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AND
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Entangled Publishing
644 Shrewsbury Commons Ave
STE 181
Shrewsbury, PA 17361
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Embrace is an imprint of Entangled Publishing, LLC.

Edited by Jen Bouvier
Cover design by LJ Anderson and Bree Archer
Cover photography by Kharchenko_irina7/Getty Images
Aleksi Isachenko/Shutterstock

ISBN 978-1-64937-170-6

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Edition October 2021

embrace

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*For Mum
because you told me to keep going
now look where I am*

Chapter One

10TH MAY 1923

Harriet took a deep breath as her fingers clutched at the lapels of her coat while she followed Charlie, trying to ignore the way her legs trembled with every step.

This wasn't really the kind of thing she would normally do, and yet here she was, dashing across the road dressed in her glad rags and making her way to the small shop that had MR. WILSON'S BOOKSTORE painted above the door.

"Charlie, are you certain about this?" she whispered as she caught up with her cousin, grabbing his wrist before he could enter the shop. It had all seemed like such a brilliant idea when Charlie had brought it up yesterday—one last hoorah before she had to get serious and find a husband.

Now that she was here, however, she was having doubts. So many doubts. If they got caught and word got back to Mamma and Papa, she would be ruined. After all, no respectable woman should be attending secret bars—especially when prohibition was in effect. Not only would they never let her come to America again, they would never *trust* her. And who was to say that was the least of her problems? What if she were caught by the police? Everything they were doing was against the law from the alcohol to the people she'd be dancing with.

She could end up going to prison. And Papa had no sway here. His title would mean nothing.

"My darling Harriet." Charlie cupped her cheek with his free hand. "I have been coming here for months now. No one suspects a thing. We dodged the servants; they'll be in bed by the time we get back, and you told me your maid would assist us tomorrow morning."

What he said was right. Her maid, Martha, had seemed a little hesitant

about this idea but she had sworn to cover for them. On that front, Harriet didn't have anything to worry about, so she merely swallowed and stared at her cousin for a moment. She wanted to lick her lips but was worried it would ruin her blood red lipstick.

"Or, we can go back home and speak nothing of this again. The decision is yours, Cousin," he said.

Harriet turned her head away from his hand. It fell back to his side and she sighed. The entire reason they were here was because they both knew this year was their last year of freedom.

After all, she had been sent to New York by Mamma and Papa to find a husband. Charlie's situation was different. He was a man, able to work and support himself. Perhaps his father wanted him settled down, but at least society wouldn't look twice at an unmarried man should he choose to fight his father's wishes.

If she turned back now, her life would be one of regret. She would die not knowing what it was like to be with a woman when that was all she *truly* wanted and this was the only place where she at least might have a chance to try.

Taking a deep breath, Harriet nodded. "Let's do it. But I warn you, should our parents discover this, I will save my own skin and throw you into the fire without a second glance."

Charlie laughed as he pulled the door open, beckoning her inside with a wave of his arm. "I would expect nothing less."

The shop was filled with lines and lines of bookshelves that covered two walls, floor to ceiling. The sight and smell of so many books—both old and new—made Harriet's heart ache, for it reminded her so much of the library back in Creoch House. Which, in itself, was strange, since the store looked nothing like the family library. It was smaller, as a start, with no roaring fire or comfortable seats and chaise lounge and tables, no portraits of old family members or original paintings by long deceased artists.

The thought of home made her heart clench, so she followed Charlie towards a shelf. She never thought she'd miss her family this much, which seemed a little naïve now that she looked back on it—she had never really been without them. Even during the War she had been stationed nearby and so visited regularly.

Focusing instead on the books before her, they made their way to the history shelves. Her fingers trailed along the spines. Charlie had told her

about this. All they had to do was pluck a book from the historical shelf, tuck a note in page thirty-two and then take it to the counter. The man behind the counter would then grant them access to the speakeasy in the basement.

Charlie stretched an arm above her head and snatched a book, giving her a wink as he wandered to the till to wait for her. She grabbed the first book she saw and followed him.

The man behind the till was stout, short, and balding, and he had a kind smile as he accepted both books. He quickly slid the notes out of the pages and placed them in the till. Both books were then handed back to Charlie as the man smiled. “Happy reading, Mr. Slater.”

The bookseller then moved around his desk and strode to the other end of the store, making a show of arranging several books. Harriet started to follow him when Charlie’s hand landed on her wrist. He shook his head before he led her to another corner. He pretended to browse for a bit, and when Harriet was starting to wonder if this were all some elaborate prank of Charlie’s, he pulled at another book and a click filled the air.

Charlie offered her a wide smile as he glanced over his shoulder, checking for any watchers. The bookseller nodded at them, apparently giving the all clear. Charlie then pushed at the shelf, which swung open, revealing it to be a door. Then he grabbed her wrist and pulled her inside.

The draughty staircase and low lighting made it seem like something out of the horror novels that her sister, Maria, adored. She was almost expecting a ghost or murderer to jump out and attack her, but the further down they went, the only thing that drifted towards her was the sound of music.

It was a beautiful melody—saxophones and violins and trumpets and drums and basses and cellos all mixing together to create the sweetest sound Harriet had ever heard.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs they found another door, and this one Charlie pushed open to reveal the club—The Lion’s Thorn.

Harriet’s eyes roamed around the hazy room. Smoke lingered in the air, the smell of alcohol and perfume creating a peculiar aroma. There were so many people that Harriet’s mouth fell open as she took a step into the room. She exhaled and turned her head back to her cousin.

“Incredible, isn’t it?”

Harriet could only nod in reply.

Before she could take another step into the room, a tall boy, either

eighteen or nineteen years, appeared in front of her. His hair was slicked back and he looked dashing in his black tie. His easy smile reminded Harriet of her younger brother, Thomas, still in Scotland. He was one of her closest friends, and their month apart was the longest they had ever gone.

That thought dampened her smile a little.

“May I take your coats?”

Harriet allowed the boy to pull her coat off.

“Would you like your usual table, Mr. Slater?” he asked.

“If you don’t mind, Eric.” Charlie grinned at the boy, slipping him a bill before he lead them through the club. They weaved through the many dancing couples—women dancing with women, men dancing with men, white people dancing with Black people. It was as Charlie had said—accepting of all, even if the world outside was not.

They climbed a small set of stairs, up to a raised area surrounded by a decorative wooden fence. It offered a perfect view of both the dance floor and the stage where the band played.

The young boy, Eric, led Harriet and Charlie to a small table with only two seats.

“I am...in awe.” There was no other way to describe this feeling coursing through her veins. She turned her gaze away from the dancing couples and back to her cousin. “Though, I *am* surprised you’re on first name terms with the staff. How often do you come here?”

Charlie studied her for a long moment, an undecipherable look in his crystal blue gaze. He took a long breath. “Often. Probably too much. I believe Father knows what I’m doing when I go out, he just doesn’t know where, so can’t do anything about it.”

“You don’t sound happy when you talk about how often you frequent here.”

“I’m not.”

Harriet frowned. “Then why come?”

Charlie leaned forward and smiled sadly at her. “What else shall I do with my time? I was young and enjoyed this sort of life once, but now that I’m older, I want purpose. Only, such carefree, youthful dalliances have tarnished me in Father’s eyes, and he will not allow me to ruin the only thing in the world he’s proud of: his newspapers.”

Harriet swallowed, reaching forward to take her cousin’s hand in her own. “I do not believe Uncle John is like that. If you had to speak to him,

perhaps he would—”

Charlie cut her off. “My father is not your papa. He’s not understanding or open to talk. I’ve disgraced myself and there’s no way back.” He shook his head, drawing his hand out from underneath Harriet’s. “Let us change the subject. I see our drinks coming.”

Pulling back her hand, Harriet sat up and offered Eric a smile as he set a glass in front of her. She raised it to her lips and took a tentative sip, relishing in the taste she had missed for so long. One month in America and this was her first taste of alcohol. Why they thought prohibition was a good idea, she couldn’t say, but at least she didn’t have to wait much longer.

And she had *longed* for the taste of her father’s whisky last night after her mild panic. It had been the first dinner that her aunt and uncle had thrown for her, bringing half a dozen eligible bachelors for Harriet to become acquainted with. It had been that overwhelming dinner that had led to Charlie suggesting this very night out.

Harriet turned back to Charlie as she set her glass down, to ask him a question to help ease the tension, but before she could open her mouth, the lights dimmed.

A spotlight appeared on the stage where the band had been playing. A Black man dressed in black tie with his curly hair trimmed close to his head stepped towards the mic and smiled. “Ladies, gentlemen, and those that are neither, it is my greatest pleasure to introduce the sweet Rosalie Smith to The Lion’s Thorn!”

He started to clap, prompting the audience to do so. Harriet only watched, unable to bring herself to join. She had been raised to never clap at a singer—it was for reeling or presentations and the suchlike.

The heavy velvet curtain that separated main stage from back rippled as a woman stepped out from behind it, and Harriet found she could focus on nothing else but her.

Chapter Two

The woman was breathtaking, with skin a smooth, milky white. She had a sharp jaw but round cheeks that were painted with a pale pink rouge that gave her a natural glow. Her bright red lips were pulled into a sultry smile that made Harriet's body tingle. Her brown hair was perfectly fashioned against her head in a boy bob cut that Harriet had always adored in the magazines yet was too scared to try out herself. An elegant black lace headband lay across her forehead, with two large feathers coming out at the side, above her right ear.

She moved slowly towards the microphone, each step measured with a pop of her hips that hypnotised Harriet.

She was vaguely aware of her cousin speaking in her ear, but all she could focus on was Miss Smith as she finally stepped up to the mic, her lace-gloved hands gently caressing the stand. Harriet had never been envious of an inanimate object before that moment.

"Thank you, Jeffrey, for such a warm introduction," she spoke in a silky voice.

Her accent was unlike Charlie's, which meant she was not from Chicago. Harriet wondered if it was a local New York accent...a *true* local New York accent. She had spoken to many people who had grown up in New York, such as her suitors from the previous night, yet she didn't think they counted. The upper class were never much to use as a reference when it came to accents. After all, her Scottish accent was miles different than those of the servants.

Before she could dwell on it much further, Rosalie added, "Why don't we start with something a little fast, just to get our blood flowing? That's important, you know."

Harriet's lips tugged into a smile, her eyes briefly leaving Rosalie as the

band started to play a few beats. She noticed that the man who had announced Rosalie to the stage was also a part of the band, sitting in the position of lead saxophonist.

Rosalie gave a throaty chuckle, joining in with the crowd who had whooped at her comment. Harriet's entire body flooded with heat. She wanted to hear that laugh again and again; preferably with their naked bodies tangled beneath silk sheets as she breathlessly sung it in her ear... and good Lord, where had that thought come from?

The band struck up a louder, more boisterous beat that Harriet was thankful for—it gave her the perfect distraction from her new, lustful thoughts. As she watched Miss Smith, she almost wished she hadn't been raised to be the perfect little lady—that she could tap her foot along to the hectic rhythm and cheer the singer on.

Couples were already up on the dance floor. Harriet sometimes found her gaze drifting towards them, once again amazed. This place was a sanctuary for the likes of her and her cousin. A place where they could be themselves without being judged. She wondered who these people were outside of this club—if they had position and power and money like her. If they had settled for a marriage to keep up appearances whilst sneaking out every night to truly feel happy.

It angered her that such a place existed and she was only now discovering its like, when she was on the brink of having to choose someone to marry.

Yet, no matter how angry such a thought made her, she would still go through with it. Being married would offer her protection from rumours that would ruin her. Rumours such as being seen sneaking out to a club for those society deemed “degenerate” or spending too much time with another woman in private.

