can manifest themselves in so many ways. We simply don’t understand their full effects. I’m going to recommend the herbal remedy. It’s just a tea, of sorts, something to calm you. And plenty of rest,” he said.

Sebastian had no choice but to agree. He did not know if he was mad, or simply being told he was mad. As the doctor left, his uncle whispered something to him, before coming to Sebastian’s side. He looked down at him sympathetically, standing next to Lady Southbourne, who dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief.

“I was sorry not to be here for your father when these events occurred. We had our disagreements, but blood is thicker than water, and I won’t shy away from my duty now. I don’t want history to repeat itself, Sebastian, but I fear it will, unless we do all we can to help you,” he said.

Sebastian nodded. He was still in some discomfort from the pains in his stomach, and there was little more he could do than agree. He was tired and wanted to go to bed, even as he feared further forgetfulness, or perhaps even the moment of total breakdown. He was living on a knife edge, poised between life as he had known it, and life as it was to be when the moment of insanity came.

“And we will do all we can to help you, Sebastian. I promise,” Lady Southbourne said, reaching out and taking Sebastian’s hand in hers.

He nodded, knowing there was nothing else he could do but accept his stepmother’s words. Langton was summoned, and it was decided Sebastian should go to bed. The butler and two footmen helping him up to his bedroom, where he was laid on the bed, his uncle now attending him with a candle in hand.

“Whatever you need, Sebastian, we’ll see to it. Running the estate needn’t trouble you. I can see to all that,” he said. But Sebastian shook his head.

It was as though control was being taken from him, and his uncle and stepmother were already making arrangements as though his demise had occurred. But nothing had changed, even as Sebastian was feeling his grip on the world around him loosening.

“You don’t have to. I’m going to fight it,” Sebastian replied, for he was determined to do so.

His uncle nodded, looking down at him in the flickering candlelight with a sympathetic expression on his face.

“Your father was stubborn, Sebastian. He refused to accept what was happening to him. Your stepmother doesn’t want the same to be the case for you. Please, let us help you,” he said.

Sebastian sighed, nodding, even as he had no intention of succumbing to the notion of madness. It was as though they were trying to convince him of the inevitability. But Sebastian was determined to fight it. He was not mad, and when his uncle had left the room, Sebastian cursed under his breath.

“I won’t let it happen. I won’t let it defeat me,” he exclaimed. He was trying to think of all the reasons he was not mad, even as the reasons why he could be played heavily on his mind.

But he was exhausted, and with the pain in his stomach now subsiding, he fell into a deep sleep.

“You can come out. You don’t have to be shy. Shall I close the window for you? Oh. But there’s such a pleasant breeze blowing in off the sea, don’t you think?” Sebastian said.

He was sitting at an easel in an unfamiliar room. It was poorly furnished, though homely, with two large windows, both of them open, looking out across steep, red-tiled rooftops towards the glinting sea beyond.

Sunlight filled the room, and from behind a crudely decorated wooden screen, a figure now emerged. It was Rosalind, dressed only in a silk chemise, smiling, though looking somewhat nervous as Sebastian indicated an old chaise lounge by the window.

“I’ve never done this before,” she said, and Sebastian smiled at her.

“You look very pretty,” he said, as now she lay down, raising her right arm above her head, draping herself over the cushions, and looking expectantly at Sebastian, who now took up a piece of charcoal and began to sketch.

“What will you do with your picture?” she asked, seeming to relax a little as he worked.

“It’s a study, for a painting,” he replied, and she smiled at him.

“A nude, I suppose. I know your reputation,” she said, and he blushed.

“Do you?” he replied, and she nodded.

“I’ve got a friend, Celine. You sketched her, didn’t you?” she said, and Sebastian blushed.

He remembered Celine and her broad shoulders, curvy figure, and ample breasts.

“I did. She was very compliant,” he said, and Rosalind laughed.

“But she was dressed, wasn’t she? You only told her it was for a nude. But how can you paint a nude without a model for one? A true model, I mean,” she said, and Sebastian paused, looking around the easel in surprise.

He did not want a reputation like that, even if Rosalind was right. His little studio was filled with half finished paintings. Each one was intended to become a masterpiece, yet he never truly captured the female form as he desired it.

“You’re right. It’s not easy to paint a nude without a nude model,” he admitted, and Rosalind smiled.

“No, I’m sure it’s not,” she said, as Sebastian returned to his sketch.

His studies were always made in charcoal. He could draw swiftly, outlining the form, the shapes, contours of the limbs, the fall of the hair, and the curvatures of the breasts. But in a dress, or even a chemise, the form was subject to imagination. To transfer the study into the nude required imagination, but that was not the realism he desired.

He had just drawn the sweeping curvature of Rosalind’s legs when, glancing around his easel, he gave a cry of exclamation. Rosalind was still there, but she had slipped the shoulder straps from her chemise, revealing her breasts. Sebastian’s eyes grew wide as she smiled at him.

“You don’t have to,” he stammered, unable to take his eyes off her, but she merely continued to hold his gaze, rising to her feet, and allowing the silk garment to fall to the floor.

There she stood. Her form, with its slender curves and pert breasts, outlined against the sunlight flooding into the studio. She was beautiful, the perfect figure, the perfect study. As she lay down, she adopted the same position as before, her right arm raised, her head resting on her shoulder. Her earlier embarrassment was gone, replaced by a mischievous smile, as Sebastian found himself hardly able to concentrate on his sketch.

“But I want to. I want you to paint a nude. I agreed to be your study, and if you’re going to paint a nude, then I should be nude,” she replied.

Sebastian’s fingers were trembling, and he could hardly take his eyes off her.

“I’ve never...if you feel uncomfortable at any moment,” he said, but she shook her head.

“Will you show me what you’ve done so far? I’m curious to see it,” she said. Sebastian rose to his feet, and taking the

canvas from the easel, he stepped across the room.

He sat down on the edge of the chaise lounge, and Rosalind lay next to him, entirely comfortable, it seemed, to be naked in his presence. The sketch was only half finished, but it showed Rosalind's outline, her breasts, the contours of her body, the mischievous smile on her face. She reached out and touched the figure, smearing the charcoal a little, before withdrawing her finger and smiling.

“Do you like it?” he asked, glancing at her, and she nodded.

“I do, but you needed me in the nude, didn't you?” she replied, and he smiled.

“It's certainly helping,” he said.

Her bare leg was touching the small of his back, her breasts a pale white in the sunlight, as though wrapped in a blanket, the

shadows on either side framing her, as she raised her hand to shield her eyes.

“Good. Then I want you to sketch me again, and I want to be your model for every painting,” she said, and he smiled at her.

“Do you really?” he asked, and she nodded, resting her head back on the arm of the chaise lounge and smiling.

“And always like this,” she said.

He looked down at her naked form, his heart beating fast, as he edged closer, their bodies touching, his overcoat against her soft, supple skin.

“If that’s what you want,” he said, and she nodded.

“I do. It’s so freeing. No corset, no petticoats, no reams of skirt, just the form as it was intended, the female form, like Aphrodite,” she said.

“Then if that’s how you want me to sketch you, I will, just like Aphrodite,” he said, as now she ran her hands across her breasts and along her body, still smiling at him with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

“But if your study’s nude, why not you, too?” she asked, and Sebastian’s eyes grew wide with astonishment.

“You want me to be nude?” he asked, and she nodded.

“Why not? It seems a fair transaction,” she replied, and he smiled, blushing, as he pulled off his overcoat and unbuttoned his shirt, pulling it over his head, so his chest and torso were exposed.

Rosalind narrowed her eyes, still with a mischievous smile on her face, raising her eyebrows as Sebastian sat in only his breeches. He looked at her, his heart still beating fast, as now she reached out and ran her finger across his shoulder, sending a shiver running through him. She was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen, and now she indicated for him to continue, pointing down at his breeches.

“These, too?” he said, and she nodded.

“A nude for a nude. Can’t we both be a study for one another?” she asked, and rising to his feet, Sebastian obediently pulled off his belt, allowing his breeches to fall to the floor and removing his underclothes, too.

Now, he stood next to the chaise lounge, entirely naked, gazing down at Rosalind, whose own attire was the same. She smiled at him, sitting up as he sat down next to her, embarrassed at the obviousness of his arousal.

“Are you sure about this?” he said, and she nodded.

“I wouldn’t have suggested it if I wasn’t, but if you’re going to paint something like these other paintings, you’ll need more than two nudes. You’ll need a definite study,” she said, and leaning forward, she kissed him.

Her hands slipped around his torso, drawing him into her embrace, as they sank down on the chaise lounge in a sudden fit of passion.

Chapter 21

Rosalind had hardly slept that night. The paintings at Somerset House had inspired her, and she had sat up late at her easel, attempting to recreate something of the nudes she had seen that day. But her thoughts constantly turned to Sebastian, distracted by the bitter taste left by Lady Helena's words at Gunter's.

She had felt terribly sorry for him, even as she had tried to tell him it did not matter what anyone else said. Rosalind did not care if Sebastian was mad, though she knew that was little consolation to him.

"I don't care...oh, but I do care...I just...it doesn't matter to me," she said to herself, still wrestling with the matter when she awoke the following morning from what had been just a few short hours of sleep.

But like it or not, she had to care, and Rosalind knew the possibility of the earl's madness was not the only barrier to them enjoying what had seemed almost possible at Somerset House. There, with Sebastian at her side, Rosalind had dared

to picture a future for the two of them. But beyond the ideal of an artistic vision, a framed moment of happiness, there was little hope of that.

Whether mad or not, Rosalind knew her parents would object to any courtship with the Earl of Southbourne, not when the Duke of Northridge had let it be known he had every intention of marrying her as soon as possible for his own nefarious ends.

“You look exhausted, my Lady,” Molly said, when she brought Rosalind her morning tea.

Rosalind had just hidden her attempts at the nudes beneath her bed, knowing her maid would be shocked to see such depictions on canvas, even as she knew of Rosalind’s love of painting.

“Oh...I didn’t sleep well, Molly. I couldn’t stop thinking about the earl and his apparent madness. I don’t believe it,” she said. She knew the rumors about Sebastian were rife, both above and below stairs.

The maid looked at her sympathetically.

“Try not to worry, my Lady. I’m sure it’ll be all right. But he isn’t dangerous, is he?” she asked, looking fearful, even as Rosalind laughed.

“Dangerous? Good heavens, no. Why do you say such a thing?” Rosalind exclaimed.

It was one thing to speak of the earl having difficulties, but it was quite another to consider him dangerous. Certainly not to her, and not to anyone else, either.

“I’m sorry, my Lady. It was just something I overheard your mother saying,” Molly said.

Rosalind sighed. She could hear her mother saying that just to insinuate the earl was a danger to her daughter, even if it was the farthest thing from the truth.

“I’m sure it was. But no, he’s not dangerous. Far from it,” Rosalind replied, thinking back to the day she and the earl had enjoyed together at Somerset House and Gunter’s, where there had been no sign of madness, and no suggestion of danger, either.

Having washed and dressed, Rosalind went down to breakfast, hoping to dissuade her mother from such unpleasant thought. She knew her mind was made up. But as she entered the dining room, where the smell of deviled kidneys hung in the air, her mother looked up at her angrily.

“So, here you are,” she said, as Rosalind sat down at the table.

One of the footmen stepped forward to pour a cup of coffee, and Rosalind looked at her mother, wondering what she had done to elicit such a greeting at this early hour.

“I slept a little late, mother. I was tired,” Rosalind said, helping herself to a slice of toast.

Her father was reading a periodical, and he looked up at her and tutted.

“No wonder,” he replied, and Rosalind looked at both her parents in confusion.

“What have I done now?” she asked, for it seemed she was destined to be a perpetual disappointment to her parents, never capable of pleasing them and always in the wrong.

“Somerset House, Rosalind,” the duchess said, her face set in an angry expression, her lips then pursed.

Rosalind sighed.

“I went to an art exhibition with Elizabeth. There were hundreds of others there; most of the ton. I don’t see why you should object?” Rosalind replied.

She had not asked her mother’s permission to go, but neither had seen any possible objection to her doing so. Her mother banged her fist down angrily on the table.

“An exhibition at which you were seen by no less than a dozen of our acquaintances on the arm of the Earl of Southbourne, being led into an area of ill-repute,” her mother exclaimed.

Rosalind blushed. She might have known she would have been seen. It was one thing to attend an art exhibition, but to have passed beyond the red velvet curtain was bound to have caused gossip.

She had seen many of her mother’s friends at the exhibition, and it seemed they had been quick to relay their own sense of horror at seeing her enter into what they themselves dared not do. She sighed, not knowing what to say, even as she had no regrets in having done what she had done.

“Rosalind, what were you doing in such a place? Do you know how many people saw you?” her father exclaimed, folding his periodical and tossing it onto the table.

“But why does it matter? I went to see the paintings. You know I love art,” Rosalind replied.

“Art? That’s not art. It’s filth. Nude paintings...the female form...unspeakable acts,” her mother exclaimed.

The two footmen standing at either ends of the sideboard blushed, their lips trembling, as though they were about to burst out laughing. Rosalind rolled her eyes.

“It’s hardly like that, mother,” she replied, but she knew the duchess would never see it in the same way.

To her mother, those paintings only represented a moral degeneracy in society. She was not a committed churchgoer, but her sensibilities were puritanical in this regard, and it seemed Rosalind's father agreed.

“And to view these abominations on the arm of a man, the man we've forbidden you from having anything to do with,” he exclaimed, shaking his head.

Her mother had begun to sob, pulling out her handkerchief and dabbing at her eyes.

“I can only imagine what the Duke of Northridge will say. You've disgraced yourself, Rosalind, disgraced yourself!” she cried, and now the two footmen could not fail to disguise their amusement.

Rosalind had heard enough, and she rose to her feet, intent on retreating to her bedroom, angry at having been the subject of such idle gossip on the part of her mother's friends.

“You always take other people’s side against me. You make me out to be at the center of a scandal. But it wasn’t like that. I was invited to the exhibition by Lord Cuthbert. He and Elizabeth are courting. Sebastian, the Earl of Southbourne, was there. He appreciates art as I do. He invited me to see the other paintings. I accepted. Then we went to Gunter’s for ices,” Rosalind replied, fixing her parents with a defiant gaze.

Her mother let out a wail.

“Gunter’s? Oh, for ices? Oh, you didn’t, Rosalind. You’re betrothed to Richard. What’s he going to say when he finds out?” she exclaimed, but Rosalind was past caring.

“He can say what he likes for all I care. I don’t want anything to do with him or with you,” she said, and turning on her heels, she marched out of the dining room, slamming the door behind her.

On the stairs, she paused, catching her breath, and knowing she would regret what she had just said. But in the heat of the

moment, she had told the truth about how she felt and was angry at the way everything she might want or not want was supposed for her.

“Why can’t they just let me be happy?” she asked herself, for on Sebastian’s arm, in his company, she had been, if only for a few fleeting moments.

When Sebastian awoke, he was still in the artist’s studio at the top of the house by the sea, caught up in the dream of Rosalind, in whose arms he had spent the night.

But opening his eyes, he found himself in the gloom of his bedroom, a thin shaft of light coming through a gap in the curtain, and the true memory of the previous night now returned to him. His stomach still had a dull ache to it, and sitting up in bed, he poured himself a drink from a jug of water on his bedside.

“What a dream, but what a waking reality,” he thought to himself.

A dream was like a painting. One could gaze at it, inhabit it, even, but there always came a point when it was torn away, snatched by the necessity of a return to the world as it was, rather than what it might be.

But as he got up, Sebastian’s mind lingered on his dream of Rosalind in the nude. She was the subject of his painting, but not only by imagination. In his dream, she had been there in front of him, allowing him to paint her as she truly was.

“And insisting on my being the same,” he said to himself, smiling, as he gazed at his naked form in the mirror.

After getting dressed, Sebastian’s mind turned to more practical matters, and he thought back to the events of the evening before. His mind was lucid now, sleep having eased the turmoil, and he thought again about the painting, and the strange circumstances of its having been altered.

“I know I didn’t change it. Just like I know I didn’t mislay the cigar case,” he told himself, adamant in his own recollection, even as events surrounding it told a different story.

As he went down to breakfast, his mind was made up. He would resist his madness with all his might, and would not be turned into an invalid, despite what both his stepmother and uncle might think. He found them both in the dining room eating toast and marmalade, and as he entered, they looked up at him with concerned expressions.

“How did you sleep?” Lady Soutbourne asked.

“Very soundly, thank you,” Sebastian replied.

He noticed his uncle had taken the chair once occupied by Sebastian’s father. After his death, Sebastian had made a point of not sitting there, not wishing to think of himself as having replaced his father or cast his memory aside.

“That’s something, then. And I’m sure the doctor’s remedy will help, too. Madness can’t be stopped, but its symptoms can be alleviated to a certain extent. Those so afflicted need proper understanding. Treatment is only part of the solution,” Sebastian’s uncle said.

He spoke with what seemed to be authority, even as Sebastian was certain he knew nothing of such things. He had absented himself at the moment of Sebastian’s grandfather’s descent into madness, or so Sebastian’s father had told him.

He had done nothing to help his brother in his hour of need. But now he had appeared at Southbourne House as a familiar, and it seemed he was intent on remaining, even as Sebastian had no need of him.

“I don’t see what a few herbs in a tea can do to help me remember the things I might forget,” Sebastian replied, sitting down and helping himself to toast and jam.

“Oh, Sebastian, please, you’ve got to give it a chance. The doctor knows what he’s talking about, I’m sure,” Lady Southbourne said, looking at Sebastian imploringly.

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t try it. But I doubt it’ll help. If I’m going to go mad, won’t I do so? Besides, I feel better this morning. I know I didn’t alter the painting, and I know I didn’t mislay the cigar case,” Sebastian replied.

He spoke with a certainty greater than he felt, but he was not about to give his uncle the satisfaction of declaring him mad or being proved right. His stepmother shook her head sadly.

“Well, if you say so, Sebastian. We’ll go along with it. Perhaps someone altered it. One of the servants, or an outsider. We can’t be too careful,” she replied.

Sebastian shook his head. He knew he was right. He was certain he was right. There was so much he could remember, and to draw a blank at these apparent differences was simply not possible. He was either mad or not.

“Well, it doesn’t matter now. But I won’t be treated like an invalid. I don’t need to be confined to bed or sent away to a sanatorium,” he said, fearing his stepmother and uncle might already have planned to do just that.

He had heard of the late Francis Willis. He was the clergyman turned doctor whose sanatorium treated the king, and he had no intention of being subject to a man like him. Other doctors had suggested similar treatments, but it seemed the doctor his stepmother had called the previous evening was of the opinion something definite now had to be done.

“No one’s talking about that, Sebastian. We just want what’s best for you. No, the meeting this morning with Mr. Gerard, do you feel well enough for it?” Victoria asked.

Sebastian was confused. Reginald Gerard was the land agent for the estate and managed the day-to-day affairs of the earldom on Sebastian’s behalf. They had met the previous month, and there had been no pressing business to attend to. Sebastian did not remember a meeting being arranged, even as he feared another bout of memory loss.

“Reginald? We met last month. There’s no need for a meeting,” Sebastian replied, supposing it was his stepmother who had become confused.

Victoria and Sebastian’s uncle exchanged glances.

“It’s in your diary, Sebastian. We spoke about it last week. He’s coming to discuss the Norfolk holdings. Your father left the matter in such disarray, though we can hardly blame him for that. We need to make a decision on what’s best for the tenants. I’m still in favor of selling, but it’s up to you. I’m sure Mr. Gerard will give us his opinion,” Victoria said.

Sebastian was at a loss, even as he knew the matter of the Norfolk holdings was pressing. The dowry of a distant ancestor had provided a small number of tenements and cottages on the Norfolk coast, and it had been the intention of Sebastian’s father to sell them before the madness seized him.

Sebastian had agreed, but nothing had been done, and when last he had met with the land agent, Mr. Gerard had suggested waiting for more favorable market conditions.

“Property never really loses value, my Lord. It’s better to hold on to it when the need arises,” the land agent had advised, and Sebastian had considered the matter settled.

“But I don’t remember arranging such a meeting,” Sebastian said.

“He’s coming this morning at eleven O’clock. It was in my diary. I’m sure it’s in yours, too, Sebastian,” she said.

Sebastian rose from the table, not wanting to show his fear at having forgotten something so important, even as he felt certain he had not done so.

“If you’ll excuse me,” he said, retreating from the dining room and hurrying towards his study.

He was convinced his stepmother was wrong. There was no meeting he had forgotten, no task lying ahead to remember. The diary lay on his desk, opened at that day. Sebastian resented its presence. It was a constant reminder there were things he could not remember. Now, tentatively, he looked down at the open page.

“Eleven o’clock, Reginald Gerard. Norfolk,” he read, gasping as he did so.

There were the words. Proof of his having previously known something of what they reminded him of. But try as he might, Sebastian could not remember writing them, even as he knew them to be his own. The script was a little shaky, but the exaggeration of the “g” was his own, as was the length and flick on the bottom of the “f.”

“I wrote it, but I can’t remember,” he exclaimed, and as he stared down at the page, tears rolled down his cheeks.

Chapter 22

“Concentrate, Rosalind. It’s far easier to make a stitch than undo one,” Rosalind’s mother said, noticing as Rosalind pulled through a thread on her embroidery ring, missing the intended line of the pattern.

The duchess had adopted a new strategy in her attempts to bring Rosalind back into what she considered a respectable occupation of her time. There was to be no more “lurking” as her mother put it, and Rosalind was now forbidden from shutting herself away in her bedroom during the day. A strict routine had been devised, and Rosalind was to spend most of her day in her mother’s company, observed and criticized over every movement.

“I’m trying, mother,” she replied, for Rosalind had never possessed of a natural talent for needlework.

“A lady should know how to embroider. Didn’t you listen to anything Miss Burns tried to teach you?” the duchess exclaimed, shaking her head.

Miss Burns had been Rosalind's governess. She was a strict woman, devoid of humor, and against whom Rosalind had rebelled whenever the opportunity had arisen. A refusal to learn needlework had been one of the ways she had done so, and now she was finding it impossible to follow the pattern her mother had provided her with.

"I prefer to paint, mother," Rosalind said.

The clock on the mantelpiece seemed to be going at half its normal speed, the morning dragging on interminably. The drawing room was stifling, and Rosalind wished she was anywhere but in her mother's company.

"Yes, well, you won't be doing anymore of that, Rosalind. This has all gone far enough. I blame myself, of course. I thought I was encouraging you when you were younger. I even told your father that a young lady should paint a little. It's good for her. Little did I know what it would lead to," she replied, tutting and shaking her head.

Rosalind sighed. Her mother's mind was made up, even as Rosalind had no intention of stopping her nighttime activities. If her mother discovered the paintings hidden beneath her bed, she would be horrified, especially given the subject matter.

But Rosalind had no choice but to endure her mother's criticisms, and as the morning dragged on, her thoughts turned to Sebastian. She did not know when she would see him again or if her mother had anything to do with it. The thought brought with it a cloud of melancholy.

"Perhaps we could take our embroidery out into the garden, mother," Rosalind said, as the sun shone on her through the morning room window, causing her considerable discomfort in her thick skirts and petticoats.

Her mother looked up from her embroidery, as the clock struck midday.

"We're expecting the Duke of Northridge any moment," she said, and Rosalind's heart sank.

She wondered when the duke would make an appearance. Would he be angry with her for the events at Somerset House, or would he simply pretend nothing had happened, and carry on as before? It was not long before the butler announced his arrival.

Setting aside her embroidery, Rosalind rose to her feet, meeting the duke's gaze as he entered the room, and bobbing into a short curtsy.

“Ah, Rosalind, I see your mother's instilled some discipline in you,” he said, and Rosalind blushed, angry at how he presumed to speak to her.

