



A SECOND SONS BOOK



HIS GRACE, THE DUKE

NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

EMILY RATH

PENGUIN BOOKS

HIS GRACE, THE DUKE

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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Content notice: *His Grace, the Duke* contains descriptive sex scenes involving a polycule (MMMF); impact play; light bondage and sensory deprivation; sleep deprivation; mild bloody violence; brief/vague discussion of past childhood trauma; pregnancy and childbirth (epilogue only).

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*To Jacqueline Durran, costume designer
on Pride & Prejudice (2005). You
gifted us with the outfit in Matthew
Macfadyen's "walks through a field at
dawn" moment . . . and my life has
never been the same.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

HELLO, BEAUTIFUL READERS! Sorry about that little cliffy in book one. It couldn't be helped. There's just too much story to tell! Be forewarned, *His Grace, The Duke* is book two in the Second Sons series. If you haven't already read *Beautiful Things*, STOP HERE (spoilers below).

If you've read *Beautiful Things*, then you know where we are:

- The duke is engaged to Piety Nash.
- Burke is reluctantly ~sort of~ engaged to Olivia Rutledge.
- Renley has some major explaining to do.
- And Rosalie and James are currently on a midnight carriage ride to London.

Keep in mind this is a polyamorous romance, so our heroine has multiple suitors, and she won't be picking just one in the end. Prepare yourself for a much spicier book as each relationship naturally grows. And yes, I'm talking about relationships between the guys too. If you've followed me on TikTok, you'll know what I mean when I say this story earns an Emily-approved emotional 5 sword-cross ranking. You're welcome. :)

Grab your smelling salts and get ready to clutch your pearls. Let's give Rosalie and her gentlemen a happily ever after worth swooning for.

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



THE CARRIAGE SWAYED gently as a team of four horses pulled it steadily onward. It was dangerous to travel at night, but light from the full moon and a sea of stars guided the way. Dawn was soon approaching. The colors were already shifting; the indigo was not quite so depthless. Soon a spray of pinks and purples would break over the horizon.

James hoped to be in London well before sunrise. He wanted to beat the morning traffic and avoid any early-rising busybodies who might recognize his coach arriving at Corbin House. Tucked under his arm, Rosalie shifted in her sleep. He stifled a smile.

When they first started their journey north, it hadn't escaped his notice how she kept herself as far from him as possible. Wedged in the corner of the coach, she did her utmost to not even look in his direction. Who was it that she didn't trust? James . . . or herself? He wasn't sure. All he knew was that if he clenched his jaw any tighter, he might break his teeth.

But if Rosalie resolutely had nothing to say, then neither

did he. The only indulgence he allowed himself was to glance over every so often and trace the feminine arc of her neck with his eyes, illuminated by that bright moon.

She finally fell asleep, and he breathed a sigh of relief. At least when she was asleep, he could look at her without restraint. She still wore his evening coat over her ball gown, his mother's necklace around her throat. His mind flashed with images of their stolen moment in the library. It made him almost feral when he brushed his fingers over that damn necklace, feeling how her soft skin warmed the pearls. He imagined her wearing other Corbin family jewels and nothing else . . . stretched out naked on his bed, reaching for him, wanting him—

Christ.

She was right not to trust him. He couldn't get her out of his head.

But in sleep, our true desires surface. A jolt in the road had her jerking away from the window. That's when she leaned towards James, her head falling on his shoulder. She let out a contented sigh as she curled into him, her left arm drifting until her gloved hand settled on his thigh. She hadn't noticed when he shifted slightly, wrapping his arm around her.

That was two hours ago. Two hours of holding her in his arms. It was all he could do not to move. Her hair was falling out of its elegant style. One curl fluttered in her face, swaying with the movement of the carriage. He wanted to tuck it behind her ear, but he was afraid to wake her and watch her recoil. Part of her *must* trust him. Part of her felt safe in his arms. She could admit it in sleep. Could she ever admit it when she was awake?

"Whoa . . . *whoa*," the coachman called

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The clatter of the horses' shod hooves told James they were now on cobblestones. One more change over and they would be in Town.

Rosalie pressed into him as she sat up, blinking as she looked around. Bright, golden torchlight flickered outside the windows to either side as they entered a carriage yard. The coachman was already calling orders to a pair of grooms to change out the tired team. Realizing where she was, she shifted away. "Sorry," she murmured. "I fell asleep." She wrapped her arms tightly around herself, suppressing a shiver. James frowned. She'd be warm again if she would just stay in his arms. To anyone else, he would have said as much, but she was too stubborn. If James said anything, he was sure she'd opt to ride atop the carriage like a piece of luggage.

She peered out the window, blinking in the harsh torchlight. "Have we arrived?"

"Not quite. This will be the last change over. We'll be in Town in another hour."

"Did you sleep at all?"

"No."

She stifled a yawn, pressing herself back into the corner, arms crossed tight inside his evening coat. That would have to be his first stop this morning. James had an entire wardrobe waiting for him at Corbin House, but Rosalie had only the clothes on her back. Hardly appropriate attire. In fact, it was downright scandalous. But it was also their easiest problem to fix.

James was a bloody fool. He never acted impetuously, and this was why. He would be arriving in Town with the sunrise, his family's unwed ward on his arm, both of them still dressed for the ball from which they fled like thieves in the night.

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"We need a plan," he said, breaking their strained silence.

Rosalie glanced over at him. "A plan?"

"Yes. We need an excuse to have just taken off like we did."

She was quiet for a moment. "What did you have in mind?"

He shrugged. "I've been mulling it almost since we left but I can't think of any good reason why we'd leave like we did that doesn't link us romantically . . . What if we say your aunt was taken ill? Would she play along?"

Rosalie worried her lip. "And I just happened to receive news of it late at night while dancing at a ball? And you rushed to bring me to her side?"

She didn't need to say what they both knew. It was a hopelessly weak excuse.

"I thought perhaps an engagement party," she said, peering out the window again.

James frowned. "What?"

"Our excuse," she replied, watching the footmen scurry in the yard. "We rushed to London to throw together a surprise engagement party for His Grace and Piety. The sooner we set the date, the easier our quick exit can be forgiven." She turned back to face him, golden light from the torches illuminating her beautiful face. "It's not exactly foolproof, but—"

"No, it's brilliant," he muttered. It was a lie that worked on so many levels too. "I'll write a note to George as soon as we get to Corbin House and have him bring everyone to Town. Next Friday, we'll throw a party to celebrate the engagement. Naturally, I needed your assistance in the planning. You clearly have a good eye for it."

She smiled faintly. "Your mother is the planner. I just did as she bade me."

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Both their smiles fell at mention of his mother, for was she not the reason they both felt the need to flee so recklessly in the night? His mother who was threatening to steal their happiness by shackling Burke in marriage to Oliva Rutledge, a woman who hated the very idea of him. James would lose his best friend and watch him suffer in a marriage doomed to fail. Rosalie would lose her . . . what were they now? Friends? Lovers? Burke admitted to sharing carnal relations with her in the music room. James had been trying very hard not to picture it. Did Rosalie know he knew?

His own memories of last night sat like a stone in his chest. God, he'd said such hateful things. The moment the words were spoken, he regretted them. It was a reflex, born out of misplaced anger. The look of pain on her face still haunted him. He had to say something. He had to apologize or at the very least explain.

"Rosalie . . ."

She turned to face him. "Yes?"

He sighed. "About last night in the library . . ." She went utterly still.

"I was angry and upset," he explained. "I said things I didn't mean. I'd appreciate it if we could . . . can we put it behind us? Can we forget it ever happened?"