As she felt her blood start to pump with anger, her thoughts suddenly stilled as Rosalie Smith began to sing. Harriet wasn't overly religious. She wasn't even sure what her beliefs were. Especially when it was so often used to preach hate against people like her. And the ones dancing in this very speakeasy. Yet the first thought that flew into her mind as she heard Rosalie Smith sing about the passions of first love was *this must be what angels sound like* as her voice curled around the room like soft velvet.

A movement from the corner of her eye caught her attention, and she turned in time to see Charlie stand from his seat and offer her his hand. “Let's dance.”

Harriet gave an unladylike snort of laughter as she took another sip from her cognac— She had known none of the whisky in the club would compare to her father's brand and so had gone for her favourite brandy. When she noticed Charlie was still standing with his hand outstretched, she lowered her glass.

"You cannot be serious." She rather loved dancing, yet there was a difference between dancing in a Mayfair ballroom and an illegal speakeasy. She was more inclined to hide in a corner and hope no one would notice her.

"Deadly. You won't get her attention sitting up here," he declared with a grin. Before she could protest, he took her hand from her lap and tugged her from her seat.

Harriet knew that, should she press the issue, Charlie would stop and let her return to their table. Yet she couldn't deny that his words had stirred something within her. She really did have a better chance on the dance floor of attracting Miss Smith's attention. So Harriet hastily downed the remainder of her drink and turned back to Charlie, giving him a quick nod and allowing him to lead her to the dance floor before she could change her mind.

Charlie brought her around to face him and started to lead her into a fox-trot. Thankfully, Harriet was rather fond of her dancing and kept up to date with the latest styles. She let her gaze wander around the dance floor, watching couples who were so obviously in love, it made her heart ache, and others who were just there to have a good time. When they made their way by the stage, Harriet risked looking up at Rosalie, finding that her gaze was already on Harriet.

Before Harriet could even react to that, Rosalie's dark brown eyes swept away to the next person, and she felt her heart crash to the bottom of her rib cage. No doubt it was a routine of hers—to examine those who were dancing to her music. And maybe she was much too plain for someone like Rosalie. After all, Americans tended to be more outgoing than Harriet's upbringing had ever—or ever would—allow her to be.

Perhaps that plainness wasn't enough to capture Miss Rosalie Smith's attention for long.

Yet, as she went to whisper in her cousin's ear, ready to ask him to take her back to the table, she noticed Rosalie's gaze dart back towards her. This time, her eyes didn't flicker away a second later. They stared and stared

until Harriet gained enough courage to shift her own and meet her gaze. The second she did, Rosalie's lips pulled into a wide, breathtaking smile, even as she continued to sing. Her eyes continued to study Harriet, and when she was sure she still held Harriet's attention, she did something that Harriet had never seen another woman do to her before. She winked.

Harriet's cheeks were aflame as she turned her gaze back to Charlie, who seemed to have been lost in his own thoughts. He noticed her darkening cheeks and gave a hearty laugh.

"Is the plan working?" he ventured with such a teasing tone that Harriet felt herself blush further.

"Oh shush!" Harriet reprimanded, even though there was still a smile on her face. No matter his teasing, Harriet could never truly be angry at her cousin. Not for long, anyway.

He led her into a spin, earning a loud laugh from Harriet as she followed through, all too aware of Rosalie Smith's eyes still on her.

Chapter Three

Harriet giggled loudly as she collapsed into her seat. She drained her new glass of cognac and set it down on the table, pleased when she heard Charlie order another round from a passing waitress. She was maybe letting the alcohol get to her, but she decided that she was entitled to one night of carefree abandon.

“Well, that was marvellous,” Harriet said, her cheeks aching from all the smiling. It seemed unladylike to be behaving in such a way, and she had no doubt that Mamma and Papa would never have had allowed her to come if they knew *this* was what she would be doing. Not that Harriet worried much. There was a whole ocean between her and her parents, so they would never know. Nor would they know of the flirting with Rosalie Smith. That was strictly between the two of them.

“And it served its purpose. Miss Smith couldn’t keep her eyes off you.”

And her cousin, apparently.

“It would certainly appear so,” she said, glad that the flush on her cheeks could be written off as exertion from the dancing and not her embarrassment.

Her eyes flickered back to the empty stage. Rosalie had declared the need for a break for both her and the band. The only sound that filled the speakeasy was the chatter amongst its patrons.

“Do you want to meet her?”

Harriet turned back towards him so fast she pulled a muscle on her neck. It was yet another move that her mother would have chastised her about. She really needed to remember all those lessons her governess taught her when she went back home. Otherwise, she would never hear the end of it.

“Excuse me?”

Charlie chuckled, folding his hands under his chin and resting his elbows

on the table. “Would you like to meet her?” he spoke slowly, as if addressing a child.

“How is that possible?” The idea did sound rather glorious.

He gave her a crooked grin. “I know the staff by name, remember?” Charlie stood from his seat and turned, striding away before Harriet even had time to organise herself, or try to stop him. That was the thing about her darling cousin, he was reckless, impulsive, and one day, it was going to get him in trouble.

She sighed, reached for her new glass of cognac, and took a tentative sip. She rather loved the taste of cognac, but it wasn’t her favourite—that title had to go to the Scotch whisky that was brewed in the distillery owned by her papa. She knew it was a long shot that they’d have her family’s brand, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t enjoy a little taste of home...

She gently touched the arm of a passing waiter, smiling up at him in what she hoped was a kindly manner. “Could you perhaps get me a glass of Scotch whisky, please? I don’t have money but my cousin, Mr. Charles Slater—”

“Charlie’s here? I didn’t see him come in! Jeffrey will be pleased!” He seemed oblivious to the look of bemusement crossing Harriet’s face. “I’ll get your drink in a second, miss.”

He was away before Harriet could even begin to wonder why the saxophone player would be happy to see her cousin. She had her guesses, of course; it just seemed strange that Charlie had never mentioned him before.

The waiter reappeared after a short time, placing the glass of Scotch on the table. “There you are, miss.”

“Thank you for the drink. Be sure Mr. Slater tips you well.”

The waiter laughed. “He always does, miss, he always does.”

As the man turned and walked away, she raised the glass to her lips and took a tentative sip. It was decent, but nothing like what her father distilled. Then she saw her cousin cross the stage, followed by two other figures. Harriet couldn’t help but notice how close he was to the other man—she recognised him as Jeffrey. There was hardly any space between them, and she was pretty sure she saw their fingertips brush as they walked.

Harriet turned her attention back to Rosalie, who was wearing the same dress from her performance—a plain black gown that reached the middle of her calves with long, tight-fitting sleeves. A black satin sash that contrasted with the matte fabric of her dress was tied around her hips, helping give her

the fashionable straight silhouette. Harriet didn't really need much help when it came to that, but she could tell that Rosalie was curvier than she.

Realising she was staring, Harriet turned back to her drink, taking another sip before setting the glass back down, stopping herself from swallowing it in one gulp. Any more of this and she wouldn't be able to walk.

Harriet remained sitting as Charlie, Jeffrey, and Rosalie approached her. Her heart raced and she licked her lips, trying to ignore the light fluttering in her stomach.

"My darling cousin," Charlie said. "I would like to introduce you to Mr. Jeffrey Williams, the finest saxophone player you will ever meet."

Even though all of Harriet's concentration was on Miss Rosalie Smith, she took a moment to truly *look* at Jeffrey Williams. His hair was short, curly, yet slicked into waves rather like Harriet's own. Despite his features being rather chiselled, he looked soft, with kind eyes framed by long, thick eyelashes and plump lips that seemed made for gentle smiles.

Harriet smiled in response to the bow of his head before she returned her attention to Rosalie as Charlie introduced her with a knowing smile.

"And I would also like to introduce you to Miss Rosalie Smith," Charlie continued. "A fine singer and even finer dancer I am told."

Rosalie simply smiled that sultry smile, even though her eyes held a sparkle as if she knew the effect she was having on Harriet.

"Allow me to introduce you both to my darling cousin, Lady Harriet Cunningham, daughter of the Earl of Creoch, neither a musician nor a singer—"

"But a lover of both, nonetheless," Harriet cut her cousin off with a sharp gaze before she put a smile on her face. "Please, join us."

Charlie and Jeffrey brought two seats over from a vacant table. She thought Charlie would guide Rosalie to the seat opposite Harriet, for that's how things were generally done amongst their people—but instead he assisted her into the seat directly to Harriet's right. He took the one to her left, leaving Jeffrey to fill the vacant seat directly across from her.

There was a beat of awkward silence, where no one seemed to know what to say or do. Harriet was too aware of Rosalie's thigh brushing her own to make her tongue work, but thankfully Charlie broke the ice, as he always did. He couldn't stand silence and loved the sound of his own voice, a combination that promised to keep conversations going, no matter what.

"My cousin and I were just talking about how wonderful the show was

tonight,” he started, his gaze darting between Jeffrey and Rosalie, but mostly focusing on Jeffrey, which only confused Harriet further. She longed to know why she had never heard of this man before now... They told each other everything. “Weren’t we, Harriet, dear?”

Her mind was jumbled; she was finally close enough to see the colour of Rosalie’s eyes. She had noticed from the dance floor that they had been dark brown, but now she could see they were umber, with hints of moss green. They were beautiful and seemed to be another thing that enchanted Harriet.

Which is probably why all she could murmur in answer to Charlie’s question was, “Breathtaking.” Her cheeks immediately warmed and she tried to ignore Charlie’s teasing grin and the pulse thundering in her ears by taking another sip of her Scotch.

Rosalie didn’t seem to mind, for she gave Harriet a wide, dazzling smile that sent flutters through her stomach. “You’re both too sweet,” she drawled, though she looked only at Harriet. “Though, if I know you, Charlie, you’re looking to flatter Jeffrey more than you are me. Why don’t Lady Harriet and I go for a walk and you two can have your precious time together?”

She was on her feet as soon as she had finished speaking. Her words—and the bluntness of them—were such a shock to Harriet that she simply watched Rosalie as she organised herself. It was only when she turned back to her, raising a thin eyebrow, that she realised she was expected to follow.

She led them through the dancing bodies over to a small table to the side of the bar. It was tucked into a cosy corner, hidden by a large, decorative plant that her sister, Maria, would have been awed with. Maria had fallen in love with gardening at a young age. The gardener at Creoch House had quickly gotten used to having Maria shadowing him, and when she was older and it had been clear she wasn’t growing out of it, Papa and Mamma had carved out a little part of the garden for Maria to do with as she pleased.

As they sat down, Harriet cleared her throat. “I take it, from the way you spoke, you know of Charlie’s...preferences?”

“That he enjoys the company of men, women, and those who are neither in his bed?” Rosalie enquired as she fished in her bag for something. “Yes, he’s been coming here for some time now.” She pulled out a cigarette holder and a cigarette, setting it alight and taking a long drag. Rosalie blew out the smoke and grinned at Harriet. “Why anyone would prefer men, I

have no idea. Give me a pretty lady any day and I am content. Men are scared of us and the power we wield. That's why they've pushed us down for so long." She met Harriet's gaze head on, unflinching. "But we're rising."

Harriet stared at her, eyes wide. She sometimes fooled herself into believing that she could be attracted to and in love with a man, but that didn't stop her from always picturing a woman whenever she imagined her "happy ending." However, she wasn't used to hearing such words, especially coming from another woman. If she had tried speaking like that back in Scotland, she would have been locked up. Her darling papa maybe wasn't as opposed to change as some of their class, but he couldn't quite wrap his head around women's suffrage. When the news of Emily Davison had broken in 1913, she'd been sure her father was going to burst a vein.

"Have I shocked you?" Rosalie questioned as she drew another puff from her cigarette. "Forgive me, I must admit that I haven't met many English ladies."

