
A SECOND SONS BOOK
BEAUTIFUL THINGS
NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING AUTHOR
EMILY RATH

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BEAUTIFUL THINGS

Emily Rath is a *New York Times* and internationally bestselling author whose chart-topping, sex-positive, queer-inclusive fantasy and romance novels include the Second Sons Regency romances, the Tuonela Duet fantasy novels, and the "why choose" sensation, the Jacksonville Rays Hockey Romances. A former university professor, she holds PhDs in Political Science and Peace Studies. Emily was born in Florida, raised in Kentucky, and now lives in the Pacific Northwest.

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To Darcy and Wentworth and
Knightly . . . collectively.
And more especially to Jane, the saucy
minx who created them.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

MAYBE YOU SAW the cover of this book or read the blurb, and thought, "I loved Bridgerton, let's give this a try!" But be forewarned, dear readers, this is a Regency-era polyamorous romance. What does that mean? Glad you asked.

This story is first and foremost a Regency romance. So be ready for a deliciously slow burn. We're talking prolonged eye contact, subtle hand touches, and soooo much sexual tension. We all know that Darcy hand flex scene. BUT this is also a "why choose" polyamorous romance. That means the female main character will have multiple male suitors (Austen approved) and she won't choose just one in the end (Emily approved).

Not only is everyone ultimately happy with this arrangement, they wouldn't have it any other way. That's not to say there won't be some tears, heartache, and more than a few dramatic surprises to enjoy between page one and our long-awaited happily ever after.

If you love the humor and heart of Jane Austen and the sexy vibes of Bridgerton and you've ever felt like screaming "Christ Almighty, just pick them both!" while watching an episode of Poldark, this series might just be for you. Grab your smelling salts and get ready to clutch your pearls—this is not your grandmother's Regency romance.

XO,



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THE LORDS AND LADIES AT ALCOTT HALL

In the British social hierarchy, the order of rank is as follows:

- King/Queen
- Duke/Duchess
- Marquess/Marchioness
- Earl/Countess
- Viscount/Viscountess
- Baron/Baroness
- Baronet/Lady
- Knight/Lady

Names and titles can be confusing, but I tried to keep it as true to the time period as possible. The following are characters with titles, presented in order of rank (high to low):

The Corbins (Dukes):

- George Corbin, The Duke of Norland
- Harriet Wakefield Corbin, The Dowager Duchess of Norland, George's mother
- Lord James Corbin, The Viscount Finchley, George's younger brother

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The Rutledges (Marquesses):

- Constance Rutledge, The Marchioness of Deal
- Lady Olivia Rutledge, daughter

The Swindons (Earls):

- Mary Swindon, The Countess of Waverley
- Lady Elizabeth Swindon, eldest daughter
- Lady Mariah Swindon, youngest daughter

The Blaires (Viscounts):

- Diana Blaire, The Viscountess of Raleigh
- Lady Madeline Blaire, daughter

The Oswalds (Knights):

- Sir Andrew Oswald, esq.
- Lady Anne Oswald, wife of Sir Andrew
- Miss Blanche Oswald, daughter

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THE CARRIAGE RATTLED down the rain-soaked road, hitting each puddle and bump with a vengeance. Rosalie groaned, holding tight to her seat with both hands. Three days of rain with no reprieve, but she couldn't risk delaying her journey any longer. When a duchess requests your immediate presence, you don't question it. You pack your bags and get on the first coach.

Which is how Rosalie found herself wedged in the corner of a public coach bound for Carrington. She'd been trapped in this miserable box all day, windows shut tight against the gale. Six hours with no air, forced to endure the overly informal touch of the country solicitor seated next to her. Across from her, a tradesman was asleep, his knees knocking against hers as he snored, hat tipped down over his eyes.

When she couldn't take the stifling air for another second, she used her handkerchief to wipe the foggy window, peering out through the glass.

"Stopped raining?" the solicitor murmured, leaning against her until she felt his hot breath fan over her cheek.

She clenched her teeth as she fought down the urge to

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elbow him in the gut. "Mhmm." She unlatched the window and pushed open the pane of glass.

"Do you know how much longer to Carrington, sir?" the old lady on the far side of the carriage asked.

"Can't be much farther, ma'am," the solicitor replied.

"How I long to freshen up," the lady sighed.

Rosalie couldn't agree more. Disheveled was a nice word for how she felt. She would have preferred to meet the Dowager Duchess of Norland looking less like a duck waddling in from the pond. Her dark curls were flat, her dress sticky against her legs, sweat beaded uncomfortably between her breasts. Such ghastly summer heat was most unusual for September.

The solicitor groaned, stretching his legs. "It will be so nice to—*aghh*—"

CRACK.

One moment Rosalie was peering out the window. The next she was crashing into the tradesman. The whole group flopped in a tangle of twisted arms and legs.

"*Ouch*—"

"Gerroffme—"

Outside, the horses squealed.

"Easy on! Whoa, whoa, *whoa*!" came the coachman's cries. The carriage tilted at a wild angle as he reined the team to a halt. After a few panicked moments, all was still. A heavy fist rapped on the roof. "Everyone all right in there?"

The tradesman groaned under Rosalie.

"Get—*off*—me," she panted, jabbing the solicitor with both elbows as his arms wrapped needlessly around her.

He moved off, helping the elderly lady right herself.

"Everyone all right?" the coachman called again.

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"Ye-yes," Rosalie replied.

"What happened?" the tradesman growled, dabbing at his cut lip.

"Broken wheel," the coachman replied. "Damn it!"

"Stay within," said the footman, his head popping in view of the foggy window. "It's quite slick out here."

"Oh, I knew we would crash," the old lady whined. "All this rain . . . foolish to travel in such conditions . . . should have delayed."

Rosalie held back a smile. The poor lady sounded just like her Aunt Thorpe, who was prone to nervous fits. She could only imagine how her aunt would shriek at a broken wheel. "Don't worry, ma'am," she said. "Nothing so broken that can't be mended—"

Just then, the coachman rattled the door open, stuffing his face within. "Sorry ladies and gents, but it looks like this break can't be easily mended."

The group stared daggers at Rosalie, as if this were somehow her fault for being optimistic.

"I've sent the lad on ahead," the coachman continued. "We're not but a mile from Carrington. He'll get us a new wheel, and we can be on our way in no time."