Something flickered in her eyes. It came and went so fast, he couldn't read it. "What part exactly didn't you mean, my lord? The part where you called me low-born and loose? Or the part where you claimed all my air with your tongue in my mouth?"

Shit.

He shifted awkwardly on the bench seat. "I suppose . . . both."

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She turned away to face the window. "Fine. Consider it forgotten."

Those four words launched like arrows shot from a bow.

He rubbed at his chest, sure he might feel one of the shafts. "We're ready out here, m'lord," the coachman called.

James tore his eyes away from Rosalie. "Drive on," he called back. In moments, the carriage was rattling off as the new team pulled them ever closer to their destination.

After a few minutes of silence, James felt Rosalie's eyes on him. He turned slowly to face her. She looked so tired, so vulnerable. He wanted to wrap her in his arms again.

"Don't for one moment think that I can't see through this ruse," she said, her voice simmering with frustration.

He opened his mouth to apologize again, but no words came out.

She scoffed. "James Corbin, Viscount Finchley . . . you forget that we stood in that library as equals. I got inside those thick walls of yours at last. I know you're doing the noble thing here, pushing me away. I know you and admire you . . . and I kissed you back."

James had suddenly forgotten how to breathe.

She leaned a little closer and her intoxicating spiced floral scent enveloped him. He'd been caught in her perfumed snare for hours. "I know duty means everything to you. So, we'll not mention it again, but only if you tell me the truth here and now . . . will you dream of it?"

"Christ, Rosalie. Don't ask me for what I cannot give."

Her gaze softened. "You can't give me the truth?"

"Not this truth," he muttered. "Not when it will do neither of us any good to hear it."

"The truth is all over here, you and I," she replied. "From the

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moment we met, you've given me your truths, no matter how cruel. Without truth between us, there is nothing."

She sounded so forlorn. He just wanted to make her happy again. He wanted to see her smile. *He* wanted to be the reason she was smiling.

"Here is my truth," she went on. "You've filled my dreams since the first night I met you. Even when you showed me nothing but open animosity, I dreamed of you. I dream of a gentler touch from your hands, gentler words from those lips that kiss me so well."

Her eyes trailed down his face, settling on his parted lips. He knew she possessed more than one sketch of them drawn with her own hand.

Bloody fucking hell.

This woman was going to be the death of him. It took everything he had to turn away, looking resolutely out the window, rather than take her in his arms again. He wasn't the sort for intimate reveals. No woman had ever held his interest long enough to be worthy of his heartfelt vulnerability. But she was right: She'd gotten inside his walls last night.

He sighed, letting himself break just enough to slide his hand across the velvet of the bench seat, seeking out her gloved hand. She was waiting for him, her fingers lacing with his. He pressed his forehead to the cool glass of the window and closed his eyes.

"James," she whispered. "Do you ever dream of me?"

This carriage was to be his confessional. He would say the words aloud, her touch would absolve him, and then they would begin the essential business of forgetting. They would both forget, for nothing had changed.

Duty over love. Family.

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Title.

“James . . .”

The words were on his lips. She deserved to know. He *wanted* her to know . . . but that would be cruel to them both. He gave her hand a squeeze and dropped it back to the seat. “To dream implies sleep,” he muttered, his eyes locked on the outline of the looming city, framed in softest lavender by the rising sun. “And that is a luxury I cannot afford.”

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“WE’RE HERE.” THE gentleness of James’ voice clashed with the stiffness of his resolve. It had been almost an hour since their last conversation, and he was still looking out the carriage window.

Rosalie watched with a heavy heart as his Corbin mask slipped firmly into place. His shoulders squared, his beautiful green eyes hardened, and that imperious chin lifted. James, the man who kissed her with a passion verging on obsession, was firmly locked away. In his place sat Lord James, Viscount Finchley.

Heavens, but it was an impressive transformation. This was the man she met on her first night at Alcott Hall. The lord who challenged her and sneered and treated her like an inconvenience. Her weary Atlas, carrying all the world’s troubles on his shoulders.

The carriage rattled into the courtyard of Corbin House and Rosalie peered out the window, taking in the handsome grey stone walls that stretched three stories high. It was still quite early. Morning light tinged the stone a hazy blue.

"Let me do the talking," James said, voice low.

She shrugged out of his evening coat and tried to hand it back to him.

"Keep it."

"I can't," she replied. "You know how it will look."

He huffed. "It will look like a gentleman offered a lady a coat to keep her warm. Anyone who says otherwise will answer to me."

"James—"

"Keep the damn coat," he growled, leaning into her space until his face was mere inches from hers.

Her breath caught in her throat.

His gaze softened slightly, those green eyes rooting her to the spot, as he raised a hand and brushed his thumb over her parted lips. "I can't wear it if it smells like you," he whispered, his voice pained. "I cannot think. Rosalie . . . I can't breathe."

For the briefest of moments, he touched his forehead to hers. Did he know? Did he see the way she was holding her face in the crook of her elbow all night, using his scent to calm her to sleep? The coat smelled so wonderfully of him—wool and leather oil and faint notes of spiced cologne. But now it smelled like her too, so it was tainted.

No, not tainted. Tempting. *Too* tempting.

"Just put it back on," he said, dropping his hand away from her. "And leave the talking to me."

He scooted away just as the carriage door swung open. He stepped out in his waistcoat and shirtsleeves, taking all Rosalie's air with him. She shrugged herself back into the coat, grateful for its warmth.

"Good heavens," came a high, female voice. "We didn't know to expect you, my lord. Gracious, you must be exhausted."

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What were you thinking, driving through the night? Dangerous—downright *reckless*—oh, I do hope nothing serious has happened at the great house.” By the way the woman fretted, equal parts servile and maternal, Rosalie felt sure she must be the housekeeper.

“Good morning, Mrs. Robbins,” James replied. “I know this is highly irregular, but I bring good tidings. His Grace is newly engaged.”

“Well—that is—” The lady blustered, and Rosalie could well imagine why. “That is simply wonderful news, my lord! May we know who is to be the new duchess?”

“Miss Piety Nash,” James replied. “I arrive express from Alcott where it was just announced. I’m on strict orders to prepare an engagement party. His Grace wants no expense spared,” he added. “George was explicit that it be held in a fortnight. I came ahead of the rest of the group with Miss Harrow, for there is much to plan and I require a feminine eye.”

Rosalie smirked. It was masterfully done—shifting the blame of their expedition onto the duke. George Corbin was surely eccentric enough that his staff would easily believe he sent his brother to London in the dead of night to plan a party for him.

“Miss—who, sir?”

Until that moment, James had been standing in front of the carriage door, blocking Rosalie in. He stepped aside now and held out a hand for her. She took it, letting him help her down the step.

“Gracious,” cried Mrs. Robbins. She was a short and stout lady with a ruffed collar at her neck and frizzy blonde hair tucked under a mobcap. She glanced from Rosalie to James. “Good morning, miss. Welcome to Corbin House.”

“Good morning,” Rosalie replied, giving the woman a smile.

James still held onto her hand, leading her forward. The footmen bustled around behind, shutting the carriage door and flipping up the step.

“Mrs. Robbins, may I present Miss Rosalie Harrow,” James said, his tone almost bored. “She is my mother’s ward. She was indispensable in arranging the Michaelmas ball. When I told her of my mission to plan a society soiree in less than a fortnight, she was only too happy to lend a hand.”

Rosalie watched Mrs. Robbins take in her disheveled hair, her ball gown and jewels, James’ coat. “Well, let’s get you both inside, then. A spot of tea and breakfast—”

“Nothing for me,” James replied. “But please show Miss Harrow up to the Burgundy Room.” He turned to Rosalie. “I have business this morning. We can meet this afternoon to go over the schedule of events. Does that suit you?”