"Scottish, actually," Harriet corrected almost instantly. It was a habit she had gotten into when she was young and hadn't managed to escape. The distinction was *very* important to her. "Have you met *any* ladies?" she added after a moment.

Rosalie offered her a delightful smile. "None at all."

"So, I am your first?" Harriet asked, her cheeks reddening even more when the double meaning caught up with her.

"In that respect, you most certainly are," Rosalie replied, either not noticing the colouring on Harriet's cheeks, or being a saint and choosing not to comment on it. "And I couldn't have picked a more beautiful lady for the occasion."

Harriet was certain her face was aflame as she reached for her drink. Her gaze flickered back to the table where Charlie sat. He and Jeffrey were huddled close together, locked in a conversation that seemed heavy and personal, judging by the set of Charlie's jaw.

"He's a nice man," Rosalie offered after a beat. Harriet turned back to her with a questioning look. "Jeffrey. He's good for Charlie. Keeps him grounded."

Harriet didn't want to admit that she hadn't known about Jeffrey's existence until that very night, so she kept her face neutral as she asked, "How do you know him?"

“Jeffrey?” Rosalie prompted, continuing only when Harriet nodded in confirmation. “He’s my best friend. We met at another club...must be four years ago now. It wasn’t long after the War ended... I had lost my mother and brother in such a short time, and so I had to find a way to earn a living. I didn’t have many talents except singing and dancing, so I started looking for jobs at clubs. I was desperately trying to get an audition at this one club, but no one would see me. I came back every day, determined to get them to notice me.”

A fond smile appeared on her lips as she lost herself to the memory. “Jeffrey worked at the club, too. Officially he was just a musician but he was best friends with the owner. His opinion held a lot of weight. He noticed me constantly coming back and took a chance on me, gave me an audition and then gave his word to the owner.” She reached for her drink and looked over Harriet’s shoulder to where the two men sat. “The rest is history, as they say.”

Harriet’s gaze flickered back over to her cousin. He pressed a soft kiss to Jeffrey’s lips, who smiled shyly and reached for Charlie’s hand. She resented that not only would they be hated for them both being men, the fact that Jeffrey was Black would also cause a million different kinds of problems.

“If anyone ever found out, he could be sentenced,” she said. “How can love be illegal? It’s ridiculous! It’s not like we can choose who we love, no more than we can choose our eye colour or who our parents are!”

It took Harriet a long moment to realise her slip. And she did so only by seeing the slight way Rosalie’s eyes widened. She never spoke of this to anyone outside her family. Mamma, Papa, Thomas, and Maria all knew, because she loved them and knew they would accept her. And even though she knew this bar was a welcoming place, she knew not everyone was friendly—even people like her who risked everything simply by being here.

If anyone heard that, they could use it against her. That was why her parents wanted her married—people start talking when all the people you were seen with were women. And that was also why she had refused to go further than a few kisses with her first love, Susanna, one of the nurses from her time at the hospital during the War.

Her face must have given her inner panic away, however, as Rosalie slid her free hand towards her, laying it over her own. “Not all of us Americans will do anything for some extra coin. Besides, revealing your truth would

mean revealing mine and, since it's a criminal offence, I'd really rather not do that."

Harriet offered her a smile in thanks. Her free hand came over Rosalie's, squeezing it. "My people are worse. Trust me. They do nothing all day and so live for gossip or scandal. I swear, during the War that was all they concerned themselves with. It drove me up the wall— Here I was, tending to young men who had lost hands, legs, sight, movement, livelihood, and all they cared about was the most menial of gossip. And then the War ended and all they want to do is pretend it never happened."

Harriet took a deep breath to calm herself. Her opinions on politics weren't always welcome, and she often got carried away. She raised her gaze to Rosalie's, curious to see what she thought of her outburst, only to find her frozen. Her eyes were glazed over, staring into nothingness, and Harriet knew she had to be reliving old memories. Harriet frowned, thinking to herself what she could have said that would have caused such a reaction...then she realised.

The War.

"I am so sorry," she whispered.

Rosalie's gaze seemed to focus once more. She offered Harriet a tight smile as she slipped her hand free. Her cigarette had burned out and she reached into her bag to retrieve another one. "You couldn't have known."

"I should have. No one went through the War without losing someone."

No immediate family members of Harriet's had been killed— Charlie had taken a bullet but had recovered well enough. The only people who haunted Harriet were the soldiers under her care who had died. She couldn't recall their names but their faces stayed with her.

In a desperate attempt to distract herself from those thoughts, Harriet studied Rosalie's features. She was still smoking her cigarette but had obviously lost herself to thoughts or memories, giving Harriet the perfect chance to notice the smaller things that she hadn't before. There was a freckle on her neck that seemed to beckon Harriet's lips, her front teeth were a little crooked, her nose was slightly hooked and was so beautiful with how strong it made her look, and there was a mole to the left side of her upper lip.

"I'm sorry," she muttered, offering Harriet a smile as she dashed out the end of her cigarette in a tray on the table and returned the cigarette holder to her bag. "I'm being terrible company right now. Let's talk about something

else to distract us both. Is this your first time in America?”

Harriet shook her head, thankful for the change in subject. “I’ve been here two times before. Mostly Charlie and his family come over to visit us. He really enjoys the season. It is my first time in New York, however. They used to stay in Chicago but with the growing violence, Uncle John moved his newspaper here to New York.”

“New York is the best place to be. It’s honestly the greatest city in the world. Even better than London—though I have never been there.”

Harriet held up her hands as she giggled. “Don’t worry, I find that I’m starting to agree. London is decent enough during the season. Edinburgh is always reminding you of the past—New York seems to be showing you the future.” A sad smile crept over her face. “Now, if you had said the greatest ‘place’ in the world, that’s when I would have had to disagree. My home is a small town in a place called Ayrshire...but it’s beautiful. Not just our house but the entire area. It’s green and quiet and quaint.”

Rosalie looked at her for a moment, her lips spreading into a beautiful smile. “I rather like the sound of that.”

Harriet returned her smile. Her mind filled with images of showing her around, taking her on walks around the garden and the gorgeous loch, showing her the distillery, introducing her to their farms.

But before she could even get another question out, to test the waters of making those visions come true, her cousin appeared at their table.

“We better get a move on. We can’t be out too late or the servants will catch us. By the time we get back, it’ll be four a.m., which is pushing it.” Even though it was the last thing she wanted to do, Harriet allowed Charlie to pull her chair back so she could stand.

Rosalie stood along with her, and Harriet didn’t know if it were wishful thinking, but she was almost positive there was a certain...sadness in her gaze. Not like the sadness from before, when she thought of her lost one, but a disappointment that Harriet was leaving.

Definitely wishful thinking, Harriet, her mind hissed at her. She gathered her belongings and then turned back to Rosalie.

“It was lovely to meet you, Miss Smith,” Harriet replied, her courtesies coming back to her. With Charlie present, she had to pretend that she hadn’t just been picturing Rosalie fitting herself into her life back home.

“And you, Lady Harriet,” Rosalie replied as she bobbed into a curtsy that made Harriet giggle. It was obvious she had never had the occasion for such

a movement.

The weight of Charlie's hand on her back was warm and comforting as he led her towards the door, but there was a vibration to the touch that made her frown. She found her suspicions confirmed when his hands trembled as he helped her into her coat.

"Are you well?" she asked, reaching up to feel his forehead, her frown deepening with worry and concern. He simply smiled at her and put on his own coat, ignoring her completely.

Harriet longed to press the issue. Her cousin didn't shake for nothing—something must have happened. And the only cause was his conversation with Jeffrey. The man she had had no idea existed until tonight.

Before she could bring that up, however, Rosalie appeared at her side. Her brows rose and her stomach did somersaults. There was a hesitancy to her gaze but she still seemed happy, almost eager, to have caught up with them. "I know you need to go, I promise this won't take long."

Worry gripped Harriet's throat. "What's wrong?"

"Well, the truth of the matter is that I'm performing here next Tuesday. I'll be with a few other girls, so it'll be a singing and dancing event. I wanted to let you know...to see whether you wanted to come along. You don't have to, of course, but I wanted to ask." She almost seemed nervous, which sent a thrill through Harriet's stomach. She hadn't really had any plans to return to The Lion's Thorn after tonight—this was supposed to be a one-time-only occasion.

Yet the very thought of saying no didn't seem right.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," she answered truthfully.

Rosalie's dazzling smile was sure to follow her into her dreams, it was so breathtakingly beautiful and sudden, as if she had been prepared for a no.

"Good. I'll see you then!" Her voice was a little breathless. She waved before she turned and disappeared into the crowd, leaving Harriet with Charlie, who grinned at her like he knew some secret she did not.

"You are smitten," he said after a long beat, when Harriet could no longer see Rosalie squeeze through the crowds.

Harriet merely humphed and stalked by him to start the long climb back up to the bookshop, his loud burst of laughter echoing through the secret chamber.

Chapter Four

They had to walk some way before they finally came across a taxi cab. It was the Prohibition; no alcohol meant there was really no reason for people to be out at such a time, so there were fewer taxi cabs to be found. Except a select few who seemed to know of speakeasies and didn't seem to worry about the consequences of not informing the police.

The drive home was silent. Harriet was consumed with thoughts of Rosalie, pulling up pictures of her in her mind, completing that dream of one day taking her back to Creoch House. Her questions about Charlie and Jeffrey also crept to the forefront of her mind, and when they finally entered the three-story brownstone that was her uncle's New York home, she couldn't keep it to herself any further.

"Why have you never mentioned Jeffrey before?" she questioned, eyes fixed on his back. Charlie had apparently wanted to make a quick escape to avoid this conversation, but Harriet was never one to give him the comfortable way out. "I thought we told each other everything. Why keep him secret?"

He didn't turn straight away. Harriet watched the tense rise and fall of his shoulders. It seemed her cousin was always tense nowadays. After the War and the things he had seen...she couldn't really blame him. She merely wished there were a way she could help.

Finally, he let out a long sigh and turned, slowly, to face her. His brows were pulled down and his lips pressed into a thin line. "I... Nothing can come of it," he declared after another shaky exhale. "And the thought of speaking about it to you made it seem...real. I didn't want you to know and then one day have to tell you that we were no longer seeing each other because something had happened." He reached up and scratched the back of his neck. "I know it's foolish..."

There was a hard lump in Harriet's throat that she had to swallow as she took a step towards him. She reached for his hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "It's not foolish at all, Charlie. It's protecting your heart. Amongst our people, that's an important trait." She brushed her fingers over his cheekbone. "I'm sorry that it's even something you need to worry about."

Charlie brought her hand around to his lips, pressing a kiss to her knuckles. "I know you are, dear, and I love you for it." He took a deep breath, released her, and smiled. "Now come. We need to get to bed otherwise the servants will catch us and tell Father. And trust me, you do not want that."

Knowing that she most certainly did *not* want Uncle John to discover she had been to an illegal pub, Harriet followed Charlie up the stairs to the second floor. She kissed Charlie's cheek as she bade him goodnight before they went down the separate ends of the hall.

Her maid, Martha, had laid out her nightgown, so all Harriet had to do was remove her clothes, careful to drape them over the nearby chair to avoid giving Martha too much work the next day, and pull the nightgown on. The water set aside for her to wash her face had long gone cold, but Harriet didn't mind as she removed her makeup, following it with some creams to moisturise her face, neck, hands, feet, and elbows.

By the time she'd crawled into bed, she was exhausted and asleep almost as soon as her head hit the pillow.

It felt as if she had no sooner closed her eyes than Martha was there, shaking her awake. "Sorry, m'lady, but it's eight and breakfast is out. Even Mrs. Slater is up and dressed."