"I'm sure you'll do your best," said the tradesman with an irritated grunt.

The carriage door rattled shut and Rosalie was left wedged next to the solicitor.

"Well," he said with a grin. "Looks like my luck is improving leaps and bounds."

"What can you mean, sir?" cried the old lady.

He flashed Rosalie a smile. "Only that I get to spend more time with this divine creature, eh Miss Rose?"

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Rosalie stiffened. She told them all her name, as was only fitting when one shared a coach for hours on end, but he certainly had not earned the right to drop the use of her surname . . . or shorten her Christian name. Perhaps if Aunt Thorpe were here, Rosalie would have smiled and ignored his advances. But Rosalie was blessedly, *brazenly* alone.

And she would suffer fools no longer.

She snatched up her travel case and wrenched open the door, pushing her way out of the coach. Her feet sank with a squelch into the mud, and she grimaced, trying to hold her skirts out of the mess. The air smelled of wet earth, but the surrounding countryside was lovely as a painting. The rain was little more than a fine mist now. All around sat rolling hills. Off to the left, a tree line glowed in the mist, the changing autumn leaves glistening like gold and rubies.

The solicitor ducked his head out the open door. "Get back in here, you silly girl."

"No," she replied through clenched teeth. "The coachman says it's barely a mile to Carrington. I'll walk."

She heard three confused murmurs from within the carriage.

"In all that mud?" came the old lady's voice. "Child, what can you be thinking?"

Rosalie just squelched over to the coachman. "Sir, I will walk on to Carrington. But I'll leave my case, if you don't mind. Can I retrieve it when you get to the village?"

"'Course, miss," he said with a tip of his hat. "We'll settle up out back o' the Whispering Willow."

She nodded her thanks and lifted her skirts, squelching over to the wet grass.

"Miss Rose, do you require a chaperone?" called the solicitor.

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Rosalie turned, eyes flashing. "Sir, if you attempt to follow me, I shall have to find a stick and whack you about the shins until you can follow no more!"

It took nearly an hour to reach Carrington, which assured Rosalie the distance was most certainly greater than one mile. By the time she shuffled down the high street towards the glowing lights of the Whispering Willow, her dress and pelisse were slick with mud up to her knees. Her every step squelched.

"Good evening, welcome to—*heavens*—" The innkeeper gasped as she eyed Rosalie. "Did you fall from a horse, dear?"

"Something like that," Rosalie replied, doing her best to wipe her feet on the mat. "I was on the morning coach from Town. We broke a wheel about a mile out on the north road."

"Aye, we heard about that," the innkeeper replied. "And you . . . walked here?"

"Trust me, a little mud was preferable to the alternative," Rosalie muttered, still feeling the whisper of the solicitor's hot breath on her neck.

"Well . . . you'll be needing a cup o' tea," the innkeeper said. "You best come with me."

Rosalie followed the lady down a dark, narrow hall that connected to a small pub.

"Are you looking for a room?"

"I haven't money for a room," Rosalie replied. "My aunt only gave me enough to cover the coach fare. I'm supposed to be going to Alcott Hall. I was told a coach would meet me here to take me the rest of the way—"

The innkeeper turned. "Oh dear, Mr. Henry came already. He picked up a few high-society types and left . . . oh, two hours ago now."

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"Perfect," Rosalie muttered. Could this day get any worse? "How far is it to Alcott?"

"About five miles," the innkeeper replied, showing her to a little table in the corner.

Dark wood paneling gave the public house a closed-in, cozy feel. A few crowded booths sat along one wall, a bar along the other, and a man stood in the corner tuning a violin.

"Rest yourself here, and I'll get you set up with some tea. I'll have my cook bring you a spot of stew too. On the house, dear, while you wait."

"Thank you," Rosalie murmured, taking the offered seat.

In moments, she was served a cup of tea. She sat alone, holding the cup with both hands, loving the feel of the heat sinking into her palms.

It felt daring to sit alone in a pub. Her aunt would surely disapprove. Rosalie just smiled, taking another sip of her tea. She watched as the men in the room laughed and told jokes, patting each other on the back, lighting pipes, taking swigs from their mugs of ale. It was a picture of country life. She longed to fish the sketchbook out of her travel case and capture the scene.

"Hello, darlin'," a burly man said, dropping into the seat across from her. He spilled a bit of the frothy beer from his mug on the table. "Well, yer a pretty lass, aren't ya! You remind me of me daughter, Bessie!"

Rosalie leaned back as the man spittled. Was she to be accosted by every unscrupulous man in England?

"Oh, leave the lady alone, Alfie," a man called from the bar. Others chuckled, but none seemed interested in coming to her aid.

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Alfie wasn't deterred. "What's a beauty like you doin' alone in a pub, sweetness?"

She grasped around for something to say to make him leave. "I'm not alone, sir."

He leaned across the table, eyes glassy with drink. He even had the audacity to reach across, trying to snatch her hand. "'Course not. I'm here, ain't I?"

She lifted her cup out of his reach, lest he spill it in her lap. Suddenly, a hand closed on her shoulder, and she jolted. The hand was firm, and far too large to belong to the innkeeper.

Then a deep voice spoke. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

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2

Rosalie

ROSALIE STIFFENED AS Alfie's mouth opened in a comical *O*, displaying his wide set of yellowing teeth. The masculine voice behind her was smooth as honeyed tea.

Heart in her throat, she lowered her eyes and followed the line of a leather-gloved hand up the crisp cut of a wet slicker to the man's face, half hidden in the shadow of his hat brim. He was tall and handsome, with the bearing of a gentleman.

He doffed his hat, and a spill of black hair swept across his forehead. His grey eyes narrowed under dark brows. "Have you been waiting long, *sister*?"

She blushed. "I—"

"This ain't never yer sister," Alfie barked.

The man's face lost what little warmth it had. "Do you mean to say you know the members of my family better than me, sir?"

Alfie sputtered, eyes darting from her to the gentleman.

In moments, the man from the bar tugged on Alfie's sleeve. "He didn'a mean nothin' by it, sir," he said, dragging Alfie away. Only when Alfie was forced out the door with complaints of not having finished his ale did the stranger release his hold on her shoulder.