Rosalie knew what he was doing. He needed to confer a sense of authority to her. He wanted the staff to see her as more than a guest. “Yes, of course, my lord,” she replied.

He gave a curt nod. “Excellent.” With that, he turned and walked off, leaving her in the company of Mrs. Robbins and the two footmen.

“Well then, John, Tanner, you heard Lord James. Bring the lady’s luggage to the Burgundy Room,” said Mrs. Robbins with a snap of her fingers.

The young footmen exchanged a confused look. “But she has no luggage.”



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Corbin House was just as beautiful as Alcott Hall, though on a vastly different scale. The halls were narrower, the ceilings unpainted, and the architecture and furniture stylings all had a more modern feel. Rosalie followed dutifully behind Mrs. Robbins up to the second floor. With no luggage to tote, the footmen had quickly disappeared.

"You must have had a terrible journey," Mrs. Robbins said, keys jangling at her hip. "If we had known to expect the family, we would have opened the house."

"Please don't make yourself uneasy on our account," Rosalie replied, trotting to keep up. "It was beastly of us to arrive like this, but His Grace says 'jump' and it falls to us to say 'how high?'"

Mrs. Robbins turned left at the stairs, taking Rosalie down a long hall. "Larders empty, half the staff on leave. If I had even a day's warning . . ."

Rosalie let the woman fret aloud as they made another turn at the end of the hall. Mrs. Robbins opened the first door on the right and disappeared into a dark bedroom. She immediately went over to the window and opened the curtain a crack, just enough to let a little light pool inside. Then she moved over to the mantel and pulled a servant's cord. Rosalie was sure a bell was ringing somewhere in the depths of the house.

"You're welcome to take a rest, dear," said Mrs. Robbins, turning down the coverlet on the bed. "You look dead on your feet. There's a wash basin in the corner. Fanny will bring you some hot water. And there's a proper washroom in the hall."

A knock at the door had both women turning. "Come in, Fanny," Mrs. Robbins called.

A pretty, red-haired maid with copious freckles stepped

into the room. She had a sleepy look on her face that disappeared as she took in Rosalie standing by the bed.

"Fanny, this is Miss Harrow. Please see she has everything she needs. Miss Harrow, should you require anything, please let any of the staff know."

"Thank you, Mrs. Robbins," Rosalie replied, offering the woman a grateful smile.

The maid glanced around the room confused. "But . . . why is she in here?"

Mrs. Robbins tsked. "Lord James expressly requested this room. We'll bring in some flowers and I'll have the girls dust it up a bit, and it will be right as rain." She moved towards the door, keys still jangling at her hip. "And it sounds like we'll soon have a houseful, so we'll need every room we can get."

The housekeeper ducked out, leaving Rosalie alone with young Fanny.

The maid was still surveying Rosalie from her tousled hair to her satin slippers. "How can I help, miss?"

"Umm, perhaps some hot water," Rosalie replied. She desperately needed a wash, especially after the events of last night.

Oh, heavens. She was all but naked under her gown. She'd quite forgotten that Burke ruined her chemise. When Fanny helped her undress, she'd find Rosalie in nothing but her stockings and stays!

"And *umm* . . ." Rosalie would surely die of mortification. "Could—could you perhaps . . . find me a spare chemise?"

The maid paused at the door. She turned slightly, her face unreadable. "Yes, miss. Right away."



ROSALIE WOKE WITH a wince, raising a hand to massage the painful crick in her neck. It was disorienting at first, sitting up to see dark shapes out of place all around. The events of the previous night quickly came screaming back to her, reminding her of where she was and why.

She sat in the middle of the four-poster bed, her borrowed chemise slipping off her shoulders. The house was quiet as a tomb, save for the soft *tick tick tick* of the clock on her mantel. The curtain was still open only a strip, wide enough to glow on the clock's face.

Ten o'clock.

She gasped. She'd only meant to close her eyes for a moment. Instead, she'd slept for three hours! She slipped off the bed and dragged open the curtains. Bright sunlight flooded the room. It was slightly larger than her room at Alcott. The walls were a wine red with a gold pattern to the paper. The furniture was all dark wood, while the mantel and fireplace were black marble. She had the distinct impression this was meant to be a masculine space. The art was not florals,

but landscapes, and there was little else that might cater to feminine needs.

A dark wood door framed either side of the bed. Rosalie opened the one closer to the window and found a shallow, shelved closet stacked with linens. The door to the other side was locked. She rattled the handle, looking around for a key. Perhaps it connected to a water closet or a washroom.

Passing a mirror, she frowned at her reflection. Her fashionably styled hair was in shambles all around her face, loose curls hanging down, even while the rest of the pile teetered lopsided on her head. She had dark circles under her eyes, and the imprint from the lace on the edge of the pillowcase was creased into her cheek.

Working fast, she tugged all the pins out of her hair until it all hung in a thick mess of dark curls down her back. She did her best to catch all the pearls woven into her braids, but a telltale *plink plink* told her at least a couple slipped through her fingers. Once the mess was down, she fixed it back up in some semblance of a style.

Before she could dress, there came a sharp knock at the door.

“Yes?” she called.

“It’s Fanny, miss. You’re needed downstairs. Mrs. Robbins says it’s urgent.”



To Rosalie’s utter shock—AND annoyance—the urgent business downstairs had nothing to do with any kind of party planning. No, the truth was far more irritating. In her rush

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to appear, Rosalie wore only her chemise and slippers, with James' evening coat wrapped around her like a pelisse. She stepped into the sunny morning room to find the most fashionable woman she'd ever seen smiling at her.

"You must be Miss 'arrow?" The lady fluttered across the room like a fairy. She was dressed in canary yellow silk that fit her like a glove, showing off her ample assets. Her dark locks were done up in curls and she wore a sparkling feathered headpiece.

Rosalie tugged the lapels of James' coat tighter over her chest. "I am."

"Mon Dieu, your beauty was not understated," the woman cooed. "I am Madame Lambert, modiste extraordinaire." She posed with a flourish, one hand arched in the air like a dancer. "But you may call me Paulette," she added, dropping her hand back to her side. Those dark eyes took in Rosalie from tousled head to slippered foot. "I see I 'ave not come a minute too late." Her smile quirked, the red paint on her lips stretching wide. "You're missing a dress, ma chérie."

She fought her blush. "Yes . . . umm . . ."

Before she could finish her sentence, the modiste turned to direct the movement of three house maids who came bustling in with an alarming display of boxes balanced between them. Two footmen followed behind with yet more boxes.

"Set ze big ones just 'ere," the modiste said, pointing to the table.

The footmen did as they were asked, excusing themselves immediately, shutting the door as they left.

The modiste crossed the room. "Well then, let's get you into ze first gown—"

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“Wait!” Rosalie looked from the modiste to the maids to the towering pile of boxes. “There’s been a misunderstanding. I have clothes. I really don’t need—”

“Don’t be silly, *ma chérie*,” the modiste said with an airy laugh. “Rule number one: If a lord wants to buy you a new wardrobe, you let him.”

The maids giggled and the modiste had the audacity to flash them a knowing wink. They were surely going to get the wrong idea about her and James now.

“I ‘ave everything he asked for,” the modiste said, opening the top box to pull out a devastating ball gown encrusted with shimmering beads.

All three maids gasped. One put a hand over her mouth to contain a squeal of excitement.

Rosalie’s mouth fell open in surprise. “He can’t possibly think this is suitable for a day dress,” she cried.

“Of course not,” the modiste replied. “This is for *ze* opera. *Ze* other boxes ‘ave morning dresses and walking dresses and a habit for riding.” She gestured to each with a wave of her hand.