Harriet groaned, throwing her arm over her face to shield her eyes as Martha opened the curtains and let the sunlight enter.

"Thank you, Martha," she groaned, not unkindly. "I'll feign an illness of some sort. No doubt I'll look the part." She giggled softly, finally feeling brave enough to lower her hand. "Would you mind fetching me something for this headache? I'll get washed whilst you're gone."

Martha nodded. "Of course, m'lady." She gathered the clothes over her arm and then left the room.

Harriet allowed herself a minute to adjust to being awake, trying to ignore the pounding in her head, before she made her way over to the vanity. Fresh water had been brought up, sprinkled with lavender flowers, and Harriet relished the freshness on her skin. The scent seemed to ease her pain a little.

By the time Martha returned she had cleaned herself and slipped into her brassiere and knickers. She finished pulling on her slip and took the medication from Martha. "You are a saint." She sighed, turning towards the mirror to examine the dark circles under her eyes that looked as if someone had struck her. "And I'm afraid you shall have to work your magic. I cannot go downstairs looking like this."

"Of course, Lady Harriet."

Getting dressed seemed to take double the time. Martha had to press a lot of powder under her eyes to cover the dark circles, and she paired that with some rouge to give her a healthy flush. She chose to wear a simple A-line emerald green skirt and a sheer white blouse tucked into it, with lapped sleeves and a square neckline. If she were back home, she would have needed to add a cardigan to help with the colder temperatures, but in New York, she didn't have that problem.

"Darling Martha," Harriet murmured as she made her way to the door. "What would I do without you?"

Her maid smiled softly as she continued to tidy up the room, organising all the disarray from the night before. "You'd manage, m'lady. You give yourself too little credit."

With those kind words echoing in her mind, Harriet set off for breakfast.

Uncle John and Charlie were already in the dining room, but she was surprised to find Aunt Elizabeth there. She normally took breakfast on a tray in her room...though there didn't seem to be any food in front of her, which meant she was waiting for Harriet.

A suspicion confirmed moments later when Charlie and Uncle John stood at her presence and her aunt offered a wide smile. "Ah, there you are!" The smile faded a little. "My dear, are you all right? You look quite pale."

Harriet's gaze flickered over to Charlie, more than annoyed to find him looking rather dashing despite getting as much sleep as she. No doubt he was used to it, though.

"I am. Martha has given me something for my sore head so I'll be dandy in a few moments." Harriet sat down, not really feeling up to eating much and taking only a slice of toast and buttering it. "What was it you wished to speak to me about?"

Her aunt still looked a little concerned but she said, "We didn't get the chance to discuss the dinner on Saturday night." Her smile stretched further. "What did you think of our guests?"

It was a polite way of asking which men she preferred. Harriet didn't want to disappoint her aunt—especially when she had put so much work into that dinner—and so repeated the answer she had given Charlie the night before.

"I rather enjoyed Mr. Madson's company; he seemed like a decent man. He is a lawyer at his father's firm and seemed intelligent and kind. I also found Mr. Holmes quite agreeable. I didn't learn what his job is, but he made me laugh and he complimented me a lot, which is always nice. As for the others...I'm afraid I didn't get much time to talk to them and so I don't feel right passing comment on them." She didn't mention that Charlie had warned her of those other men due to their rather reckless reputations.

Her aunt hummed. "That's good to hear. I had planned to host another dinner this coming Friday, so we can invite those two back, if you wish?"

Harriet nodded. She wasn't particularly excited, but she could hardly say no when this entire visit was about finding a husband. She couldn't back out. It wasn't just her own reputation on the line, but that of her family.

"Good!" Aunt Elizabeth glanced up at the clock. "I really must get on with the day. Are you ready to go, dear?"

Uncle John folded his newspaper over and nodded. "Yes, love. Is it your refugee charity meeting today? I'll drive you there on the way to the office." He turned to Harriet and Charlie after helping his wife from her seat. "Goodbye, you two."

Aunt Elizabeth kissed Charlie's cheek and offered Harriet a smile before they both hastily left the dining room. The two cousins were alone and after a beat of silence, Charlie grinned at her. "Well, my dear, you look terrible."

Harriet narrowed her eyes as she raised her toast to her mouth for a bite. She chewed for a long minute, keeping her glare focused slowly on her cousin, and when she swallowed, she finally declared, "It's all your fault, you know. So I'd hold your wheesht if I were you."

Charlie said nothing in return, yet there was a sparkle in his eyes that spoke of his continued amusement. Harriet focused on eating her slice of toast, washing it down with a glass of orange juice.

"How about some fresh air? It may stop you from dying on the spot." He chuckled as he stood, making his way to her side and hooking her arm through his. Harriet playfully swatted his arm and allowed him to lead her from the dining room to get their coats.

It wasn't until they had made it a few blocks away from the house that

Charlie turned to her and said, "Sorry about Mother's ambush. I wish I could have warned you about it."

Harriet wrapped her arms around her midriff. "I doubt that would have made much of a difference, if I'm being honest." She shook her head. "It's ridiculous, isn't it? I've had so long to wrap my head around this but I don't think I ever will. Getting *married*."

Saying it aloud only made the butterflies in her stomach grow, and her arms tightened around herself.

"Tell me true, do *any* of the men you mentioned to Mother interest you?" Harriet scoffed and so he added, "Or do you find them tolerable, at least?"

Despite herself, Harriet smiled. "I did mean what I said about Mr. Madson; he seemed sweet and he is rather pleasant to look at. I did talk a lot with Mr. Holmes, but he mostly asked questions about me. I didn't learn much about him. I suppose I could try to remedy that at this next dinner."

She trailed off, unable to think of much else to say. It all just seemed to crash down on her, the realisation that she could possibly end up marrying one of these men. And it didn't help that her mind was still captivated by Miss Rosalie Smith and the fact she had agreed to see her next Tuesday.

Harriet was pulled from her thoughts when she felt Charlie's hand reach for her own, tugging it free from its iron grip against her coat. He entwined their fingers and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

"I know this is hard, Harriet, but I'm always going to be here for you." He turned his head and grinned down at her. "And if I get a single sign that any of these men are less than perfect, I will personally see to it that they're never allowed back in our house."

His words startled a loud burst of laughter from Harriet's lips as she moved her hand so their arms were entwined instead. "And that, my dear cousin, is why I love you."

Chapter Five

Harriet swallowed as she glanced around the room. The day had seemed to disappear with the blink of an eye. One minute she was walking with Charlie, reliving memories from their night at The Lion's Thorn, and the next, she was surrounded by a roomful of people wearing their finest evening wear.

Instinctively, Harriet made her way over to Charlie, not noticing that two of her suitors were there. It was too late to alter course, so she put a smile upon her face and slowed, taking the opportunity to appraise them both.

Mr. Henry Madson was to Charlie's right, his brown hair slicked to one side yet refusing to lie flat against his head as was the fashion. He had a rather nice face, Harriet had to confess; a strong, square jaw, plump lips, a strong, straight nose. Yet, there was a certain...roughness to his looks that refused to be tamed to the sleek style that was favoured in fashion.

Mr. Fredrick Holmes, however, looked as if he could step into a magazine or the pictures. His dirty-blond hair was perfectly slicked back and whilst he had rather similar features to Henry, he was softer around the edges, almost delicate in a sense.

"Mr. Madson, Mr. Holmes, how lovely it is to see you again," Harriet greeted as she stepped up beside them, glancing around out of habit, expecting a footman or butler to offer her a drink. She gritted her teeth when she recalled that alcohol was banned. Her trip to the speakeasy had whetted her appetite.

"And you, Lady Harriet," Henry replied with a smile. "Please call me Henry. 'Mr. Madson' makes me think of my father." His warm blue eyes flickered over her figure. "You look rather enchanting tonight, m'lady."

Coming from anyone else, Harriet would have automatically assumed it was being said out of duty. And whilst she still believed that was the case

with this Henry Madson, he said it in such a soft and earnest manner that made her wonder what else was going on in his mind.

Not that she resented the compliment—she was wearing a new dress, one bought specifically for this dinner. It had a silk underdress that was covered by a chiffon overlay that gave the shapeless form. The chiffon was printed with a floral pattern of blues and greens, and a white silk sash, which was tied in a large, exaggerated bow, was tied around her hips to create the dropped waistline. And there was a little cape that fell over the back of the shoulders. At each side the chiffon was slitted which further gave the appearance of it being an overdress rather than a part of the white dress underneath.

Before she could thank him, however, Frederick Holmes jumped in, “Yes. I must agree with Henry here, Lady Harriet. You look ravishing.” His words slurred a little. Nothing too noticeable, but having spent her life around people who acted sober when they were quite drunk had given her an ear for these things.

Unlike Henry’s, his compliment made Harriet’s skin crawl—as if there were something more to it.

Still, she offered them both a smile and thanked them.

“How are you enjoying New York so far?” Mr. Holmes asked. “It must be far more exciting than dreary old England.”

Harriet swallowed. “I wouldn’t know,” she answered with a slight smile towards Charlie, which only grew as Mr. Holmes frowned.

“What do you mean?” He glanced between Harriet and Charlie. “Aren’t you the daughter of an earl?”

Harriet hummed. “Yes. A *Scottish* earl.”

Mr. Holmes frowned for a moment longer before he waved his hand. “Isn’t it the same thing?” he asked, not realising just how much his words set Harriet’s teeth on edge.

“No. It is not. There are precious few Scottish titles left due to the English taking them over. Perhaps it is time you looked outside your own country, Mr. Holmes, and realised there’s a larger world around you.”

Just as he opened his mouth to reply, the butler stepped in to announce that dinner was ready. Without another glance, Harriet turned and strode away to the dining hall, already deciding that Mr. Holmes was not going to get another invitation back. She also could see no sight of the other man she had allowed her aunt to invite—Mr. Adams. It seemed that with one dinner,

she had narrowed it down to one possible man.

Her family back in Scotland would be pleased with that news. They always did say Harriet was efficient.

“Allow me to apologise on behalf of Mr. Holmes,” Henry murmured from behind her. He spoke in a soft manner that seemed to beckon her attention as she craned her head towards him.

She frowned at him. “It’s not your responsibility...so why are you doing it?”

He shrugged one shoulder. “It seemed like the right thing to do. I don’t think he shall do it himself, which I suppose makes it a little redundant.” His lips—which were full and plump—tugged into a crooked smile that somehow Harriet found herself returning.

“Just a little, I’m afraid. An apology on behalf of someone else isn’t really an apology at all.” She focused her gaze on his grey eyes, before flickering it over his body, noticing that the suit he wore was tailored perfectly to show off his broad chest.

“That is true.”

Harriet turned her gaze back towards the front, realising that in any other situation, she would have been pleased to get to know him further and call him a friend. She couldn’t see anything else, yet there was something about him that said he would be a friend to everyone.

“I must confess that it speaks well of you for noticing that an apology was due, however,” Harriet added because it seemed wrong to walk in a tense silence with him.

He answered with a joyous laugh that sparked one from Harriet. She had always imagined her marriage as loveless—something she would suffer through and bear with gritted teeth.

However, she found that the longer she stared at Henry’s easy grin, the easier it was to imagine that perhaps it wouldn’t be *quite* so awful.

“Well, I’m relieved it wasn’t a total blunder then.” He gave an exaggerated sigh, placing his hands over his heart. “I’ll be able to rest easy tonight.”

Harriet laughed as they finally left the sitting room. She noticed that they had slowed to an leisurely stroll, allowing the others to overtake them.

She knew that she would never love him romantically, but there was no saying whether she’d feel some sort of platonic, content love that would make the whole situation easier.