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"Terribly sorry about all that," he said. "The rabble are usually better behaved. In the future, if you're dining alone, I suggest taking meals in your room, Miss . . ." He raised a dark brow, waiting for her name.

"Harrow," she supplied. "Rosalie Harrow."

"Miss Harrow," he repeated.

"And you are . . ."

His stoic countenance gave way to a smirk. "Happy to have helped."

Rosalie noted how every eye in the room watched him with a combination of stolen glances and open stares. A few murmured behind their hands. Surely, he must be someone of great importance. No doubt a lord.

Before she could ask another question, he tipped his hat. "Good evening, Miss Harrow." Then he turned and left.

Rosalie finished her meal in silence, thanking the innkeeper for her generosity. With her travel case in hand, she found her way outside, determined to wait at the back of the inn for the delayed coach. Perhaps she could persuade the coachman to take her all the way to Alcott. What was five more miles to him?

She slipped into the alley between the inn and the milliner's shop. As she passed a stack of barrels, she heard a pained groan. In the dark, she could just make out the silhouette of a man hunched in the shadows. She held tighter to her case as she tried to slip past.

"S'that you, black beauty?"

Heaven's sake. It was the drunk from the bar.

Alfie stumbled to his feet, holding onto a barrel for support. "Gimme yer arm. I'm in need o' help."

"You're in need of sleep." She'd dealt with the drunken fits of worthless men all her life. She was in no mood to deal with

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another. "Go home to your wife, sir. She is surely wondering where you are."

Alfie stumbled forward, trying to grab her shoulder.

She darted away, ready to sling her travel case in his face. "Do not touch me—"

"I wanna feel yeh . . . feel yer curls . . . such a black beau'y," he mumbled.

"You're drunk. Go home, before I scream and bring a constable down on you."

"Yeh rotten drab," he growled. "Come 'ere!"

He pressed forward and Rosalie shrieked. On instinct, she balled her left hand into a fist and swung with all her might. Her knuckles cracked across his nose and they both let out yelps of pain. He dropped to his knees, hands covering his bleeding nose.

"I think ye broke it, yeh bitch!"

Heavy footfalls from just behind Rosalie had her turning sharply on her heel. She felt quite feral as she swung her travel case with another shriek.

"Whoa, *easy*!" The handsome gentleman from the pub slid to a halt. "I'm not going to hurt you," he said, throwing both hands up. He looked down at the prone figure at her feet. She could barely make out his eyes under his hat brim, but he simmered with tension. If Alfie tried anything again, this man would stop him.

Her arms sagged to her sides as she stifled a sob.

"Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," she said, shaking out her left hand. That wasn't entirely true. She was a mess—filthy and exhausted, penniless, trunkless, and she probably just broke her hand punching a drunk square on the nose.

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Alfie moaned on the ground between them. "The bitch clocked meh nose!"

The gentleman snatched Alfie up by his untidy necktie. He lowered his face inches from the drunk man's bleeding nose. "Call the lady that again, and I'll give you two eyes to match your worthless fucking nose. Now get the hell out of here!" He shoved the drunk away, aiming a kick for him when he didn't move fast enough.

Alfie squealed and crawled off into the shadows like a stray dog.

Rosalie was breathless as she watched the gentleman right himself. "You didn't have to do that."

She could feel his smile, even if she couldn't see it. "Clearly not. You seemed to have things well in hand. You have a powerful left hook, Miss Harrow."

She gave him a sheepish look. "I didn't mean to break his nose."

"Oh yes, you did. And the lout deserved it. Let's see your hand then."

She stilled, her stomach doing another flip as he took a half step closer.

He paused. "Perhaps . . . let's go round back towards the light, eh?"

She breathed a sigh of relief and nodded, following him as he led the way to the carriage yard. It glowed amber, lit by a few lanterns. The gentleman turned and she could better see his features in the light.

He held out his gloved hand. "Now, let's see it."

She hesitated only a moment before she placed her left hand in his. He looked at her reddening knuckles, touching

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each with a gentle stroke. She winced but moved each finger as he bent them.

"Nothing broken," he murmured. "I told you it would be best to stay to your room, did I not?"

She bristled at being chastised by a stranger and jerked her hand away. "I have no room, sir. I am not staying at the inn."

His eyes narrowed. "Then where are you staying? Clearly you have no need of a bodyguard, but I'd like to offer my services all the same and see you safely home."

"That's not necessary."

"It's a matter of honor," he said. "You rendered me useless back there. I must redeem myself."

"I'm waiting here, sir," she replied. "My hired coach broke a wheel about a mile north of the village. It still has my trunk."

"That explains the mud," he said with a murmur. His steely gaze bore into her. "It has your trunk . . . but you're not staying at the inn. You must have some destination in mind. Or do you intend to sleep up a tree like a squirrel?"

She huffed. "Fine, if you must know, I am expected at Alcott Hall. There was supposed to be another coach waiting to take me, but it came and went, and I'm stranded here." She gestured around the empty carriage yard. "I've no money for a room, and I'm waiting for the coach to arrive to beg their mercy to bring me the rest of the way."

"You're going to Alcott Hall?"

"Yes, sir."

He gave her another appraising look. "Are you a new maid there?"

"No, sir. I am a guest of the dowager," she replied.

A frown tipped his lips. "*You* are a guest of the duchess?"

She bristled. "Not that it's any of your business, sir, but yes.

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I am the personal guest of the Dowager Duchess of Norland. Do you want to see my invitation? I didn't know you were a person of authority entitled to verify my credentials."

That damnable smirk again. "Well, Miss Harrow, you're in luck. I'm on my way to Alcott Hall and would be happy to deliver you there. I'm on horseback, mind you, so we'll be snug. But it's only a couple miles."

She blinked. "You're going to Alcott Hall? Now? Tonight?"

"I am," he replied, then leaned in. "Would you like to see *my* credentials?"

Her heart raced as she considered her options. One, wait for the coach and beg them to take her. Two, find a cozy spot in the barn next to the mice in the hay. Three, trudge there herself in the dark, dragging her trunk through the mud. Or four, accept the help of this handsome stranger, who refused to offer so much as his name.

"I . . ."

He sighed, checking his pocket watch. "While you pretend to think about it, let me just pop in and tell Mary to have your trunk delivered as soon as it arrives. We can't have you sleeping naked tonight for want of a clean shift," he added with a wink.