Rosalie sighed. “I already have a riding habit.”

Yes, the one James bought her not two weeks ago. She hadn’t even had the chance to wear it yet.

“Well, now you shall ‘ave two,” the modiste replied, handing off the ball gown to the waiting maid. “Don’t worry, *ma chérie*,” she added, stepping forward to pat Rosalie’s hand. “*Ze* viscount took care of everything. You shall be more beautiful than any woman in *ze ton*.”

Rosalie’s frown deepened. “And what else did ‘*ze* viscount’ order, pray?”

The modiste pulled a list out of her dress pocket with a

flourish, smiling as she read it aloud. "Five morning dresses, two promenade dresses, two pelisses, three spencers, five evening gowns, two ball gowns, assorted gloves for day and night, two bonnets, slippers, leather half boots, riding boots, and assorted undergarments and ribbons for hair and the like." She glanced up from her list, adding, "Oh . . . and I may 'ave included one or two items not on your lord's list, but he will be pleased all ze same . . . and he will not notice the added expense." She winked, and Rosalie wanted to die.

"I most certainly don't need all of that," she cried. "And he is not *my* lord," she added indignantly, one eye glancing to the grinning maids. She held out her hand. "Give me that list, and I'll shorten it. Really, all I need is something suitable for this morning so I can go to my aunt's house and get my *own* things."

"Nonsense," the modiste replied, giving the list a protective pat in her pocket. "Ze viscount already paid me. I am simply 'ere to check sizes."

"Wait . . . this is all mine?" Rosalie's heart was racing. This was too much. Such an extravagant gesture would surely have the whole *ton* in uproar. She glanced again at the gorgeous champagne beaded gown and the tower of boxes covering the table and chaise. "I thought you just brought samples for me to try."

"Your viscount said it was urgent, and I see he must be correct," replied the modiste, still eyeing Rosalie's shambles of an outfit. "Now, I am quite a busy woman, and I 'ave other stops today. So please, if you are finished pretending you don't want to see what I 'ave in zeez boxes, then take off your lord's coat, and we will begin with ze ball gown. I call it *La Victoire*."

Rosalie felt dizzy. Was this his great business? James

bought her more clothes in one morning than what she currently owned altogether. And if the ball gown was any indication, he'd spared no expense. She frowned again. She'd already warned James once that she didn't like extravagant gifts. He thought he could have his way by ordering all this, then sneak out of the house. But he couldn't stay away forever. He'd come back, and then she'd have her say.

"Fine." She shrugged out of his coat and tossed it aside. "Let's get this over with."



An hour later, Rosalie was growing tired of playing doll. Just as she feared, the gowns were all the highest quality. She'd never owned a dress half so fine as the first morning dress she tried on—a pretty peach satin with corded burgundy and gold piping. The ball gown made her feel like a queen . . . and it was one of *two* that now inexplicably belonged to her.

"Just look at *zis* one, *ma chérie*," Paulette cooed, holding up a beautiful forest green walking gown. "It's a new design from Paris." She turned it around and Rosalie's heart skipped a beat.

The dress had a low "V" cut to the bodice, and the inner lining of the skirt was pink with a printed pattern of flowering vines and little blue birds. Rosalie loved it. Paulette helped her step into it and slip it up over her hips. The sleeves ended in points over the backs of her hands, and there were little strings that could be tied at the wrists.

"It fits you so well," said Paulette, fastening it up the back. "And your viscount was clearly right."

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HIS GRACE, THE DUKE

Rosalie's hands stilled their inspection of the patterned skirt. "Right?"

"Green is ze perfect color for you," Paulette murmured in her ear.

"He never said that," she said with a distracted laugh.

Paulette came around the front, giving the bodice little tugs as she checked the fit. "Did he not?" She paused, both hands on Rosalie's shoulders. "Then why can't you stop blushing thinking of ze green in his eyes?"

Rosalie's mouth opened, but no words came out.

"You should wear it today to thank him for his generosity," Paulette said with a knowing smile.

"I am not with him in that way," Rosalie whispered, one eye darting over to the watchful maids. "I am a ward of his family, of his mother. The dowager duchess assured me I would be fitted for new dresses. He is only doing as his mother bids him." She said this loud enough for the maids to hear.

Perhaps if Rosalie said the truth often enough, she might begin to accept it too.

Paulette just smiled. "Of course, ma chérie." A door slammed somewhere down the hall.

"Ahh, maybe zat is ze lord now," Paulette said, dropping to her knees to check the hem. "We shall test ze viscount's indifference to your beauty."

Behind her, a maid stifled a nervous giggle.

Rosalie rolled her eyes. There was clearly no convincing the modiste. At the same time, her heart began to beat a little faster, knowing she would see James again so soon. She was annoyed about the dresses, but so much had been left unsaid

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between them. That last moment in the carriage, his thumb grazing over her lips . . .

Rosalie was distracted by shouting and another slamming door. Someone was in a heated argument. Why was James badgering his servants? She was instantly on edge wondering what must have put him in such a foul mood. Footsteps echoed through the closed door. He was coming on swift feet.

“She is with the modiste,” came the shrill voice of Mrs. Robbins. “I simply cannot let you barge in. She may be indecent—”

“Like I bloody give a damn!” Rosalie’s heart stopped as she gasped. That wasn’t James’ voice.

Paulette stilled too, her hands on Rosalie’s hem. She glanced up, first at Rosalie, then over her shoulder towards the door. The maids twittered a rush of whispered words, eyes wide, as the morning room door snapped open.

Burke stood in the frame, eyes thundering as they locked on Rosalie.



ROSALIE TOOK A deep breath through parted lips, letting her eyes trace over Burke. He stepped fully into the room, his stormy gaze sweeping once around, taking in the teetering piles of dress boxes and loose tissue paper. His magnetic pull charged the air between them as he gave her a look torn between wanting to strangle her or kiss her breathless. Was it possible the others could miss this heat between them?

Mrs. Robbins shuffled in behind him, huffing in indignation. “Really, Mr. Burke, this is most inappropriate. Come away this instant.”

Burke’s eyes locked on Rosalie. “I need to talk to you,” he said, his deep voice raising gooseflesh down her arms.

The modiste glanced from Rosalie to Burke. “Well, ze plot thickens,” she murmured just loud enough for Rosalie to hear. “Bonjour, Monsieur Burke.”

Burke’s eye flicked to her. “Paulette,” he said with a tight nod.

Paulette gave him one of her knowing smiles, and jealousy churned in Rosalie’s stomach. Why was Burke on first-name terms with a London modiste?

Rosalie put a false smile on her face. "You have not heard, Paulette. Monsieur Burke is newly engaged."

Mrs. Robbins and the maids all squealed with excitement. "I am pleased for you," said Paulette, still glancing curiously between them. "Who is the lucky woman?"

"Lady Olivia Rutledge, daughter of the Marquess of Deal," Rosalie replied. She knew she was being childish, but her heart was too battered for her to act sensibly.

Burke said nothing, but a muscle twitched in his jaw.

"Oh, my heavens," Mrs. Robbins gasped. "A marquess' daughter for our dear Burke? And His Grace settled too! A happy Christmas has come early to Corbin House."

The maids fell into fits of girlish giggles. "We need to talk," Burke repeated. "Now."

Mrs. Robbins bobbed on the balls of her feet, clearly at a loss for how to handle the situation. The maids watched in confusion, smiles falling.

"We're nearly finished here," Rosalie said, brushing her hands down the fabric of the new dress. "Mrs. Robbins, perhaps you could show Mr. Burke to the library. I'll be along as soon as—"

"I'm not going anywhere," Burke growled, taking a step closer. "I'll do this with an audience if that's really what you want. Either make them go, or let them stay and hear every word I have to say."