There was no gladness expressed at seeing her well, no attempt to flatter or compliment her. It was as though he was visiting his stables to see a prized mare, and now Rosalind's mother thanked him for coming.

“It's very good of you, your Grace, and I hope we can overlook the matter I mentioned in my letter of yesterday,” she said.

The duke nodded.

“Yes. Well, it’s not going to happen again,” he said, still with his eyes fixed on Rosalind, who remained tight-lipped.

There was nothing she could say, nothing she could do to defend or appease. In the eyes of her mother and the duke, Rosalind was lucky to receive forgiveness, even as she felt not the slightest guilt in what she had done. It was the Duke of Northridge who stood before her, expectant of her absolute loyalty and devotion.

But in her mind, in her heart, in her very being, it was the Earl of Southbourne she desired, and despite the duke’s arrogance, it gave Rosalind a certain satisfaction to think she could resist him in this way.

“It’s certainly not, your Grace. And how kind of you to suggest a picnic by the riverbanks. The Thames can be so

delightful when one goes upstream a little,” the duchess replied.

“Yes, to Richmond, and its riparian delights,” the duke said, beckoning to Rosalind to follow him,

Had she not known better, Rosalind would have groaned at the thought of enjoying “riparian delights” in the company of the duke. She did not want to go on a picnic, even as she knew she would have no choice but to do so. If this was an attempt by Richard to outdo Sebastian, it would not work, and as her mother gushed at the prospect of their picnic, Rosalind could only force a reluctant smile to her face.

“Won’t it wonderful, Rosalind? We must get you a parasol. Come along, you can leave immediately. There’s no need to delay,” the duchess said, taking Rosalind by the arm and leading her out of the morning room.

The cool marble of the hallway provided respite from the stifling atmosphere of the drawing room, but such relief was short-lived, as it was not long before Rosalind found herself in the stifling confines of the duke’s carriage, where the company

was just as overbearing as the heat of her mother's morning room.

“Now, as I said to your mother, we'll make no mention of the incident at Somerset House. I don't know what you were thinking of, Rosalind, but you were a fool to allow that man to lead you so astray. The scandal it could've caused...it doesn't bear thinking about,” he said, shaking his head.

Rosalind remained silent. There was no point in protesting against his words. In the duke's eyes, he was showing magnanimity in his forgiveness, even as Rosalind did not believe there was anything to forgive.

“If only you knew the truth,” she thought to herself, her thoughts returning to the paintings, and the imagination of herself and Sebastian caught up in their passionate depictions.

“I want you to promise me, Rosalind. No more dalliances with the madman. He's dangerous,” Sebastian said.

But Rosalind shook her head. There was nothing dangerous about Sebastian, and it was nonsense to suggest otherwise. Richard was only jealous, and like her mother, it seemed he had every intention of controlling her every move, to prevent this apparent danger taking hold.

But forbidden fruit was always the most enticing, and the more Sebastian was denounced, the more her desire for him grew.

“He’s not dangerous,” she replied, folding her arms and fixing Richard with a defiant gaze.

“I say he is, Rosalind, and I’ll remind you to whom you’re speaking. Don’t forget what I’ve done for you,” he snarled, leaning forward and raising his finger to her.

“I know what you’ve done,” Rosalind replied, turning away from him, and looking out of the carriage window.

They had left the city behind now and were driving through pleasant parkland by the river, following a track with the river on their left. Weeping willows swept down from the banks, and meadows of wildflowers stretched out on their right, their sweet scent drifting on the breeze. It would have been idyllic, had it not been for the company, and when Richard called a halt, Rosalind knew the rest of the day would be an endurance, rather than a pleasure.

“We’ll picnic here, I think,” he said, directing the carriage driver to place the picnic baskets by the riverside, where a meandering flow entered a deep, clear pool.

It was idyllic, but in Richard’s company, Rosalind could only think of Sebastian, imagining herself in his company, alone by the river, picnicking in the sunshine.

“It’s very beautiful here,” Rosalind said, sitting on the rug the carriage driver had set out for them, as Richard sat by her side.

The picnic basket contained many delights: cold meats, cheeses, a raised game pie, a loaf of bread and a pat of butter, along with sugared fruits, jam tarts, and dainty biscuits. There was wine, too, and Richard proposed a toast, raising his glass

to Rosalind, who could summon little enthusiasm for its subject.

“To our future happiness: marriage, an heir, and all it brings,” he said, raising his glass to Rosalind’s and nodding to her, even as the prospect filled her with dread.

In his company, Rosalind felt nothing of the joy she felt in Sebastian’s presence. There was no passion, no spark, even as it seemed he was trying his best to seduce her. But Richard could not compete with Sebastian, and Rosalind could only feel sad at the thought of their being such opposites, even as they were destined to marry.

“Yes. To future happiness,” she replied, still hoping beyond hope her parents might see sense, or Richard lose interest.

As the afternoon progressed, Rosalind became sleepy, and while Richard stripped off his shirt and swam, she lay down on the rug and closed her eyes. Outside, the sun was pleasant, away from the stifling atmosphere of her mother’s drawing room, and Rosalind yawned, almost falling asleep, as her mind drifted back to the afternoon in Sebastian’s company at Somerset House.

She pictured him with the portraits behind, his smiling face, that mischievous look. In stepping beyond the velvet curtain, they had known they were doing something wrong, but somehow it had not seemed to matter. In the earl's company, nothing else seemed to matter, and it was only later Rosalind suffered the consequences.

“If only he'd steal me away, then we could be together,” she thought to herself, imagining slipping out into the night, and Sebastian waiting for her with a carriage.

It was not unheard of. There had been the case of Lady Eleanor Fortescue and the groom. They had eloped to Gretna Green and married on the blacksmith's anvil. It had caused a scandal, but the two of them were happy, and the last she had heard of them, they were living in a cottage in the rural north, and very much in love.

“Why shouldn't we do the same?” Rosalind asked herself, even as she knew a hundred reasons why they could not.

She did not even know if Sebastian was in love with her. He was reticent at times, and she had seen the look of fear in his eyes following Lady Helena's humiliating enquiries. Did he fear attachment? Did the possibility of his madness hold him back?

The answer was surely yes, and it pained Rosalind to think of what he denied himself, even as she wanted desperately for him to realize none of it mattered to her. Perhaps she was naïve, or even foolish, she told herself, but love was a form of madness. It made the thought of the earl's on madness entirely reasonable.

“Well, I think we should be getting back now, Rosalind. I've got some business to attend to. Come now, gather your things,” Richard said, and Rosalind was brought back from her daydreaming.

She sat up and looked at him in surprise. Was this it? It was as though he had decided to schedule a moment of enjoyment into his routine, just as one would a meeting or social call.

There had been little attempt on Richard's part at conversation, and Rosalind could only feel a sense of disappointment at his having not even made the slightest attempt at sharing something of himself, or their plans with her.

"Oh, very well," she said, as the carriage driver now hurried to collect the remnants of the picnic.

Richard pulled off his shirt behind a tree, and Rosalind caught sight of his naked torso, as he changed into dry clothes. But the sight brought with it none of the allure of a nude. Rosalind could not imagine Richard as the subject of one of the paintings.

There was nothing seductive in the image, only the body of an ageing man, holding nothing by way of sensuousness or desire. Rosalind sighed, turning away, and following the carriage driver across the meadow.

"Well, Rosalind, did you enjoy that?" Richard asked, as though suggesting he had done his duty and was now absolved of further obligation until his schedule suggested otherwise.

“Yes, it was very pleasant,” Rosalind replied, but in her mind, she could think only of Sebastian, and how much more pleasant it would have been had he been there instead.

Chapter 23

Sebastian glanced up at the clock on the mantelpiece in his study. It was a minute past eleven. But the land agent, Mr. Gerard, was always on time. He was scrupulous about it, and it seemed odd to Sebastian to think of him arriving late. For a moment, he wondered if he had been right about the meeting, even as he glanced down at the open diary on his lap, where the appointment was written in his, albeit shaky, hand.

“Perhaps he’s forgotten, too. People do forget things. It’s perfectly normal,” Sebastian reminded himself.

He had been in a state of anxiety all morning, wondering what else he would discover he had forgotten, even as his stepmother had promised him there was nothing expected of him in the coming week. But try as he might, Sebastian could not rid himself of the dreadful fear of what was to come.

His memory would worsen, losing his faculties, and the descent into physical pain. His stomach still had a slight ache to it, and the coffee the butler had brought him was doing little to calm his fears.

“Where is he?” Sebastian thought to himself.

But as the clock on the mantelpiece passed the quarter hour, a knock came at the door, and Langton announced the arrival of the land agent, who now appeared, looking somewhat flustered.

“My Lord, forgive me tardiness. I wasn’t expecting us to meet today. I didn’t think it was necessary until next month,” he said, his faced red, as he caught his breath.

Sebastian rose to his feet, confused as to the land agent’s words.

“That was my feeling on the matter, too,” Sebastian replied, shaking Mr. Gerard’s hand.

The land agent looked at him in surprise.

“But I received your note yesterday, my Lord. In the morning. You wanted to see me today, to discuss the Norfolk holdings. I was under the impression we’d wait until next month to discuss them. There’s no urgency in the matter,” he said.

Sebastian was taken aback. He had not sent a note to the land agent. He was certain of it.

“When did you receive the note?” he asked, and Mr. Gerard took out a piece of paper from a small ledger he was carrying.

The writing was that of Sebastian, though with the same shaky hand as had shown in his diary. It was a brief missive, dated the previous day, instructing the land agent to visit him at eleven o’clock the following day, that day.

“Around noon, my Lord. I didn’t reply, because I’m afraid I was rather too busy. I had a meeting of the privy council this morning. I act as land agent to the Regent for certain holdings around Windsor. It had to take precedent,” he said, but Sebastian was not listening. His attentions turned to the timing of the note.

He could not have sent it. Yesterday morning, and for the rest of the day, he had been at Somerset House in the company of Rosalind, John, and Elizabeth. He had not told his stepmother he was going out, but he knew for a fact he had not been at Southbourne House when it was claimed the note was written. He was certain of it, and now he began to question so much else, too.

“And you’re certain of the time, Mr. Gerard,” he replied.

The land agent looked slightly annoyed at this question and nodded.

“Yes, my Lord. Now, what is it you want to discuss with me?” he asked, but Sebastian shook his head.

“I didn’t want to discuss anything with you, Mr. Gerard. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to go out myself. We’ll meet as planned next month. Don’t do anything about the Norfolk holdings. I haven’t decided if I’ll sell them. Good day to you, sir,” Sebastian said, holding out his hand to the land agent, who now looked thoroughly confused.

“Good day, my Lord.” he said, as Sebastian hurried out of the room.

He knew he was right. He could not possibly have sent the note to the land agent, and if the fact could be disproved, perhaps, so too, could the other things he had been so convinced of. Without bothering to tell his stepmother or uncle where he was going, he snatched up his outdoor coat and hat, and hurried out of the house. He took a carriage, telling the driver to make all haste to the home of Lord Cuthbert, whom he found busy about his correspondence.

“To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?” John asked, rising to greet Sebastian, who had insisted on following his friend’s butler into the study.

“I’m not mad,” Sebastian said, and John laughed.

“No, you’re not. Haven’t I been telling you that all along?” he asked, and Sebastian smiled.

“No. I can’t be,” he said, and he recounted the story of the lad agent and the alteration of the diary.

“It was a forgery. I know it was. I couldn’t have written the note. I wasn’t there. I was with you...with Rosalind,” Sebastian said, thinking back to the time he had shared with her at Somerset House.

When the note was supposedly written, the two of them were enjoying the intimacies of the nudes.

“But who sent it? Can’t you ask the butler?” John said, but Sebastian shook his head.

“No, we leave all the correspondence on the hallway table. A boy takes it. There’d be no way of telling who sent what,” Sebastian replied.

The thought was weighing heavily on him. It was one thing to believe himself mad, but quite another to think of someone attempting to make him believe it. He could not imagine who would sink so low, or what they would stand to gain from it? Was it one of the servants?

They had all seen the way the madness had seized Sebastian’s father, but they could stand to gain nothing from it, even as Sebastian’s thoughts turned to another dreadful possibility.

“Then perhaps...the butler? A disgruntled maid? Have you gotten rid of any of the servants lately? Or...you don’t think... your stepmother?” John said, raising his eyebrows.

It was not a thought Sebastian wished to entertain. His stepmother had always been good to him, after a fashion. They had not always seen eye to eye, but there had been a tolerance between them, one Sebastian did not want to think had been betrayed.

“I...I don’t know,” Sebastian replied, and now he explained the strange circumstances of his uncle’s arrival.

John listened, narrowing his eyes, and when Sebastian had finished his explanation, he shook his head.

“You can’t trust him, can you? Your father didn’t. It’s strange to think of him returning so suddenly, and just when all this starts to happen. Perhaps your stepmother doesn’t know anything about it, either. It would be an easy enough thing for him to do. Small signs, little changes, just enough to make you think something was wrong,” John said, and Sebastian nodded.

It was a terrible thought, but not beyond the realm of possibility, and Sebastian was not so naïve as to think his uncle’s presence was for purely altruistic intentions. But as for this, it was too terrible to comprehend, and Sebastian could not bear to believe it, even as the evidence suggested otherwise.

“You’re right, but I can’t accuse him, can I? Perhaps I have forgotten things, the other things, I mean. It’s possible, though. Oh, I don’t know. But I know for certain I couldn’t have written that note, and if I couldn’t have written the note, perhaps I didn’t alter the painting, or lose the cigar case, or forget the other things. Perhaps I’m not mad,” he said, and John laughed.

“I know you’re not. And because you’re not, I want you to think seriously about Rosalind. Elizabeth tells me she’s desperately unhappy. You can see it in her eyes. She doesn’t want to marry the Duke of Northridge. But when she’s with you, it’s as though something changes. The sadness grows less, replaced by joy,” he said.

The thought had been on Sebastian’s mind, too. If he was not seized by madness, and in his heart, he did not believe himself to be, then the possibility of romance, of thinking beyond the inevitable, was within his grasp.

“But what choice does she have?” Sebastian asked, for it seemed certain the Duke and Duchess of Lonsdale would

favor Richard, whatever Sebastian's own circumstance might be.

“Make the choice yourself, Sebastian. No longer the mad earl, but the prospective son-in-law. You and Rosalind, you're made for one another. Any fool can see that. But her parents are fixated on the idea of her marrying that awful man. Change their mind, before it's too late,” John replied.

Apart from worrying over his apparent madness, Sebastian had thought of little else but Rosalind. He had feared Lady Helena's words, and the rumors of the ton, would serve only to make her wary of him, even as it appeared Rosalind was more than capable of deciding for herself with whom she wished to associate.

Their time at Somerset House, and at Gunter's, had been a delight, and Sebastian had never felt such strength of feeling for any woman before. He was falling in love with her, but thoughts of what was to come had held him back, even as it seemed a glimmer of hope had now appeared.

“You're right. I do have feelings for her. Very strong feelings. But, I don't know... it wouldn't work. Not with him breathing

down her neck,” Sebastian said, but his friend shook his head.

“It’s not a certainty, Sebastian. There’s still time. Seize the opportunity at the midsummer soiree at Thornbury House. She’ll be there, and so will Elizabeth. I’m going to ask her to marry me,” John said, and Sebastian stared at his friend in astonishment.

He knew John’s feelings for Elizabeth had developed rapidly, and there was no doubting her charm or their shared pleasure in one another’s company. But Sebastian was surprised at the thought of his friend’s intention to ask her to marry him.

“Really? Have you thought this through?” he asked, and John laughed.

“Unlike you, Sebastian, I don’t overthink these things. I’ve fallen in love with her. And I’m quite certain she’s fallen in love with me. She’s certainly shown it,” he said, raising his eyebrows and grinning.

Sebastian was happy for his friend, but the intention of his engagement brought with it a sense of his own failings. John was right, he did overthink things, and he had spent so much time convincing himself of all the reasons why he should not seek a courtship with Rosalind, he was almost persuaded of it.

“I’m very happy for you, John,” he said, and his friend smiled.

“Anyway, enough about such things. I’ve been thinking. Perhaps the two of us should get out of London for a few days? We could go to Norfolk, to your holdings there, or to Bath, perhaps. What do you say?” he asked.

Sebastian told him he would think about it, but he had been toying with the idea himself. London could feel overbearing, even as Sebastian wanted to remain close to Rosalind. But his own inaction was frustrating, and given the realization of what was happening to him, of the possibility someone was trying to make him believe he was going mad, the thought of leaving the capital was attractive.

“It might prove I’m not forgetting anything,” Sebastian said to himself as he made his way home that afternoon.

Seeing John had done him good, and he returned to Southbourne House with a clear head, convinced the things he had thought himself to have forgotten were illusions, even as others might say differently.

As he arrived home, he found his stepmother and uncle sitting in the garden, talking in hushed voices. At his appearance on the steps, they both looked up, glancing at once another, as Sebastian approached.

“Oh, there you are, Sebastian. We thought you had disappeared,” Lady Southbourne said, a smile coming over her face.

“No... I...went to see John,” Sebastian replied, and his stepmother nodded.

“Why don’t you go and rest, Sebastian? You know what the doctor said,” she replied, but Sebastian shook his head.

“No. I think I’ll go upstairs and paint. John was suggesting the two of us get out of London for a while. Maybe go to Norfolk or Bath. Oh, by the way, Mr. Gerard knew nothing about the meeting, until he received my note, but I couldn’t have written the note. I wasn’t here to do so,” Sebastian said.

His stepmother looked at him in surprise, and his uncle cleared his throat, caught out, it seemed, by Sebastian’s words.

“Really? He must’ve been confused. These land agents deal with so many properties,” he said, but Sebastian shook his head.

“I know what he said, uncle,” he replied, and without waiting for a response, he turned and walked back across the garden.

It was a small, but important, victory. Sebastian had no evidence of his uncle's involvement with the tampered diary, the altered painting, or missing cigar case. But in relaying the strange occurrence of his meeting with Mr. Gerard, Sebastian had sent a warning to his uncle or whoever might be trying to deceive him.

"I'm not mad," he told himself, as he made his way upstairs.

It was his intention to paint and alter Rosalind's image to that he saw in his mind's eyes. Her pretty face, her smile, the depth of her eyes.

"I'll paint her just as she is, and this time, no one will alter it," he said to himself.

In his studio, he closed the door, drawing the bolt across. He did not want to be disturbed, and looking around, he was satisfied nothing about the studio had changed. But going to the drawer where he kept his paint pots, intending to mix his palette with the colors for Rosalind's eyes, he let out a cry.

There, in the draw, staring up at him, was the cigar case. He knew he had not put it there, for he had opened the drawer several times since the disappearance and knew it had not been there.

“I’m not mad,” he told himself, repeating the words, as he took out the cigar case and held up to his face, examining it in minute detail.

It was just a cigar case, but to Sebastian, it represented something more. Finding his sanity, and the conviction he was not mad, nor was he becoming so.

Chapter 24

“It was so good of Richard to invite you to picnic with him by the Thames. Riparian delights, how wonderful,” Rosalind’s mother said, as they drove in their carriage towards Thornbury House.

The duchess had talked of little else but Rosalind’s apparent fortune at being tossed a bone in the form of a picnic. She took it as a sign the two of them would soon be betrothed and had already begun discussing plans for the wedding at length.

Rosalind had not contradicted her mother, even as her experience of the picnic had only served to strengthen her resolve against marrying the Duke of Northridge, whose behavior on the riverbanks had only served to prove what Rosalind had already known.

His interest in her was secondary to his interest in the necessity of marriage for a man of his position. She was the chosen one, and feelings certainly not love played no part.

“Yes. Very riparian,” Rosalind replied.

Her mother swooned.

“Oh, to be young again, to feel the desire of a man,” she exclaimed,

Rosalind made a face. Her mother did not normally talk in such terms, and she was only glad her father was confined to an armchair by his gout that evening, and not present to hear it.

“Mother, please,” Rosalind said, and her mother laughed.

“Oh, Rosalind, aren’t I allowed to feel happy on my daughter’s behalf? I’m so glad you’ve seen the sense in marrying the

Duke of Northridge. Didn't I tell you he was the perfect match for you?" she said.

"Repeatedly, mother," Rosalind replied.

She had given up arguing with her mother over who she was going to marry and who she was not. But the picnic had only served to strengthen her resolve against marrying the Duke of Northridge, even if it had also served to increase her sorrow over the situation with Sebastian. She could not marry him.

Not while he held back from courtship because of his own fears surrounding the madness he was so convinced of. It was an impossible situation, one Rosalind could only despair of.

"And so he is. The Duchess of Northridge...to think of it," Rosalind's mother exclaimed, looking out of the window with a wistful look in her eyes.

Rosalind groaned. But her mother did not hear her. She was too caught up in thoughts of marriage and title, and the talk centered around little else as they made the journey to Thornbury House for the midsummer s

oiree. They had reached the point in the season where the balls, dinners, picnics, and soirees all merged into one. There was little to differentiate between them. It was the same people, wearing the same dresses, having the same conversations, only against minimally different backdrops.

It was dull, and Rosalind would far rather have preferred to be painting, then preparing to endure another evening of forced frivolity. The only hope she held was to see Sebastian, even as she knew her mother would not approve. She had begun another painting of him, imagining him in the nude, sitting with his back to her, glancing over his shoulder.

But it was not his naked form she found most alluring, but his eyes. The eyes were far more attractive than the hidden parts of the body. The eyes were a window to the soul, and a single look could be enough to break or melt a heart.

“I’ve never liked Thornbury House,” Rosalind said, glancing out of the window, as the carriage approached what was effectively a townhouse, made to look like a country dwelling.

Everything was in miniature, the house itself being built narrow and tall, but detached, and surrounded by gardens and a high wall. Lady Thornbury was a woman with old money and new ambitions.

She liked to make herself out to be a bridge between the aristocracy and the emerging monied classes, something much of the ton found distasteful, even as they were more than willing to drink her wine, and revel in her entertainments. The forecourt was busy, and as Rosalind and her mother climbed down from the carriage, a familiar voice called out to them.

“Rosalind, your Grace, I’ve got the most wonderful news. I’m to be married,” Elizabeth exclaimed, hurrying over, as Rosalind’s mother let out a cry of delight.

“Oh, how wonderful, Elizabeth. Your parents must be so pleased,” Rosalind’s mother exclaimed.

Rosalind was delighted for Elizabeth, though somewhat surprised, too. She and John hardly knew one another, and to be betrothed so quickly was remarkable. But the smile on Elizabeth's face said it all. She was happy, and Rosalind could not begrudge her that.

"I know how much he loves you, and you love him," Rosalind said, taking Elizabeth's arm, as the two of them walked up the steps into the house.

The doors opened into a large hallway, but there was no ballroom at Thornbury House. Rather, the guests were encouraged to mingle with one another in the lower rooms, where liveried footmen circulated with the trays of drinks and refreshments. The doors into the garden were open, too.

But had the weather been inclement, the whole thing would surely have been a disaster. Fortunately, the sun was shining, and the gardens bathed in a pleasant, golden evening light. They were greeted by their host; the pearl clad Lady Thornbury, who congratulated Elizabeth on her betrothal, the news having spread rapidly.

“It’s always the greatest of pleasures to hear of young love blossoming,” she exclaimed.

She herself had lost her husband some years previously, his portrait looking down at them imperiously from the top of the staircase. Elizabeth thanked Lady Thornbury for her kind words, and she and Rosalind made their way into the drawing room, where the furniture had been cleared back to make space for dancing.

Rosalind was hoping to avoid the Duke of Northridge, and she looked around expectantly for any sign of Sebastian. After the upset with Lady Helena, she wanted to assure him nothing had changed between them. She loved him, and she was not about to give up the possibility of their sharing something more, as impossible as it seemed.