Her mouth opened on a gasp of indignation as he walked away. The man was insufferable, downright irksome . . . and so handsome it made her want to laugh . . . or cry. And now he was offering to take her to Alcott Hall. Quite a turn of events from how the day started. She'd already suffered the attentions of two horrible men. Perhaps she owed it to herself to let mankind offer redemption in the form of Mr. Grey Eyes. She had the sense she wouldn't be quite so perturbed by feeling the warmth of *his* breath on her neck . . .

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He emerged from the back of the inn and offered out his gloved hand again. "Well, Miss Harrow? Are you coming with me?"

Taking a deep breath, she placed her hand in his. Before his fingers could close around hers, she jerked back. "But I insist on carrying the whip, sir. And you will tell me your name."

He blinked. "Why should you want to hold the whip?"

She squared her shoulders at him. "Because you men have not been at your best today, and I reserve the right to strike you with it should your hands begin to wander anywhere I don't want them."

His eyes flashed with some unreadable emotion, but he gave a curt nod. "Done. You shall hold the whip. Hell, hold the reins if you want. Leave me to run alongside you. I'm sure the exercise would do me good."

She fought her own smile, giving him a level stare. "And your name, sir?"

"My name is Burke," he replied. "Pleasure to meet you."

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3

Burke

OF ALL THE ways Burke thought a trip to town might end, riding double through the dark with a gorgeous woman pressed against his chest had been nowhere in his imagination. Miss Harrow sat astride in front of him, her muddy skirts riding up to show off her ruined stockings.

The sound of crickets buzzed in the air as his horse trotted down the lane. True to his word, Burke gave Miss Harrow full command of the riding crop. Christ, he nearly got a cockstand when she made that demand, her dark eyes blazing with a fire set to consume him. He cooled when he realized her full meaning. Whatever happened today beyond that scum in the alley, she was feeling vulnerable. He fought his every instinct to hunt that drunk down and pummel him bloody.

Well . . . *bloodier*.

This lady could clearly take care of herself. Even as part of him loved to think of a beautiful, confident woman fighting her own battles, it gave him serious pause. Who was she that she knew how to throw a punch? Why was that a skill she had to learn? And why the hell was she traveling alone with no money on direct invitation from the duchess?

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Whoever she was, she didn't know *him* . . . which meant she couldn't be a very close acquaintance of Harriet Wakefield Corbin, Dowager Duchess of Norland. Anyone close to the Corbin family knew everything about Burke—the details he was proud of and the details he wished they'd forget. And Burke had never heard of Rosalie Harrow. This meant she was either lying, which they would soon uncover . . . or the duchess really *did* have a secret interest in the girl, which made her a mystery he was desperate to solve.

He cleared his throat, reining the horse to a walk. It felt strange to have the cage of his arms around her so intimately. "So . . . where are you from, Miss Harrow?"

"Town," she replied. "My aunt keeps a place in Cheapside."

He liked the sound of her voice. It wasn't high and nasally, or falsely sweet. It was just . . . *her*. She had the accent of a refined lady, but her clothes were a bit worn, and he couldn't forget that left hook.

"And where is your family from?"

She shifted, catching his gaze with one eye. "Are you trying to place me, Mr. Burke? Running through your list of gentry families to see where and how you might measure a Harrow against yourself?"

He chuckled, the sound dying in his throat as he felt her shift again, her rounded arse rubbing against his cock. Christ, this was a mistake. "Once you get to know me better, you'll find I am the last person to measure someone's worth by their family name," he replied, jaw tight.

She was quiet for a moment. "My family is from Richmond . . . or at least my mother's family. I know nothing of the Harrows beyond that I had an uncle who immigrated to India nearly thirty years ago. My father never heard from him again."

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She was from Richmond? This was a useful clue. Burke was well-versed in Corbin family affairs. Before the duchess married the fifth duke, she was a gentleman's daughter from Richmond.

"So . . . you know the Wakefields, then?"

"Not personally, sir," she replied. "I'm told my mother and the dowager were childhood friends. It is on her behalf that the dowager sent for me."

"The duchess," he corrected.

"Hmm?"

"She may be announced formally as the Dowager Duchess of Norland," he explained, "But she prefers the title of duchess, especially since her son remains unmarried. And she thinks being called 'dowager' makes her sound old. I wouldn't want you starting off on the wrong foot," he added, his breath fanning over her ear. "And who are your mother's people?"

"My mother was—*oh*—" She fell silent as they made the last turn towards home.

The trees gave way to Burke's favorite view of the house. He reined his horse to a halt, its hooves crunching on the pea gravel. Alcott Hall was a three-story structure of grey stone perched on a low hill. The lower floors were lit from within, their glow shining out over a vast expanse of gardens, which gave way to a lake glistening in the moonlight.

"Well? What do you think of the house?"

"It's incomparable," she whispered. "I don't know that I've ever seen a place so perfectly situated."

"Wait till you see her in the daylight," he replied, prodding the horse back into a trot.

"Do you live here?"

He laughed. "Are we done asking questions about you, then?"

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"My life is an open book," she replied. "I have no secrets, sir."

He very much doubted that, but he wasn't sure if he trusted himself to know her better. Her beauty was arresting, even being covered in mud. If anything, the wildness of her countenance endeared her to him even more. Give him one woman like this over a drawing room full of high-society twits who only ever talked about dresses and dancing.

He groaned, for that was exactly what awaited him at the house. Christ, but this was going to be a long month. He'd almost considered going away, for there was no world in which three weeks spent rubbing shoulders with a marchioness would be to his benefit.

She went stiff in his arms. "Mr. Burke? Are you unwell?"

Damn, she heard him groan. "Quite well, just ready to be out of the saddle."

"Me too," she admitted. "I'm not used to riding astride." She wiggled a bit and he wanted to die.

They rode in silence, following the sweeping lane around the back of the house to the stable yard. Johnny, the tired groom, stumbled out at Burke's call, pulling a wool cap down over his ears. His eyes went wide as he took in Miss Harrow sitting astride in front of Burke.

Burke swung his leg back and dropped down to the cobblestones. Then he reached up with both hands, holding her at the waist, as she slid down. He caught her, pulling her close against him. She felt so small in his arms. He felt a sudden urge to protect her, to pick her up and carry her inside. He wanted to wash away the mud and wrap her in silk.