Rosalie's heart thrummed in her chest as she glanced from the modiste to the housekeeper.

"Really, Mr. Burke, I'll not tolerate rudeness," said Mrs. Robbins, bringing herself to her full height. She still hardly reached the middle of his chest.

Burke turned on her with a glower. "Mrs. Robbins, I have not begun to be rude."

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HIS GRACE, THE DUKE

"Enough," Rosalie called. She squared her shoulders at Burke, even as she spoke to the housekeeper. "Mrs. Robbins, please forgive Mr. Burke. He had a long journey, and he's clearly overtired." Burke opened his mouth to protest, but she cut him off with a raised hand. "If he wishes to speak to me again in this lifetime, he *will* go wait in the library. Perhaps you could be so good as to bring him a cup of coffee," she added. "It might help him recover his good humor."

Burke simmered with rage. Rosalie was sure, if she dared to touch him, his skin would crackle like a log on the fire.

"I think I 'ave everything I need," came Paulette's voice from her side. She gestured to Rosalie's dress. "Keep zis one. It fits you perfectly. Please tell your viscount I will 'ave ze rest altered and delivered tonight."

It was impossible to miss the way Burke flinched at the words "your" and "viscount." With a last growl, he turned and stalked out, shutting the door with a snap.

"Good gracious, whatever happened to put him in such a foul mood?" cried Mrs. Robbins. She turned to Rosalie. "Are you alright, dear?"

"I'm fine," Rosalie said softly.

Mrs. Robbins gave a curt nod. "Well, what a day. Clara, come help me with the coffee then, before he has another fit." She snapped her fingers at one of the maids and they both quickly left.

Rosalie blinked a few times, swallowing her tears. She glanced over her shoulder to see the other two maids were busy putting the clothes back in their boxes. "Was that really necessary?" she muttered at the modiste.

Paulette just smiled again. "You handled him well. I never thought I'd see ze day our Burke bowed to the will of a woman."

"You know him." The words were out before she could stop them. "Mr. Burke . . . you . . . you're acquainted?"

"Oui, I 'ave known him most of his life," Paulette replied. "His maman is my close friend . . . and he is like a son to me," she added, giving Rosalie's arm a gentle pat.

Rosalie heaved a sigh of relief, tears stinging her eyes again. Heavens, what was wrong with her? She couldn't remember the last time she cried so much in a single day.

Paulette cupped her cheek. "Whatever happened between you, he is here. And if he is here, he is yours."

The modiste's soft-spoken words were enough to crack Rosalie into pieces. She raised her hands, pressing her palms over her eyes as she took a few shuddering breaths. After a few moments, she calmed, lowering her hands from her face.

Paulette stroked her back. "Better?" Rosalie nodded.

"Bon. Now, leave zis mess with me." She gave Rosalie's cheek another pat. "Go to him, before he drowns himself in his coffee for want of you."



WITH THE HELP of a footman, Rosalie was directed to the library. She slipped inside, closing the door softly behind her. It was nothing like the library at Alcott Hall. This was a long, narrow space with dark paneled shelves. A few wide windows took up one wall, letting autumn sunlight pool across the carpets. A seating area framed an ornately carved marble fireplace, which crackled with a cozy fire.

Burke sat on the long red sofa facing the door, waiting for her. He launched to his feet as soon as the door clicked shut.

She leaned back against the wood. Her chest rose and fell with each deep breath, watching him cross the room towards her. “Never do that again,” she declared. “You embarrassed me in front of Mrs. Robbins. In front of—”

She didn’t get the rest of her admonishment out before Burke had her in his arms, his mouth covering hers, silencing her words with a passionate kiss. His hands cupped her face before sliding into her hair, digging into her messy curls as he tipped her head back. She was lost for a moment in the feel

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of him, the strength of his arms, the rich taste of coffee on his tongue, bitter and warm.

He pressed her into the door with his hips and broke their kiss, his lips seeking purchase lower on her jaw, her neck, the exposed "V" of her breasts. The door rattled as their weight shifted, and the fog of lust around Rosalie cleared.

"Wait," she gasped, pushing against him. "Burke, wait—*stop*—" She broke free of him, slipping under his arm.

He turned on his heel to follow.

It was a mistake to come to him like this. She couldn't think clearly when he was looking at her. She needed space. Heavens, she needed a chaperone. Nothing else could guarantee she behaved, not when her emotions felt so inflamed by his mere presence. No man had ever made her feel so *wild*. It scared her as much as it excited her. She didn't like feeling so out of control.

She spun around when she reached the bookshelves, and he was right there, boxing her in. She flung out both hands, pressing against his chest. "We are not doing this. We need to talk—"

"Then talk," he growled, his hands holding tight to her shoulders as he dropped his face to her neck, eagerly breathing in her scent.

She bit back a whimper. Her body was a traitor, melting for him as she felt the stubble of his jaw against her skin. She shivered with want, hands fisting his coat lapels. "Burke, I'm so angry at you. I'm angry at—*everything*—"

His hands lowered back to her hips as he gave her another desperate, claiming kiss.

She jerked free with a gasp. "No! You're a beast and I could scream." She shoved against him. "I'm furious and hurt and—and desperate for you. I can't—I hardly even know myself!"

HIS GRACE, THE DUKE

His hands tightened on her hips. “Show me,” he rasped in her ear. “I want all your rage, your passion.” His hands slid up her hips, over her breasts. “Unleash it on me. Show me how I make you feel. Christ, I *need* it.”

Something inside her snapped, and she was fighting him for dominance in another bruising kiss. “You make me crazy,” she hissed. “Why did you agree to this? I watched you dance with Olivia. You couldn’t warn me?” She tried to jerk away. “She’s your fiancée! Oh *god*—you’re a devil sent to ruin me—”

“And you’re the siren who’s bewitched me!” He held both her wrists with one large hand, raising his other to her mouth and brushing her lips with his thumb. She blinked back tears at the look of hurt in his eyes.

“You’ve upended my entire life, ripped out my heart, laid bare my fucking soul. I can’t escape this pull—can’t escape *you*.” He gripped her jaw tight, raising her chin to meet his stormy eyes. “You can run, and I will follow. I will always follow because we belong together. You know it too. So, stop bloody fighting it.”

He spun her around, his own anger overpowering hers as he pressed her against the shelves. She stifled a moan as his hot mouth sucked on the nape of her neck. Meanwhile, his hands worked feverishly to raise the front of her dress.

“Burke, someone could come in. They’ll see—”

“Let them see,” he panted. “Let them hear us. I hope they’re right outside the goddamn door. I want them to hear you cry out my name.” His left hand snaked around, cupping her sex, opening her with his fingers. At the first touch, they both groaned, aching with that perfect moment of connection.

She pushed her hips against his hand, desperate for more friction. “Oh *god*—”

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His breath was hot in her ear as his right hand came between her legs from behind, two fingers sinking deep inside her.

She gasped, knees almost buckling. This was an entirely new sensation. Both his strong hands pleased her at once. She bit back a cry as his wet mouth pressed kisses to her neck.

"You're going to come for me. Now. Hard and fast. Beg me for it."

"Burke," she whimpered.

"Not good enough." He nearly lifted her off her toes with the force of his fingers burying themselves inside her. "You make me desperate, Rosalie. I'm mad for you. You're *mine*."

Rosalie sighed with longing, opening her legs wider.

"You think I had a choice? They forced me to hurt you with that display in the ballroom. I couldn't warn you—couldn't get to you in time."