When she stopped giggling, he gave her a soft smile and said, “Not that I’m incapable of coming up with my own questions, but how *are* you finding New York?”

It was almost ironic. How when she started to think of her future marriage and life, her mind had to remind her that she’d never find herself as happy as Mamma and Papa.

Her first answer to his question wasn’t the weather or the buildings or the people...it was The Lion’s Thorn. It was Rosalie Smith’s smile. The way it seemed to brighten up her entire face, and her eyes would get a certain twinkle.

“I understand this is your first time in New York...that your aunt and uncle had previously lived in Chicago.”

Then there was also her laughter, which had sounded as beautiful as her singing. Harriet couldn’t wait until Tuesday so she could maybe hear that sound and see that smile again.

“Are you well, Lady Harriet? You seem to have gone rather pale.” Henry’s hand was on top of her arm, yet she felt no warmth like with the gentle press of Rosalie’s thigh against her own. She had been aware of every place their bodies touched. With Henry, it was simply a hand touching an arm—there was no electricity sparking through her veins.

Still, she plastered a smile on her face and allowed her hand to tuck into the crook of his elbow. “Yes. Forgive me. I was miles away.”

Henry studied her for a long moment before he nodded his head and resumed their walk to the dining room.

Chapter Six

By the time Tuesday, the day of Rosalie's next show, came along, Harriet could barely contain her excitement. As she entered The Lion's Thorn for the second time, she found that the awe hadn't quite left her. She had no idea if it would ever be something she could get over—if she would always be filled with such admiration as she looked around the secret building. It hurt more than she'd like to admit when a voice whispered that she'd never find out. Once she had her husband, she'd never get to visit the club again.

Harriet dusted down her dress—the very same one she had worn for her second dinner with Mr. Holmes and Mr. Madson. It felt a little strange to mingle those two worlds, yet it was her finest dress and she wanted to impress. As she turned to Charlie, hoping to distract herself, she was rather shocked by what she found. The look on her cousin's face was shut off, harsh. The normally soft edges seemed chiselled away as he clenched his jaw and held his shoulders stiff. He looked ready to snap at the slightest provocation.

“Is everything all right?” she whispered as she reached for his arm, surprised to find the muscles taut under her touch.

“Fine,” he answered gruffly, pulling his arm free with a rough yank.

“You are not fine, Charlie,” Harriet hissed as she grabbed his arm once more. Perhaps she didn't have a lot of strength, but moving patients around for nearly two years as a nurse during the War had granted her some muscle. Her grip was hard enough to stop Charlie from moving. And if he tried to break free this time, he would send her flying, and he was too much of a gentleman to do such a thing.

“Talk to me. Do you wish to leave? We don't need to stay if you don't want to.”

He stared at her for a long moment, those sapphire blue eyes boring into

her. He was definitely trying to find some sort of answer in her gaze, and when he released his breath and let his shoulders slump, she assumed he had found it. “It’s nothing, cousin. Let’s go and enjoy the show. Rosalie’s dancing is on par with her singing.”

Before Harriet could talk him out of it—or at least question his strange mood further—he turned and handed his hat and coat to one of the teenage boys waiting. Another came forward to assist Harriet.

The last time, there had been only one at the door to take coats. Yet as she moved further into the bar, she saw why they had brought more in. The bar was the busiest Harriet had ever seen...well...anywhere. The dance floor was still there and the couples dancing managed to swing around without colliding with anyone, a skill Harriet was sure she didn’t possess. She was used to open spaces for her dancing. People were standing around chatting on the edge of the dance floor and at the bar, and others were crammed around tables far too small for their parties.

“Is it usually like this on a Tuesday?” Harriet whispered as she followed Charlie through the crowds, her hand in his to avoid getting lost.

“No, but it’s usually like this when they have a performance,” Charlie answered as he led her upstairs. It was only five or six steps, but it was enough to make it easier to see the stage.

“So, they’re all here for Rosalie?”

He grinned at her as they sat down. “Yes and no. They’re not here for Rosalie, specifically, but they are here to see her and the other girls she sings and dances with.”

She turned her attention to the stage, watching as the velvet curtains fluttered while people moved around behind them. She wondered if one of those flutters belonged to Rosalie. Her eyes darted to the bandstand, to the people who played a soft melody in preparation for the oncoming show. She was looking for the familiar face of Jeffrey Williams, and when she found him, her gaze flickered back to Charlie.

He was focused solely on the stage. He didn’t even cast a glance at Jeffrey. She wondered if their conversation last week resulted in this foul mood. That she had brought back the realisation there was no future for them, not with Uncle John becoming stricter with Charlie and his behaviour.

The lights dimmed and she turned to the stage as the band started to play a more upbeat tune and a dozen women poured out onto the stage. They all

wore heavily beaded silver dresses covered in fringes that accentuated every single movement. The light reflected off all the jewels and glitter and sent beams dancing all over the club. Everything about their dress was built to add to the show. Even so, the entire outfit was so risqué, with the fringe reaching their knees and the actual dress reaching mid-thigh.

Her papa would have definitely fainted had he seen the dresses.

Harriet scanned the stage, looking for any sign of Rosalie, but found none. She frowned, wondering if something had happened. Her heart dropped to her stomach and she almost leaned towards Charlie to say she would go if Rosalie wasn't there, when the curtains fluttered a second time. Another woman stepped out into the centre with six girls on either side of her. And where the other women were dressed in silver, this one was drenched in red.

Her short hair was poker straight for a change, instead of the ends curling into her cheeks. She wore no headpiece. None of them did. Harriet was most curious about that until the music started up and the thirteen of them began to move, and she realised why—they all moved so fast, their dancing so upbeat and energetic, that no headband would have stayed in place.

Every single woman on the stage was mesmerising. Their feet seemed to blur as they moved and tapped against the stage, adding their own rhythm to the music. The light hitting their dresses caused rainbows to spark in every direction.

Harriet had never witnessed a dancing act like this before—she knew that they existed, even in Britain, but her people rarely attended such shows.

Now she wished she had.

Her gaze never strayed far from Rosalie, mesmerised by the glimpse of skin she'd see every time she did a spin and the fringe twirled out around her. Nothing in her wildest dreams could have prepared her for when she lifted her leg in the air until her foot was above her head and slid to the floor with her legs forming one long line against the ground.

After several minutes of dancing, Rosalie eventually slowed as the momentum of the music changed. Then she started to sing, and Harriet was lost. She was bowled over by the sweet sounds she made, how utterly heavenly her voice was. It was the perfect balance of raw and soft, husky and velvet. Harriet wanted nothing more than to find a way to get it on a record to forever play on a gramophone.

She couldn't say how long she sat there, utterly entranced by Rosalie, the

way her body moved and how her voice washed over her like a prayer. It could have been a mere thirty minutes or five hours before Harriet was released from the spell as all the girls—Rosalie included—bowed at the rapturous applause that echoed through the club before hurrying back behind the curtain.

Only when the club brightened a little and the band struck up a soft melody did Harriet straighten. She turned to her cousin, ready to apologise for being such a terrible companion, yet when she rounded, she found his seat vacant.

Her heart tightened in her chest as panic seeped into her mind. How long had he been gone? Where was he? Surely he wouldn't have left without her. Harriet stood from her chair, rocking up onto her tiptoes to try to catch a glimpse of her cousin.

She found him rather easily, his golden hair a dead giveaway. He was perched on a stool by the bar, a horde of empty glasses around him. It made Harriet wince.

Gathering her bag, Harriet pushed herself away from the table to go to her cousin...until she heard a familiar voice. Her head whipped around to find Rosalie at the centre of the stage. She was still wearing the same dress, yet a black chiffon skirt had been added to make it look more formal. She had a beautiful sheen to her skin from all the exertion, and it did all sorts of things to Harriet's mind. Mostly, it brought back all those fantasies of them sharing the same bed—no doubt her skin would take on that same sheen after hours of lovemaking.

"Thank you, thank you all," she opened as she took hold of the microphone stand. "Now, before we wrap this show up, I want to play you something new that I wrote. It's a little slower than what we've played all night but sometimes, it's good to slow down."

Harriet found her gaze darting back to Charlie. She *knew* she should keep moving and go to him. She had no doubt that it was Jeffrey who was troubling him. She remembered how broken he had looked as he had declared that nothing could happen between them. And maybe it was admitting it aloud that was causing these issues...but she wished he would *talk* to her. Whatever was eating him alive would continue to do so—the only way to stop it was to talk about it. *A problem shared is a problem halved*, their Granny used to say.

"So, without further ado, I'd like to introduce you to my new song,

‘Highland Bloom.’” Rosalie’s voice cut through her thoughts again, and Harriet’s eyes widened as the song’s title sunk in.

She felt her cheeks redden as a voice in her head whispered, *That’s about you. She wrote that song about you.* After all, how many Scottish people did she know?

However, as soon as the thought entered her mind, Harriet was quick to banish it. Why would she write a song about her? She couldn’t have made that much of an impression on Rosalie last week...could she?

Harriet shook her head, ready to move towards the bar. She was being extreme, making connections that weren’t there.

But then Rosalie started to sing, and Harriet was once again captivated. Her gaze quickly darted to her cousin before they moved back to the stage. He had been stewing all night. Another two minutes wouldn’t hurt.

*There was a time I met a girl,
She touched my hand and flipped my world,
I swear that she was sent for me,
A distant seed blown across the sea.*

*She’s as lovely as can be,
Inspiring a soft and sweet symphony,
Was it chance that blew you to my door?
Or is there the promise of something more?*

*And even if it’s not meant to be,
And you return to your home across the sea,
I’ll have our memories for when I feel gloom,
The memories of you, my Highland bloom.*

There were tears in Harriet’s eyes as Rosalie finished singing. The crowd erupted into cheers, yet it didn’t seem to faze Rosalie. She merely gave a gentle incline of her head and then turned, disappearing behind the curtain once more.

Harriet longed to follow her and hear more about the inspiration behind it. She wanted to believe that it had been written about her, but there was still that voice niggling in the back of her mind telling her she was being utterly self-centred.

She hated that it was such a part of her class to always assume that they were at the forefront of everyone’s mind all the time. No doubt, if it really was about her, Rosalie would tell her. And then she’d let the emotions

course through her. Until then, she had more important things to deal with. Harriet headed towards the bar and tried to ignore the empty glasses around her cousin and the guilt that she hadn't noticed him slip away.

"Charlie?" she asked as she drew close enough. Instead of answering her, however, he lifted another glass and downed it in one.

His eyes were rimmed with red and heavily hooded, showing he was both drunk and had been crying. His clothes and hair were in disarray, something her stylish cousin *never* allowed. It shocked her to see him like that.

She turned to the barman and waved him down. "How much has he had to drink?"

The man shrugged. "Not too sure, he kept putting money down, so I kept pouring 'em."

Harriet narrowed her eyes in a dangerous glare as she set her jaw. "Even when you noticed he was getting worse and worse?"

"Not my job to look after him," the barman replied, placing his towel over his shoulder and turning his back on her. Harriet ground her teeth. No one back in Britain would dare to turn their back on her—she was the daughter of an earl!

"Blasted Yanks," Harriet cursed before she turned back to her cousin, trying to set her anger aside. "Charlie," she tried as she reached for his arm. He tugged it free with an indecipherable moan. "Charles Fredrick Slater!" she hissed, grabbing his arm to tug him from his stool. He stumbled and fell bonelessly against her, and Harriet managed to manoeuvre an arm around him to keep them both upright.

"Harr-Harriet," he hiccuped, a slow smile spreading across his face. "Is that you?"