"Mr. Burke," she whispered, suddenly stiff.

Her eyes were open wide, her lips parted as she tried to control her breathing. He tensed with realization: She felt it

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too, whatever this was between them. Christ, she was beautiful. That fair skin and those dark eyes. He wanted to brush his fingers over her mouth. He wanted—

"Please let me go."

He blinked twice, the soft plea of her words making him drop his hands away as if she'd burned him. She might want him, but she didn't trust him. Hell, she didn't even *know* him. And he didn't know her. What was happening to him?

He cleared his throat and took a step back. "Let's get you inside."

He untied her travel case from the back of his saddle and gave Johnny a nod. The lad led the mount away. Taking a deep breath, Burke turned and offered his arm. Miss Harrow hesitated before she looped her arm in his and let herself be led towards the great house.

As they walked in silence, he could almost feel her building strong walls with brick and mortar, determined to keep him out. He smiled. If that feisty woman in the alley was the prize waiting within, there was quite possibly nothing he'd like better than planning a prolonged siege.

"Where will you take me?" she murmured.

"To see the man in charge."

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4

Rosalie

ROSALIE WALKED AT Mr. Burke's side into the great house, eyes wide as she took in every detail. They were in a long hall with a beautiful parquet floor. One side boasted floor-to-ceilingwindows set every six feet along the wall. Rosalie was sure that in daylight each must offer an incomparable view of the back gardens. The other side contained a series of closed doors. Artwork adorned the space between each door—landscapes in gilded frames, a spindly legged table set with a china vase full of blooming flowers, a carved wooden chair that looked more like a throne . . . in fact, it probably *was* a throne.

She'd never felt so out of place. Her muddy dress slapped awkwardly against her legs and her poor toes squished inside her stockings. She was desperate to take off these ruined clothes. But as Mr. Burke said, she had nothing else to wear.

"Wait," she slid to a stop, tugging on his arm.

He turned, dark brow raised in question.

"You can't take me to the duke looking like *this*," she cried.

He chuckled. "He's seen stranger sights than this, I assure you."

"But—"

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"Look, it's late. I don't want to wake staff if I don't have to. James is sure to still be awake, and he'll take care of it. Just trust me."

Damn him and that devilish smile. Each time the corner of his mouth tipped up, she felt it tug at her. This man was dangerous. He was beautiful and confident, and he looked at her with open want in his eyes, as if he'd seen her and determined she was exactly what he'd been waiting for. It was enough to have her gasping for breath . . . and he'd noticed. In the stable yard just now, she was sure of it. There was a reckoning in his gaze, a promise of more.

But Rosalie Harrow would not be tied to any man. Forget the fact that she didn't believe marriage could ever bring out the best in two people trapped within the bars of such a cage. She was also quite possibly the *worst* prospect for a wife. She had no family living, aside from her desperately poor widowed aunt. She didn't have two shillings to rub together. In fact, she had nothing to her name but mounting debts. Her wastrel of a father saw to that, leaving her and her mother to fend for themselves when he stumbled drunk into the Thames.

That was seven years ago. Seven long years of fighting off the creditors, selling everything they owned. Then her mother got sick . . . or just gave up. Rosalie wasn't sure which truth hurt her more, so she put all the details of her mother's death in a little box on a shelf in the back of her mind.

That was eight months ago. Now here she was, covered in mud, wandering the halls of a duke's house late at night. Mr. Burke led her a bit farther down the hall to where a door stood open. Rosalie heard the unmistakable *whack* of billiard balls. Mr. Burke pushed open the door and stepped inside, leading her through by the hand.

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It was a masculine room, with dark leather furniture and deep green walls. A billiards table sat under a half-lit chandelier. A handsome man in evening clothes stood at the table's edge, bending over with a cue to take his shot.

"Don't miss," Mr. Burke barked.

The man whacked the ball, sending it careening the wrong direction. "*Damn*—Burke!" His anger faded immediately to relief. "Good god man, I thought you got lost in a ditch."

This must be the duke. He had a natural air of authority that oozed aristocracy. Heavens, but he was handsome too. Narrower in the shoulders, and not quite so tall, but he had shocking green eyes and auburn hair that curled around his ears. A dusting of freckles spotted his cheeks.

"And yet, I didn't spot a search party on the road," Mr. Burke replied.

"What did you—" The duke's smile slipped off his face as he saw Rosalie. He glanced from her to Mr. Burke. "Who is this?"

"Picking up strays now, Burke?" came a deep voice.

She turned to see another man step out of the corner, glass of brandy in hand. If she thought the others were handsome, this man was . . . words failed her. He was like something out of a painting, a sculpted David come to life. He had a halo of golden curls and skin so tan he looked almost foreign. She felt sure he must be a sailor. His jaw was chiseled, his shoulders broad, and he had the most devastating blue eyes.

Mr. Burke set her travel case on a chair. "Bloody hell . . . Renley, is that you?"

"Of course, it's me," the other man said. "Burke, how are you?" He crossed the space in three strides and the two embraced like brothers, slapping each other's backs.

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"I think you've gotten taller since I last saw you," Mr. Burke laughed, pretending to measure his friend. He was the tallest of the three by several inches.

"Damn, it does me good to see you," said Mr. Renley, still holding his friend by the shoulders. "You haven't changed a hair."

"In foul temper or manner," Mr. Burke joked.

"Enough," the duke barked over both men. "Burke, who the hell is this?" His finger was pointed straight at Rosalie.

She shrank under the heat of his gaze.

"Oh, right," Mr. Burke said, as if he suddenly remembered she was still in the room. "I found her tonight in Carrington in a bit of a desperate situation."

"And you brought her home with you?" The duke's voice dripped with derision. "What the hell were you thinking?"

"I was thinking she was a guest here," Burke replied. "This is Miss Rosalie Harrow. She has an invitation from your dear mama to join the house party," he added with a wink.

Rosalie took in the surprised looks of both gentlemen.

"Would you have preferred me to leave her stranded outside the inn?" said Mr. Burke.

The duke rounded on her. "You have an invitation from my mother?"

Rosalie blinked at his rudeness. Why did no one believe her? Did she have to pin the letter to her pelisse? She dipped into a curtsy. "Yes, Your Grace."