Rosalie was ready to tip over the edge. She pressed her forehead into the curve of her arm, eyes shut tight as she rode both his hands. "Burke, please—"

"You're so beautiful when you beg. But I'm not ready to end your suffering. I've been dying a slow death for hours, desperate to be near you, to hold you in my arms." He teased her with tongue and teeth on that soft spot behind her ear. "I searched for you the moment the waltz ended, and what did I find?"

"Burke—"

"You and James *missing*. Gone like a puff of smoke. No word. No note. You ripped the air from my chest. You left me on my knees, aching for you."

His fingers circled back up to her sensitive bud. She sighed as he found it, giving it the lightest touch that made her toes curl.

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HIS GRACE, THE DUKE

"Then I had to come here and find you being measured for your fucking trousseau. I could kill him for it," he growled. "You're mad? I'm livid. I see only red. I see only *you*. God, you own me. I can't breathe. Can't think—"

His words were barely registering. Rosalie was too lost in the pleasure he gave her. She needed this release like she needed air. "Burke, please," she whimpered. "Finish me—"

Burke pinched her bud and she shattered. It wasn't the slow, cresting waves of euphoria she rode with him last night. This was a desperate kind of release that clawed its way out of her. It was like breaking the surface after nearly drowning in deep water.

She sagged against the bookshelves, legs shaking. Her breath was ragged as he pulled his hands away, leaving her empty and wanting more. The skirts of her new dress fluttered down around her legs as he stepped back. She turned to face him, still leaning against the shelves. "I'm sorry we took off like that. It was selfish. But it wasn't about you."

His eyes shot up and he scowled at her.

"Well, it wasn't *entirely* about you," she admitted. "From my first night at Alcott, everything changed, and I just . . . I needed perspective and I couldn't get it there. I was lost in the dark. I couldn't see my own hand before my eyes. And James—"

"Was more than willing to offer you a new perspective. Yes, I'm aware."

Clearly, he was still angry. It was settling in his shoulders and swirling in his eyes. She gasped as some of his words finally registered. "Wait . . . what did you say about a trousseau?"

He glowered and turned away.

She put a hand on his shoulder. "Look at me." His shoulder

stiffened. "Oh, Burke . . . do you think I mean to marry James? Is that the new perspective you think I seek?" She put a hand on each of his shoulders. "Burke, look at me." She waited until she had his eyes before saying, "I am not engaged to James. I told you last night what happened between us. He doesn't want me in that way. If you don't trust him at his word, trust me at mine: I am not now, nor will I *ever* be engaged to James Corbin."

"I thought you ran off with him to elope," he admitted. "Everyone did. We all—everyone said it. They were so sure. It was the only thing that made sense." He dragged both hands through his black hair, looking anywhere but at her.

She reached for him again and he stiffened. "You're shaking," she whispered. "Oh, Burke . . ." She wrapped her arms around him.

He stiffened for a moment, but then he was clinging to her. He dropped his head to her shoulder, breathing her in as he pressed his face to the curve of her neck. "I thought you were eloping with him," he said again. "Oh god, I thought—"

He thought he'd lost her. He thought she'd heard the news of his engagement last night and rushed off to London to marry his best friend to spite him. No doubt vicious gossips like Elizabeth and Blanche spun him up, painting a sordid picture of what must have happened between Rosalie and James—hours alone in a carriage, this house to themselves, then Burke arriving to find her being fitted for a new wardrobe that did indeed rival a trousseau.

She kissed his forehead. "I would never do that to you," she murmured against his brow. "I would never hurt you in such a way. I am not half so spiteful that I would consider

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HIS GRACE, THE DUKE

trapping myself in marriage as a suitable punishment for you being forced into a fake engagement.”

His head lifted off her shoulder. “It’s never going to happen.”

She smiled sadly. “You may not have a choice. You would marry her to protect James—”

“No,” he growled, forcing her to look at him. “It will never happen. Do you hear me? I will *never* marry her.”

“You cannot lose your position because of me. I will not shoulder that burden.” Her eyes closed as she fought back tears. “Oh god, I should go,” she whispered. “I told James I would go. I have done nothing but disrupt all your lives. I will keep hurting you if I stay—”

“No.” His hands were impossibly gentle as they cupped her face. “Leave, and I will follow. Have I not proved that already?”

The words broke her heart, even as they shored it up again. “Burke, stop letting me in,” she whispered. “I’m no good at this. Needing someone and being needed. I’ll hurt you, and I couldn’t bear it. Please, just push me away. Save yourself—”

“Never,” he replied. “What did you say to me last night?”

His smile made her melt. The grey in his eyes was a storm she wanted to get lost in. “We said many things—”

“You are my siren,” he murmured. “I hear only your call. This thing with Lady Olivia will get sorted one way or another. I really don’t care. I only care about this.” He kissed her again, his lips soft and seeking. “I care about you. About *us*. I make you this vow: I will marry you, or no one.”

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ROSALIE'S SURPRISED LITTLE gasp sent Burke's heart racing faster. He meant every word. He would marry this woman today if she'd let him. This very hour. From the moment they met all those weeks ago, he couldn't be near her and not want to look at her . . . to touch, to worship, to *claim*.

She consumed him. Or he ached to be consumed. Either way, it didn't matter.

She blushed, trying to lean away. She was nervous. Retreating. Building her walls. He saw the way her heart fluttered. He felt it rising and falling between them as he pressed in slightly.

"Heavens," she said on a breath. "So now you want to marry me?"

He raised a hand and let his fingers trail along her jaw, down the line of her neck. He didn't bother to hide his smile as he felt her lean into his touch. This little siren was always hungry for more. "Would you ever let me?"

She sighed, closing her eyes tight, before she whispered, "No."

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HIS GRACE, THE DUKE

It shouldn't have hurt him to hear her say it aloud . . . but it did. The twinge was most definitely there. And she knew it too.

She leaned in. "Burke, I love you. But—"

"But no cages," he replied, placing two fingers over her parted lips to quiet her. "I know. I respect your choices, I do. I just . . . please don't explain it again. I don't think I can bear to hear you deny me twice in the same breath."

"But do you believe me?" she pressed. "You believe I have no intention to marry your friends either? I like my life. I like making my own decisions, being my own mistress—"

"I know," he repeated, more firmly this time. She quieted with a nod.

Looking at her made his heart ache. The long hours he'd just spent thinking she'd left him for James were a torture. He'd been a madman. A man possessed with a single purpose: getting to Rosalie. Following Rosalie. Holding Rosalie again.

Was it possible to still miss a person when they were right before you? When you actually had your hands on them, feeling their warmth against your skin?

"You are so beautiful," he murmured. "I want to feel you everywhere. Every moment, I want you. I want your skin against mine. Married . . . unmarried . . . I just want to be yours."

She closed her eyes again, shaking her head with a soft whimper. "Burke, this is madness. How can this be real?"

He cupped her cheek with a gentle hand. "You know you feel it too. You've felt it from the beginning."

"I don't even know your name," she whispered, opening her eyes. "You won't tell me."

He grinned. "And if I tell you, you'll marry me? Is that your condition? I accept."

"There should be no conditions between us," she replied with exasperation. "You should *want* to tell me. You should want me to know everything about you. No secrets. No hiding. I couldn't bear it."

His smile widened. There was no great mystery to his name. Indeed, if she was really interested, she could have asked any of a dozen people at Alcott to reveal the secret. Hell, even Blanche Oswald knew it. But he was willing to play along. Let this be his great sacrifice for his unpardonable behavior in the morning room.

"Fine," he said with a fake sigh. "If it means that much to you, I suppose I can tell you my name. But I must warn you, it's terrible."

She leaned in, eyes alight with new interest. "Tell me."

"There's only one person living who actually uses it," he hedged. "Not even my brother calls me by my Christian name. Not Tom. Not James—"

"Just tell me," she cried, slapping his chest.