"It is, yes, now come on, you need to get home." She started to steer him towards the front door, desperate to get out of the club and get them home. Though she wasn't even sure how that was going to happen. She was having a hard enough time getting Charlie to walk. How on earth was she supposed to get him into the house without waking the servants or worse, her aunt and uncle?

After stumbling two feet from the bar, Harriet felt the weight of her cousin lift a little. Her head snapped to the side only to sigh when she found Jeffrey there, roping Charlie's arm around his shoulders. Rosalie was by his side, making Harriet's heart flutter. Before Harriet could even say a thing, she vanished a moment later after Jeffrey said something in her ear.

“What happened to him?” Jeffrey asked, drawing her attention away from thoughts of Rosalie. The concern in his voice made her heart warm.

“Alcohol,” Harriet answered, not wanting to explain her suspicions. She remained silent as they caught up with Rosalie at the door. She carried both Harriet’s and Charlie’s possessions in her arms and was there to hold the door open as Jeffrey and Harriet manoeuvred Charlie’s limp form into the hidden passage.

By the time they made it out of the bookstore, Harriet was panting and sticky from sweat. She had worn her best dress to impress Rosalie, and now that she was *finally* with her, she was in disarray because of Charlie.

Still, Harriet found herself constantly glancing at Rosalie, her heart fluttering as she realised that, no doubt, there were a lot of people back in the club who wanted her attention after such a splendid performance. And yet here she was, assisting Harriet with her inebriated cousin.

They walked for several minutes before they found a cab. Rosalie dove into the middle of the street to ensure it spotted them, and Harriet sighed in relief as it pulled up to the pavement.

The driver came out and without a word helped Jeffrey get him into the back seat. And she was certain she saw him slip the driver a few notes—no doubt to ensure silence.

Once they had Charlie safely inside, they closed the door and Harriet thanked the driver, before telling him she’d be only a moment. He tugged at his hat and then returned to his seat, leaving Harriet alone with Rosalie and Jeffrey.

“Thank you, both of you. You have no idea what this means to me.” Harriet glanced briefly over her shoulder, shaking her head at the sight of her cousin’s head pressed against the window, his eyes shut. “I don’t think I could have managed him by myself.”

“It was nothing,” Jeffrey said, his gaze also focused on Charlie, though Harriet noticed there was a tightness to his eyes. He swallowed, then smiled, sharing a look with Rosalie. “I’ll leave you two alone.”

Before Harriet could say that she needed to get back to the house with Charlie before they got caught, Rosalie took her hand and dragged her back into the nearest alley. Harriet craned her head, worried about what the driver might think, but when she turned, she saw Jeffrey was talking to him through his window, no doubt distracting him on purpose.

The alleyway was definitely wide enough for them to stand at a decent

distance, and yet she was pressed so very close to Harriet. Her hand was still wound tightly in Harriet's, and it felt like her skin was aflame.

When Rosalie finally spoke, her breath fanned across Harriet's cheek, the sweetest breeze she had ever experienced.

"Did you enjoy the show?" Her voice was a soft whisper as if she were nervous of the answer. Harriet couldn't believe that this brilliant woman was anxious of her opinion.

Harriet smiled as she gently squeezed Rosalie's hand, relishing when she returned it. "Let me put it this way: I enjoyed it so much, I didn't notice when my cousin was getting himself utterly hammered." She waved her hand back towards the car, earning a laugh from Rosalie.

Again the sound rocketed through Harriet's senses. She'd gladly do whatever she could to keep that sound falling from those beautiful lips. It completely transformed her face, lighting it up in the most glorious way that made Harriet's knees weak.

"I'm glad to hear it." Rosalie glanced down at their entwined hands briefly, before she looked up at Harriet underneath her long eyelashes. "And the song?"

Harriet gnawed on her lip. She brushed her thumb over Rosalie's knuckles. She wished that their gloves were gone so she could relish the feel of skin on skin. "Beautiful. It nearly made me cry." She also wished she had the courage to ask about its meaning.

"I must confess, I'm a little surprised you came at all," Rosalie said, her fingers still stroking Harriet's hand.

Harriet frowned. "Why wouldn't I? It's all I've been able to think about since you asked me!" Her cheeks burned as her confession caught up with her. And there was no way to take it back now.

Rosalie gave a low laugh. "Is that so?" She cocked her head to the side. "So if I asked you to come out again...would you accept?"

Pursing her lips, Harriet said, "That depends."

"On?"

"Are you asking me to come out again?"

This time she was rewarded with a burst of twinkling laughter that enticed Harriet to join in with her. When they quieted down, Rosalie answered, "Yes. I would relish the idea of getting to know you better, Lady Harriet."

Harriet's heart leapt through her chest to her throat. She felt like she was

soaring, and she tightened her hold on Rosalie's hands, afraid she'd take off if she didn't hold on.

She opened her mouth. "Rosalie, I—"

Yet no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't get her mouth to form the words that she really wanted to say.

All Harriet wanted was another night with her, some more memories to hold in her heart.

But no. She needed to tell her that she was about to get married. It wasn't fair to Rosalie to drag her along and play with her heart like this. She needed to decide for herself whether she wanted to keep going.

Well, here goes nothing. Harriet drew a deep breath, ready to say the words and deal with the consequences.

"I need to get Charlie back. The servants wake up early, and neither of us can get caught by my uncle."

You utter coward! Her mind hissed at her, cursing her with words that would have caused any respectable young lady to faint.

Rosalie tilted her head slightly, her thin brows furrowing as if realising that the words Harriet said hadn't been what she meant to say. She didn't press the issue, however. She merely gave her a soft smile and said, "Of course. Though, I do hope I shall see you at the club again soon?"

"Of course! I'd love to!" Harriet winced internally.

Harriet turned, ready to head back to the cab, when she felt a tug at her hand. She returned her gaze to Rosalie, finding her raising her left hand to her lips, pressing a gentle kiss to her knuckles. All throughout it, her eyes never left Harriet's.

"Until then, my lady."

Harriet was certain her face was all red and mottled, even as a cool chill swept through the air. Her heart hammered such a furious rhythm against her chest, it was surprising that Rosalie couldn't hear it. She swallowed, fumbling for words but unable to get anything out. Her tongue seemed to be made of lead, and all she could do was offer her a shaky smile.

Harriet tried to recover what little dignity she had left and turned, quickly striding out of the alley and back to the cab. She heard Rosalie's low, husky laugh follow her as if she knew exactly what effect her actions were having on Harriet.

Only when she was safely inside the cab did Harriet allow herself to look back at them. She found Jeffrey and Rosalie standing on the pavement, side

by side, their arms entwined. When they noticed her staring, they both raised their hands in farewell, and Harriet returned it before she turned and used all her willpower to stop herself from watching them as the cab started to move away.

And when they had turned several corners, ensuring neither Jeffrey nor Rosalie would be able to witness her, she raised her left hand to her chest and ran her fingers over her knuckles.

Chapter Seven

The next morning, Harriet sat at the dining table, alone with Uncle John. Usually Charlie was there to keep her company. It wasn't that she didn't love Uncle John...she just didn't know him very well. And if she was being perfectly frank, he rather terrified her.

"No Charles today?" she asked, knowing better than to call him Charlie in front of his father. Uncle John rather hated the nickname, even though the entire family used it. Perhaps it was that which made her feel odd when in his presence. She always felt like she had to tiptoe around him.

Uncle John shook his head. "No, he's not feeling well, according to Jackson. He'll be in bed all day mostly—he did say he may make it down for dinner but I wouldn't hold my breath."

Yet despite her strange relationship with Uncle John, she had never once believed that he treated his son any differently than how Papa treated Thomas. She had just expected the same unconditional love that a father gave his son. Yes, there were times when Papa was furious and disappointed in Thomas, but they always worked it out.

Now that she had been living with them for some time, however, Harriet could see that the relationship between Charlie and Uncle John was nothing like that. His son was going through something and yet he couldn't seem to pull himself away from his newspaper long enough to find out what.

"Such a shame," she murmured as she took a sip of her water. "I shall check on him later. I may take some tea up once I've finished my breakfast and see if he can stomach that."

"Oh, I wouldn't bother yourself with it, my dear," Uncle John replied even though most of his attention remained on the newspaper. It always confused Harriet why he read his own. He knew what was on every page, so why on earth did he read every issue?

“I insist.” She smiled at him. “It shall be no bother. He is my only cousin; I do enjoy the idea of keeping him around for another few years.”

That earned a laugh from her uncle. A rare sound.

“Well, don’t take too long with him. I believe your museum trip with Henry Madson is today, if I remember the dates your aunt told me. So you must be ready for that.”

Harriet froze. She had completely forgotten about the museum trip.

It had been arranged during the last dinner before Rosalie’s show yesterday. It was during a dance that he had asked if she had ever gone to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. When she had declared that she hadn’t gotten around to it yet, he had asked if he could show her around. She couldn’t have said no. This was why she was here in New York—her family’s reputation both here and back home was counting on her finding a suitable match so scandal didn’t come to them.

And truthfully, she couldn’t really complain. She *did* want to go, and it certainly looked good that he was asking to take her somewhere like that. Her only problem was that it was difficult wrapping her head around the fact that this man could one day be her husband.

Still, she put a smile on her face. “Of course. I’ll also write a letter afterwards for Mamma and Papa. They’ll be dying for some news. I fear I have neglected them. And it’ll also be a chance to see if there’ve been any developments—when I left it looked like Thomas was finally getting up the courage to propose to his sweetheart, Elsbeth, so I wish to know how things have progressed there.”

Uncle John hummed. “Sounds like there will be a wedding on the horizon.”

“Only if my darling brother doesn’t lose his courage again,” Harriet answered with a smile, thinking of the two times he had already planned on asking Elsbeth for her hand but then couldn’t go through with it. He told Harriet afterwards that it didn’t feel right and he had talked himself into believing Elsbeth would say no.

Once, Harriet had wanted to make sure that she wouldn’t walk away because she got tired of waiting, and Elsbeth had smiled and said she knew he was planning on asking her, he was simply taking his time, but she’d wait an eternity for him.

It was at that moment Harriet had fallen in love with Elsbeth and couldn’t wait for the day she could officially call her sister.

“I can’t blame the boy,” Uncle John replied as he folded his newspapers and set it aside. “I remember when I asked your grandfather for your aunt’s hand. My hands couldn’t stop shaking. I was sputtering over my words and couldn’t even meet his eye. To this day I’m sometimes surprised he consented to give me his only daughter.”

Yet there was a look in his eye that spoke of something else. She had heard only snippets of how Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle John had met and married. Harriet wondered, as she saw his eyes glaze over, what had been left unsaid.

Before the silence could stretch on uncomfortably long, Harriet swallowed her mouthful and said, “He must have seen how much Aunt Elizabeth loved you.”

Uncle John blinked rapidly as if coming back to his senses. He softly smiled at Harriet. “A love I cherish every day.” For an instant, it made him look kinder and approachable, two words Harriet had never associated with her uncle. Then it disappeared as he stood up. “Forgive me, I’ve got a lot to do today, if you’ll excuse me.”

Without another word, he turned and strode from the room, leaving Harriet alone with her thoughts.

Having no one to distract her with conversation allowed her to finish her breakfast quickly and head to Charlie’s bedroom.

When she got there, Harriet knocked on the door twice before she slipped inside. Not a single light was on nor were the curtains drawn. He didn’t stir in his bed as she closed the door behind her and with a small “tut,” she made her way over to the windows and threw the curtains open with a single flourish. The light streamed in, filling the room with brightness. Charlie cursed loudly in either pain or protest—probably both—as he darted upright.