As soon as the words were spoken, she knew something was wrong. The man called Renley stifled a laugh. The duke's eyes flashed with some heated emotion, as the muscle in his jaw ticked. Next to her, Mr. Burke snorted.

The duke rounded on Mr. Burke. "Goddamn it, you know

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how George hates it when you do that. The last thing I need is for him to be in a mood."

Mr. Burke raised both hands in mock surrender. "I never said you were the duke. Any implication was a total slip of the tongue."

Rosalie gasped, eyes narrowing on Mr. Burke. Had he tricked her? She fought the urge to use her uninjured fist to punch him square in the nose too.

"Oh, and this is Tom Renley," Mr. Burke added, gesturing to his friend.

"Lieutenant Tom Renley," the handsome sailor added, confirming her theory. "Pleased to meet you."

The false duke stepped forward. "Please excuse my worthless friend," he said. "I am not the Duke of Norland. I'm his younger brother, James Corbin."

She looked from Mr. Burke to the lord. "I'm sorry if I'm a nuisance, my lord. I was meant to arrive three days ago, but the rain—"

"Aye, it's delayed half the house party," he replied. "But why did you not come with the group this afternoon?"

"My coach broke down, sir. I walked into Carrington, which is where Mr. Burke found me. As he said, I had a spot of bother at the inn, and then he offered to—"

"Whoa, wait." Lord James held up a hand. "What happened?"

Mr. Burke looked down at her with a smile. "A drunk made the mistake of trying to have his way. Miss Harrow here put him in his place."

Lord James puffed out his chest in anger as Lieutenant Renley's brows lowered in concern over those beautiful blue eyes. "What happened?"

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"Tom, you should have seen it," Mr. Burke said with a grin. "She broke the lout's nose with a mean left hook. It was poetry."

Both gentlemen watched her with wide eyes. The lieutenant looked impressed; Lord James wary.

"I think she's had enough excitement for one night, though," said Mr. Burke. "James, can we get a room sorted? Her trunk should be arriving soon. A bath is probably in order too," he added.

"Right, come with me. I'll wake the housekeeper." The lord moved towards the door and snatched a candle off a side table, waiting for her with one brow raised.

Mr. Burke gave her a half smile and held out her travel case. "Welcome to Alcott, Miss Harrow."

Rosalie followed closely behind Lord James as he swept down the hall, heels of his shoes clicking on the polished wooden floor. He took a sharp right and the space opened into a hall three times as large. Rosalie stifled a gasp.

It was still a hallway . . . but the grandest hallway she'd ever seen. It was broad, with a vaulted, Baroque painted ceiling. Four massive chandeliers floated in the air. Their crystals appeared eerily muted in the dark. The walls were festooned with works of art. Some of the frames were larger than life—portraits, still-lifes, hunting scenes, landscapes. The artist in her couldn't wait for the daylight to see them to better effect.

The lord turned, raising his candle high, and she nearly stumbled into him. "So, who are you, then?" he said with that imperiously arched brow.

"I'm Rosalie Harrow," she repeated. "Look, I get the distinct impression no one knew to expect me. But I promise, my intentions are honest. I *was* invited by the duchess. I have her letter here if you—"

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"That won't be necessary," he said. "I know my mother is expecting you. What I don't know is *why*. What does she want with you?"

By the look on his face, Lord James must be used to people answering any question he asked with alacrity. The trouble was, she wasn't sure of the answer. "All I know is that our mothers were childhood friends. My mother died recently, and that's the first I heard mention of the dowager duchess. My invitation here is as much a mystery to me as it is to you, sir."

He considered her words with a deepening frown. "How old are you, Miss Harrow?"

It was rather a rude question to ask, but she was beyond propriety standing in this grand space half dipped in mud. "I'm twenty-two, sir."

"And your father?"

"Dead, sir."

"Your family?"

"I have but one aunt living."

"Your fortune?"

Now she laughed. "Is this an interrogation, my lord? If I pass your test, will you do the gentlemanly thing and show me to a room?"

His nostrils flared like a dragon without fire. Before he could respond, hurried footsteps echoed down the gallery. They both turned to see a footman trotting towards them, candle flickering in his hand.

"My lord," the footman said, sliding to a halt, wig askew.

"What is it, Parker?"

"A carriage arrived, my lord, delivering a trunk for the lady."

She heaved a sigh of relief. At least she wouldn't have to sleep naked tonight.

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"Mr. Burke promised the coachman payment, my lord," the footman added. "But Mr. Reed has already gone up to bed—"

"I'll handle it," said Lord James. "Please go find Mrs. Davies." He turned, thrusting out his candle. "Take this, Miss Harrow, and wait here. The housekeeper will be along shortly." Their fingertips brushed as he handed it over and she pulled back from his touch.

Without another word, the lord turned on his heel and stormed away. The footman gave her a little nod before he too ran off, the orb of his candle bobbing away down the grand gallery. Rosalie stood alone, candle in one hand, travel case in the other, waiting for the housekeeper . . . and praying for a bath.

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5

Tom

AS SOON AS James left with the young lady, Burke breathed a deep sigh and sank into one of the leather smoking chairs. Tom stepped forward and extended his glass of brandy. "Here, I think you need this more than me."

Burke took the glass and drained it, setting it down with a clatter.

Tom sank into the opposite chair, loosening his cravat with a sharp tug.

"When did you arrive?" Burke asked.

"Just this afternoon," he replied. "I didn't know I'd be interrupting a house party. I feel I should take my leave, but James said I could stay . . ."

"Yes, well you can't possibly expect a restful time at your brother's house. How many hellions does he have now, four?"

"Six," Tom replied.

"Hell on earth," Burke said with a groan, stretching out his long legs. "I'm sure I speak for His Graceless when I say you can stay here as long as you like."

Both men were quiet for a moment as Tom watched Burke with a growing grin. "So . . . are we going to talk about it?"

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Burke glanced up. "Talk about what?"

"The *girl*," Tom said with a laugh. "What the hell happened with that girl?"

"She already told you," Burke said evasively. "A drunk was pawing at her in the pub and I stepped in. Then she was outside, and he came at her again. She socked him right in the nose, dropped him like a stone before I could lift a finger."

Tom leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "I meant between *you* and her."