“There he is,” Elizabeth whispered, nodding towards the hallway.

Sebastian was standing there with his stepmother, and a man whom Rosalind did not recognize. There was a vague

similarity between the two men, and she wondered if perhaps they were related, even as Sebastian had made no mention of any relatives other than his stepmother. As he turned, she caught his eye. He looked embarrassed, even as their gaze lingered, and she wondered what he was thinking, and how he was feeling.

“He looks different,” Rosalind said, as Sebastian turned away, following his stepmother into the room across the hallway.

She did not know what to think, or what to do. Should she approach him? Was he avoiding her through embarrassment?

“Perhaps he’s not feeling well. John said he’d been suffering stomach pains, but there was something else, too. Something about a letter, and proving he wasn’t mad. I think it’s terrible. The uncertainty of it all,” Elizabeth replied.

Rosalind felt suddenly upset, tears rising in her eyes. She wanted to help Sebastian, not be pushed away. Why would he not tell her these things? Did he not trust her?

“I think I’ll go and take the air outside, Elizabeth. You don’t need to come with me,” Rosalind said, and pulling a handkerchief out from her sleeve, she held it to her face, hurrying off through the crowded drawing room and into the garden, not wanting Elizabeth to see how upset she was.

Once outside, she paused, catching her breath and sighing. She felt foolish for her outburst, but it all seemed so unfair. The whispered rumors about Sebastian, his own belief in what was happening, and then there was the Duke of Northridge, too. She did not want to feel jealous of Elizabeth, but now she was happily engaged, in love with a good man, and with a bright future ahead, Rosalind could not help but compare herself.

She had none of those things, even as she desired them. The doors at the back of the house gave way to a narrow terrace, with steps leading down to a garden below, where shrubbery lined walkways extended on either side, with a lawn at the center. The flower beds were in the flush of midsummer colors, and a pleasant scent hung in the air.

No one else was about, and Rosalind made her way down to the lawn, following one of the paths, and pausing at the entrance to what appeared to be a maze, cut into the shrubbery. She wanted to be alone, and she took the path through an

archway in the shrubbery, following it in a zigzag, and finding herself in the midst of the maze.

“At least Richard won’t find me here,” she thought to herself, imagining she might hide there for the rest of the evening.

She followed the path a little further, not wanting to get too lost, but enjoying the sensation of finding her way. She had brushed away her tears, feeling saddened by her jealous outburst. It was not Elizabeth’s fault she had found happiness, and to upset herself over it was folly, even as Rosalind did not fully understand Sebastian’s behavior. She wanted to talk to him, but to do so would be to risk the wrath of her mother and the Duke of Northridge.

“I wish he was here now,” she said to herself, imagining the two of them walking together in the maze, walking hand in hand, with no one to see them...

There had been no romance on the banks of the river, no snatched kiss, or heat of passion. Richard was dull, and not possessed of a single romantic inclination. In Sebastian, Rosalind had caught a glimpse of what a lover might be, of

what it would be like to be part of one of the paintings she so admired, to feel loved and desired.

To be wanted. A shiver ran through her, and she closed her eyes, imagining herself in Sebastian's arms, the two of them lost in the maze together.

"He forgot an appointment with the land agent. It was in his diary, and he forgot it. He claimed differently, of course," a voice through the shrubbery said.

Rosalind opened her eyes, her heart skipping a beat, as she realized she was again overhearing a conversation involving Sebastian's stepmother.

"When I saw him at Gunter's, I was very concerned, Victoria. I don't think he knows what's going to happen to him, and fancy accusing his uncle in such a way," the voice of Lady Helena replied.

They were on the far side of the shrubbery, walking along the edge of the lawn, and Rosalind followed, hoping the foliage would be enough to keep her hidden as she listened. Her heart was beating fast, and she strained her ears to hear Sebastian's stepmother's response.

“Well, he didn't accuse him as such, but the implication was there. He suspects something, but it's all nonsense, of course. It's him that's going mad. And perhaps these are the symptoms we have to live with, as sad as that might be to accept,” Lady Soutbourne replied.

Rosalind was astonished, and now she thought back to Elizabeth's words about the letter John had mentioned to her. Something had happened to Sebastian. A new development in this tale of twists and turns, and as she reached the corner of the shrubbery, where the path of the maze veered left, she heard Lady Helena's parting shot.

“He's not your responsibility, Victoria. You don't owe him anything. If he goes mad. So be it. You're more than capable of managing things without him. Aren't you?” she said.

Their voices now disappeared along the path, and Rosalind shook her head, terrified as to what she had just heard. Was it all a conspiracy? It sounded very much like one, and Rosalind knew she had to say something to warn Sebastian of the impending danger, even as she wondered if he had not realized it for himself.

Retracing her steps through the maze, she emerged cautiously onto the lawn, glancing along the path to where Lady Southbourne and Lady Helena were talking by a large statue of a cherub holding a bow and arrow. She returned to the house, hastening inside, and catching sight of Elizabeth and John by the refreshment table, hurrying over to them, as they both looked up at her and smiled.

“Have you seen Sebastian?” she asked, but they shook their heads.

“He’s in a funny mood tonight. He’s brooding over something. But he won’t tell me what it is,” John said, shrugging his shoulders.

“Are you all right, Rosalind? You seemed upset before,” Elizabeth said, and Rosalind forced a smile to her face.

“I just needed some air. It’s such a stifling house. Everyone’s so confined. I much prefer a ballroom for an evening soiree, don’t you?” she said, glancing around her, trying to catch a glimpse of Sebastian, who was nowhere to be seen.

She feared being caught by her mother or the Duke of Northridge, and now she retreated to the powder room, mulling over what she had heard, and wondering if her suspicions could have any grounds to them, even as she felt certain something wicked was occurring. It would not be beyond the realm of possibility to invent a madness, to create one in the mind of another, to make them believe they were mad, when in fact.

“He’s not,” Rosalind told herself, as now she searched for Sebastian, determined to tell him the truth, even as others were determined to keep it from him.

Chapter 25

Sebastian had not meant to avoid Rosalind, though it was admittedly easier to do so. He did not know what to say to her, his own confusions clouding his judgement. He had been brooding on the discovery of the cigar case and on the certainty of his not having sent the note to the land agent. It was all so confusing, even as it made perfect sense if one accepted the possibility of there being a conspiracy against him.

“But why? Why would they want me to be mad? They...no, him...” he told himself, knowing his uncle’s arrival could not be mere coincidence.

He had no proof, and yet he knew for certain he was not going mad, not in the matters pertaining to those things he remembered without doubt. But to accuse his uncle openly would be foolish. He would only say this was yet another symptom of Sebastian’s madness and use it against him.

“I can’t be certain. But I am,” Sebastian told himself, as now he took refuge upstairs, away from the other guests, and in a

part of the house he did not think he was supposed to be in.

He had made his way up the back stairs, finding himself in a narrow corridor presumably used by the servants, all of whom were busy serving drinks downstairs. A small alcove with a window seat, looking out over the gardens, now provided Sebastian with a refuge, and he sat down with a sigh, shaking his head as he wondered what to do next.

“Rosalind must think I’m a terrible man,” he thought to himself.

He had seen her briefly on his arrival, but he had held back from talking to her, knowing she was under the watchful eye of her mother and the Duke of Northridge. So many barriers were placed between them, but the apparent fact of his madness was no longer one. At least, that was how it seemed.

“I feel just as I always did, but I was made to think...oh, it’s too awful,” he told himself, for the idea of a conspiracy against him was too dreadful to comprehend.

He trusted his stepmother. She had been good to his father, and Sebastian knew how difficult it had been for her in the long months of his final illness. She had been stalwart in her dedication, often speaking of duty and the necessity of sacrifice. Sebastian respected her for that, even as their finding themselves thrown together in the aftermath of Sebastian's father's death had not been easy. But the arrival of Sebastian's uncle was another matter.

"I don't trust him," Sebastian told himself, and the more he thought about it, the more he felt certain something was wrong.

Glancing out of the window, he could see his stepmother and Lady Helena conversing together by a large statue of a cherub. He wondered what they were talking about. Lady Helena had always been interested in other people's business, and he shuddered at the thought of the humiliation she had inflicted on him at Gunter's.

What had Rosalind really thought? As he watched from the window, a sudden footfall in the corridor caused him to look up, and he imagined he was about to be discovered by a servant.

“I’m just going back down,” he called out, rising to his feet, but to his surprise and pleasure, even as he felt embarrassed to see her. It was Rosalind who appeared in the archway to the alcove.

She looked at him with concern, breathing a sigh of relief, as Sebastian gave a weak smile.

“I’ve been looking everywhere for you,” she said, stepping forward as Sebastian blushed.

“I... I’m sorry... it’s not been... things are difficult,” he stammered, not finding the right words to say, even as she now reached out and touched his face.

A shiver ran through him, and he reached up, cupping her hand in his. Her touch was gentle, comforting, and reassuring. He felt a fool for having so readily withdrawn from her, even as she was surely the only person who truly understood him. There was no judgement in her expression, no question of

rejection. She wanted to help him, and Sebastian knew he had been cruel in pushing her away.

“Then tell me. What’s happened? Why the sudden change? You keep me at a distance, Sebastian, but I don’t want to be. I know it’s impossible, but I feel a sense of possibility, even if it’s only in a dream,” she said.

Sebastian knew just what she meant. It was a dream, but the most pleasant of dreams; the most delightful. He loved her, yet he had kept her at such a distance as to make the possibility seem an impossibility.

“Someone wants to make out I’m mad,” Sebastian said.

He feared these words would make him appear mad. To deny madness, to make out as though others were causing it, was that not madness? But to his surprise and relief, Rosalind nodded.

“I thought as much myself...well, perhaps not entirely. But it didn't make sense. You're not mad. I haven't seen the slightest trace of it in you. It's different for everyone, I suppose. But I don't believe you're mad, Sebastian. I just overheard your stepmother talking to Lady Helena.

I didn't like it. It was as though Lady Helena wanted you to appear mad, to be mad...I had to tell you. And I heard them once before, too, discussing you. I wasn't eavesdropping, but..." she said, her words trailing off, as Sebastian stared at her in astonishment.

“They were talking about me?” he asked.

This only served to add to his suspicions. Was the whole ton part of a conspiracy against him? He had never liked Lady Helena. She was a woman interested in the affairs of others for her own gain. The sort of person who gathered information with the intention of deploying it at the moment of her own advantage.

Was she in league with Sebastiana's uncle? The thought filled Sebastian with dread. He could trust no one, except Rosalind, of course. She nodded.

“Lady Helena seemed very interested in the manifestation of your apparent madness. I didn’t overhear the whole conversation. I was out in the garden, you see. But it was clear they were talking about you, and Lady Helena wanted to know as much as possible,” Rosalind replied.

Sebastian sat down with a heavy sigh. The thought of his being discussed in such a manner angered him. His stepmother had no right to say such things, even if she believed them to be true. But the dilemma of what to do remained. Rosalind sat down next to him, and to Sebastian’s surprise and comfort, she slipped her hand into his. He looked up at her, and she gave a weak smile.

“I’m sorry you’re involved in all of this. You shouldn’t have to be. It’s not fair,” Sebastian said, but Rosalind shook her head.

“I want to be. I am. I don’t believe you’re mad. I know you’re not. But I wish you wouldn’t let it hold you back,” she said.

Sebastian looked at her with a confused expression. What did she mean? He was not holding back. There was nothing to hold back from. She was an impossibility, even as his feelings for her could not be denied.

“From what? I don’t understand,” he said, and she took both his hands in hers.

“You’re forever denying your feelings, Sebastian. I suppose I am, too. I was upset this evening when you didn’t talk to me. I wanted... oh, it’s all so difficult. I don’t want to marry the Duke of Northridge, but if you won’t... if I don’t know... I don’t think you’re mad, and I don’t want you to hold back. Perhaps I’m making a dreadful fool of myself...” she said, stammering, as Sebastian now realized what she meant.

His heart was beating fast, their hands clasped together, and now, hardly thinking of or caring for the consequences, he drew her into his embrace. Their lips met in a passionate kiss, the sort of kiss they had so often seen depicted in the works of art they had gazed at together.

The paintings Sebastian knew Rosalind imagined herself to be a part of. He clasped her in his arms, their foreheads resting

together, their lips parting for just a moment, before their kiss continued, their unchained desires overtaking them in the passion of what they now shared.

“You’re not making a fool of yourself. It’s me who’s been the fool. I held back Rosalind. I didn’t know... I desired you, but it seemed an utter impossibility. Now I know it isn’t, but... what about the rest... what about your mother? The Duke of Northridge?” Sebastian asked, momentarily brought back to his senses by the thought of the consequences of what they had just shared.

Rosalind drew back, gazing into his eyes. She smiled, a smile of such affection, such reassurance, as to make him actually believe what they had shared was a possibility of something more to come. He had held back on his feelings for too long, his true feeling. Even as he had wanted to protect her from the apparent madness engulfing him.

“What about us? What about how we feel?” Rosalind asked, and Sebastian breathed a deep sigh of relief.

He had denied himself for too long. He had held back his feelings, even as they had only grown stronger. To deny such

feelings was an impossibility. He could not do so any longer. He loved Rosalind. He loved her more and more with every passing day. She was like a scene from a painting, now come alive, inviting him into her portrait. They could be lovers, just like those they had seen depicted at Somerset House. Painting their own picture, a picture of love.

“Then nothing else matters,” Sebastian replied, as leaning forward, he kissed her again, the fullness of his desire now given over to her, the truth of his feelings revealed.

As their lips parted, Rosalind smiled. Sebastian brushed the hair back from her cheek, and she rested her forehead against his, glad to be in his arms, and grateful for the reassurance of his embrace. This was what she had imagined; what she had desired. It was just like one of the paintings, but now, Rosalind really was a part of it, no longer in her imagination, but in truth.

The alcove, with curtains held back by plush cords, and the window seat with its cushions, was like a frame itself, and for

just a moment, Rosalind allowed herself to believe the scene could last forever.

“Nothing else matters. No, just the two of us together,” Rosalind whispered.

She had searched everywhere for him, and had almost given up, when a corridor had led to the back stairs and up to the place where she had found Sebastian sitting in the alcove. She had wanted to tell him about what she had overheard in the garden, even as she had feared it might cause more problems for him. But the truth was what mattered, and Rosalind wanted to reassure Sebastian as to what she knew to be true.

“There’s more, too. I’m sorry about earlier. I’ve been terribly distracted. But I discovered something terrible,” Sebastian said, and now he explained to Rosalind what he had discovered about the cigar case and the note to the land agent.

“But you’re right. You couldn’t have written the note. The shaky handwriting is obviously a forgery, isn’t it? Someone’s trying to make you believe these things, but who would do such a thing?” Rosalind asked.

She had her suspicions, even as it seemed wrong to accuse Lady Southbourne of such a thing. There was no proof, and yet it was all so clear to see.

“My uncle, perhaps. He’s here tonight. You might’ve seen him when we arrived. My father never trusted him, nor do I. I haven’t seen him for years. Then all of a sudden, he returns, filled with concern as to my apparent condition. But if I know I’m right about the note, and the cigar case, I could be right about other things, too,” Sebastian said.

Their hands were still clasped together, posed as though in a portrait. Rosalind felt so sorry for him. He had suffered terribly, and for nothing. He was not mad, but in being made out to be so, he was surely feeling what it would be like to experience the affliction of his father and grandfather.

“We all forget things. It’s perfectly normal, and not a sign of madness, not at all. I’m forever forgetting where I’ve put a certain color of paint or a bonnet or shawl. But it doesn’t mean I’m going mad,” Rosalind said.

Sebastian smiled at her.

“You’re the only one who believes me,” he said, but Rosalind shook her head.

“No, lots of people believe you. John and Elizabeth for a start. Isn’t it wonderful they’re getting married?” Rosalind said, as a sudden wistfulness came over her.

The kiss she had shared with Sebastian had been a single moment, snatched in the frame of the alcove. But when they stepped forth, Rosalind knew the world awaiting them would be very different to that of the portrait they had created for themselves. Beyond the frame, the Duke of Northridge was waiting, along with Rosalind’s mother, and the expectations of the ton. She longed to remain at Sebastian’s side, in his arms, in his heart.

“I’m pleased for them. It’s a little rushed, but well, I suppose love doesn’t always keep to our own expectations,” Sebastian said, blushing a little, as Rosalind smiled.

“It surprises us,” she said, and he nodded.

“And are you glad to be surprised?” he asked.

Rosalind leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. She was glad to be surprised by the joy of finding a man she felt an absolute kindred spirit. So often she had heard of marriages of compromise, two people brought together through arrangement, who could never hope to love one another. How often she had feared it would be her lot, too, or assumed no marriage could be an entirely happy one. But in Sebastian, Rosalind had found her soul mate, the man with whom she was meant to fall in love, and having done so, she was not about to let the possibility of happiness escape her.

“I’d be far more so if we no longer had to pretend,” she said.

He held her gaze, their hands clasped together, and now their lips met in a further kiss, prolonged and passionate. Rosalind

was again swept up in her feelings for Sebastian, feelings she no longer held back on. She was Ariadne; he was Dionysus, and she wanted only to be his. She had fallen in love with him, and there was nothing so could do to change it, even if she had wanted to.

“I love...” Sebastian whispered, their lips parting, but as he spoke, a call from along the passageway caused them both to startle.

“Oh, Rosalind, there you are. We’ve been looking everywhere for you,” Elizabeth exclaimed, appearing with John at her side, as Rosalind blushed, and Sebastian turned away. The portrait of their passion now turned to a more formal affair without a hint of scandal attached.

Chapter 26

Rosalind did not sleep well that night. She did not sleep at all. After tossing and turning for several hours, she got up and continued her portrait of Sebastian. Inspiration came easily. She could picture him so vividly, the look in his eyes, the touch of his hand against hers, the feel of his lips, even the scent of his cologne.

All of it gave rise to the perfect image, one she now depicted effortlessly on the canvas. But what use was a portrait, when it was the longing for something real she so desired. Her mother had chastised her for disappearing, though the Duke of Northridge had been delayed, and the dancing had been lackluster at best. Rosalind had been forced only to endure the duke's company for a short while, even as he had promised to call on her in the coming days.

"I can feel a proposal coming, Rosalind," her mother had said, but Rosalind could think only of Sebastian.

The matter of Sebastian's apparent madness had been resolved. There was no madness, only the cruel pretense of

whoever it was who was trying to make it seem as though Sebastian was going mad. Rosalind suspected Sebastian's stepmother, and as she and her mother had left, she had seen Lady Southbourne talking to the man she now knew to be Sebastian's uncle.

They had been whispering in low voices, casting furtive glances towards where Sebastian had been talking to John. The sight had made Rosalind shudder, for the thought of their attempting to drive him to insanity was wicked beyond measure.

"It's too horrible for words," Rosalind said to herself, as she made her way down to breakfast that morning, her thoughts distracted by the events of the previous evening.

Her father was still suffering from the effects of the attack of gout, and Rosalind found only her mother in the dining room, eating a slice of toast and marmalade ponderously.

"You can't get married at the same time, Rosalind," she said, looking up as Rosalind entered the room, and not bothering to qualify her statement.

“Who can’t, mother?” Rosalind asked, and her mother tutted.

“You and Elizabeth, of course. Two society weddings in the same week? No, it won’t do. You’ll have to talk to her. We’ll arrange it properly in the coming weeks once the proposal’s been made. But it never hurts to have these things arranged, does it?” she said.

Rosalind now realized what her mother was talking about. She had moved from possibility, to probability, to certainty. Rosalind might as well already have been married to the Duke of Northridge, for in her mother’s eyes, it was only a matter of time before the great event occurred, and there was no harm in planning ahead.

“I’m seeing Elizabeth this morning, mother. We’ll talk about it then,” Rosalind replied.

She had every intention of talking the matter over with her friend, but not in the manner her mother expected. Rosalind wanted to tell Elizabeth about her feelings for Sebastian. She had kept them hidden for too long, and now she and Sebastian had reached a new level of intimacy, Rosalind wanted someone with whom to confide these strange and unexpected feelings. Her mother nodded approvingly.

“Yes, the two of you can discuss your preferred dates, the type of dress you might like to wear, the entertainments,” she said, smiling at Rosalind, as though this was an example of generosity.

Rosalind would be given free rein in deciding on the practical matters of her wedding, but as for whom she would marry.

“That’s very kind of you, mother,” Rosalind said, finishing the cup of coffee one of the footmen had poured for her, before rising from the table.

It amused her to think of the secret she harbored, and the scandal hidden from her mother and the rest of the ton. For once, Rosalind was possessed of something for herself, rather than that chosen for her by others. Sebastian, it seemed, felt

the same, and Rosalind wondered what Elizabeth would say when she discovered the truth.

“Though I won’t tell her about the nudes,” Rosalind said to herself, fearing her friend’s sensitive disposition might be somewhat overwhelmed by such an extensive repertoire of scandalous goings on.

She met Elizabeth in the park opposite the house, where formal gardens provided a pleasant perambulation amid the perfumed air of a thousand colored blooms. The two women walked beneath their matching yellow parasols, arm in arm, discussing the events of the previous evening. Rosalind was waiting for the right moment to mention Sebastian, and it came when the talk turned to Elizabeth and John, having searched for Rosalind and Sebastian as the evening drew to a close.

“What were you doing in that funny little alcove upstairs? It was on the servant’s corridor, wasn’t it?” Elizabeth said as she and Rosalind reached the end of a long walk, flanked by sweetly scented rose bushes in all manner of color and variety.

Rosalind blushed, even as she was not ashamed of their having been discovered. She had thought of little else than the kiss she and Sebastian had shared, her desire for its repetition only heightening with every recurring memory. She could feel his arms around her, the touch of his lips against hers, the swift beating of her heart in the snatched moment of their passion.

“We were talking. It was...oh, Elizabeth...would you think terribly of me if I told you I was in love with him? With Sebastian, I mean?” Rosalind exclaimed, turning to Elizabeth, who looked momentarily surprised, only to regain her composure with a smile.

“Well, I wouldn’t be surprised, Rosalind... it’s obvious. John and I have spoken of it on numerous occasions. He knows Sebastian’s in love with you, and I know you’re in love with Sebastian. But so much holds you both back, your betrothal to the Duke of Northridge, Sebastian’s madness,” she replied, looking sympathetically at Rosalind, who shook her head.

“But it’s not true, is it? Sebastian isn’t mad, and I’m not betrothed to the Duke of Northridge. Not yet, at least. Last night, at Thornbury House, I overheard Lady Southbourne and Lady Helena talking with one another about Sebastian, and then he told me about a note he’d apparently written to his land agent, arranging a meeting, but he couldn’t possibly have written it, because he was with us at Somerset House. He’s

played a fool of by someone or someone wants to make him out to be mad. To convince him he's mad," Rosalind said.

Elizabeth looked horrified, even as a note of skepticism crept over her face.

"Making him think he's mad? Oh... but Rosalind... you can't truly believe that," she said, but Rosalind shook her head.

"I do believe it, Elizabeth. I've got no reason to doubt it. I know he's not mad, and that can only mean someone else wants to make out as though he is. It's simply dreadful. But it's not just that, I love him," she said.

Rosalind had not yet spoken such words out loud. To admit to another, the love she felt for Sebastian seemed quite extraordinary, even as it was surely entirely natural. The thought of being in love, and of being loved in return, was intoxicating, overwhelming, even, and as she spoke the words, tears welled up in her eyes. Elizabeth smiled at her.

“Oh, Rosalind. What a terribly complicated situation you’ve created for yourself. But I can see the same look in your eyes as I had when I looked in the mirror after John told me the same. When he told me he loved me, I was overcome. I couldn’t quite believe it, but it was true. We felt the same for one another, and knowing that... I know how you feel, Rosalind, even though I know it won’t be easy,” Elizabeth replied.