He laughed, snatching her hand and planting a kiss on her palm before she could pull away. "It's Horatio."

She blinked, her lips slightly parted. "Horatio? As in . . ."

"As in 'There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.'"

She smiled softly, her dark eyes sparkling with delight. "*Hamlet*, right?"

"Aye, my mother is a whore, but a well-read one," he replied, giving her hand another kiss. "*Hamlet* was always her favorite."

"So you are Mr. Horatio Burke," she murmured in the sweetest voice. Raising a hand, she cupped his cheek. "And now you are *my* Horatio."

The sound of his name on her lips made his cock twitch.

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HIS GRACE, THE DUKE

Which was deeply confusing, as the only person he allowed to use it was his sweet maman. Perhaps it was her claims of ownership that had him aching. Or perhaps it was merely Rosalie's touch that excited him. Her presence. That spiced floral scent that filled his senses. She was still using his massage oil. She had to be nearly out of it by now. Was she rationing? Did she think of him as she dabbed it on her delicate wrists?

"Stop looking at me like that," she whispered.

"Like what?" he replied, knowing damn well what she meant.

"Like . . ."

He leaned in, ghosting his lips over hers, teasing them with the tip of his tongue. "Like what, sweet siren?"

"I want you too," she whispered. "I want all of you. The parts you show the world, and the parts you hide away. I want Horatio and Burke. Can you ever let me have both? Even without the piece of paper binding us one to the other . . . can you learn to *trust* me with both?"

"I'm untrusting by nature," he admitted, cupping her cheek again.

She covered his hand with her own, turning her face to kiss his palm. "We can both try. That's all either of us can ask of the other. Patience and the will to try . . . the will to trust. I said I love you, and I meant it. I loved you as Burke, and I mean to love you as Horatio too. Will you show him to me?"

He groaned, pulling away from her. "Christ, enough. Say more, and I'll show him to you right here on the library floor." He glanced over his shoulder towards the door. "I can't imagine we'll be alone much longer. Tom was only going around the corner. If not him, a nosy maid is sure to come in with a tray at any moment."

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Rosalie blinked. "Renley? He came with you?"

"Of course." He stepped away from her, checking the time on the mantel clock. "I'm surprised he's not back already." He sank onto the sofa, stretching out his long legs. "Marianne said you met last night. Did you like her?"

At the lady's name, Rosalie flinched. That was proof enough for Burke to confirm his suspicions. He smirked.

"Did she—she journeyed north with you?" she murmured, her cheeks blooming pink.

"Yes, well we were rather impatient to follow after you," he mused, taking a sip of his coffee. He watched her with open curiosity. What thoughts now spun through his sweet siren's mind? "She offered Tom and I use of her carriage. Did you like her?" he repeated. "I sensed from Tom that perhaps the two of you didn't get on . . ."

Rosalie sank onto the sofa opposite him and busied her hands with pouring herself a cup of coffee. "Yes, we met," she replied, her voice clipped. "She told me their happy news."

Burke raised a brow. "Happy news?"

She nodded, both hands holding tight to her cup as she raised it to her lips. "Their engagement. Marianne told me herself."

Burke's heart stopped. Fear mingled with rage and confusion. It wasn't true. It couldn't be true. He rattled his cup onto the saucer, smacking them both down on the side table. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Renley and Marianne," she replied. "They're engaged."



“TOM—WAIT—”

Tom shrugged out of Marianne’s reach, his feet moving him swiftly towards the front door. “I have to go.”

From the moment he stepped foot in Marianne’s town-house, it felt like he’d become trapped in some strange dream. She’d been so anxious that he stay, offering him tea, then luncheon. The table was already set for two, and those pale blue eyes were open wide, pleading with him for his continued company. He figured it was the least he could do to repay her kindness for bringing them to London in the dead of night.

It was clear Marianne had something on her mind. After his third refusal of a second cup of tea, she finally admitted the truth: She’d lied to Rosalie at the ball and told her they were engaged.

All the pieces of the previous night clicked together with a violence, nearly making him dizzy. That haunted look Rose gave him. The way she recoiled and ran. The tears in her eyes. Without even realizing it, Tom had given her as much of a

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reason to flee as Burke, leaving them both scrambling to chase after her.

"I don't understand why you're so upset," Marianne cried, following him down the hall, one hand clinging to his uniform.

Tom growled and spun around, jerking his arm free of her touch. "Are you really so obtuse? You told Miss Harrow we're engaged. We are *not* engaged!"

Marianne stepped back as if his words were a physical blow. "Why are you being so hateful?" she whispered, raising one hand to press over her heart. "This isn't like you, Tom."

Tom dragged a hand through his unruly curls. "Christ, Mari. You're telling people I proposed to you. I *never* proposed to you."

A small smile flashed on her lips. "Well, that's not entirely accurate."

"Fine, but I have not proposed to you in many, *many* years." He leaned his face down towards hers. "And if you'll remember, the one and only time I ever *did* propose, you said no."

"Ask me again."

The words shot through the air, knocking Tom breathless. A strained moment stretched between them as they stared into each other's eyes.

He took a shaky breath. "Mari—"

"I mean it, Tom. Ask me." Her hands fluttered out to grip his arms, stopping him from turning away. "I know you feel what there is between us. I know you want me too. I wrote to you, and you came. You said such beautiful things, Tom. I knew then that you must still love me!"

He groaned. This was an unmitigated disaster. Nothing she said was untrue, exactly. He *had* traveled to London expressly

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to visit her. But she'd completely misunderstood his purpose. He apologized for his resentment and wished her well.

Nothing in his tone or manner should have encouraged her to think he wanted anything more than a clean break at long last.

"Marianne, that wasn't—"

"I know you have a softness for the girl," she went on. "She's sweet and innocent. A rose as lovely as her name."

He grimaced, surprised by how much he disliked the sound of Rose's name uttered from Marianne's lips.

"But she is a passing fancy," Marianne pressed, raising a hand to cup his face. "You will soon forget her. For what you and I have is so much more. We have a connection, Tom. Your spirit is bound with mine. It has been for these eight long years. Was I wrong to end Miss Harrow's suffering? Was I wrong to tell her what we both know to be true?"

He pulled her hand off his face. "And what is that?"

Her eyes glistened with tears. "That our love is for the ages. Whether now, or in a year from now, the fact will remain: We are meant to be together." She leaned up on her toes, inching closer. "Tell me you can deny it, Tom. Tell me you can deny *us*."

Her free hand tightened on his arm as she gazed longingly into his eyes. Eight years had done nothing to lessen her beauty. Her icy blue eyes, her porcelain smooth face framed by dark curls, those perfect apple cheeks blooming pink. She was beautiful . . . but it no longer caused Tom's pulse to race. The intensity in her eyes no longer made him weak. The curve of her lips no longer called him to claim her. The feel of her in his arms no longer set him on fire.

She was beautiful, yes . . . a beautiful stranger.

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In truth, the feel of her wrapped around him now was making him squirm. His gut clenched as he imagined Rosalie walking through the door, seeing Marianne so close. He stepped away.

"You're determined to hurt me," she said, voice trembling. "I see it in your eyes. I feel your resentment. You still blame me for Thackeray. You want me to prove my devotion by denial. I'll do it—"

"No, Mari." He felt suddenly so tired, so emotionally drained. "God, I'm so sorry. I'm sorry for everything. I've always been so tongue-tied around you, such a fool. I don't know how to just say what I mean and assure you that I mean what I say . . ."

"Love makes us do crazy things," she replied.