“If I told your father you spoke that way in front of me, I believe he would have you horsewhipped,” she quipped as she sauntered over to sit on the edge of his bed. Her eyes flickered around the room as he took a long moment to adjust to the light. A part of her was shocked at the state the room was in until she remembered that she had helped him get changed into his pyjamas last night, had left the clothes on the floor because she was desperate to get to her own bed, and he had probably dismissed his valet before the poor man could attempt to tidy up.

“What are you doing?” he grumbled, his words muffled by the arm he

had flung over his face in an attempt to shield his eyes. He collapsed onto his back again with a loud groan, the covers falling down to his waist to reveal his creased and rumpled silk pyjamas. He clearly hadn't had a peaceful night.

"I'm here to check if you're still alive."

"I am."

"Well, in that case, I'm now here to make your life hell before I need to leave," she chirped with a large smile on her face. She cocked her head to the side as she watched him blink furiously, finally removing his arm from his face.

"What did I do to deserve this?" he asked, fixing his red-rimmed eyes on her. They were bloodshot and hooded, with dark shadows beneath, which made his already pale face look even worse. His golden hair was dishevelled, sticking up in every direction with some plastered to his forehead and neck with sweat.

"What did I do to deserve this?" she repeated in a mocking tone, to grate on his nerves. "You got blackout drunk, couldn't stand, let alone walk. I had to wake Martha up and both of us had to walk you back to your room. You were in a state! I have no idea what came over you, but I surely do not wish to see it again."

She watched him as he lay in the bed, his eyes closed. She was almost worried he had fallen back asleep, but his fingers kept twitching. It was clear something was eating away at his mind. She waited for him to talk about it, yet the seconds ticked into minutes and she realised he had no intention of saying a damn thing to her.

"Well?"

He lifted his gaze then. "Well what?"

Why did you get so drunk? The words were on the tip of her tongue, yet she couldn't speak them into existence. She knew that he would refuse to talk about it.

A part of her knew, deep down, that Jeffrey was behind this. It couldn't have been *caused* by Jeffrey himself...the man wouldn't have helped Harriet lead him out of the club and into a taxi if it were. So it must have come from Charlie's end. And she'd help him work things out if he'd only *talk to her*.

The anger at his lack of trust in her sparked a flame that grew into a full-blown blaze. She pushed herself to her feet and rounded on him, her voice

like steel. “We get to the club, you get a bit moody but *insist* that you’re fine. Then the next thing I know, the show is over, you’re passed out at the bar, and it takes three of us to get you into a taxi! Anything could have happened! Do you realise the danger you put us in? That you put *me* in?”

Even Harriet herself rather hated how that sounded. She didn’t really *care* about that. All she wanted to know was what was causing him this pain. Yet, the words were said and they couldn’t be taken back.

She was ready to apologise when she saw his mouth open. He stared at her for a long moment, and her own words died on her lips. She could see the fight inside his mind as he tried to work out what to say. She almost wanted him to try to fight his corner...maybe the emotional fallout would lead to some weight being lifted from his shoulders.

Yet she saw the moment he decided to stay silent and continue to wallow in his grief. His entire face went blank and he closed his eyes once more. It made Harriet grit her teeth so hard, her jaw started to ache.

It was impossible to look at him. She still loved him and didn’t want to say words that would lead to her losing him. She knew her temper too well. So she stalked towards the door. With her hand on the knob, she stopped and turned back to him.

“How many times have I told you my fears and secrets? If you don’t trust me with yours, why on earth should I trust you with mine?”

He flinched like she had struck him, and she knew that those words had hurt him. She didn’t want to take them back, however.

“Harriet,” he started, his eyes flickering open. She could see there were tears forming there but she refused to be swayed.

Without another word, she turned and left the room, slamming the door behind her.

Chapter Eight

Harriet hummed as Henry Madson told her all about the painting they stood in front of. He was somewhat of an art history expert, apparently, and knew a lot about most of the paintings and their painters. Harriet enjoyed art to some extent; after all, she had grown up surrounded by paintings like these. Yet she never really saw the appeal of studying them.

So, even though she wanted to give Henry her full attention as he rambled on about the paint or texture, Harriet found her mind wandering back to Charlie. She couldn't help it. He still hadn't come down from his room by the time Henry had come to pick her up in the afternoon.

Harriet had been too lost in thought to notice that Henry had stopped, and so found herself careening into his chest. His hands came up to stop her from stumbling, holding her for a moment before promptly letting go with some pink staining his cheeks.

"Forgive me." He cleared his throat. "Is everything well, Lady Harriet?"

Glancing around, Harriet was surprised to find absolutely no one looking at them. She had expected that sort of behaviour to cause whispers to start. It made her think of before the War, when she hadn't been allowed out without Mamma present...and even then they had never gone anywhere too public. Unmarried young ladies only ever attended dinners thrown by their peers.

Turning her attention back to Henry, she realised that the little bit of colour on his cheeks added to his appeal. Harriet couldn't deny that Henry Madson was handsome. He had a square face but not in an unappealing way. His jaw was strong and cheekbones sharp. And he had plump lips, thick brows, and gorgeous wavy hair that refused to lie in the flat style that was fashionable. She guessed that was what gave off the rugged vibe that always came to mind when Harriet looked at him.

In fact, he reminded her of the heroes from the romance novels she read when she was younger. There was one in particular that involved a pirate who went on adventures and wooed ladies, and Henry rather fit the look of that character.

It was strange to think that, if Charlie hadn't taken her to The Lion's Thorn, she could have entertained the idea of marrying him. After all, Henry seemed nice and kind, he was beautiful and whilst she'd never love him romantically, perhaps—in time—she'd love him enough to perform her “duties” as a wife.

But when she looked at his face and imagined that, it morphed into the soft, heart-shaped one of Rosalie's instead. And when she saw his grey eyes staring back at her...she longed for them to be a warm brown instead.

A sigh left her lips. Something she didn't realise until she saw Henry's brows raise. She swallowed. She couldn't talk about her fight with Charlie. For one, it was private and, whilst they were courting, she didn't feel safe enough with him yet. And secondly, he would never understand. There was too much to explain for it to begin to make sense.

“May I be honest, Henry?” she said, glancing around briefly. She waited until he nodded. “Whilst I do enjoy paintings, I'm not really fussed on the history behind them. I suppose I spent my whole life learning about the history of everything around me, so I don't bother when I don't need to.” She pressed her lips together and glanced up at him through her lashes. “I hope you don't think me rude.”

Henry let out a small laugh. “Not at all. In fact, I'm honoured you trusted me enough to tell me.” He glanced up at the nearest painting, purposefully looking away as he added, “I was rather worried it was me that was the problem.”

Harriet swallowed. *Not you exactly...* Harriet thought as she reached for his arm and slid her own through it. She wished times were different and her life were simpler.

“No, I enjoy your company, Henry,” she said, because it wasn't a lie. She just didn't enjoy it in the way he believed. “I am loving the museum, but what if, instead of telling me the history or techniques or brand of paint used”—that earned a smile from him—“you tell me how the painting makes *you* feel.”

He glanced at her from the corners of his eyes. “Are you sure?”

“Of course. You can learn a lot about someone when you ask them to talk

about what they see in a painting. If you do it for me, I'll return the favour. No more technical discussions." She gave him a dazzling smile, the one she normally reserved for Papa when she wanted his approval on something he definitely wouldn't approve of. "Do we have an accord?"

She held out her free hand, watching as Henry eyed it for a long moment. She wondered what he was afraid of...if there were some secret he was terrified of letting slip, which made her wonder what kind of secrets he had.

Eventually he took her hand and gave it a firm shake. Harriet beamed and waved back to the last painting they had been talking about before her mind had wandered. "So, let's start with this one!"

...

By the time Harriet got back home from her museum visit with Henry, she had just managed to rush to her room to change into her dinner clothes. Her aunt and uncle were getting dressed as well, so she saw no one. Martha hastily tidied up her hair and helped her get dressed, all the while asking how her outing with Mr. Madson had gone. She answered honestly—that after she had asked him to share *his* feelings about the paintings, things had improved. They had shared laughter over silly paintings and solemn thoughts over serious scenes. It had been rather pleasant.

So much so that the time had ticked on and she hadn't even realised how late it had been until the nearest clock had chimed. She had rather enjoyed her time with Henry, yet it had felt more like an outing with a friend rather than a future husband. Martha had commented that was maybe a good thing in the long run.

Harriet had had no reply to that.

Once she was dressed, she made her way to the stairs, ready to head to the drawing room to wait for dinner to be announced. She had no idea if Uncle John and Aunt Elizabeth would already be down...and Charlie... She shook her head, ready to put thoughts of her cousin to the back of her mind.

Until she saw him coming from the other corridor, heading for the stairs as well. He looked better, less sickly. His hair was combed back, he was dressed in black tie and looked more *human*. Yet when his eyes flickered up and saw Harriet, he seemed to pale. His eyes darted away, and he fiddled with his cuffs.

Harriet ground her teeth. He was acting as if she were the nanny and he'd been caught sneaking off to the kitchens. If that's how he was going to

behave, then fine. She raised her head and kept walking, not even glancing at him from the side of her eye as she passed him and started to descend the stairs. She heard him sigh but it wasn't until he called her name that she drew to a halt. No matter how upset she might be, she couldn't *ignore* him.

She turned to him and raised an eyebrow. "Yes?" she prompted when a moment had ticked by and he still hadn't said another word. He descended several steps before he stopped, and he gazed down at her with those baby blues of his.

"I do rather prefer my dinners *warm*, Charlie, so if you have something to say—"

"I'm sorry," he interrupted her, catching her by surprise. Her cousin never said sorry or admitted to being wrong. It infuriated her to no end and caused a lot of arguments between them. "I don't want to explain it now—not here, but please know that I am sorry and I will tell you everything." He glanced around to see whether his mother or father were floating about, or if any of the servants were lingering. When he was certain the coast was clear, he strode down the steps between them. Then he took her hand. "We can go to the club tonight and I'll explain there, all right?" His mouth tugged up at the corner. "I promise to drink only water."

Despite herself, Harriet felt her own lips move in response. She gave his hand a small squeeze. "All right. I can agree to those terms." And it was an added benefit that she might catch a glimpse of Rosalie, even if only for a second. "Now come on. I'm willing to guess your mother and father are waiting for us."

"Almost right," a voice added then, causing them both to turn around. She watched as Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle John emerged from the drawing room, following the butler. "I had nearly given both of you up for lost. It's good to see you'll be joining us after all."

"Of course, Aunt Elizabeth, I wouldn't miss it for the world."

With a large grin thrown over her shoulder at Charlie, she gave his hand a gentle tug and led them down the stairs and into the dining room.

Since it was only the four of them, it was a rather quiet affair. Harriet had expected to be grilled about her date with Henry from the moment she sat down, which was why she was surprised when it wasn't until they were halfway through their main course—succulent chicken with boiled vegetables and mouthwatering white sauce—that her aunt asked.

"How was your outing with Mr. Madson, my dear?" She took a small sip

of her wine. "I still find it inspiring that you're allowed out without chaperones now. I remember when your Uncle John was courting me, we couldn't be left alone for a single second. If we went anywhere, a housemaid or family member came with us to make sure we were always decent." She laughed. "I'm so happy to see how things are changing."

"It went well," Harriet said in a soft tone as she cut a small square of her chicken. "He knows a lot about painting and is very enthusiastic about it... which I am not. Yet when I pointed that out, he was quick to change subjects. It was a rather nice outing, if I'm honest. He seems nice." He just wasn't Miss Rosalie Smith, she wanted to add.

"Has he mentioned calling on you again?"

Harriet shrugged elegantly with one shoulder as she reached for her glass of water. "He said he would telephone later in the week to arrange another meeting. He said that I could pick the next outing, since it was his idea to take me to the museum. We did learn a lot about each other today but I may suggest a dinner for our next outing."