Rosalind was relieved. She had feared Elizabeth might not understand that she would speak of duty and expectation and obedience. But Elizabeth had experienced that same feeling. The feeling of being loved and loving in return. Rosalind smiled.

“Oh, I’m so glad... I wasn’t sure... well... you don’t think badly of me?” she said, and Elizabeth shook her head.

“Good heavens, no, you’ve fallen in love, Rosalind. Who could think badly of you for that? The Duke of Northridge, perhaps, and your mother... but I don’t see why she should be so set on your marrying that awful man. A miserable duchess is hardly an ambition a mother should hold for her daughter. Why not be the happy wife of an Earl? A countess can hardly be looked down on,” Elizabeth replied.

“Because she thinks he’s a madman or soon to become one. Like the rest of the ton, my mother judges on hearsay and rumor, rather than evidence. She won’t even speak to him. She’s made up her mind, and that’s that,” Rosalind replied.

There was no doubting the difficulties involved, the impossibility of the situation. Rosalind could refuse the Duke of Northridge until she was blue in the face, but it would not alter her mother’s opinion of the Earl of Southbourne. Sebastian was mad, and it would take far more than the proof of a land agent’s note and a missing cigar case to prove otherwise.

“Then what are you going to do about it, Rosalind? Will you make a stand? And what if... well, what if he really is mad?” Elizabeth asked.

This was where skepticism came into play. Rosalind had expected it, even as it made for an uncomfortable question. She, too, had asked the same. By his own admission, there was every possibility Sebastian would be afflicted with the same illness as his father and grandfather.

If someone was trying to make him think he was mad prematurely, there was no reason why they should not simply be hastening the inevitable. But if that was the case, Rosalind was of the opinion that to be forewarned was to be forearmed.

She knew the risks of falling in love with anyone, and she was prepared to accept those risks, even as others would surely have shied away from the possibility of falling in love with a madman whose last vestiges of sanity may soon be lost forever.

“I don’t think he is, and if he is, well, none of us knows what the future truly holds, do we?” Rosalind replied.

The thought of a moment captured in a painting came to her again. Any painting was the capturing of a moment. It had a past, a story leading up to the view on the canvas. But it had a future, too. Those whom it depicted would go on living their lives.

But in that moment, that one moment, they existed as they were, and it was the same for Rosalind and Sebastian. She wanted to exist as in a portrait, frozen in the alcove with Sebastian's arms clasped around her. She loved him, and wanted to go on loving him, just as those immortalized lovers at Somerset House went on loving one another into eternity.

"No, we don't. But I'd hate to think you were hurt, Rosalind, or had your hopes destroyed. Do you think anything can come of it?" Elizabeth asked.

Rosalind did not know. It was madness, the madness of love. She wanted to think something could come of it, and she had allowed herself to think of such possibilities, even as the practicalities seemed impossible.

"I don't know," she said, answering Elizabeth's question honestly.

They had made several circulations of the formal gardens, and had now come to the gates of the park, preparing to part ways with another. Elizabeth and John were going to the theater that afternoon, and Rosalind could not help but feel a sense of sadness at the thought of them doing such ordinary things. The

sort of things she and Sebastian were denied. Could theirs ever be a true courtship? She was entangled in a web, one she was growing ever more caught up in.

“Don’t risk everything on this, Rosalind. You’re still so young. We both are. I don’t want you to make a terrible mistake,” Elizabeth said, but Rosalind shook her head.

“I’d be making a far greater mistake if I married Richard,” she said.

The two friends embraced one another, and Rosalind watched as Elizabeth walked off along the street, where she was due to meet Lord Cuthbert at a nearby coffeehouse. Sighing to herself, Rosalind again wished her own life could be as simple. She could not be jealous of Elizabeth for finding happiness, but she, too, desired that same happiness for herself.

But her own life was not so simple, and making her way home, she knew she would have to face her mother, and her endless questioning over the wedding, the wedding still to be formalized by a betrothal.

Letting herself into the house, she slipped upstairs by the back staircase, used by the servants, and shutting herself in her bedroom, she took out the portrait of Sebastian from beneath the bed. His expression was changeless. What else could it be? But the sight of him cheered her, and she raised the canvas to her lips, pressing them against his own with a sigh.

“I do love you,” she whispered, gazing down at the portrait, willing it to come to life.

But like her memory of the alcove, of the kiss they had shared, it was but a moment in time, and if Rosalind and Sebastian were to have any hope of a future together, they would have to step beyond the canvas, and imagine a bold and uncertain future together.

Chapter 27

Sebastian, too, had not slept well, his emotions swinging from passionate desire to passionate guilt. He had been glad of the kiss he had shared with Rosalind, even as he knew they had crossed a line, one neither of them could step back from. He knew his feelings for her, and now he knew her feelings for him, too.

There was absolute certainty in them, but what were they to do? Thought of elopement had crossed his mind. A dramatic escape to Gretna Green, marriage on the blacksmith's anvil, but their problems would only be waiting for them in their return.

“My problems,” Sebastian told himself, for even if Rosalind could dismiss the Duke of Northridge's advances, the question of possible madness remained, the clock ticking towards an inevitability, one Sebastian could not fight against, if fate was leading him to that same end as his father and grandfather.

“Good morning, my Lord,” Langton said, as Sebastian came down to breakfast that morning.

The butler was standing in the hallway, and Sebastian could not help but wonder if he, too, was part of the conspiracy against him. He was growing ever more paranoid, expecting any of the servants to be responsible for the tricks being played on him.

“Good morning, Langton,” Sebastian replied, picking up his correspondence from the silver tray the butler was holding.

There was nothing of interest, merely dull invitations to the remainder of the season, none of which Sebastian had any interest in responding to.

“The last of the claret has arrived, my Lord, but I hope the champagne will be here soon. We need to put it in the cellar to keep cool,” the butler said.

Sebastian looked at him in surprise.

“Claret? Champagne? Are we expecting guests?” he asked, and the butler raised his eyebrows.

“This evening, my Lord, the Southbourne soiree,” he said, with a questioning look on his face.

Sebastian drew a blank, but he had grown used to offering a pretense at understanding, and now he nodded.

“Ah, yes... the soiree. Well... go and see to it, Langton. We can't be seen to not be doing things properly,” he said, and the butler nodded.

Sebastian could hear his stepmother and uncle talking in the dining room, and as he entered, they looked up at him and smiled.

“We were just talking about you, Sebastian. You do feel well enough for tonight, don’t you?” his stepmother asked, and Sebastian nodded.

“Very much so,” he replied, trying to appear at ease, even as he was trying desperately to remember what the soiree entailed.

He remembered nothing about it. There had been no mention of it, and neither John nor Rosalind nor Elizabeth had mentioned the prospect of being entertained at Southbourne House. Was this just another attempt at deception? Sebastian looked at his stepmother with what he hoped was an emotionless expression.

“Oh, I’m so glad to hear it. Your uncle was just saying how sad it would be if you weren’t able to attend. People are worried about you. Only yesterday, at Thornbury House, Lady Helena was expressing her fears to me. I told her there was nothing to worry about. That we’d do all we could for you. And it’s not as though it’s got you in its grip yet,” Lady Southbourne said.

Sebastian nodded. To argue, to fly into a rage, to accuse, would only add fuel to the fire. They would claim an instability of the mind, and perhaps he would even be confined to the house under the orders of the doctor whose tonic Sebastian had poured down the drain.

“I’m sure it’ll be a splendid occasion. You really don’t need to worry about me. I’ll be quite all right,” Sebastian said.

“I’m sure you will,” his stepmother replied.

But despite his words to the contrary, Sebastian was again questioning himself. There may well have been a soiree organized some months earlier. It was certainly not beyond the realm of possibility, even as Sebastian had no actual recollection of it.

His father had detested such occasions, but his stepmother had always enjoyed playing host, and Sebastian had no doubt she would relish organizing such a gathering. He would play along, and having done so during the course of breakfast, he asked one final question before excusing himself.

“Will Lady Rosalind be attending? I don’t remember who exactly we’ve invited,” Sebastian said.

His stepmother smiled at him and nodded.

“Oh, she’ll be there, yes. Her mother replied immediately to my invitation,” she replied.

As Sebastian left the dining room, he pondered this fact, wondering if Rosalind herself had any knowledge of the invitation, or whether it really had been accepted with the intention of attending. The Duchess of Lonsdale was no friend to Sebastian, and she would surely not want her daughter anywhere near a madman.

But Sebastian remained hopeful, for even if he could not remember discussing a soiree at Southbourne House, he was pleased to think Rosalind might be there. The lingering memory of their kiss still foremost in his mind.

“Rosalind, is that you?” Rosalind’s mother called out, as Rosalind let herself into the house.

She sighed, having hoped to make her way upstairs without being seen or heard. But her mother’s shrill voice was both question and command, and Rosalind knew she was now summoned.

“Yes, mother,” Rosalind called out.

The drawing room door was open, and taking off her gloves and bonnet, Rosalind approached cautiously, fearing the tone of her mother’s voice suggested she had done something wrong. As she entered the room, she realized she had. Her father was there, his foot resting on a gout stool, and her mother was standing by an easel, the picture on it covered with a drape. Rosalind’s eyes grew wide and fearful. She recognized the easel; it was her own.

“This, Rosalind... this... this... filth,” her mother exclaimed.

Rosalind raised her eyebrows, her hands trembling with anger as now she realized what had happened. Her parents had betrayed her. They had searched her bedroom; they had found what was most precious to her, and now her mother pulled off the drape, uttering an exclamation of disgust, as Dionysus and Ariadne came into view.

Her father turned away in embarrassment, and her mother shook her head, glaring at Rosalind, who fixed her with a defiant look.

“You had no right, mother,” Rosalind cried, as her mother shook her head.

“I’m ashamed of you, Rosalind. Didn’t I forbid you from painting such... obscenities? I wanted to encourage you in your landscape painting and using the gentle watercolors of an

English pastoral scene. And instead... this," her mother said, pointing at the painting, where the two lovers gazed at one another in the throes of their passion.

"It's the myth of the Ariadne and Dionysus, mother. It's a classical story, told for generations. Dionysus threw Ariadne's jewels into the heavens to create the constellation Corona," Rosalind said.

But the duchess did not seem interested in classical myth, and certainly not in its depiction. She considered it nothing but filth, and shaking her head, she threw the drape back over the painting in disgust.

"Perhaps it is, Rosalind, but I doubt any classical text makes reference to the faces of these two individuals sharing the remarkable similarity to yourself and the Earl of Southbourne," her mother said.

To this, Rosalind had no ready reply. It was true; the likeness was remarkable. She had made it so. Rosalind had painted herself as Ariadne and Sebastian as Dionysus. They were star-crossed lovers, and it was Rosalind's jewels Sebastian had thrown into the heavens.

“Because I love him, mother,” Rosalind replied, even as she knew her response would only elicit further horror on the part of her mother and father.

“You... what did you say?” her father exclaimed, and had it not been for his gouty affliction, he would surely have risen from his chair in anger.

“I said I love him, father. That’s why I painted the picture of the two of us together. I love him and he loves me. But you wouldn’t listen when I told you. You wouldn’t listen when I tried to explain,” Rosalind replied.

She was feeling defiant now. They had betrayed her trust. But this was now the opportunity to tell the truth. She wanted them to know she was hurting, to know her true feelings for the man they had so readily dismissed as nothing but a madman. Her mother sank down into a chair by the hearth. Her face turned even paler than before.

“You can’t love him, Rosalind,” she said, shaking her head.

“But I do, mother. Can we help who we fall in love with? You refuse to even acknowledge him,” Rosalind replied.

She did not want to be angry with her parents, even though she was. But she wanted them to understand her feelings for Sebastian, her feelings about marriage and courtship, her desire for a choice. But it seemed they were having none of it.

“Acknowledge a mad man? It seems he’s driven you mad, too, Rosalind,” her father said, shaking his head.

“But he hasn’t, father. Can’t I make up my own mind on these matters? Why can’t I paint? Why can’t I do those things I gain pleasure from?” Rosalind said, her tone now one of pleading, even as her mother and father both shook their heads.

“No, Rosalind, you can’t, not when you’ve proved yourself so incapable of making the right decisions. This paining proves it.

Imagine what the Duke of Northridge would say if he knew about it. No... it can't be," her father said, and nodding to Rosalind's mother, she pulled the painting from the easel and tossed it into the hearth, where the flames from the fire sprang up around it, as Rosalind let out a cry.

The drape burned first, revealing the faces of Ariadne and Dionysus, of Rosalind and Sebastian. The heat liquified the paint, and their expressions, so fixed on one another, now melted away. Last to go were the eyes, still gazing at one another with that same look of love and longing. Sebastian was gone, and tears rolled down Rosalind's cheeks as she realized the impossibility of what she had placed her trust in.

"How could you?" she said, turning to her mother, who looked at her stiffly, unmoved, it seemed, by the destruction she had just wrought.

"It's for the best, Rosalind. We had our suspicions. I had Molly let me into your bedroom, where I found your unpleasant creation. No more. Do you understand me?" she said.

Rosalind made no answer.

“And what’s more, I’ll be ensuring the Duke of Northridge formalizes your betrothal as soon as possible, Rosalind. It’s high time you were married, and all this nonsense was over. You can put a stop to it tonight,” her father said.

Rosalind was too angry to think properly, too caught up in the awfulness of what was being said. But her father’s words made her pause, and she looked at him curiously.

“Tonight?” she asked.

“Yes, the Southbourne soiree. The earl’s stepmother invited us. I couldn’t very well say no. It would look suspicious, as though we were purposefully avoiding. You know how people are. I don’t want any hint of a scandal. But I’ll be watching your every move, Rosalind,” her mother said.

Rosalind sighed. She knew she could not win, and now she feared this would be the last time she would ever see

Sebastian. Certainly if her parents had anything to do with it. She felt betrayed, and her heart was broken in two.

Tears rolled down her cheeks as she glanced at the charred remains of the painting, smoldering in the fireplace. It represented a final ending, the ultimatum of a choice made for her. Sorrowfully, Rosalind made her way upstairs, finding her bedroom in disarray, the pots of paints and brushes scattered over the floor.

“I’m sorry, my Lady. Your mother gave me no choice. She suspected something,” Molly said, when she brought Rosalind a cup of tea later that afternoon.

“It’s not your fault, Molly. She’d have found a way, one way or another,” Rosalind replied.

The maid set down the tea on the table by the window and placed her hand gently on Rosalind’s shoulder.

“But still, my Lady, I’m sorry. You should be allowed to marry who you want to. I know it’s not my place to say it or express my opinion. But that’s how I feel,” she said.

Rosalind smiled. Molly had always been a loyal maid, and a dear friend, too. She had kept the secret of the paintings, but there had been nothing she could do to prevent their discovery by Rosalind’s mother.

The secret was out, and while Rosalind felt resigned in her sorrow, she was glad she had told her parents the truth. She loved Sebastian, and there was nothing more to it than that. Her mother could force her to marry the Duke of Northridge, but she could not force her to love him.

“It’s very kind of you to say so, Molly. I’m so grateful to have you,” Rosalind replied, taking out a handkerchief and dabbing at her eyes.

“What will you do now, my Lady?” she asked.

Rosalind sighed. She had not thought that far ahead, the shock of the confrontation over the portrait enough to make her feel only despair as to the future. She had not expected things to be easy, but she had hoped to explain the truth of her feelings in her own words and in her own time.

Now, all she could do was imagine the possibility of her father carrying out his threat. Richard would be summoned. The matter discussed, the betrothal formalized. It was a business arrangement, and Rosalind was the commodity.

“I don’t know, but... I won’t stop painting, Molly. I can’t. She won’t stop me. Did she find... everything?” Rosalind asked, and the maid smiled and shook her head.

“No, my Lady. The painting was enough to scandalize her. The rest of the things you hid, the blank canvases, the unopened paint pots, they’re all still hidden away,” Molly replied.

“Then I’ll start again,” Rosalind said, determined not to be downhearted, even as it seemed her dreams of Sebastian

would now be confined to her mind, rather than depicted on a canvas.

Chapter 28

“There you are, my darling, immortalized,” Sebastian said to himself, stepping back and smiling at the sight of Rosalind depicted on the canvas before him.

He had been working on the portrait all day, hiding himself away from the preparations going on downstairs. Sebastian had no desire to play host at a soiree, to find himself the object of whispers and gossip. The ton would come, of course, to view the madman was a pastime few would miss, and Sebastian shuddered to think of himself as both of an object of ridicule and pity.

“Perhaps I should just leave,” Sebastian thought to himself, remembering John’s words about a visit to Norfolk or Bath.

The thought was appealing. A chance for the fresh sea air of the Norfolk coast, or to take the famous waters in the baths that gave the city its name. Sebastian paused, looking at the portrait of Rosalind, his feelings torn. He could not just abandon her. He did not want to abandon her. He wanted to be with her. She was his every desire, and yet.

“An impossible one, too,” he told himself, shaking his head, as he took a fine brush and began to paint the detail of Rosalind’s eyes.

He knew them intimately, and as he gazed at the canvas, it was as though Rosalind was looking back at him, just as she had done at the parting of their lips in the alcove at Thornbury House. She was beautiful, in his mind’s eye, on the canvas, in every way.

“I can’t leave her,” he said to himself, sighing and shaking his head.

On the walls around him, and stacked in piles against the walls, the paintings of his feelings, the swipes of paint, the streaks of color, the expression of his emotions. Sebastian had so often used the canvas to display his feelings, but now his feelings were clear, and before him, the object of those feelings looked back.

“I love you,” he whispered, touching his finger to his lips, and placing them on the smooth depiction of Rosalind’s countenance, the unflinching eyes gazing back at him with the look of love he had purposefully given her.

But a painting would not be enough. It could never be enough, just as a dream could never be enough, or even the depths of his imagination. Only she would do, in all her fullness, and despite every obstacle, every difficulty, Sebastian knew those feelings would never change.

“The Lady Augusta Shellington-Painswick, accompanied by the Honorable Lady Elizabeth Shellington-Painswick,” the master of ceremonies said.

Sebastian stifled a yawn. It seemed his stepmother had invited the whole ton to the occasion of her Southbourne soiree, and now Sebastian forced a smile to his face, as a large woman, dressed in a voluptuous purple dress, covered in pearls and sashes, and wearing a diamond tiara on her wig approached, accompanied by a gaunt young woman, whose face was overly powdered, matching her ivory gown.

“Lady Shellington-Painswick, how nice to see you,” Sebastian’s stepmother said, greeting the woman gushingly, as she had done every other guest.

“Lady Southbourne, it’s a pleasure to be here,” the woman replied, before turning to Sebastian with a sympathetic look on her face.

“My Lady,” Sebastian said, taking Lady Shellington-Painswick’s hand in his.

The sympathetic look was one Sebastian was now used to. All the guests had adopted it, even as they had not been explicit as to the reason for their sympathy. But the matter was clear. They had come to gawp and to do so would require a modicum of forced sympathy.

Lady Augusta held Sebastian’s gaze for a moment, perhaps trying to discern something of the madness she had no doubt

discussed at length in every salon and drawing room she had visited during the season.

“It’s a pleasure to see you, my Lord,” she said, and her daughter said the same.

This process was repeated over and over again, as footmen hurried back and forth, ushering guests into the rooms set aside for the soiree. Sebastian’s stepmother had spared no expense in making the arrangements, and along with the master of ceremonies, she had hired a considerable number of staff for the evening, instructing that glasses were to be constantly replenished, and having ordered far more food than could possibly be eaten.

“You’re doing very well, Sebastian. It helps having the master of ceremonies. Even I can’t remember who I’ve invited,” Lady Southbourne whispered.

Sebastian nodded, and he was about to reply when a familiar name was called out.

“The Duchess of Lonsdale, accompanied by her daughter, the Lady Rosalind Fairchild,” the master of ceremonies called out.

Sebastian’s heart skipped a beat. He had been waiting for the name to be called out, and yet somehow, it now came as a surprise, too. He glanced towards the door, and there she was, resplendent in a beautiful red dress, wearing a necklace of diamonds, the perfect picture, just as Sebastian imagined her to be. He smiled at her, their gaze meeting as Sebastian’s stepmother held out her hand to Rosalind’s mother.

“Your Grace, how glad we are to have you here,” she said.

Sebastian had been surprised to think the Duchess of Lonsdale would deign to be seen at the home of a man she had so readily denounced. But society was fickle, and the duchess showed no qualms in acceptance of the invitation.

“It’s a pleasure, truly, a pleasure, Lady Soutbourne,” she said, glancing at Sebastian, who smiled back at her, not wishing to give her the satisfaction of confirming what the duchess believed of him.

“And Lady Rosalind, how pretty you look,” Sebastian’s stepmother said.

As Rosalind moved to greet Sebastian, he could feel the duchess’ eyes on them both, and there was nothing Sebastian could do but greet Rosalind with the formality he had assumed with every other guest, too. It broke his heart to do so. All they had shared, all they knew of one another, the feelings welling up inside them.

“Good evening, Lady Rosalind,” Sebastian said, almost choking on his words, and Rosalind, too, appeared to be fighting back the tears.

“Good evening, my Lord,” she said, offering Sebastian her hand.

He raised it to his lips, imagining what could be between them, even as so much as held them back. He thought about the kiss

they had shared and the passion of their being together, unbridled by the expectations of society. But here, in the starched formality of his stepmother's soiree, only a look and a memory were permitted.

"Come along, Rosalind, we mustn't delay the introductions," the duchess said, and with a final glance, Rosalind stepped away.

"I'm going to take the air," Sebastian said, stepping back, as his stepmother looked at him in surprise.

"Are you all right, Sebastian?" she asked, but Sebastian had already turned away, the master of ceremonies having announced the arrival of the Duke of Northridge.

"He's come to gloat, and to watch our every move," Sebastian said to himself, slipping away from the line and hurrying into his study.

With a sigh, he closed the door, knowing he was being churlish, but fearing he really would be driven mad by the sight of Rosalind and the Duke of Northridge together. It was an impossibility, one he could hardly bear to live with.

He cursed himself for having so easily given way to his feelings, even as he had vowed to keep from the intimacies so many others took for granted. But love could not be tamed. It was like a wild animal, roaming where it wished, and when it had discovered its prey.

“Why should I hide myself away in here? They really will think I’m mad,” Sebastian told himself, banging his fist down on his desk, and shaking his head.

He was not feeling very well that evening, and the cup of coffee he had drunk earlier had only worsened the symptoms. He poured himself a brandy, drinking it in one gulp and taking a deep breath.

“Don’t be a fool, Sebastian. Show them what you’re made of. Show them you’re not mad,” he said to himself, and taking another deep breath, he stepped out of his study, met by the chatter and laughter of the soiree.

Music was playing, and Sebastian made his way through the throng towards the refreshment table. He helped himself to a glass of punch, its heady aroma filling his nostrils, as he glanced around him for any sign of Rosalind. She was with her mother and the Duke of Northridge, the two of them standing on either side of her, as though guarding her from both approach and escape.

“Ah, there you are. I’ve been looking for you,” a voice behind Sebastian said, and turning, he found John smiling at him.

“Oh... yes, I...” Sebastian began, but his friend nodded.

“I thought you’d want to make your escape, though not immediately. Elizabeth’s just gone to the powder room. She’s...” John began, but Sebastian interrupted him.

“You’re a lucky man, John. I envy you,” he said.

His friend looked at him in surprise.

“That’s kind of you to say, Sebastian, but... what makes you say it? Are you thinking about Rosalind?” he asked, and Sebastian nodded.

He thought of nothing else but Rosalind. Jealousy, envy... they were not nice things to feel, but Sebastian was envious of his friend. There were no barriers to his love for Elizabeth, nor to hers for him. They had fallen in love and they were to marry. It was as simple as it was profound, just how love should be.