"Nothing happened," he said quickly.

Tom grinned. "Right . . . so the sexual tension you could cut with a knife was . . ."

Burke smirked, not looking up.

"Oh, you are in *so* much trouble," Tom laughed, slapping his knee as he flopped back in the chair. He knew his friend well. Granted, they hadn't seen each other in nigh on two years, but Burke's taste in women could hardly have shifted so greatly in their time apart. "James is going to have kittens over it, you know."

"James can mind his own bloody business," Burke said with a scowl. "Nothing happened."

"Right . . . and now that she's here, I imagine you're hatching no plans . . . making no designs on her," he teased.

Burke dragged a hand through his hair. "She's a guest of the duchess, Tom."

"When has that ever stopped you before?"

"I'm a work in progress," Burke muttered.

"She's gorgeous . . . feisty too."

"Don't," he groaned.

Tom laughed, loving how easy it was to goad him.

Burke got to his feet, snatching the empty glass off the

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table. He went over to the corner and filled it, bringing a fresh one over for Tom. Before Tom could take a sip, the door snapped open, and James swept in like an angry storm front. Burke handed out his glass. James snatched it, taking a deep sip. Burke went and made himself a fresh one, while James sank into one of the other empty chairs.

"Well? Is Miss Harrow settled?" asked Tom.

James nodded, leaning back with a tired sigh. "I don't know what the hell my mother was thinking bringing her here. The other ladies are going to eat her alive."

Burke returned to his chair. "You can't possibly think she means to throw her at George, do you?"

Tom sensed the hint of anxiety in his tone, the simmering note of possession.

James glowered, setting his glass down with a clink. "Burke, I don't know what happened—"

"Don't start," Burke replied. "I can see a pretty girl and not touch her. Your gentility lessons have not been in vain."

Tom decided it was safest to change the subject. "So . . . what's the deal with this house party?"

Both men groaned.

"My mother is determined to see George settled," James explained. "She's invited a horde of high-society ladies and their chaperones to fill the house for the next month. I guess she imagines if George can't escape them, he'll eventually break down and propose to one."

"That seems . . . foolproof?" Tom offered with a shrug.

"It's idiotic," James snapped.

"It's a goddamn nightmare," echoed Burke. "We've already got a viscountess and her mousey daughter, the Swindon

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sisters, even Sir Andrew and Lady Oswald are here chasing Blanche around with a butterfly net."

Tom couldn't help but laugh. Blanche Oswald grew up with them. She was one of the silliest women breathing. "That's the duchess' idea of a good match for George?"

"I think it's less about her manners and more about the fact that Sir Andrew now owns half of Carrington. We're told her dowry is pushing thirty thousand," James said.

"Surely you don't need to be fortune hunting," Tom said with a raised brow. "Is the estate in crisis?"

"Not currently," Burke replied. "All thanks to James, here."

"But capital is capital," James added. "No lord can afford to settle for a penniless bride. George is too eccentric to get brains, beauty, and a dowry. At this point, mother is putting all her chips on a dowry. She means to have him announcing his engagement by the Michaelmas ball."

Tom was well familiar with the Corbins' annual ball. They'd been hosting a Michaelmas soiree every year for nigh on four generations. Navy life meant Tom had missed quite a few, but it was always a smashing good time. The Corbin punch was legendary.

"How long are you on leave this time?" Burke asked.

James snorted into his drink and Tom shot him an annoyed look. "I have a somewhat open order," he told Burke. "It may last until Christmas . . ."

Burke raised a dark brow in question and Tom groaned.

"He's in the same situation as my dear brother," James explained.

Tom rubbed the back of his neck with a weathered hand, wishing he could sink through the floor. God, it was so

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infuriating. But naval politics meant that sometimes an officer had to make sacrifices in the name of his career. In Tom's case that meant—

"Wait," Burke said on a gasp. "You never . . . oh, Tom, are you only home to bag a wife?" At Tom's look of solemn resignation, Burke let out a laugh. "What a romantic you are. Like Poseidon in search of Amphitrite, you come in from the sea."

"I'm First Lieutenant now," Tom argued. "A captaincy is next, so long as I can rank up. And my captain believes the surest way I rank within the year is to take a wife who can help me pay for it."

Burke leaned forward. "So, young Poseidon, the plot thickens. The duchess plans to parade eligible ladies in front of George for the next month, and you figured you'll what? Pick one off the end with a title and a reticule full of diamonds and hope George doesn't notice? Do you really think you can fall in love in a fortnight?"

Tom scowled. "It's not like that. You both know I have no interest in marriage. Not after . . ." He fell silent and, for once, Burke tactfully made no comment. "This isn't about love. I'm through with all that. This is a career move, plain and simple."

Burke set his glass aside. "Well, Lieutenant, you have your mission, and now we have ours. The duchess has kindly arranged for a bouquet of eligible ladies to stay in the house for the next three weeks. That's plenty of time for us to find you a suitable wife with a thick pair of lips to kiss and deep pockets to caress."

"You're both going to stay out of this," Tom growled.

"Nonsense," said James. "Between the three of us, we'll find you a lady so perfect you'll forget all about . . ." He cleared his

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throat and drained his glass. "Just leave it to us. We'll have you walking down the aisle by Christmas."

The prospect made Tom positively miserable.

Burke raised his glass in mocking salute. "Glad to have you home, Tom."

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JAMES WOKE WITH a start as his valet jerked back the curtains, letting a bright stream of sunlight cascade across the bed. He untangled himself from his sheets. Another odd series of dreams last night had him feeling just as tired as when he laid down his head.

"Sorry, my lord. You asked me to wake you promptly at seven. Shall you take a tray here, or go down?"

James rubbed his face with both hands. "What? No, I'll dress and go down. Is my brother awake? Or my mother?"

"Her Grace's bell rang at half six, my lord." William set out a blue morning coat, red brocade waistcoat, and tan breeches.

"And my brother? He didn't abscond in the night back to Town?"

"I believe His Grace is still here, my lord," William replied.

"Be sure his valet wakes him soon and remind him that his guests will expect to see him for breakfast."

"Very good, my lord."

William helped him dress in silence. James took one last look in the mirror, noting the dark circles under his eyes.