He closed his eyes and shook his head, taking a deep breath. "No." He opened them, jaw set. This had to end. He had to make her understand. "Immaturity makes us do crazy things. Ignorance and jealousy, they make us crazy. For those have been the driving factors that have kept me tied to you all these years. Not love . . . not really."

"You're being cruel again," she whimpered, wiping at her eyes.

"Mari, look at me."

Her wet lashes fluttered up as she met his gaze.

He took a deep breath, trying to find the right words that would leave her in no doubt of his intentions. "I loved you once," he admitted. "I loved you and would have married you *then*. But eight years have now passed."

A soft sob escaped her as she tried to turn away, but he grabbed her shoulder. These words had to be spoken for *both* of them.

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"I've traveled around the world and around again," he went on. "I've seen and done so much in the last eight years. I'm not the same immature lad of sixteen, chasing after your skirts, desperate for a smile or a look. I'm not the jealous man of eighteen who wanted to kill Thackeray when he won you fair and square—"

"Oh, but Tom, I wanted you then too. I wanted you to come save me. I never loved Thackeray. How could I as long as you walked the earth?"

How desperate had he once been to hear these words from her lips? Now they rang hollow. Giving her the gentlest smile he could muster, he let the hammer fall. "I am not the man for you, Mari. I can never be that man. I could never make you happy in the way you deserve—"

"But what of *your* happiness?" she cried. "You want to rank up, yes? You want to be captain? I can fund it for you, Tom. Together, we can make any life we want. I have Thackeray's money. I have this house. We could be free—"

"I *am* free," he countered.

The moment the words were spoken, a weight lifted off his chest and he took an unrestricted breath, his mouth curving into a relieved smile. He was already free. Free of Marianne's pull, free of doubt, free of indecision. He leveled his gaze at her, shoulders set.

Marianne shrank away from him, reaching blindly behind her until she felt the back of a chair. She sank down, tears falling.

"Oh, Mari . . . I'm more sorry than I can say," he offered, feeling the words wholly inadequate for the depth of his emotion.

He *was* sorry, and not just for her benefit. He was sorry for

himself too. For the wasted years. For his anger, his long-suffering jealousy. What a fool he'd been. What an insufferable arse. In this moment, standing in Marianne Young's entry hall, Tom resolved himself to being the master of his own happiness.

He dropped to one knee at her side. "You will recover from this in time."

She gave a little sniff, not looking at him.

"Besides, why should you bother with getting remarried?" he added, determined to see her smile again. "You're in a position so many women would envy." He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket, offering it to her.

She took it with a shaky hand.

"You are mistress of your own house, with control of your accounts. You are well-loved in society, with friends aplenty and a busy social calendar. What need have you to bring a man into your life who would only upend your comfort?"

She dabbed at her eyes. "You wish me to remain alone forever?"

"No, of course not," he said quickly, rising back to his feet. "But don't marry to please a man. Don't marry someone like me, a wastrel of a second son who you would have to support financially."

"You're not a wastrel, Tom," she said through her sniffing.

He gave her a crooked grin. "You haven't known me for a long time, Mari. For all you know, I am King of the Wastrels on three continents."

This earned him a little hiccupping laugh as she dabbed at her eyes again.

"If it is truly your wish to marry again, find a good man," he went on. "A man who will not be intimidated by your independence. A gentleman who is independent himself and not

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in need of a wife he can use as his personal bank. Marry a man who is mad about you and you about him. Someone who makes your heart race and your passions flare white-hot, even as your soul settles, rested in comfort entwined with theirs. If you find that in another person, marry them without delay. Until you find that . . . well . . . be your own mistress. Live your life on your terms. I wish you well, Marianne. I always will.”

He turned to leave at last, grabbing his hat off the side table.

“And what of you?” she called, rising to her feet, his handkerchief still clutched in her hand.

He glanced over his shoulder as he donned his hat, slicking his curls back behind his ears. “What of me?”

Her watery eyes were wide, her cheeks blotchy and her nose red from crying. She looked at him with such open longing. It made his heart twist in his chest. He hated hurting her, but he couldn’t make his heart beat for her again. Never again.

“Have you found that person?” she whispered. “The one who fans the flames of your heart and eases the quiet of your soul?”

His mouth went dry as his mind suddenly flashed with visions of his future—his deepest desires, all his unspoken cravings. What might it take to make those dreams a reality?

Clearing his throat, he gave a soft laugh. “That was my advice for you. I imagine my own path will look quite different.”

With a nod, he took his leave.

As he closed her front door, he heaved a sigh of relief. Standing in the shadow of her house, he resolved to leave Marianne and everything she represented resolutely behind him. Striding off down the street, he didn’t look back.



BURKE AND ROSALIE waited another quarter of an hour in the library, expecting Tom to arrive.

When he didn't, Rosalie asked if she could call a coach to go to her aunt's house.

"Would you like to come with me?" she asked, her voice quietly hopeful as she kept her attention on her cup of coffee.

Something inside Burke's chest clenched tight. "You want *me* to meet your aunt?"

"Of course," she replied, taking a sip.

"Not James or Tom? You want it to be me?"

She set her cup aside with a huff. "Did you expect to stay in the shadows?" Crossing her arms, she leaned forward, dark eyes narrowed. "You don't get to pick and choose which parts of my life you claim. If you're in my life, you are *in* my life, Horatio Burke."

God, he loved this woman. Heaven help him, he was mad for her. He smirked. "Agreed. And I heartily look forward to claiming all parts of you . . . day and night."

She ignored him, which made his smile broaden.

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"It's unlikely my aunt will even be home at this hour," she explained. "But I think she would like to meet the people with whom I now share a house and a life."

"And a bed," he added with a grin. He couldn't help himself. He loved making her blush. His effort was rewarded with a flash of pink in her cheeks that faded into the dark curls framing her face.

"We shall not be shocking her with scandalous falsehoods," she replied, rising to her feet. "I have never shared a bed with any member of this household—family or staff or even canine . . . though, during my first week at Alcott, one of the hunting dogs slipped into my room and hid under the bed. He made a valiant effort to join me, but was rebuffed."

"I consider myself rather cleverer than a hound and harder to bully," he replied. "Let your maid try and drag me out by my scruff, and we'll see who has the stronger mettle."

"Two things, sir," she said, collecting his cup with hers and placing it on the tray. "First, I have no maid, so I will be doing my own dragging."

He chuckled, reaching for her, but she stepped away, her brows still lowered in mock seriousness.

"Second, if the moment ever arises when you *are* in my bed with my hands on your scruff, you will beg me to bully you. Now, are you coming with me or not, because you can't wear that."

He barked a laugh, glancing down at his evening ensemble. He'd long since loosened the knot of his cravat and unbuttoned his waistcoat. She was right: He didn't want his first impression with her only living relative to be marred by the fact that he was wearing day-old dress clothes.

"Give me ten minutes to change," he said, rising to his feet. "I'll meet you in the entry hall."

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TOM RETURNED TO Corbin House to find it bustling. Two carts were parked in the courtyard with footman hurriedly unloading crates. The staff had no warning to expect the family's arrival, and Mrs. Robbins was clearly overcompensating. She'd ordered enough food to feed an army.

Entering through a side door, Tom was nearly bowled over by a delivery boy.

"Easy there, lad," Tom grunted, stumbling out of the way.

"Sorry, sir!" the boy called, not slowing his steps.

Two more servants swept past him, cleaning buckets on their arms. Down the long hallway, the housekeeper emerged, a maid trailing behind her.

"Ah—Mrs. Robbins!" Tom called. "Where is Miss Harrow?"

The housekeeper's smile was warm and inviting. "Bless my eyes, is that you, Mr. Renley? My, how handsome you look in your officer's uniform."

"Yes. I—"

"Renley!"

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