“I wish I could... oh, I just wish things were different, John. I shouldn’t wallow in my own self-pity. It makes me look weak. But perhaps I am weak. Perhaps I am mad,” Sebastian replied.

His friend placed a reassuring hand on Sebastian’s shoulder.

“Utter nonsense. There’s not a shred of weakness in you. You’ve proved as much countless times. No, Sebastian, you’re not mad, and you’re not weak. But there’re those who’d like to make you think you are, and those for whom it would be far more convenient if you were. Now, I need to find Elizabeth, and I suggest you do the same with Rosalind,” John replied.

It all sounded so simple. It was simple. In words, at least. But Sebastian knew the reality was very different. This was not a painting. It was not something he had control over. The artist was master of their canvas. They controlled precisely what happened to those depicted there. But life was not a canvas, and Sebastian was not the artist of his own destiny, or so he felt.

“One dance, perhaps...” he thought to himself, feeling certain the duchess could not begrudge the host of the soiree from dancing with her daughter.

But as he turned, Sebastian’s heart fell. The musicians had just taken up their tune, and the small space for the house was far from suitable for such a large gathering was now filled with twirling skirts and flapping tails. John and Elizabeth were among them, as were Rosalind and Richard.

The Duke of Northridge had a smug, satisfied look on his face, while Rosalind's was one of forced resignation. He had her in a tight grasp, and looking over at Rosalind's mother, Sebastian could see the look of satisfaction on her face. He wanted to do something to rescue her from this injustice. It was unbearable to think of it, to know what would happen to her, and to feel powerless to act.

But the matter was settled, and the announcement of the betrothal would surely come soon. Neither Sebastian nor Rosalind could prevent it, even as it surely broke her heart as it did Sebastian's.

"Now you're being selfish, wallowing in your own self-pity. It's her who has to live with it," he told himself, trying to tear his gaze away, even as he continued to torture himself with the sight of Rosalind in Richard's arms.

His stepmother, too, had joined the throng, dancing with Sebastian's uncle, and as he stood on the peripheries, Sebastian felt a terrible sense of a world moving on, forging ahead, while he was left behind. John and Elizabeth, Rosalind and Richard, even his stepmother and uncle.

They were all making plans for a new life, one Sebastian would not be privy to. He was the madman, and soon, his madness would consume him. Whether trick or not, this was his fate, and he felt only a sense of horror at the inevitability of what was to come.

“Don’t they make a charming couple?” a voice to his side said, and Sebastian looked up to find Lady Helena standing next to him.

“Who?” Sebastian asked, for he was not entirely certain to whom she was referring.

“Your stepmother and uncle, of course,” she replied.

Sebastian did not think there was anything charming about his stepmother and uncle dancing together. Quite the opposite, in fact. To see them together raised further questions as to his uncle’s intentions, and while Sebastian still had no proof as to what those intentions were, he was growing ever more

convinced as to possibility of his being forced into the madness he was trying so hard to resist.

“Perhaps,” Sebastian replied.

He knew Lady Helena was only interested in scandal and gossip. She had proved as much at Gunter’s, with her apparent sympathy and a forced show of concern.

“Oh, Sebastian, you can’t begrudge the possibility of Victoria finding happiness, can you?” Lady Helena said, raising her eyebrows.

The thought of such a possibility had not occurred to Sebastian, but its suggestion was not one he favored. If his uncle was to marry his stepmother, and if he intended to continue in his crusade against Sebastian, a power struggle would ensue. Sebastian was the Earl of Southbourne, but a madman could not hold such a position, and if Sebastian could be proved as such.

“I’m sure I can’t, no, Lady Helena,” Sebastian replied.

Lady Helena looked at him with a forced expression of sympathy.

“You poor thing, Sebastian. It must be so very confusing for you, this...madness,” she said, and she placed her hand on his arm.

Sebastian drew it away.

“I’m not mad,” he replied, and she nodded.

“No... I know you’re not,” she said, her tone patronizing, as though merely agreeing with him as a matter of appeasement, his denial being all the proof she needed.

Sebastian looked back to the throng, and at the sight of Rosalind and the Duke of Northridge dancing with one another. Rosalind's face was still set in a look of resignation, and Sebastian shook his head, turning away, as tears welled up in his eyes. She was everything to him the most delightful of creatures and yet, in that moment, Sebastian could not have felt more distant from her, more desirous of her, or more despairing.

"If you'll excuse me," Sebastian said, and Lady Helena nodded.

"You should rest," Lady Helena said, smiling at Sebastian, who grimaced, nodding to her, before slipping away.

He wanted to be alone and stepping out onto the steps leading down into the garden. Tears rolled down his cheeks. He breathed deeply, clenching his fists, and cursing under his breath. It was growing dark now, and gazing up into the sky, he could see the constellation Corona its seven stars, glinting in the darkness. He thought of Rosalind, and the diamond necklace she was wearing Ariadne's jewels.

“If only I could do the same as Dionysus,” Sebastian said to himself, brushing a tear from his eye.

Chapter 29

“You were somewhat stiff during the dance,” Richard said, as he and Rosalind stepped back from the throng.

“I’m feeling somewhat lightheaded,” Rosalind replied.

Her mother was waiting for them, and she looked questioningly at Rosalind, who now sat down on a chair against the wall.

“Are you all right, Rosalind? You look pale,” her mother said.

“She was dancing very stiffly,” Richard said.

This was Rosalind's hope, that her mother, and the duke, would think she was unwell. She was desperate to get away from them. Since Richard's arrival to collect her, Rosalind had been kept at either his or her mother's side. They had escorted her into Southbourne House, and before the introduction, her mother had threatened her to have nothing to do with Sebastian.

"It's bad enough we must pretend there's no scandal involved. But if you put a foot out of line, Rosalind..." her mother had said, allowing the possibility of her threat to linger in the air.

The encounter with Sebastian had been heartbreaking. They might as well have been strangers, introduced in the formality of a first meeting. But behind Sebastian's rigid expression, Rosalind had seen a longing passion, and she had known he was thinking back to the same events as she was to the kiss they had shared, to the intimacies of the portraits, to the truth of their feelings for one another. Nothing had changed. If anything, her feelings for him had only grown stronger with every passing moment.

"You can sit out for the next dance, Rosalind. I'll fetch you some warm milk with nutmeg. I'm sure one of the servants can bring it," Rosalind's mother said, but Rosalind shook her head.

“I really don’t feel well. I need to go to the powder room,” she said, and her mother sighed.

“Very well, Rosalind. But don’t dally. Young ladies are always dally in powder rooms these days. It’s not befitting,” she said.

Rosalind rose to her feet, not wishing to appear as relieved as she was to at last be escaping the company of her mother and the duke. Richard tutted, but he made no attempt to stop her, and Rosalind pushed her way through the throng, making in the direction of the powder room, even as she had no intention of going there.

She wanted a few moments to herself, and now she glanced around her for a way out into the garden, taking a passage from the main room, and following it past large aspidistra plants perched on pedestals, beneath portraits of those whom she assumed to be Sebastian’s ancestors. None of them looked mad, but there was no telling, of course, and that was the point.

“But he isn’t mad. I know that, even if no one else does,”
Rosalind said to herself.

She had almost reached the end of the corridor now. It was dark outside, the passage lit by candles in sconces, but from up ahead, she could feel a cool breeze, as though a window or door was open, and following the line of aspidistra plants, she came to the end of the corridor, where an open door led out into the garden.

To her surprise, a figure was standing there, and at the sound of her footfall, they turned. It was Sebastian, and for a moment, the two of them looked at one another in surprise.

“I wasn’t following you, I promise,” Rosalind said, feeling as though she should offer some reason for her being there, after the stark formality of their earlier greeting.

His face was illuminated in the moonlight, and he smiled at her, shaking his head.

“I wouldn’t have minded if you had. But you know what’ll happen if you’re discovered here. I don’t want you to get into trouble on my account,” he said.

But Rosalind shook her head. She did not care if she did. She was glad to have escaped from her mother and the duke, and glad to be in Sebastian’s company, even if just for a few short minutes.

“I won’t. They think I’m in the powder room. And ladies can take as long as they wish in the powder room,” she said, stepping forward to stand next to him.

“I was just looking up at the stars. It’s such a bright night. The whole universe is there, every star, every constellation. Can you see Corona?” he asked, pointing upwards.

Rosalind leaned forward, their cheeks touching, as she gazed along the length of his arm. Neither of them drew back, and now she slipped her hand into his, gazing up at the constellation at Ariadne’s crown. It was beautiful, and

Sebastian now turned to her, smiling, as he looked down at the diamond necklace she was wearing.

“It’s beautiful,” Rosalind whispered.

“Just like you, and if I could throw your jewels into the heavens, I would,” he said.

Rosalind laughed, and she drew him into her embrace.

“I wish you could,” she said.

He put his arms around her, and she rested her head on his chest, caught up as she had been in the alcove, their portrait now framed by the open door. She desired nothing else but to be with him, even as it seemed an impossibility.

“I wish I could have you in my arms forever. Seeing you with him... it broke my heart, Rosalind,” Sebastian said, and Rosalind felt tears welling up in her eyes.

“I wish it could be different,” she said, as he kissed her on the top of her head.

“There’s something I want to show you, but I know you’ll be in trouble if you agree... perhaps...” he said, but Rosalind shook her head.

She wanted to see whatever it was he wanted to show her, and now he led by the hand, back past the aspidistra plants and through a side door, taking a spiral staircase up to the top floor of the house. The distant chatter of the guests faded, and silence now reigned as they stood before a wood-paneled door. Sebastian took a key from his pocket, unlocked it, and led her inside.

Having lit a candle from one of the sconces to light their way, he now held it up, illuminating the scene before them. They were in an artist’s studio, Sebastian’s studio, and Rosalind looked around her in amazement at the rows of canvases lining the walls and stacked against one another on the wooden floor.

“It’s remarkable,” she exclaimed, for she had not seen Sebastian’s work before, and it made her think sadly of the painting her mother had burned in disgust.

But these canvases were different. They were not paintings, as such, but images of color, bold brush strokes, or cautious dabs. They appeared to be the result of emotion, and Rosalind wondered if perhaps Sebastian had used the canvases to reveal his feelings. But there was another painting, too, standing on an easel, and as Sebastian held up the candle, Rosalind gasped.

“I hope you don’t mind,” he said, smiling at her.

The painting was of Rosalind herself. It was beautiful, and Sebastian had painted her in just the way she would have wanted him to as a nude. The figure, her figure, sat reclining on a chaise lounge, a smile playing across her face. Her breasts were uncovered, but a thin silk sheet, almost luminous, concealed her lower half, the tinge of her pink, supple skin visible beneath.

The detail was exquisite, and it seemed Sebastian had painted every detail of her features, each painted in an exacting style, the curvature of her breasts, the length of her fingers, the tip of her nose. The study was perfect. The study of a man who had fallen in love with his subject.

“I... I don’t mind at all. It’s beautiful,” Rosalind replied, and Sebastian smiled at her.

Tears welled up in her eyes, and she began to cry, even as he put his arm around her.

“There, there, it’s all right. I hope...” he said, but Rosalind shook her head.

“No... it’s not that. It’s... I painted you, I painted you as Dionysus, and myself as Ariadne. But my mother found it. She burned it. I wanted to show you it, but she burned it. Oh... it was too awful. I’m so sorry,” Rosalind exclaimed, overcome by emotions of her loss, of what it had represented, and of what this represented, too.

This was a painting of love. The love of a man for a woman. But it was more than that. It was the expression of a desire, one neither of them could realize. Rosalind would be forever trapped in the portrait, a moment framed, but without a future. Her own painting had been burned, and along with it, her hopes. But now, she turned to Sebastian, clinging to him, their lips meeting in a kiss; a kiss expressive of the passion the painting represented.

“You’ve nothing to be sorry for, Rosalind,” Sebastian said, as their lips parted.

His hands were clasped around her waist, their bodies entwined, holding one another, desiring one another. In that moment, Rosalind felt again a sense of their being subjects in a portrait, but one without anyone to view it.

This was their moment, no one else’s, and again they pressed their lips together, their hands clasped, caught up in the passion they now shared, a passion unquenched by all that had gone before, now welling up in both of them, as their kiss became ever more intense.

“But I’m sorry for it all. The way they treat you, the way they try to make out as if you’re mad. You’re not, I know you’re not,” Rosalind exclaimed, as now she arched her neck, allowing his lips to trace a trail along the course of her neck, his hands pulling at the shoulders of her dress.

She had been astonished at the likeness of her breasts in the painting, breasts he had only imagined, but now they were exposed, cupped in his hands, his touch firm. Rosalind gasped, a shudder of delight running through her at the thought of what they were doing, of what they were sharing.

How often she had gazed upon the paintings in her father’s books, the elegant nudes, and later, the daring portraits she had seen, of star-crossed lovers, their bodies entwined, caught up in the pleasures of the flesh.

But no amount of imagination could have prepared her for what she was now experiencing, what they were experiencing together. Her dreams had so often led her into the frames of the portraits, picturing herself as the subject.

But now she was the subject, caught up in the passion of what the two of them now shared, a passion she had longed for, as now she let her dress fall to the floor, exposing herself to his touch, his own arousal clear, as he brought his lips to hers once again.

“It doesn’t matter as long as I have you, nothing matters,” he gasped, his hands running down the small of her back as he fell to his knees, his tongue searching her out, as Rosalind let out a cry at the intensity of his touch.

Never had she felt such pleasure overwhelming her, never had she imagined the touch of a man could feel like this. She knew Richard could never make her feel like this, nor did she ever wish him to. She wanted to give herself wholly and fully to Sebastian, to be his and his alone.

A further shudder ran through her, and she clasped her hands to Sebastian’s shoulders, willing herself to greater heights of ecstasy, and gazing at herself, reflected in the canvas beyond. There, her eyes were unflinching, her gaze held. But now, Rosalind looked down at Sebastian, her eyes half closed, caught up in the pleasure of this new and unexpected delight.

He looked back at her, breathless, it seemed, from the ecstasies of their exertion. She wondered what would happen now, a lull in their passions. As he rose to his feet, still visibly aroused, as he slipped his arm around her and kissed her gently on the lips.

“What... are we to go to your bed?” she asked, knowing she sounded naïve in her words, even as she knew nothing of carnal desires and pleasures.

To her surprise, he shook his head, stepping back, and averting his gaze.

“I... no... it’s not a good idea, Rosalind,” he said.

She looked at him in surprise, feeling suddenly embarrassed to be standing before him, as naked as her own image in the painting, more so, for there was no silk sheet to wrap herself in, and now she reached down, pulling her dress up over herself, still looking at him in confusion.

“But I... I don’t understand... I admit I’ve never... well, it’s all so new to me,” she said, fearing she had said something wrong, even as he shook his head.

“No... I can’t, it’s not right... the illness, Rosalind. My illness. If you... if there was a child,” he said, and Rosalind suddenly understood.

But she shook her head, not caring for the consequences, even as she knew she should. Their child. If there was a child, they would be loved, whatever expectation lay ahead. She knew she was risking everything, but the risk held no fear for her. It was what she wanted. He was what she wanted, and the consequences could come later.

“It doesn’t matter to me, Sebastian,” she said, pulling up the shoulders of her dress, but he shook his head.

“No, I’ve been a fool, Rosalind. I’m the one to blame. All of this, I’ve made you believe in possibilities. I’ve taken advantage of that belief. But it’s not right. None of it. Please, you should go. They’ll be wondering where you are, and if they realize I’m gone, too...” Sebastian said, his words trailing off.

Rosalind looked up at him with a sorrowful expression on her face. Was this a rejection? She wanted so desperately to be his, to know what it was like to be joined as one, just like the paintings they had seen together, the paintings she had imagined herself to be part of.

“Then I’ll go,” Rosalind said, for there seemed little point in arguing.

It would always be the same, a forbidden love, whispered, yet never spoken of. Tears welled up in her eyes, and now she looked up at him as he turned his gaze away.

“I’m sorry, Rosalind. We just can’t. I can’t let you,” he said, and with these words, Rosalind left the room, clattering down the spiral staircase, filled with sorrow, and the bitter taste of rejection.

“What did I tell you, Rosalind? You’ve been gone almost an hour,” Rosalind’s mother exclaimed, as she rejoined her and Richard a few moments later.

“I’m sorry, mother. I just... lost track of time,” Rosalind replied, knowing the moment she had shared with Sebastian would remain with her forever, even as time marched sadly on.

Chapter 30

As the sound of Rosalind's footsteps disappeared down the stairs, Sebastian sighed. He felt terrible, torn between his desire and passion for Rosalind, and his sense of foreboding as to what might have happened, had the two of them succumbed to their desires.

“Another madman. I can't risk an illegitimate heir, but mad, what was I thinking?” Sebastian exclaimed to himself, glancing at the portrait of Rosalind, and cursing himself for allowing his feelings to get the better of him.

He loved Rosalind; he loved her more than words could say, but because he loved her, he knew he could do what his heart desired. There was a naivety about her not of her own doing, of course. She was an innocent, and for him to have taken advantage of her innocence would have been wrong.

He had stopped himself, and while he knew he had upset her, it had been for the best. The scandal of what might have been did not bear thinking about, and Sebastian shook his head,

glancing again at the portrait, from which Rosalind's unflinching gaze stared back at him.

"I do love you, Rosalind. I love you enough to let you go," he said, shaking his head.

Sebastian could not face returning to the soiree. They could think him mad for all he cared. He would take up John's offer and suggest the two of them went to Bath, even as he feared his friend might prefer to remain in the company of Elizabeth.

Now the two of them were betrothed. He closed up the studio, being careful to lock the door, and made his way through the upper part of the house to his bedroom. He had already told Langton not to bother bringing him anything to drink before bed, and shutting himself in, he lay down on the bed, still fully clothed, snuffing out the candle and plunging the room into darkness.

"I'll always love her," he told himself, even as he felt certain he had lost her forever.

The repose of sleep did little to alter Sebastian's mood. He awoke with a sense of resignation and guilt over what he had allowed to pass between himself and Rosalind. There had been no doubt as to their shared passion, but Sebastian had allowed that passion to get out of hand, and he was only grateful he had drawn back before the possibility of something far worse had occurred.

"If she was with child... oh, it doesn't bear thinking about," he told himself, as he stood shaving at his washstand.

His thoughts were distracted, and he nicked his cheek, drawing blood, and cursing himself for his distraction. It seemed he could do nothing without the thought of Rosalind clouding his reason. He dropped the razor blade into the bowl of water, watching as the blood tinged the clarity. His blood was what had held back his passion, the blood flowing in his veins; the blood passed on to an heir whose future would be uncertain from the moment of birth.

“I can’t do that, I just can’t,” he told himself, and now his mind was made up.

He would go to Bath with or without John. A change of scenery, away from the whispering tongues of the tongues of the ton, would do him good. In Bath, he could be nobody. A stranger. And as a stranger, perhaps he could forget something of the past, and allow the events of the last few days and weeks to be forgotten.

Having finished shaving, holding a handkerchief to the razor cut across his cheek to stem the flow of blood, Sebastian sat down and wrote a hasty note to John. He told his friend of his turmoil, and begged that they might leave at once, even as he knew John would be loath to leave Elizabeth.

“For just a little while, long enough to clear my head,” Sebastian said to himself, hoping for a respite from his troubles and clarity for his mind.

Rosalind had not slept that night. She had laid on her bed, still wearing her dress, thinking about Sebastian. She had imagined him holding her, their lips pressed together, their bodies entwined. She had wanted nothing more than to be with him, to reassure him, to know what he was thinking, what he was feeling.

She was confused, even as she suspected, she knew the reason for Sebastian's rejection. He had not said as much in as many words, but the fact was obvious to make love would be to risk her being with child, and Sebastian had no desire to saddle Rosalind with the burden of a mad husband and a child who would almost certainly suffer the same fate.

It brought tears to Rosalind's eyes, as she admitted the truth to herself the truth as to why they could not be together, even as it was all she desired.

“And even though I love him, and he loves me,” she said to herself, rolling onto her side with a sigh.

It was morning, and sunlight was flooding through the window, the curtains of which Rosalind had not bothered to close. A gentle knock now came at the door, and Molly entered, bearing a tray with a cup of tea and two boiled eggs on it. She looked surprised at the sight of Rosalind lying fully clothed on top of the bed, for Rosalind had instructed her maid not to wait up the evening before and to have an early night.

“Oh, my Lady didn’t you know how to take off the dress?” Molly asked as Rosalind sat up.

“I didn’t want to take it off,” Rosalind replied, and Molly shook her head sadly.

“Oh, my Lady has something happened? You look so very sad,” Molly said, and Rosalind began to cry.

She could not hold back her tears, sobbing, as the maid hurried to set down the tray and put her arms around her.

“It had to end, Molly. I always knew it did. I always knew... oh, but I wanted it to continue. I wanted it to continue so very much, with all my heart. I love him, I can’t ever love another, only him,” Rosalind exclaimed.

It was as though she was in the midst of a bereavement, mourning the loss of her love, love she knew she would never experience again. Richard was but a pale comparison. She did not want to love him. She could not love him.

“You poor thing, but you will, my Lady. A broken heart can be mended, I promise you. It takes time. That’s the greatest healer. Time and the love of another. And there will be others, my Lady. I promise you,” Molly said, but Rosalind did not want to hear such words. She did not want to believe them.

“No... it’s him I love, Molly. Him and him alone. Oh...” she began, just as a loud knock came at the door.

“Rosalind, are you ready yet?” her mother’s shrill voice echoed from outside.

Rosalind hastily brushed the tears from her cheeks, rising to her feet, as Molly hurried to open the door.

“I’m just getting ready, mother. Why the urgency? It’s not yet nine O’clock,” Rosalind replied.

Her mother tutted.

“I want you to come downstairs. Richard’s here. He’s waiting for you. Put on something nice mauve or peach. Make yourself look pretty,” the duchess said, glancing at Molly, who nodded.

“We’ll do our best, your Grace,” she said, and Rosalind’s mother nodded.

“See to it you do. And be quick. He’s waiting. He’s waiting to ask a question,” she said, fixing Rosalind with a knowing look, before turning and leaving the room.

Rosalind was in no doubt as to what that question was, and now she knew she had no choice but to face it. Except there was no question. A question implied an answer, one to be chosen. But this question was merely a formality. The answer was already given. It had been assumed. And as Rosalind finished getting dressed, she felt resigned to her fate.

“It’ll be all right, my Lady. We’ll still have one another, and you’ll have Lady Elizabeth, too,” Molly said, and Rosalind smiled weakly.

She knew she was not entirely alone, but this was something she had to face alone, and now, taking a deep breath, she made her way downstairs, where she found her parents talking to Richard in the drawing room. Her father had his foot propped up on a gout stool, but Richard to his feet, coming to meet Rosalind and smiling at her as he did so.

“What a pretty dress you’re wearing,” he said.

Rosalind had chosen the peach-colored dress, just as her mother had suggested, and now the duke took her by the hand, leading her to the bay window, looking out over the gardens. Her mother pretended to turn and talk to her father, but Rosalind knew they were listening to every word.

“You came very early this morning,” Rosalind said, and Richard nodded.

“Yes, I’ve got some urgent business on the continent. It’s going to take me away for some time,” he replied.

A sudden surge of hope welled up inside Rosalind, and she wondered if perhaps she might still be spared the immediacy of a betrothal. Trying to look saddened by his words, she feigned her surprise.

“Oh... must you go? How long will you be away for?” she asked, hoping he might suggest it would be a considerable length of time.

“Some weeks, I’m afraid. That’s why I had to come and see you. I intend to expedite our plans. I’m going seek a special license for a marriage without the necessity of banns. We can marry before I go away. It only needs to be a small ceremony, after all. We can hold some sort of gathering.