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Perhaps his mother might know of a tonic to aid with sleeplessness. Leaving that problem aside for now, he donned the mask of a Corbin and left the serenity of his bedchamber.

The breakfast room was already occupied by multiple early risers. As James entered, everyone jumped to their feet, no doubt expecting him to be the duke.

"Only me," he said with a smile. "Please, let's not stand on ceremony while you're all guests here. Think of Alcott as your home."

"Too kind, Lord James," one of the ladies murmured.

Burke was the first to resume his seat. Sir Andrew returned to eagerly salting his poached egg. Next to him, Lady Oswald and Blanche twittered about every feature of the room, from the flowers to the china patterns. Across the table, the Viscountess Raleigh and her daughter Madeline spoke in hushed tones.

James took his seat, leaving the end chair open for his brother. As he was served a plate, he noticed the subtle glances cast his way. The ladies waited for him to offer up something . . . *anything*. Plans for the day's entertainment, a delightful anecdote about George, history of the house. Instead, he focused on his breakfast.

"His Grace?" he muttered, as a footman poured him a second cup of tea.

"Not yet awake, m'lord."

James folded his newspaper and shot Burke a look to tell him where he was going.

Burke lifted the corner of his mouth, his expression clearly saying, *Better you than me*.

James cleared his throat and stood. "After breakfast, I

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thought we might walk in the gardens . . . now that the rain has eased. I'm sure His Grace will be happy to join us. He's quite proud of his fruit trees."

"Capital idea," replied Sir Andrew.

"What a lovely thought," chimed his wife.

"And of course, the ladies will take tea with the duchess," he added, nodding to the two younger ladies. "And more of our house party arrives today."

The table murmured their excitement as James leaned down, one hand on Burke's shoulder. He spoke only loud enough for his friend to hear. "If I'm not back in half an hour, it's because I'm burying George under those damned trees."

Burke took a sip of his coffee. "Shall I instruct the tour guide to avoid the side gardens?"

With a scowl, James nodded and left.

James crossed half the house and scaled three flights of stairs to reach his brother's bedchamber. A footman waited outside the door with a sleepy look on his face. James didn't envy him. He couldn't imagine a worse job than being forced to stand outside a door and wait endlessly until someone chanced to need it opened.

"Open it," James said.

The footman scrambled for the handle and gave it a tug.

James swept into the room, making no noise on the plush blue carpets. His eyes adjusted to the darkness, the fire in the hearth having gone out hours ago. He sighed as he saw the state of his brother—spread-eagle in the middle of his massive four-poster bed, bare arse on display. To either side of him, a girl was curled, not a stitch of clothing to cover their

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nakedness. One still wore a belted contraption around her waist that gave her . . . the anatomy of a man.

James looked pointedly away. This was one of the less compromising states he'd found his brother in recently. His brother, who—on top of being a virulent breed of fornicator—was also prone to drinking, smoking, gambling, and all other forms of vice.

"Christ, man, get up," James barked. He crossed over to the window and jerked open the curtains, letting the room flood with blinding sunlight.

"Wha—whashappen?" George grunted, face still deep in his pillow.

James grabbed the ewer of water from the side table and tossed the contents over the bed. The maids squealed and bolted out either side, their wet tits bouncing. The girl wearing the cock harness blushed crimson as she noted James standing at the end of the bed. She shimmied out of the device, which left the dark curls of her sex on full display.

"Get out," he said, pointing towards the concealed servant's door in the corner.

Both women rushed to leave with their clothes bundled in their arms.

"Killjoy," George groaned, rolling over to give James an unwanted view of his half-hardened cock. "I wanted to enjoy them again when I woke up."

"You've had more than enough fun for now," James said, tossing his brother a robe. "Get dressed. You have a house full of guests and I *need* you. They're here to see the Duke of Norland, not his little brother."

George stuffed his arms through the sleeves of his robe

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and snatched the ewer from James' hands, using it as a piss pot. He tried to hand it back to James, but James stepped away. There were many roles James would serve in his quest to protect the family and the county from George's influence, but piss pot attendant was not one of them.

George set the ewer aside and stood, stretching his arms high over his head. His half-masted cock was still on display and James had to fight the urge to smack it.

"I'll call Robert in to help you dress."

"I'm famished," George said, dropping into a chair by the bed.

"Well, you missed breakfast," James replied. "Robert will bring a tray."

"You really are an insufferable little fuck, James."

"Coming from you, I'll take that as a compliment," James said, wholly unfazed by his brother's rudeness. Seeing as they were eight years apart in age, they had never been close. "I will not have you ruin this for mother," he said. "She's invited several prominent families, and they will be your guests for the next three weeks. Not mine, George. *Yours*. If you want to see just how insufferable I can be, try and weasel your way out of this."

"You are absolutely no fun." George rubbed at his temples. "Christ, I need a cure for this headache."

"The perfect cure is fresh air and sunlight," James replied. "You'll find both in the gardens when you take your guests on a tour in half an hour."

George groaned again. If the brothers had one singular thing in common, it was how much they detested playing tour guide. "What do I get if I play your little game and behave as the benevolent duke for the morning?"

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"Not just this morning. You need to be on form for the next *three* weeks—"

"Impossible—"

"Mother expects you to announce your engagement by Michaelmas. I've never seen her so determined, George. Your options at this point are either the altar or the grave."

George muttered under his breath something about fleeing to the continent.

James just gave his brother a bitter laugh. "You're not going anywhere. The coachmen are under strict instructions not to remove you from this house."

George puffed himself up. "So, I'm to be a prisoner in my own home?"

"If that's what it takes," James replied. "As long as we have guests here, I'll be riding your arse at every moment . . . and you won't like it nearly as much as you did last night when whoever she is did whatever it was with that filthy wooden cock."

George grinned. "If you knew the pleasures that little toy could bring, you'd not be trying to use it as a threat."

"Yes, but I won't use a cock," James growled. "It will be my booted foot up your arse, and I'll keep kicking until I knock out your goddamn teeth."

Before another barb could be uttered, there was a soft knock at the door.

"Enter," James called.

The door swung open to admit the young valet. Behind him, a footman carried a breakfast tray piled with boiled eggs, sausages, toast, and a small cup of piping hot cocoa.

James turned to the valet. "You have exactly twenty minutes to get His Grace fed, clothed, and downstairs. If I don't

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