When when I return I’ll be passing through the heart of the wine lands and can bring back enough claret and champagne for the whole ton. Now, I leave on Monday, that leaves us less than a week. I propose to marry on Friday, and spend the coming days together before my departure,” he said.

There was no question of a refusal. The matter was decided. More than decided, it was all arranged. Rosalind was nothing but a puppet, her strings pulled by the three people in the room, all of whom had conspired to bring her to this moment. She stared at Richard, hardly knowing what to say. What could she say?

“I...” she began, but her mother interrupted.

“It sounds like you have everything in hand, your Grace,” she said, smiling at them, as the duke nodded.

“It’s a mere formality. I know the Archbishop’s son. We’ll have the license tomorrow. I was thinking Saint Bart’s the great, I mean for the wedding. I’ll speak to the rector. He won’t refuse not when I know he’s seeking donors for the upkeep of the roof. We can celebrate with a small affair a few guests, nothing overly elaborate. Now, I know there won’t be time for a new dress. But if you and Rosalind visit a modiste today, perhaps something can be done,” he said.

Any pretense at romance had now been turned to practicality. He had not even asked for her assent, let alone told her of his own feelings for her. The two of them might as well have been strangers, meeting for the first time.

But Rosalind would not give him the satisfaction of showing her distress. He knew he held power over her, but it was a power to which she would never submit. Not in her mind, at least. In this, in her vows, and in the future, she would refuse to acknowledge him as her husband. She did not love him, and she never would.

“A toast, I think,” Rosalind’s father said, as Rosalind and Richard joined Rosalind’s parents by the hearth.

A bottle of champagne was summoned, despite the early hour, and glasses were poured, and a toast offered. Rosalind made a pretense at appearing happy, but happiness was far from her mind. She was not happy, and the prospect of an imminent wedding filled her with dread. As soon as she was able to do so, and with Richard hurrying off to a meeting about his upcoming trip to the continent, Rosalind made her way to Elizabeth’s house, where she found her friend in the throes of planning her own wedding.

“Oh, Rosalind, I’m so pleased to see you. The modiste sent over some beautiful samples of fabric for the dress, you see. Won’t you help me choose one?” she asked, holding up a dozen swatches of material and smiling.

Rosalind promptly burst into tears, and Elizabeth, who had been sitting at a large table in her mother’s drawing room hurried to her side.

“What’s wrong, Rosalind? Oh, you poor thing,” she exclaimed, pulling out her handkerchief, and dabbing at

Rosalind's cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Elizabeth. I had to come and talk to you. I had to tell he's asked me to marry him, Richard, I mean. Well... he hasn't asked me, he's told me," she said.

Elizabeth sighed.

"I'm sorry, Rosalind... but have you accepted? I suppose you haven't got a choice. It won't be for some months though, will it?" Elizabeth said, but Rosalind shook her head.

"It's on Friday, Elizabeth. He's getting a special license. I haven't got a choice. He's going to the continent, you see, and he wants us married by then," she replied, descending into fresh sobs, as Elizabeth held her in a tight embrace.

"You poor thing... oh, how dreadful," she exclaimed, and it seemed there was no longer any hope, any solace, only the

grim prospect of Rosalind becoming the Duchess of Northridge, and happiness forever escaping her.

Chapter 31

“Are you going somewhere?” Sebastian’s stepmother asked, as Sebastian came downstairs the next morning.

He had packed a bag, and John had written to say they could leave for Bath at once. Sebastian was looking forward to getting away, and he nodded, noticing his uncle standing in the door of the dining room across the hallway.

“A few days in Bath with Lord Cuthbert. It’ll do me good. We won’t call at the estate but stay in the town. I’m not needed here, am I?” Sebastian asked, fearing his stepmother might mention something else of vital importance he had forgotten.

But to his relief, she shook her head.

“It’ll certainly do you good, Sebastian. Have a safe journey, and we’ll see you when you return,” she replied, smiling at

him, as though encouraging him to go.

Sebastian nodded, putting on his coat, and wanting only to leave as quickly as possible. His uncle expressed a similar sentiment as to his hopes for Sebastian's safe journey. Thanking them both, Sebastian stepped out into the summer sunshine, taking a deep breath, and glad to think he was leaving his troubles behind, at least for a short while. Rosalind was still on his mind, but he reminded himself he had done the right thing, even as it had been truly painful to do.

"I couldn't burden her with the scandal. I love her too much for that," he told himself, vowing to forever hold Rosalind in his heart the perfect picture, even as there could be nothing real about his dreams.

John was waiting for him in a carriage at the end of the street, and they were to depart immediately for Bath, overnighting at an inn along the way, and staying with a friend of Lord Cuthbert's, who had a townhouse on the Royal Crescent.

"Ah, here you are, very good. How are you feeling?" John asked as Sebastian climbed into the carriage.

“I’ve felt better, but... let’s just get going. I want to get away from all this. It’s all so confusing. I don’t know... well, I don’t know if I’m mad or not,” Sebastian replied.

His friend shook his head.

“You’re not mad. How many times do I have to repeat it to you, Sebastian?” he asked, rolling his eyes.

Sebastian smiled. He was exasperating himself with his own speculation, let alone those around him. But as they set off, he let out a sudden cry, realizing he had left his bag behind in the hallway.

“I really am going mad. This is utterly ridiculous. We’ll have to go back. Do you mind?” he said, but John waved his hand dismissively.

“We’re only a few minutes away. It’s easy to forget things. Come along, we’ll go back. It’s no trouble,” he said, and leaning out of the carriage window, he instructed the driver to return to their starting point.

Sebastian did not want to be seen by his stepmother or uncle. He would slip in through the back of the house via the kitchen door. John insisted on accompanying him, and the cook looked somewhat surprised to see the two aristocrats enter through the pantry as she was humming to herself while kneading dough.

“You gave me quite a fright, my Lord,” she exclaimed.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Pattison. I forgot something. I just need to use the back stairs,” Sebastian replied, and leading John through the underbelly of the house, with its larders and cold rooms, they made their way up the back stairs to the hall.

A door led discreetly from below the main staircase into the marble flagged hallway, but as Sebastian approached the top of the stairs, he could hear hushed voices coming from beyond. His stepmother and uncle were talking, and now he

paused, turning to John, who reached out and opened the door a tiny crack.

“I wasn’t expecting him to go, but it doesn’t matter. We know it’s working. When he returns, we’ll finish what we’ve started,” his stepmother said.

Sebastian could see her standing by the banister at the bottom of the stairs, her uncle standing just beyond the line of his vision, his hand on Lady Southbourne’s arm.

“I’ve waited long enough, Victoria. A few more days won’t make a difference. You’ve done well first, my brother, and now Sebastian. It was a marvelous ruse my grandfather’s madness made to be my brother’s, too and now my nephew’s,” Sebastian’s uncle replied.

Sebastian’s eyes grew wide with horror. He turned to John, who looked equally astonished, but who now caught his arm, lest Sebastian do something impulsive.

“Listen,” John mouthed.

“It really wasn’t difficult to move a cigar case, alter a painting, or mistake arrangements of social events. And we were lucky in finding Mr. Palin, too. He was very helpful when it came to my husband, and he’s proving his use now. He played the part of a doctor very well, didn’t he?” Sebastian’s stepmother said.

His uncle laughed.

“Exceedingly so a slow working poison, working little by little. My brother suspected nothing, and neither does Sebastian,” he replied.

“He suspects he’s going mad, but... he is, isn’t he? All those cups of coffee. I overdid it a little when he was sick, but no matter. A few more doses, and he’ll be just like his father confined to his bed, incapable of making decisions, and then...” she said, her words trailing off.

“And then, my dear, you and I will marry, and without a legitimate heir to your poor, mad stepson, I’ll become the Earl of Southbourne,” Sebastian’s uncle replied.

They laughed together, and Sebastian watched as his uncle put his arm around Lady Southbourne, drawing her into an embrace and kissing her. He was trembling with anger, and it was as much as he could do not to burst through the door and confront them immediately.

“Stay your hand,” John hissed, holding Sebastian back, as he turned to his friend with a look of horror on his face.

“I knew... I knew he was doing something, but her... and my father...” Sebastian exclaimed, sinking down onto the top step, as John put his arm around him.

“You’re not mad, Sebastian, but those wicked creatures want to make you out to be. I’ve never heard such cruelty all this time they’ve been conspiring against you,” John exclaimed, shaking his head, as Sebastian struggled to make sense of what he had just heard.

It was too awful for words, his father, and now him, subjected to the same wickedness so vividly described. It was a plot many years in the making, one both his uncle and stepmother had planned together for their own gain.

“But what do I do?” Sebastian said, looking up at John, who glanced towards the door leading into the hallway.

“You come back, Sebastian, and we expose the truth. You’re not mad, and you were never going to be,” he replied.

When Sebastian walked through the door later that day, his stepmother looked at him in surprise as she emerged from the drawing room.

“Oh... Sebastian, you're back? Didn't you leave?” she asked.

Sebastian shook his head, forcing his face into an expression of nonchalance.

“John took ill on the journey. We decided to come back. Bath can wait. Besides, I feel a little out of sorts myself. I'm going to retire for the evening. But I'll be at breakfast tomorrow morning. I presume I haven't forgotten anything else I needed to remember?” he said, and his stepmother shook her head.

“No, not at all. You rest, Sebastian. It'll do you good. I'm sorry to hear about Lord Cuthbert. I'm sure he'll be quite all right, though. He's got Elizabeth, after all,” she said, smiling at Sebastian, before returning to the drawing room.

Sebastian clenched his fists. All these years, his stepmother had been playing him for a fool. Her demeanor was always the same pleasant, but never overly familiar. She had carved a niche for herself, a cuckoo in the nest. Sebastian wondered what had brought her to Southbourne House all those years ago.

Had she ever truly loved his father, or had she and Sebastian's uncle always planned this wickedness? It made him shudder to think of it. And he retired to his room, instructing Langton to bring up a tray for him later in the evening.

"Her Ladyship thought you might like some coffee, my Lord. There's a pot here freshly made and piping hot," the butler said, when later he brought up Sebastian's dinner.

Sebastian thanked him, but as soon as the door was closed, he seized the pot, pulling off the lid and tossing the contents out of the window. There was no doubt in his mind as to the source of the poisoning, and it horrified him to think of the many apparent kindnesses his stepmother had shown him in bringing cups of coffee to his study. She had often lingered to watch him drink it, and now he knew her reason.

"Vile concoction," he thought to himself, examining the dregs in the pot, where a fine white sediment had collected around the rim.

He thought back to the “doctor” and his prescription, shuddering again at the thought of the many ways in which his stepmother and uncle had executed their plans.

“But not anymore,” he told himself, and eating only the slices of bread on his dinner tray reasoning as to Mrs. Pattison’s trustworthiness in preparation, Sebastian retired for an early night.

He awoke early the next morning, being methodical in his dress and appearance. He shaved and put on clean clothes, dousing himself with cologne, before making his way downstairs, and hoping the plans he and John had made were now in place. The smell of breakfast wafted from the dining room, and Sebastian’s heart was beating fast, knowing he was entering the lion’s den.

“Ah, Sebastian. I was sorry to hear about Lord Cuthbert. How unfortunate to find your visit to Bath cut short before it even began,” Sebastian’s uncle said.

He was eating a plate of deviled kidneys, a coffee pot placed in front of him. Sebastian sat down opposite, with his stepmother between them. She smiled at him, offering him the marmalade jar, as he took a slice of toast from the rack. Sebastian glanced towards the window, which looked out over the gardens. The curtains hung down on either side, plush red velvet reaching down to the floor.

“It couldn’t be helped, uncle. We’ll get there eventually or to Norfolk, perhaps,” Sebastian replied, spreading marmalade liberally on his toast.

“We should discuss the matter of the Norfolk holdings. But not now. In the coming days,” Lady Soutbourne said, and Sebastian nodded.

He was trying to maintain his composure, even as he wanted only to explode with rage, his anger tempered by the knowledge justice would soon be served.

“I agree. It’s time we made a decision,” Sebastian replied.

“Won’t you have some coffee? It’s a fresh pot. You can’t eat toast and marmalade without coffee,” his stepmother said.

Sebastian nodded, allowing his stepmother to pour it for him, watching as the steaming liquid filled his cup. She set down the coffeepot, smiling, as she watched Sebastian raise the cup to his lips. The aroma was bitter, just like that he had thrown out of the window the previous evening. His uncle, too, was watching, as though with anticipation. And Sebastian now took a sip, swallowing the hot coffee, and holding his stepmother’s gaze.

“Delicious,” he said, but with a sudden jerk, he dropped the cup, sending the contents across the table, the china smashing into a hundred pieces, as Sebastian fell from his chair, shaking, his body convulsing, as he writhed on the floor.

Lady Soutbourne screamed, and Sebastian’s uncle rose hurriedly to his feet, as Sebastian now lay still, his eyes wide and staring.

“My God, you put too much in it, you fool,” Sebastian’s uncle snarled, rushing to Sebastian’s side as his stepmother held her hands to her mouth.

“I didn’t it was the same as usual, just as Mr. Palin said. A spoonful, that’s all. He must’ve reacted last night’s he’s had too much. Oh... no, it can’t be. They’ll discover it. If he’s... he’s not... dead?” she stammered.

Sebastian’s uncle leaned over him, and his stepmother cautiously did the same. But as they did so, Sebastian blinked, and in a trice, he sprang to his feet. Lady Soutbourne screamed again, and Sebastian’s uncle fell back in horror, as now, from behind the left-hand curtain, John emerged, and from the right-hand curtain, another man, a magistrate of Sebastian’s acquaintance, emerged, too.

“You thought you’d killed me, didn’t you? Well, you’ve certainly succeeded in framing yourselves,” Sebastian exclaimed, gazing triumphantly at his stepmother and uncle, who now cowered at the magistrate’s presence.

“I think I’ve heard enough to corroborate your story, my Lord. I’ll see to the arrangements for prosecution,” the magistrate, a tall, lanky man, with graying hair, whom Sebastian had befriended during a legal dispute over monies owed him by a contractor, said.

“But... no, Sebastian, it’s not what you think. You think it was poison in the coffee? No, it was your tonic, the one prescribed for you. We were worried you weren’t taking it,” Lady Soutbourne said, but Sebastian shook his head.

“Nonsense. I know exactly what you’ve been doing. We heard it all in the hallway yesterday, the two of you conspiring. I suspected as much from you, uncle, but not from you... I trusted you, Victoria,” Sebastian said, shaking his head.

The door to the dining room now opened, and several members of the militia entered. They had been waiting outside for the signal, and John had just summoned them, as now they took Sebastian’s uncle and stepmother into custody. Sebastian watched them go, shaking his head, before sinking down into a chair by the window. John put his arm on his shoulder.

“You’re not mad, Sebastian. Do you believe it now?” he said, and Sebastian nodded.

Everything, the missing cigar case, the altered painting, the changes of dates and reminders of events. All of it along with the poison had been a deliberate and calculated attempt to drive Sebastian to believe the madness his grandfather had suffered was his own. His father had succumbed to it, and Sebastian could not help but feel a deep sense of sorrow at the thought of what the man he had loved and respected had suffered at the hands of Lady Southbourne and Sebastian’s uncle.

“I do, yes,” Sebastian replied, and now, he really did believe it.

He was not mad, and that fact brought with it a change, a change in his feelings towards Rosalind. He had pushed her away, forcing himself to believe there could be no future between them. But with the burden he had carried for so long now lifted, the possibility of finding the happiness he had believed lost had returned.

“And that means...” John said, smiling at Sebastian, who now rose to his feet.

“It means I can’t hide behind it any longer. It means... I could be with Rosalind,” he said.

“And you should hurry, Sebastian. She’s to marry Richard by special license this very week. Elizabeth told me as much. But there might still be a chance, if you act soon, that is. But don’t delay,” he said, imploring Sebastian to act, even as it still seemed an impossibility.

“I can only try,” Sebastian replied, and galvanized into action, and knowing his thoughts were entirely his own, he hurried from the dining room, calling for Langton to have a carriage summoned, intent on telling Rosalind the truth of his feelings, and proving he was not mad.

Chapter 32

“You’ll ride in an open top carriage, Rosalind. I know it’s only a small affair, but we want you to be seen, don’t we?” she said.

Rosalind had no interest in open top carriages, wedding dresses, or nuptial celebrations. Her fate was decided, and now she awaited it. It did not matter if she was dressed in rags or as a princess. The outcome would be the same. Her own unhappiness and the prospect of a lifetime of regret. She had no choice in the matter. The choice had been made for her.

“Whatever you say, mother,” she replied, gazing out of the window at some birds splashing in the birdbath.

How free they were, and how she wished she, too, could be free, free to fly away and never return. But Rosalind was trapped in a gilded cage. She would be the Duchess of Northridge, with all the finery and trappings to go with it.

She would have houses and estates, pretty clothes, and servants. Her every whim would be indulged, and yet all she really wanted to be was happy. She had been happy in Sebastian's arms, but it had all been a dream, the fantasy of a painting, rather than real life.

"I say an open top carriage, Rosalind. I want the whole ton to see my daughter married," Rosalind's mother said.

Her father was sitting with his leg propped up on a gout stool, and he nodded, and was about to say something further when the drawing door opened, and the butler appeared, looking flustered.

"I'm sorry, your Grace. He's insisting on seeing you immediately," he said, and behind him, to Rosalind's astonishment, came Sebastian.

She had not expected to see him again, to ever see him again. But here he was, as bold and brass, and striding into the room, he bowed to her, before turning to Rosalind's parents, both of whom looked astonished.

“Your Grace, I’ve come because I can’t bear to stay away. I need to tell you the truth. The truth of my love for your daughter and my intention to marry her, if she’ll agree to it,” he said.

Rosalind gasped, and her mother shrieked.

“Get him out of here. Edmund send him away,” she exclaimed, as Rosalind’s father staggered to his feet.

“What’s the meaning of this?” he demanded, but Sebastian now drew himself up, taking Rosalind’s hand in his and raising it to his lips.

“I love you, Rosalind. I love you with all my heart. I can’t bear to live without you. I’d rather die. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me? Just as we dreamed... just as we imagined it to be. Will you be mine and let me be yours? Just like the paintings,” he said.

Rosalind's heart skipped a beat. He was different, changed. Gone was his reticence, his fear replaced.

“But what's happened? What's changed? You know I will. You know I love you. But I thought... I thought it couldn't be,” she said, but he shook his head.

“There's so much I need to tell you. But I know I'm not mad they were driving me to it. They've been exposed. There was poison, my uncle, my stepmother...” he exclaimed, and it was as though he could not utter his explanation quickly enough, and now Rosalind began to understand.

He relayed the events of the last few days in haste, explaining how he and John had discovered the truth as to Lady Victoria's wicked intentions. Rosalind was shocked, but not entirely surprised. She had suspected something they both had.

But this was the proof they had needed, and she rejoiced with him in the knowledge of his sanity. There could be no holding back now, and as his explanation came to an end, she threw her arms around him and kissed him. Her mother let out another shriek.

“Rosalind, what are you doing?” she exclaimed, but Rosalind knew her own mind.

She knew her feelings for Sebastian, and nothing would now hold her back.

“I’m embracing the man I love, mother. The man I want to marry. The man I will marry. I love Sebastian, mother. You won’t stand in the way of our happiness, not now,” Rosalind replied.

She knew what she was doing about the scandal she would cause. But they would face it together, come what may. All that mattered was the truth about Sebastian. He was not mad. Nor would he be so. It had all been a lie. A terrible lie, one they had almost been broken by.

“Rosalind, I forbid it. You’re to marry the Duke of Northridge,” her father said, but Rosalind shook her head.

She was about to defend herself, but Sebastian now stepped forward.

“Your Grace, I know what you think of me. What you thought of me. But it isn’t true. None of it. I’m not mad. I won’t become mad. But I do know one thing: I’m madly in love with your daughter. She means everything to me.

And I swear to you on all that’s good and right, that I’ll love, honor, and protect for the rest of our earthly lives together. I intend to marry your daughter, your Grace. I’d rather do so with your permission. But if not, I’ll do so anyway. I don’t require a dowry, or anything from you. I merely implore you to consider your daughter’s happiness. Isn’t that all that matters?” he replied.

Rosalind’s father faltered. He glanced at her mother, who had fallen silent.

“You make an eloquent case, sir,” the duke replied, and Sebastian nodded.

“It comes from the heart, your Grace,” he said, putting his arm around Rosalind, who rested her head on his chest.

In his arms, nothing else mattered, and in his promise, there was nothing but sincerity. She trusted him, and she knew he would love her just as he said. Rosalind’s father was about to reply, but the door now burst open, and to Rosalind’s astonishment, though perhaps she should not have been surprised. Richard stood staring at the scene before him.

“You...” he snarled, advancing towards them, as Sebastian stepped in front of Rosalind to protect her.

“I’ve made up my mind, Richard. I won’t marry you,” Rosalind said.

The duke stopped in his tracks, staring at Rosalind, who faced him defiantly.

“I find you in the arms of another man, and you think I’d still want to marry you? You’re nothing but a slut, Rosalind, just like the women in those paintings you love so much,” Richard snarled.

“Then at least I’m a happy one. I’d rather be the butt of scandal, then your wife,” Rosalind replied, for she no longer cared what anyone thought of her.

The women in those paintings, the paintings she loved so much, were free. They had cast off the shackles of societal expectations, the revealing of their bodies a show of defiance against a world where women were forced into corsets and petticoats, every part of their bodies concealed lest it arouse the temptations of men.

But Rosalind wanted to be free, and in coming to love Sebastian, she had realized she could be so. It had always been

her dream to step into the frames of those paintings, to be like those women, to be free. Now she was, and she was happy.

“Your Grace, please, wait a moment,” Rosalind’s mother said, tears rolling down her cheeks, as she reached out her hands to him imploringly, but Richard shook his head.

“I’ve been played a fool for long enough by all of you. No... let the little slut marry the madman. See if I care,” he replied, and turning on his heels, he marched out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Rosalind’s mother promptly fainted, and Rosalind rushed to her side, pulling out a bottle of smelling salts to revive her. As the duchess opened her eyes, she gazed up at Rosalind with tears in her eyes.

“Oh, Rosalind, what have you done?” she said, her voice sounding weak and distant.

Rosalind smiled.

“I’ve made the right choice, mother. That’s what,” she replied, and glancing up at Sebastian, she held out her hand to him.

He took it, kneeling at the duchess’ side, the two of them looking down at her, as she sighed and shook her head.

“I just wanted you to be happy, Rosalind,” she said, and Rosalind placed her hand on her mother’s arm.

“But can’t you see I am, mother? Sebastian makes me happy. That’s all I need. And if it’s what you want, too, then give us your blessing,” she said.

The duchess sighed.

“Very well, Rosalind, you have it for what it’s worth, you have it,” she replied, and Rosalind now turned to Sebastian, who leaned forward and kissed her, the happy prospect of marriage now awaiting them, a new portrait for a new day.

Epilogue

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this Congregation, to join together this man and this woman in holy Matrimony; which is an honorable estate, instituted of God in the time of man’s innocency, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church...” the rector began, pronouncing the words from the prayer book, as Rosalind and Sebastian stood before him.

The church was a small one, and the congregation matched its size. Rosalind and Sebastian were joined by Elizabeth and John, Rosalind’s mother and father, along with Molly, the maid. They had invited no one else to witness the ceremony, and there was to be no grand celebration to follow.

All that mattered was their vows, and exchanging them before God. Rosalind was wearing a pretty dress, white linen, with a lace trim, and Sebastian was dressed in a new blue frock coat and breeches. He looked very dashing, and as Rosalind had entered the church escorted by John, owing to her father’s gout his face had lit up with a smile.

“I love you, Rosalind,” he whispered, as the rector pronounced the final words of the service, closing his prayerbook as the small congregation apart from Rosalind’s father stood.

Her mother had resigned herself to this moment, and during the carriage ride that morning, she had expressed a hint of gladness at the fact of Rosalind’s marriage.

“Married to an earl... there could be worse things, Rosalind,” she had said, and Rosalind had smiled, taking her mother’s words as a sign of tacit approval.

“Congratulations to you both,” Elizabeth exclaimed, as she and John hurried to greet the newly married couple.

Sebastian and Lord Cuthbert shook hands, and Elizabeth and Rosalind embraced. Rosalind could not have felt happier in that moment, and now she slipped her arm into Sebastian’s, the man she could now call her husband.

“But what will you do now?” John asked, for there was not even to be a dinner or formal reception.

Rosalind and Sebastian glanced at one another and smiled.

“We go to Norfolk tomorrow, but spend the night here in London. Rosalind’s parents have graciously allowed us to reside with them overnight, and we’ll leave first thing in the morning,” Sebastian replied.

Rosalind was glad they would be spending their first night together in the very place she had painted them as Ariadne and Dionysus. She had a surprise for him, and having thanked the rector, and paid their dues to Rosalind’s parents, the two of them set off by carriage, returning to Rosalind’s house, where Molly had prepared the room for them.

“So, this is where you paint, is it?” Sebastian said, as Rosalind closed the door behind them.

“In secret, yes. But it doesn’t need to be in secret now, does it? I can paint whenever I wish, and wherever I wish. But we haven’t even decided where we’ll live or what we’ll do,” Rosalind said, for their marriage had been a hasty one, and the practicalities of the future had not yet been decided on.

“I think you’ll like Norfolk. There’s a little village there, right on the coast, with brightly painted houses, and I have a dream of painting you there, in a room flooded with light, as you recline for me in front of a window, looking out to sea,” Sebastian replied.

Rosalind laughed. She liked the idea, and now he took her in his arms, kissing her as she slid her arms around his waist.

“Then you shall. But there’s something I want to show you a present for you,” she said, as their lips parted.

He held onto her hand, wanting to keep her in his embrace, but she pulled him towards an easel in the corner, where a canvas was covered with a drape.

“Can I pull it back?” he asked, and she nodded, holding her breath, as he reached out to pull back the drape.

The material fell in folds, revealing the canvas beneath, and Rosalind smiled as Sebastian’s eyes grew wide with delight. The painting was of them not in the character of a Greek myth, or imagined in some dreamlike setting, but together, reclining in the nude, their hands clasped together, Rosalind’s head resting on Sebastian’s shoulder. They were gazing into one another’s eyes, their lips almost meeting in a kiss, a scene of passion and love.

“Do you like it?” she asked, and he nodded.

“I think it’s beautiful, Rosalind, as beautiful as I so often imagined you, when I couldn’t hold you as I do now. But nothing compares to this,” he whispered, turning to her, and slipping his arms around her.

For a moment, their poise was that of the painting, but unlike the scene on the canvas, they themselves were not frozen in

time, and as their lips met, Rosalind let out a deep sigh, caught up now in the passion they had so long desired of one another. Nothing held them back. They belonged to one another, entwined as one, passionate as one, making love as one.

“I love you, Sebastian,” she whispered, arching her neck, as his lips traced a trail along the collar of her dress, their hands clasped together.

“And I love you, too, Rosalind. I’ve loved you since the moment I set eyes on you,” he whispered, pulling at the cords of her dress, which slipped down to the floor, revealing the very form she had painted, and which now he could gaze on without fear.

He led her to the bed, and they fell amid the silk sheets, their bodies entwined, becoming as one, as Sebastian pulled off his shirt and breeches, exposing himself to the same gaze as in the painting. She smiled at him, their lips meeting in a kiss, his hands fondling at her breasts, pulling her closer into his embrace.

This was her desire, as it had always been the desire to be part of the paintings she so often imagined herself into. Now, she

was she was that figure, as was he, and they would create their own work of art together.

“I never imagined we would be together, not like this,” she whispered, and he smiled.

“But we are, and nothing else matters,” he replied, as now he took her in his arms, their bodies as one, making love, just as Rosalind had desired.

His arms enfolded her, his lips pressed against hers, and with a gasp, he brought his fullness to bear on her, flooding her with such ecstasy as to be overwhelming. She had not imagined it could be like this, and now there was no holding back, pain turning to pleasure. Her eyes closed, as Sebastian’s rhythm became faster, and she clasped at him, letting out a sudden cry.

Her whole body was flooded with the heat of passion, and with a cry, Sebastian, too, gave forth, their bodies shuddering together, clasping at one another, their lips pressed together in a kiss. For a few moments, they lay together, neither able to speak, breathless, and still entwined.

“Just like the paintings,” Rosalind whispered, and Sebastian opened his eyes and smiled at her.

He brushed back the hair from her cheek and kissed her.

“Oh, but isn’t it so much better to create our own masterpiece, than gaze on those of others?” he replied, and in this, and in everything they had shared, there was no doubt in Rosalind’s mind, they had done just that.

THE END ?

*Can't get enough of Rosalind and Sebastian? Then make sure
to check out the [Extended Epilogue](#) to find out...*

What special gift will Sebastian give Rosalind and how will she react?

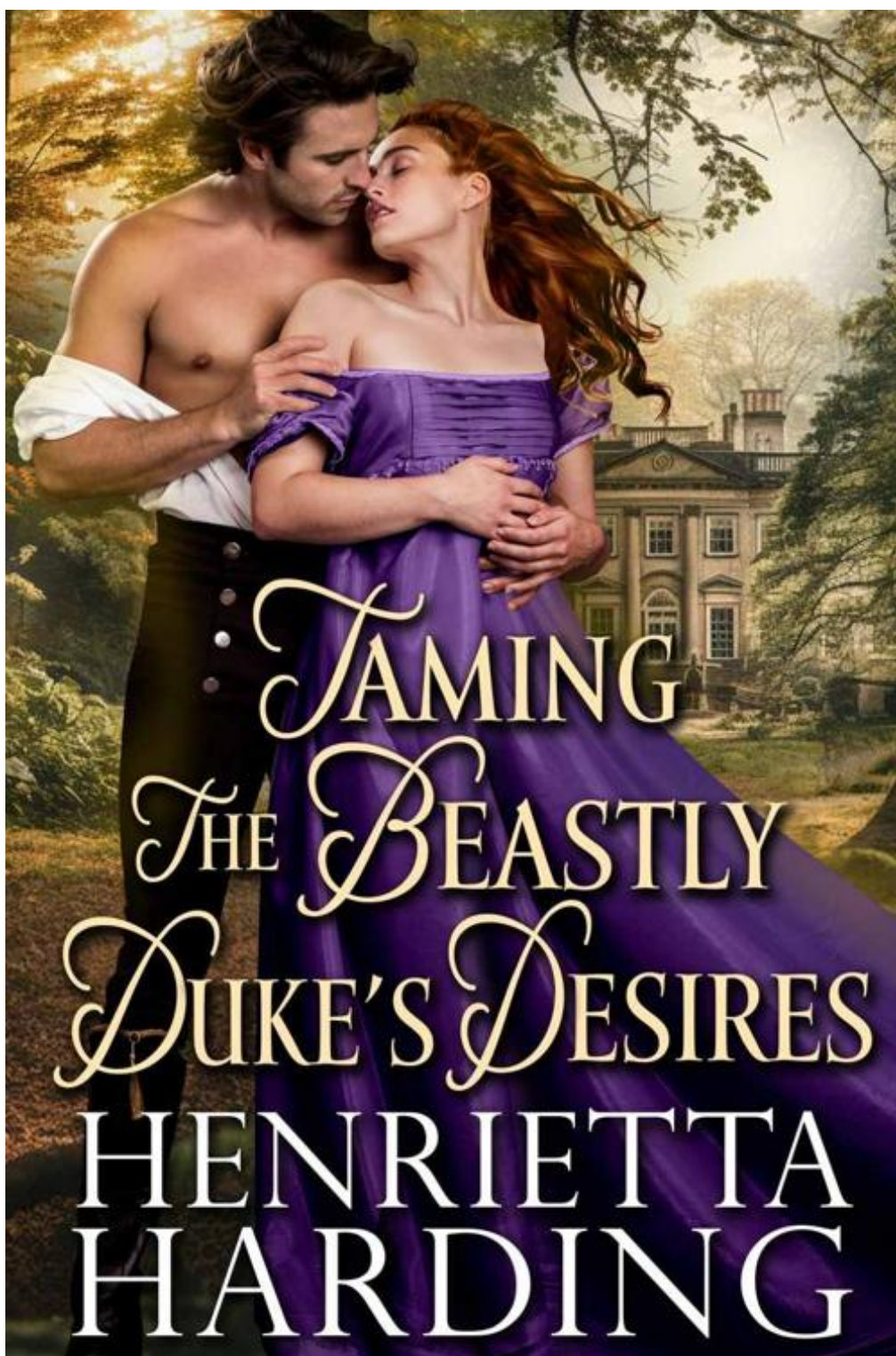
How will the notorious Victoria end up?

What will Rosalind's parents think of her choices? Will they change their mind over the years?

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<http://henriettaharding.com/rosalind>

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first chapters from “**Taming the Beastly Duke’s Desires**”, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*



TAMING
THE BEASTLY
DUKE'S DESIRES
HENRIETTA
HARDING

Taming the Beastly Duke's Desires

Introduction

The fiery Charlotte Evans never expected to return to Raven Valley, but when an unexpected invitation arrives from her aunt, she finds herself drawn back to the place where her love of plants and flowers was first kindled, a place of mystery and memories. Yet, amid nature's breathtaking charm, she becomes enmeshed in the enigma spun by her neighbour, the tempting Duke of Whitmore. When circumstances bring them scandalously closer, and a mystery unfolds...

Will Charlotte find a different side to the devilish man who at first called her a trespasser?

William Sinclair is a man with a secret past, and a desire to be left alone. Yet, when he encounters the alluring Charlotte trespassing on his land, his reclusive intentions are tested, and he finds himself at odds with burning thirst for solitude. As events take a dramatic turn, William discovers he can no longer rely solely on himself, and in Charlotte's enticing company, he begins to realise he does not have to.

Can his forbidden desire bloom entwined with the malevolent blossoms of his past?

As Charlotte and William face their unexpected challenges together, can they put their differences aside, and find common ground, no longer as trespassers on one another's land, but as trespassers on one another's hearts? Against the backdrop of the secluded valley, where passion blooms on every side, Charlotte and William find an unexpected blossoming of sinful romance. However, will their lust's fragrance overpower the

ghosts of yesterday and make what at first seemed impossible, possible? Or is it doomed to wither in time?

Chapter 1

Northumberland, England

Spring - 1813

“Is this really the way to Ravenwood Manor?” Charlotte Evans called out, pulling down the carriage window and leaning out.

The jolting of the carriage was becoming quite unbearable, and it had been almost an hour since they had passed the last signpost on the northern road, taking any number of ever more obscure turns as they went. She leaned further out as the carriage driver turned and nodded.

“This is the way, Lady Charlotte. I thought you’d been here before,” he said.

Charlotte nodded. She *had* been there before, but it had been many years ago, when she was only a child. The countryside looked different, somehow—vast stretches of rolling moorland on every side, dotted with the occasional tree or lonely farm.

It was unrecognisable now. In her childhood, her visits to Ravenwood Manor had been an adventure, but now, aged twenty-two, and still reeling from the tragic death of her parents, the journey was becoming burdensome. She had left Chatham—her father’s dukedom—almost a week ago, and her journey north had been long and tiring.

“It’s been fifteen years since I was last here,” Charlotte replied, looking out across the moorland for anything remotely familiar.

“We’re coming to the head of the valley now, Lady Charlotte. A few more miles, then we’ll be there. I’ll be glad of a bed in the stables; so will the horses,” the carriage driver said. Charlotte pulled up the window and sat back in the compartment with a sigh.

She did not know why her father stopped coming to his ancestral home all those years ago—a falling out with his sister, Charlotte’s aunt, and then...

“It was such a strange business. He never spoke of it, but it’s been so long. And my aunt...what’s she going to be like after all these years? She was most insistent I come. Guilt, perhaps,” Charlotte said aloud, taking out the letter her aunt had sent her.

It had arrived a month ago, offering Lady Margaret’s deepest condolences on the death of her brother and inviting Charlotte to stay with her in Northumberland. It had been a strange letter—the condolences formal, as though Charlotte’s aunt had shed no tears for the passing of her brother.

Charlotte had not particularly wanted to go. Her aunt was now a distant figure and had shown little interest in her since falling out with Charlotte’s father all those years ago. Charlotte’s life was in the south. She had supportive friends there, and the benefits of society all around her. Charlotte’s only family was her aunt.

And with no male relative to inherit her father's estate and title following his death, Charlotte had found herself without any form of income. Her aunt's invitation had come at just the right time, and Charlotte had rented her father's estate to the member of parliament for Chatham, before making the journey north.

"You'll find Ravenwood Manor much the same as you remember it, I'm sure, and it'll be such a delight to have you here. You can stay as long as you wish. We'll be good company for one another. I remember just how much you adored the grounds and woods when you were a child," her aunt had written, and Charlotte now read over the words again, reminded of the happy days she had spent at Ravenwood Manor as a child.

"I did love the grounds, especially the rose garden with its hundreds of perfumed blooms. And the strange wooden door leading through the wall into the woods where the bluebells carpeted the ground in spring. And the sunken ponds, where the air smelled damp and heady, and the rhododendrons grew with their towering mass of flowers. And...oh, it was beautiful, but...it won't be like that now," Charlotte said aloud to herself.

The eyes of a child always saw things differently, and it was perhaps for that reason she found nothing familiar in the landscape they were passing. Charlotte had grown up, and

Ravenwood Manor now seemed a strange and unfamiliar place to be returning to.

She did not know what she would find there. Perhaps only lingering memories and the sense of a past she had long left behind. Both her parents were dead, her father having died within a few months of her mother, who succumbed to a dreadful fever.

But where else am I to go? she asked herself.

The answer was nowhere. Her aunt was the only family she now had, and with her father's estate now let, Charlotte could do nothing but accept Lady Margaret's invitation. The carriage was now trundling down a steep track, with hedges growing tall on either side.

Trees arched above, creating a canopy of dappled shade, and Charlotte remembered this being the route into the valley, a winding lane, now crossing a river, and following the course of the water. This was the River Raven, after which the manor was named.

“I never understood why it was built so far away from anywhere. No wonder my father bought the estate in Chatham and left my aunt here,” Charlotte thought to herself.

As a child, the remoteness of the Ravenwood estate had seemed magical and otherworldly. But now, without the eyes of a child to see through, Charlotte could only think it lonely and isolated.

There would be no society here, no friends to call on, no balls to be invited to, and no salons in which to sit and take tea... even though she detested such things as a rule. But Charlotte would only have her aunt for company, and she feared the two of them might not get on.

“I’m going to have to take a lot of walks,” Charlotte said to herself, and she could at least look forward to finding those many places she had played as a child, and discovering new ones, too.

Charlotte was something of a botanist, entirely self-taught, but still an expert on plants and their medicinal uses. In this, she had followed in her father's footsteps. He had built a hothouse on their estate at Chatham and had collected all manner of exotic plants from around the world in his youth when he and Charlotte's mother had made expeditions to the new world and the orient.

Charlotte had inherited her father's love of plants, and it had been at Ravenwood Manor where he had first introduced her to the joys of plant collecting.

"Every plant has a use, Charlotte. It's just a matter of finding it," he would say, and Charlotte had grown up learning all the different uses of the plants she found in the gardens, both at home and at Ravenwood Manor.

The one saving grace of her move north was seeing the gardens again. Even if her aunt proved less than pleasant company, Charlotte knew she would have the gardens, woods, and moorland to walk about and discover plants both old and new.

“The one saving grace in all of this,” she thought to herself, as the carriage followed the course of the river along the valley.

As it curved, Charlotte caught her first glance of Ravenwood Manor, framed between the tall oaks growing on the riverbank. It had not changed, even in all the years since she had last set eyes on it.

The valley had a timeless quality to it, and the house was just the same. It was built of sandstone, with gable ends, and a wing on one side, built as an addition by Charlotte’s paternal grandfather. The roof was steep, with a dozen chimneys lining the ridge, and many of the windows were shuttered.

It must be so lonely for my aunt. She’s a recluse, Charlotte thought to herself, as now the carriage pulled through the open gates and along the tree lined drive, sweeping onto the forecourt, which commanded a view across the garden to the hills beyond.

The valley of the River Raven cut through the moorland, creating a contrast between heather and woodland. The trees grew steeply on the valley sides, rising to make Ravenwood Manor almost invisible until an approach was made. It was

like another world, secret and hidden away from prying eyes. The carriage driver jumped down from the buckboard and opened the door of the compartment.

“There we are, Lady Charlotte. Safely here,” he said, as Charlotte climbed down from the carriage.

The air was sweet with the scent of the gardens. It was a damp, earthy smell, and Charlotte could hear the pleasant running of water in the river below the house. The last time she had stood there, she had been ten years old, and her aunt had kissed her with tears in her eyes.

“You’ll bring her back soon, won’t you, Archibald?” she had said, clutching Charlotte’s father’s hand as she spoke.

“We’ll see, Margaret. I’ve got a lot to think about,” he had replied.

Charlotte remembered the conversation vividly. Not because she had understood it, but for the opposite reason. She did not understand why her parents had never returned to Ravenwood Manor, even as her aunt had begged them to do so. But now she was here, a sense of familiarity came over her. What seemed to be another world once again became her world, as though the house and grounds had been waiting for her return.

“It’s a strange place,” Charlotte said, as the carriage driver looked around him with interest.

“I don’t think I’ve ever known a house so remote as this,” he said, shaking his head.

At that moment, the door opened, and the once familiar figure of Charlotte’s aunt’s butler appeared. His name was Collingwood, and whilst he had aged considerably in the past fifteen years, he was still recognizable by his smile.

“Miss Charlotte, as I live and breathe, you’ve come back then,” he said, and Charlotte smiled.

“Good day, Collingwood. How nice it is to see you again after all these years. I don’t think Ravenwood Manor looks any different to how I remember it. But I suppose we change, don’t we?” she said, and the butler nodded.

“We all change, Lady Charlotte, but Ravenwood stays the same,” he said, glancing back towards the house.

The carriage driver had unloaded Charlotte’s trunks from the carriage, and the kitchen boy now came running at Collingwood’s summons. Charlotte followed them into the house. As she stepped across the threshold, a familiar sound transported her back to her childhood.

It was the ticking of the grandfather clock in the corner of the hallway. It had belonged to her paternal grandmother, who had always prided herself on it keeping time, or so her father had always told her.

“She’d wind it up every morning at nine o’clock and stand here listening to it chime,” he had said. Now it chimed, just as it always had.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon, and Charlotte stood listening to the familiar striking of the pendants. She smiled as the butler turned to her.

“Her Ladyship winds it every day,” he said, reinforcing Charlotte’s memory of her father’s words.

“Is my aunt here?” Charlotte asked, for she had seen no sign of Lady Margaret, as now she looked around the familiar hallway, unchanged in all the years she had been away.

The walls were lined with the same portraits. Her father and aunt when they were children, sitting with long forgotten dogs on the lawn behind the house, ancestors whose names had disappeared into obscurity, and a portrait of Henry VII. He had been monarch when the house and lands were gifted to Charlotte’s family for their siding with the king during the civil wars which ended the Plantagenet dynasty.

“She’s resting, Lady Charlotte. I’m to make you comfortable, though,” Collingwood said, but Charlotte had no desire to rest.

She had been sitting in the carriage for most of the day, and she was keen to step out into the gardens and be reminded of that same familiarity she had now experienced in the house.

“I’ll go out, I think. I won’t be long. But I want to...well, I want it to feel familiar,” Charlotte said, and the butler smiled.

His hair was grey now, and he walked with a slight stoop. But Charlotte remembered when he would carry her on his shoulders around the house or lift her up into the apple trees to pluck the ripest fruits from the branches.

“It’s good to have you back here, Lady Charlotte. The house... it’s missed you, though I’m surprised you don’t arrive with a young man in tow; if you’ll pardon me for saying so. I always imagined seeing you married,” he said, blushing a little, as Charlotte smiled.

“No, Collingwood. I don’t think I’ll be getting married,” Charlotte replied, shaking her head as she thought back to some of the disastrous reasons why marriage was not something she was immediately considering.

Her parents had tried to introduce her to eligible young men, but more often than not, the expectations of these would be suitors did not match her own. There had been the time she had spoken lyrically and with great enthusiasm to the son of Lord and Lady Ashby about the various merits of snake venom. Suffice to say, he had not called on her the following day.

Then there had been the disaster with the Duke of Brentwood’s son, Oliver, whom Charlotte had insisted the giant water lily pads in her father’s hot house could support his weight. He had ended up floundering in the pond, soaked through, and had caught a cold from which he had barely recovered.

Charlotte had not heard from him again, either. She was, by her own estimation, not like other women, and whilst she tried her best to feign interest in balls and soirees, Charlotte’s true love lay in botany and the natural world. She was fascinated by it and would use any excuse to share her interest with

others. Her audience did not always enjoy or appreciate her thoughts on botany, though.

“Oh, but perhaps...I’m sure you will, Lady Charlotte,” Collingwood replied.

But Charlotte was eager to be outside, and now she hurried to change her shoes and turn up the folds of her skirts, intending to make the once familiar walk through the gardens and into the woodland before returning to greet her aunt later on. Calling out her goodbyes to Collingwood, Charlotte stepped out into the garden, breathing in the fresh, damp air, and making her way around the back of the house.

It’s just as I remember it, she said to herself, delighting in the resurgence of memories.

There was the tree her father had attached a swing to for her when she was six years old and there was the pond by which she and her mother would sit and picnic. The garden was in bloom, and everywhere she looked, flowers and plants were bursting into life: rhododendrons, roses, lilies, coneflowers, iris, lavender, in every colour imaginable.

Pinks and purples, deep shades of reds and oranges, yellows and magentas. The scent was heady and intoxicating, and as Charlotte made her way further into the garden, it was as though she was stepping back in time to a moment when she was not yet grown up, not yet bloomed, and every possibility lay before her.

I hadn't realised what I was missing, she said to herself, feeling as though she, too, was blooming like the flowers in the garden.

Chapter 2

“No, damn it, not like that. I can’t do it myself, tie it tightly,” William Sinclair exclaimed, as his servant, Rupert, tried to lace up his left boot.

“I’m sorry, your Grace, it’s just...you need to move your foot this way,” the servant replied, indicating the easier position.

William gave an exasperated cry.

“Damn it, Rupert. I can’t do it myself, can I? If I could, I wouldn’t have you crouching on the floor. It’s not my fault I can’t lace up my own boot, is it? If it wasn’t for that bloody Frenchman, perhaps I wouldn’t have to rely on you. Lace it up, quickly. Now, I want to go out. If I don’t move the damn thing, it’ll seize up,” William snarled, and the servant hurried to tighten the lace.

“There we are, your Grace. It’s done now. Shall I help you? You can lean on me if you wish,” Rupert said.

“The day I lean on you, Rupert, is the day I accept defeat. I know you’re only trying to help me. You’ve been my loyal batman all these years, but I’ll do it myself. Do you understand?” William replied.

The servant straightened up, stepping back and nodding.

“Yes, your Grace,” he replied, as William took a deep breath and allowed the weight on his legs to balance.

He clenched his teeth, breathing through the pain on setting his left leg equal to his right. It had been a war wound he got on the Iberian Peninsula fighting against the French. William was a decorated officer, but the injury at the hands of a French skirmish had brought his distinguished military career to an end.

Ever since, William had lived with the pain of his injury, sustained from an errant gunshot during a skirmish, and every day he battled through the pain, insisting on walking on his injured leg, despite the advice of others not to do so.

“You’ll only make it worse, William,” the army surgeon had said, but William was adamant.

He was a stubborn man, used to getting his own way, and having retired to his Northumberland estate, William was now something of a recluse. Rupert had been his batman, his servant, his right-hand man, on the Iberian Peninsula and he, too, had returned to England following William’s injury.

He was loyal beyond all expectation, and whilst William would not openly admit it, he could not do without him, the pain in his leg growing progressively worse with each passing day.

“I’ll be back later. Have something ready for me to eat,” William said, and Rupert nodded.

“Yes, your Grace,” he replied, as William hobbled across the hallway.

He had lived at Raven Grange for the past five years, becoming something of a recluse in that time, and living without staff or servants, apart from Rupert, in the glorious isolation of the Raven Valley. His nearest neighbour was Lady Margaret Sweeting, a recluse in her own right, the two of them having barely met, save on a couple of occasions when their paths crossed in the woods, or William rode past her carriage on the track by the river.

That was how he liked it, for William had no desire to make friends. He lived with his memories, still with that same discipline he had known in the military and determined not to allow his injury to get the better of him.

“You’ll have to help me on the steps,” William said, for he refused to use a stick, and now Rupert stepped forward, taking William by the arm, and helping him down to the door.

Raven Grange was a sprawling house, built at the head of the valley in the sandstone matching other dwellings on the moor. From the door of the house, William could see down the full length of the valley, across the woodlands, and above the chimneys of Ravenwood Manor. Smoke was rising from the chimneys, and William wondered what would become of Lady Margaret when she was too old to manage the isolation of her valley dwelling.

If I could get rid of her, I'd have the whole valley to myself, William thought to himself, as he walked across the flagstones at the front of the house, taking his usual path through the trees.

William was too stubborn to admit the pain his injury gave him. He did not even walk with a limp, preferring to endure the pain through gritted teeth, and refusing to show any sign of weakness, except in private to Rupert.

It's not getting any worse. If I can do this walk each day, I'll never admit defeat, he said to himself, taking the familiar path through the trees and following a stream leading to the river below.

It was the same walk every day, approximately three miles in length, and taking William just over an hour to complete. He enjoyed the solitude, the peace of the woodland, and a chance to reminisce about old times. He was thirty-three years old and resented the fact of his injury. William should still be fighting battles and leading men to victory.

He did not relish his life as it was, even as he had no choice in the matter, and lived as a recluse to avoid the awkwardness of explanation. In this, he was content, or so he told himself. Solitude, peace, reminiscence; that was what he wanted, and that was what he had. He had never married, nor did he court friendships of any kind.

Rupert was his companion, and William spent his days reading and writing his memoirs in the study at Raven Grange. Apart from his walk, he did not go out, and he could not remember the last time he had encountered anyone but Lady Margaret in the valley.

“And let it stay like that,” he thought to himself, as he made his way down the familiar path by the stream.

But as he came to the bottom of the hill, where the stream joined the river, William was surprised to see a woman, her skirts pulled up, her feet bare, stepping gingerly into the water. It surprised him, and he stared at her in astonishment. She had not yet seen him, and now she began to sing, her words familiar to him from his childhood.

*How many kinds of sweet flowers grow
In an English country garden?
We'll tell you now of some that we know
Those we miss you'll surely pardon
Daffodils, heart's ease and phlox
Meadowsweet and lady smocks
Gentian, lupin and tall hollyhocks
Roses, foxgloves, snowdrops, forget-me-nots
In an English country garden*

I wonder who she might be? She's on my land as soon as she steps into the water, William said to himself, still watching, as the woman stepped gingerly down from the bank.

His eyes narrowed, watching her, and wondering what to do next. William did not take kindly to trespassers, and having never seen her before, he decided to scare her off.

Charlotte had been wandering in the gardens for over an hour, exploring all the familiar places she had once known, and delighting in the happy memories of that beautiful place. The door through the garden wall had taken her into the woodland, where tall trees grew above the mossy floor and ferns grew in abundance.

A path led down to the river, and Charlotte had remembered the place her father had taught her to swim when she was a child. There was a pool at the confluence between the river and a stream, deep and clear, its waters invitingly blue, and reflecting the dappled sunlight streaming through the canopy above.

Isn't it beautiful? Why did we stay away for so long? she asked herself, taking off her shoes and stockings, and intending to wade into the water.

She had a mind to swim, though she thought her aunt would disapprove if she returned wet through to the house. As she

had walked, Charlotte had hummed a tune her mother had taught her when she was a child. It was all about the garden, and now, as she stood at the water's edge, she sang the words as best she remembered them.

*How many insects come here and go
In an English country garden?
We'll tell you now of some that we know
Those we miss you'll surely pardon
Fireflies, moths and bees,
Spiders climbing in the trees
Butterflies drift in the gentle breeze
There are snakes, ants that sting
And other creeping things
In an English country garden.*

The words reminded Charlotte of her mother, and she smiled at the thought of all the happy memories she had of Ravenwood Manor and the valley. The water was icy cold, but pleasantly so on a warm day, and Charlotte waded a little further into the depths, contemplating whether to launch herself fully into the water.

I could just say I fell in, she thought to herself, but as she took another step forward, a shout from the far bank caused her to look up in alarm.

The noise echoed through the trees, causing a flock of birds to rise into the sky. Charlotte saw a man, a tall man with a powerful physique. Muscular and handsome, with dark brown, almost black, hair, watching her from the opposite bank. His appearance was alarming. Charlotte had not expected to see anyone in the valley, and now she stared at him fearfully, as he shouted at her again.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he demanded.

“I...I’m not doing anything. It’s a hot day. I took my shoes and stockings off to wade into the water. I’ve been coming here since I was a child,” Charlotte replied, feeling suddenly defensive.

If anything, her question to him could be the same. The valley belonged to her family, and she had every right to be there.

“Is that so? Do you mean you’ve been trespassing since you were a child?” he demanded.

Charlotte shook her head. This was extraordinary, even as the man appeared livid with rage.

“I’m not trespassing. This is my family’s estate,” she retorted.

“Not when you step into the water, it’s not. The river marks the boundary between my land and Lady Margaret’s. You’re trespassing. Now get back, or do I have to make you?” he cried, advancing towards the riverbank, and taking a step into the water.

Charlotte fancied she detected something of a limp in the way he was walking. Whilst she felt certain she could outrun him, the thought of him catching her filled her with terror. He was nothing but an unpleasant bully, and Charlotte was certain she would ask her aunt all about him as soon as she returned to Ravenwood Manor.

“We always swam here when I was a child. Why do you care so much?” Charlotte replied, retreating to the riverbank, and pulling on her shoes and stockings as the stranger continued to watch her from the opposite side of the river.

“I don’t care who you are, or what you used to do. This is my land, and I’ll keep you off it, if I wish. Do you understand me?” he demanded.

Charlotte nodded. There was no point in arguing. He was nothing but an arrogant bully, and she wished to have nothing more to do with him. His appearance and angry words had sullied the pleasant memories she had of the river. Now she retreated up the bank, glancing behind her, as the stranger continued to watch her.

“I’m going to tell my aunt all about you,” she called out, once she was a safe distance away from him.

“If I catch you here again...” he replied, his words hanging menacingly in the air.

Charlotte turned and hurried up the bank, slipping in her haste and going over on her ankle. She looked back, clutching her foot in pain, but the stranger was gone, and feeling suddenly terrified, she fled, hobbling through the woods, and not stopping until she reached the door through the wall into the garden. She was breathless, looking back over her shoulder for any sign of pursuit. But the woodland was quiet, and her encounter with the stranger seemed almost like a dream.

How horrible, she thought to herself, for it was as though the child innocence of Ravenwood Manor was shattered, replaced by the fear of a stranger, and the threat of what might come next.

William watched the woman scrambling up the bank, shaking his head, as he turned and pushed his way through the undergrowth and back to the path. She had been terrified, and whilst there might have been a time when William felt a modicum of guilt for having scared her, now he felt nothing but indifference.

She had been trespassing, and he had warned her off. She would think twice before bathing in the river again. Whether she was who said she was or not.

I didn't realise Lady Margaret had a niece, he thought as he continued along his way.

But in truth, William knew nothing about his neighbour, nor was he particularly interested in her, either. He kept himself to himself, as did she. But the arrival of the stranger could upset the peace and tranquillity of the valley, and that was why William had been so forceful in his anger towards her. He wanted that peace. He craved it. It was safety for him and far from the prying eyes of the world.

I'll be glad not to see her again, as pretty as she was, he thought to himself.

The sight of the young woman with her skirts hitched up *had* been alluring, with her dark red hair and willowy figure, standing in the flowing water. She was pretty, even in her anger at being challenged, her cheeks flushed red and her bright eyes glinting in the dappled sunlight.

William was not used to seeing women, apart from the charwoman who came once a week by horse and trap to bring provisions from the nearest village and take his washing to be laundered. But she hardly counted. She was a wizened old creature in whom William took no interest. But the sight of Lady Margaret's niece was different, and William smiled to himself at the thought of seeing her in such an innocent state.

If I'd been but a few moments later, perhaps she'd have been wearing nothing, he said to himself, shaking his head, even as the thought was a pleasant one.

It *was* a pleasant one, but William dismissed it out of hand, reminding himself of the danger of allowing others into his well-ordered world. The woman was not welcome. No stranger was welcome, and William would deal ruthlessly with anyone found trespassing on his land.

He walked slowly back up the hill towards Raven Grange, pausing to look back across the valley, and wondering if the woman was even now informing her aunt of the beastly man she had encountered in the woodland.

“I hope she does, and I hope Lady Margaret makes a point of reminding her niece of the necessity of keeping out of my way,” William thought to himself, knowing just what he would do if he found the woman trespassing on his land again.

Chapter 3

“You’ve been gone quite some time, Lady Charlotte. I was beginning to worry,” Collingwood said, as Charlotte entered the house to find her aunt’s butler waiting for her in the hallway.

Her dress was muddied, and the hem torn, and she fancied she looked quite dishevelled, having scrambled up the bank from the river and pushed her way hurriedly through the undergrowth and back to the door in the wall of the garden.

She was breathless, though would not admit to being scared. The man she had encountered was nothing but a bully, and she had every intention of informing her aunt about his behaviour as soon as she saw her.

“I...yes, I lost track of time. Is it very late, Collingwood?” Charlotte asked, for she really had no sense of how long she had been gone.

“It’s teatime, Lady Charlotte. It’s laid out in the drawing room for you. But I’m afraid your aunt’s not feeling well. She’s retired with a megrim. She apologises and promises to see you in the morning. Will you take some refreshment now?” Collingwood asked.

Charlotte was disappointed not to see her aunt. It seemed strange to think she would pass the night at Ravenwood Manor without seeing its chief occupant. Nevertheless, there was nothing for it but to agree.

Tea was a rustic affair with toasted teacakes with butter; scones with jam and cream; and thickly cut sandwiches with ham and strong mustard. Charlotte ate hungrily, and having drunk two cups of tea, she retired to her bedroom, overlooking the gardens at the back of the house.

“If my aunt won’t be dining this evening, there’s little reason for me to do so, Collingwood. Besides, I’m tired, and I’d like to go to bed,” Charlotte had told the butler, who had appeared relieved at the thought of an evening off from his duties.

Lady Margaret kept only a small staff at Ravenwood Manor and Collingwood acted as both footman and butler when it came to the serving of dinner and luncheon.

“As you wish, Lady Charlotte,” he had said, furnishing her with fresh candles and a tinderbox.

As a child, Charlotte had occupied a bedroom on the side of the house, but tonight, she was to sleep in the room where once her parents had resided. It was comfortably furnished, with a four poster bed, an oak chest, a writing table, and washstand. There were chairs by the hearth, and the maid came to set a fire, as Charlotte busied herself with unpacking the few possessions she had brought from the south.

“It’s Elsie, isn’t it?” Charlotte said, as the maid busied herself at the hearth.

“That’s right, Lady Charlotte,” the maid said, smiling at Charlotte, who was glad of female company after her long journey north with the surly carriage driver.

She was a pretty young girl, perhaps sixteen or seventeen, and Charlotte was curious whether she knew anything about the man she had encountered that afternoon in the woods.

“I met a man by the river this afternoon. He was tall and powerful looking. He had black hair and was handsomely dressed. I wasn’t expecting to meet anyone in the woods; he was quite frightening,” Charlotte said, and the maid’s face grew pale.

“Oh, yes, Lady Charlotte. That’s the Duke of Whitmore or Colonel Sinclair. I think that’s how he likes to be known. He’s not a nice man, Lady Charlotte, not at all. I’d not like to be caught by him. They say he guards his land jealously. He lives at Raven Grange, a few miles from her up on the hill at the head of the valley.

On my day off, my mother insists I walk the long way to the village, rather than risk encountering him on the path through the woods,” Elsie said, shaking her head, as the fire crackled into life.

Charlotte was intrigued to hear Elsie's description of the man. It was certainly the same, and as she thought back to their encounter, she shuddered.

"I'm going to ask my aunt about him. He was very rude to me. But thank you, Elsie. I'll see to the fire for the rest of the evening. I'm sure you've got plenty to be getting on with," Charlotte said.

The maid bobbed into a curtsy and left the room, leaving Charlotte alone with her thoughts. She yawned and lay down on the bed, glad of the warmth of the fire, despite it having been a pleasantly sunny day outside. It was not long before she was asleep, her dreams filled with memories of her encounter with William Sinclair.

"You're trespassing on my property. This is the boundary," the duke exclaimed, and to Charlotte's horror, he waded into the water, advancing towards her, his eyes fixed on angrily.

She was almost waist deep herself, and now she tried to turn, losing her balance, and an unseen current caught her from below. With a cry, she fell backward with a splash, flailing out her arms as she was engulfed by the flow of the water. Charlotte was a good swimmer. Her father had taught her well, but the cumbersome nature of her couture ensured she had difficulty swimming back against the current.

“Help me,” she cried, as a strong hand grabbed her, pulling her up from beneath the surface. She gasped, flailing in the arms of the duke.

“You foolish creature. What were you thinking?” he exclaimed, as she looked up into his eyes with both fear and thanksgiving.

If it had not been for him, Charlotte would certainly have drowned, pulled under the water by the current and carried away downstream. He pulled her back towards the bank, and still she was gasping for breath, soaked from head to toe, her hair straggling over her shoulders.

“I’m sorry. I thought I could swim against it. You startled me, and...” she said, gazing up into his eyes.

“Are you blaming me for your fall? Didn’t I come to your rescue? You were foolish to wade in like that,” he said, still holding her in his arms, as now she sighed.

“I’m sorry if I was trespassing. When I was a child, there was nowhere we couldn’t go. I know these woods better than anywhere else I’ve ever been,” she said, feeling suddenly embarrassed by her actions.

A smile came over his lips, and he narrowed his eyes, looking her up and down, as still he cradled her in his arms.

“So you’re not just some idle trespasser? A simple girl from the village?” he asked.

“I am not,” Charlotte replied, looking at him with pointed indignation.

He laughed, still looking her up, and now he shook his head, sitting back on his haunches, as she scrambled to her feet. Her dress was soaked, and she shivered, fearing she would catch a chill.

“If you’re going to swim, you should remove your dress. You’ll wake up with a dreadful cold tomorrow if you persist in those wet clothes,” he said, as though inviting her to scandal.

Charlotte blushed.

“I don’t need any advice, thank you. I didn’t mean to trespass on your land. I didn’t realise I was. And if you hadn’t scared me,” she said, as he scrambled to his feet.

“I didn’t set out to scare you. I thought you were a trespasser, and not the intriguing creature I now find you to be,” he said, taking a step towards her.

Charlotte's heart was beating fast. What would he do to her? She took a step back, catching her foot on a root and stumbling. With a deft movement, the stranger caught her in his arms, holding her once again, his grip strong and reassuring.

"I've got you," he said, as he brought his lips to hers.

Charlotte awoke with a start. Footsteps. She heard the clicking of a door closing hurriedly. She sat up, forgetting for a moment where she was. It was dark now, and the fire had burned low. The wind had picked up, and Charlotte could hear it whistling through the trees outside.

The window frame rattled, and Charlotte climbed out of bed, going to the door, and opening it to peer out onto the landing. All was quiet there, but Charlotte felt certain she had not dreamed of the footsteps, nor the clicking of the door. Someone had come to her room, and the lingering scent of rose and lavender perfume hung in the air.

“How curious,” she thought to herself, wondering if perhaps her aunt had come to see if she was still awake.

But it was the dream itself she found most unsettling. The dream of the stranger who was almost certainly the man she had encountered, even if the events she had dreamed of had been somewhat elaborated by her restless mind.

I certainly wouldn't kiss him, Charlotte thought to herself, even as the act itself had not been without its dream-like pleasure.

The duke had held her in his arms. His gaze had been alluring and fearful. The way he had kissed her had sent a shiver of delight running through her. It was a strange sensation of fear and pleasure mixing together. She wondered where her dream might have led had it concluded.

“Better the dream than real life,” she told herself, closing her bedroom door and returning to bed.

Charlotte was soon asleep again, her dreams mundane now. The next morning the lingering thought of the kiss remained, and Charlotte could not help but wonder just what might have happened if William Sinclair really had caught up with her.

The scent of roses and lavender was hanging in the air. It was the same unmistakable scent from the previous night. As she entered the dining room the following morning, Charlotte felt certain her aunt had been her nighttime visitor. Lady Margaret reminded Charlotte of her father.

They had the same highbrow and slender noses, a feature of the family. Her aunt was ten years younger than Charlotte's father, a handsome, aristocratic woman, with dark hair and hazel-green eyes, her cheeks pale and pinched, and with a permanently haughty expression on her face. As Charlotte entered the room, she looked up at her and gave a faint smile, looking her up and down and nodding.

“Ah, Charlotte. I'm sorry I wasn't there to greet you yesterday. I trust your journey was a pleasant one?” she asked, as Charlotte took a seat opposite her.

“Oh, yes. A long one, but I’m here now. It’s awfully nice of you to have me here,” Charlotte replied.

If she had expected an exuberant welcome, she was disappointed. Her aunt seemed somewhat distant, even as she had made every effort in her letters to assure Charlotte of a warm welcome.

“It’s the least I could do. Your parents...your father...well, I felt terribly sorry for you when I heard what had happened,” she said.

Again Charlotte thought her aunt’s words to be somewhat lacking in sympathy. She expressed no sorrow at the death of her brother, even as she showed it to Charlotte herself.

“It’s been a difficult time, I admit. I’m just glad to be here,” Charlotte replied.

Collingwood poured her a cup of coffee, and Charlotte helped herself to deviled kidneys from a tureen on the sideboard, returning to the table, as her aunt reached for the marmalade.

“I suppose you’ll want to explore the gardens and the woods. You were never away from them as a child, if I remember correctly,” she said, and Charlotte nodded.

“I went out as soon as I arrived. I couldn’t help myself. I’ve got so many memories of Ravenwood Manor,” Charlotte said, and her aunt nodded.

“I’m sure you have, and I hope you’ll be happy here. Stay for as long as you want to stay. I want you to feel at home,” she said.

Again, her tone sounded odd. There was distance in her words, and Charlotte could not help but wonder if her aunt really meant what she said about happiness and welcome. In truth, Charlotte knew little of her aunt. She was a distant figure, related by blood, but no real bond. Like Ravenwood Manor

itself, Lady Margaret was a memory, and it would take some time for Charlotte to discover the truth about her.

“I’m sure I will be. I keep remembering things, the swing my father made for me in the garden, and the picnics I’d have by the pond with my mother. I went down to the river, too,” Charlotte said, and at these words, her aunt looked up at her.

“Yes. Well, be careful of the river. The currents are strong. It’s not deep, but it’s fast,” she said, as though she knew something of Charlotte’s dream the night before.

“There was a man there. He shouted at me,” Charlotte replied.

Her aunt’s eyes grew wide and almost fearful. She gripped the knife she was holding more firmly, a splodge of marmalade falling from it onto the pristine white tablecloth.

“A tall man? Dark haired?” she asked, and Charlotte nodded.

“That’s right. But who is he? He said I was trespassing. He waded after me into the water. I ran away, but he was quite threatening,” she said.

Her aunt pursed her lips.

“His Grace, William Sinclair, the Duke of Whitmore. A colonel in some regiment or another. I’m afraid you’ve encountered my neighbour, Charlotte, and he’s not a nice man. He guards his land jealously, and woe betides anyone who trespasses. He peppered a young boy in the backside with his pistol just a month ago; caught him poaching. No. Not a nice man. You should stay well away from him,” Lady Margaret said.

“I will, don’t worry,” Charlotte replied, though she was curious as to her aunt’s apparent animosity towards the stranger, and wondered what dealings the two of them had had.

They seemed well suited as neighbours. Her aunt, a virtual recluse, and the duke, a man who wished for no one's company but his own. He guarded his borders as though still defending against an unseen enemy from abroad.

"I'm sorry if he scared you. Stay away from the riverbank and you'll be fine," Charlotte's aunt said, and Charlotte promised to confine herself to the gardens and the woods.

But as she walked there that morning, her mind was still on her encounter with the duke, and on the dream of what might have been. She felt certain there was something her aunt was not telling her about the stranger. Maybe it was some unspoken rivalry or conflict. Had he threatened her? He seemed just the type to do so, and whilst she heeded her aunt's words and remained away from the riverbank, Charlotte could not help but wonder what a second encounter with William Sinclair might lead to.

Chapter 4

“Won’t you come and see the coneflowers, Aunt Margaret? I’ve never seen so many varieties all in one place. They look beautiful,” Charlotte said, showing her aunt several of the different flowers she had discovered on her walk that morning.

It had been a week since Charlotte had arrived at Ravenwood Manor, and her days had now fallen into a predictable routine. She would rise early and have breakfast with her aunt sometimes and sometimes alone. After breakfast, she would walk in the gardens and woods.

There were dozens of different paths to choose from, and Charlotte would spend several hours walking here and there, exploring different parts of the gardens, or climbing higher through the trees onto the ridge, looking down onto the valley. She was always careful to avoid the river, fearful of what might happen if she encountered the duke again.

“I don’t walk in the woods anymore, Charlotte. I prefer to stay in the house in the drawing room and library. What more can a person want?” her aunt said, and Charlotte furrowed her brow.

It had been Cicero who had made the point about a library and a garden being all that was necessary for a good life. Charlotte did not think a drawing room added much to the latter. Besides, she was keen to have her aunt's company. They had barely spent any time together, and Lady Margaret was often complaining of a megrim and confining herself to bed. Charlotte thought this odd, for despite the two of them now living together, their lives were very much apart.

“I just thought it would do you good, that's all. Wouldn't you like to see the flowers?” she asked, but her aunt shook her head.

“I don't think so, Charlotte. No. But we could go to the village this afternoon, if you'd like to? The stable hand can take us in the horse and trap. There's a bookshop there, and one of the farmer's wives serves tea and cake in a barn on the square by the church. Would you like that?” she asked.

Charlotte knew she would certainly like that, and despite having failed to persuade her aunt to accompany her on a walk, she felt glad to at last be spending time with her. After

luncheon, they set out, riding in the horse and trap, with the stable hand driving the horse.

He was a feisty piebald named Pippin, who snorted his way through the woods, following the track by the river. It was a pleasant day, cool and fresh, but with a little warmth in the sunshine, and Lady Margaret had loaned Charlotte a yellow bonnet to wear.

“Isn’t it lovely? The woods have such an earthy, fresh scent to them,” Charlotte said, as they crossed the river, making in the direction of the village.

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