Aunt Elizabeth chuckled. "I'm glad to hear that. And you also have Mr. Holmes. He's asked you to the opera this Friday, so you must think about that as well." She must have noticed the grimace on Harriet's face for she added, "I know he blotted his copybook at the last dinner, but it may be worthwhile attending the opera and seeing how things go."

Not really wanting to protest, Harriet nodded.

Her aunt beamed. "I'm so glad that you're having such success. I do think British men aren't quite as progressive as Americans. I think they're far too caught up in the old way of things to notice the changes and the strong women they could share their lives with."

Harriet said nothing to that. She didn't want to agree or disagree, knowing that neither British nor American men held much interest for her. Yes, there were a few she found attractive in an objective way, but her leaning was definitely towards women. And that wasn't something she could admit over dinner with her aunt and uncle.

...

Dinner passed without any incident and, since it was just the four of them, it didn't take long for them to retreat to their rooms. Martha was already there, waiting to get her dressed for bed, until Harriet informed her of their plans to sneak out once more.

As Harriet sat alone on the edge of her bed, waiting for the signal from Martha that both her aunt and uncle were abed, her mind wandered.

The conversation about her suitors came roaring to the forefront of her mind, her aunt's words about planning something else with Henry and the opera with Frederick reverberating in her skull.

She understood why she had to do this. Her people lived for gossip—they had nothing better to do with their time, after all. And nothing would go unnoticed by them. If she had to put her own desires first, refuse to marry a man and live her life in the constant company of women...they would talk.

Her desires were against the law, and if it didn't get that far, it would at least cause her and her entire family to be shunned. She couldn't just think of herself—what of Thomas and Elsbeth's children, growing up under the shadow of Harriet's disgrace.

Everything her father—the long lineage of the Cunningham family—had worked for would be gone in one fell swoop, all because of Harriet's selfish urges.

Her thoughts refused to quiet as she wrapped her arms around her midriff. So much that she didn't even hear the knock until Martha's hand was on her knee as she knelt in front of her.

"M'lady? Are you all right? You don't *need* to—"

Harriet pushed herself to her feet with a shake of her head, even as she drew in deep, ragged breaths. "I'm fine. Is that my coat? Thank you, my dear."

Martha's lips pressed into a thin, disapproving line from which they didn't budge. Even as she led them down the stairs, telling them to hide whenever she saw servants coming their way.

It wasn't long before they were at the back door, ready to begin the long journey to the speakeasy. And Harriet had managed to bury all her earlier thoughts into the smallest boxes at the back of her mind.

Martha wrapped her arms around her torso as her gaze flickered over Harriet's face. "Are you certain of this, m'lady?"

"Definitely. Don't wait up for us. Leave this door unlocked and we'll be back in no time." Harriet leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her lady's maid's cheek. It would have made her family back in Scotland think her ridiculous but she didn't care. How much did she owe to this girl? And she had to try to prove that she *wanted* to do this. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, m'lady. Sir." She gave a small bob of a curtsy and then

turned. She shot Harriet a final look of concern before she closed the door and disappeared, leaving Harriet alone with Charlie.

"I think that girl loves you," Charlie declared as he tugged on his gloves. He started walking before Harriet had a chance to reply, forcing her to run to catch up with him in the most undignified way.

"Why yes, she does. And I love her."

He stopped suddenly, eyes wide, and Harriet sighed, suddenly catching his meaning. "We're *friends*, Charlie," she said.

He shook his head. "I'm friends with my valet. He doesn't ask me if I'm sure about my decisions or worry for my safety. He does his job, we talk, we share laughs. That's it. If he knows what I do and where I go, he leaves me to my own devices. That girl cares for you."

Harriet huffed. "Then I'm afraid, Charlie, that you are *not* friends with your valet. You're merely amicable." She shook her head and took a step closer to him, glancing up into his eyes. "Charlie, this may sound shocking to you, but you can have that deep bond without it being romantic or sexual." She let him ponder that for a long moment before she added, "And I know she's not in love with me, because we've already *had* that conversation."

Harriet then turned and started to walk down the street to get a decent distance away from the house before trying to hail a cab.

Charlie trailed behind her, confusion etched over his face as he asked, "You have?"

"Of course!" She gave an unladylike snort. "It was during the War. I had gotten leave from the hospital and returned to Creoch. Do you remember Susanna? I was reading letters from her and writing some before I went to bed. I must have passed out, for when I woke up, they were still on the bed and she was there, reading one.

"There was no mistaking what the letters meant. I was frozen, worried that she was going to use these to ruin me or blackmail me, but instead she hesitantly admitted to feeling the same way.

"After that, I started thinking about how easy it would be, because the War had to end and we'd be under the same roof again and had known each other for some time. And how often do you meet someone like you right on your doorstep? But, as we talked, we realised it wouldn't work. Neither of us really felt that way about the other and it felt dishonest, to be together because it was convenient."

Harriet swallowed, realising she had been rambling. She shook her head, stopping to turn back and fix Charlie with her gaze. “We’re friends. She does love me, I know she does, and she does care for me, but not in a romantic or sexual way, Charlie. The emotions aren’t mutually exclusive.”

As she started to walk again, she chanced a glance at her cousin from the corner of her eye, finding his head bowed with a deep frown etched on his face. He was thinking, and thinking hard. She didn’t want to pull him away from that reverie, not when it seemed so important. So she stayed silent as she walked beside him, moving only when the headlights of a car came and she stepped out to hail it.

Chapter Nine

Unlike the last time she had been in The Lion's Thorn, Harriet was focused only on her cousin now. Yes, her eyes maybe flickered around once or twice to see if she could catch a glimpse of Rosalie, but other than that, she had been monitoring Charlie nonstop. She wanted to see his reaction—see how his eyes tightened, his lips turned down, his jaw clenched, as they started walking towards their usual table.

It seemed to confirm her suspicions that Jeffrey was at the heart of all this because nothing else made much sense. Charlie was the *cheerful* one. He never let a single thing get him down, he was always able to see the positive in every situation. Seeing him this way made her feel uneasy and really, the only thing that ever affected him was when he couldn't control his heart as he wished.

As he pulled her seat out for her and tucked her in, Harriet took her gloves off and set them on the table. Charlie waved down a waiter and ordered both their drinks—a glass of water for himself, like he had promised, and a small Scotch whisky for her—before he turned his gaze to the table and refused to look up. His fingers drew patterns on the white tablecloth and Harriet watched him do so intently for five minutes before she huffed.

“Charlie, if you're not going to speak then I'm going home. I didn't come here to watch you sulk.”

He sat there for a long moment before he sighed and raised his gaze. His eyes were heavy with burden, and it made her heart clench. Sometimes she hated that she was rather quick-tempered with him. She felt so comfortable around him that she didn't feel the need to pretend to be some great lady like she had been raised to be. Yet there were times that she wished she could hold her tongue when it came to him.

Especially when she was so often hurt when he did the same thing to her. Being so close had its downside, she guessed. She made a mental note to try harder to be kinder to him, more patient.

Harriet stretched her hand across the table and clasped his hand in hers, stilling it from its mindless movement.

Charlie raised his head and smiled. “Do you remember what I said about my father?” he asked, and Harriet nodded in reply. It still shocked her to think Uncle John would put the reputation of his newspapers before his son but she believed Charlie. “Well, before we came out last night he drew me into his study. He proceeded to tell me that if I didn’t stop messing around and get my life together, he was going to cut me off, cast me out.”

The drinks arrived but Harriet didn’t care. She tightened her hand around his as she tried to process that information. “Surely it’s...it’s a scare tactic...he...can’t...”

Charlie scoffed loudly. “He sounded serious enough to me. Even showed me the letter that he’d written to send to the lawyer to start the process of cutting me off from the accounts.” His finger circled the rim of his glass as he solemnly shook his head. “I think he put up with it for so long because he thought it was just my youth—that this is all something I’ll grow out of. But I think he’s tired of waiting for me to do it myself. He wants me to settle down and get serious. Not going to lie, I think your parents sending you here to get you a husband has inspired him into finding me a wife this year.”

Even though it wasn’t her fault, guilt started to eat away at Harriet as if it were. But she didn’t want to make this conversation about her, so she kept all comments to herself, letting Charlie air everything in his own time.

“*That* is why I was so put off yesterday. I have no skills, really. Father has made sure I’ve never had to work, always hoping I’d one day join him. Now, unless I put the work in, he won’t keep supporting me. I can’t really blame him, if I’m honest; he’s worked hard to earn his money and I’ve done bugger all.” He took a long drink of his water, grimacing as if wishing it were something else.

Harriet made a sympathetic sound and pushed her glass towards him. “You need it more than I.”

He grinned, accepting her whisky and taking a drink. “So I need to get serious. Settle down...which means...well.” He glanced towards the stage and Harriet understood. In a way, she had been right all along.

“It means you must break things off with Jeffrey and you must stop coming here.” Harriet stood and pushed the chair closer to his side so she could wrap her free arm around his shoulders. “Oh, Charlie, I’m so sorry. I had no idea you liked him so much,” she admitted, wondering if that was rather insensitive. Then again, her cousin was the very definition of a man sowing his wild oats.

He chuckled harshly. “Neither did I. Not until I was faced with the fact I had to lose him. I don’t know what I was thinking, getting involved with him. He’s a man. He’s a musician. He’s Black.” He scoffed. “In our world, that’s the farthest from a socially acceptable match you can get.”

Harriet squeezed his hand. “If you feel strongly for him, then keep it going, Charlie. I know plenty of men of our class who are married and have affairs. And let’s be honest, have you seen what’s coming out about the Edwardians?”

They shared a chuckle, but Harriet noticed that he didn’t say anything about her suggestion. She wondered if it had already occurred to him and he had decided against it. His father worked in newspapers and journalism, a world of deceit. No doubt he could hire people to keep track of his son’s life and if he found that out...who was to say what would happen?

“We are cursed, my darling cousin,” she admitted with a sigh, trying to banish those thoughts along with the belief that her uncle was *that* bad a man. “Born of a world that thinks the way we love is wrong. As if love can ever be wrong.”

“We love?” He frowned down at her, and Harriet felt her cheeks flush. “Is this about Rosalie?”

“I wouldn’t say I love her. I’m not even certain what I do feel, to be honest. We’ve had only two rather short interactions, yet there’s something about her that calls to me.” She removed her arm from around his shoulders. “She said yesterday that she wanted to get to know me better. And it made me so deliriously happy...until I realised I had to tell her the truth about why I’m here. I tried to do it last night but I clammed up.”

Charlie turned back to his own glass, taking a sip of water as he pushed Harriet’s now half-empty glass of Scotch back towards her.

Harriet swallowed down a mouthful. Her mind was reeling at having spoken all her feelings into existence now. “I do not intend to disappoint my parents, Charlie. Not after everything they have done for me. They are right, after all. If I remain unmarried and spend time around only a certain

lady, rumours will start. And they won't just affect me— If that were the case, I wouldn't give a damn of the consequences. But they'll affect *everyone*. Mamma and Papa, Thomas and Elsbeth, Maria. I refuse to hurt them by being selfish.”

“Harriet—” Charlie started but Harriet shook her head. She didn't want to see any pity or judgement on Charlie's face. She stood with a smile, even though her gaze was fixed above his head. “Excuse me, I'm going to powder my nose.”

Chapter Ten

Harriet had no idea how long she hid in the restroom. She knew it was much longer than was acceptable, and she was thankful it was only Charlie out there waiting for her. She knew she would never had gotten away with that during a house party—Mamma would have come searching for her long ago. It was nice to be allowed the freedom to hide, however, with no one judging her. It meant she could process the things that had come spilling out of both her own and Charlie's mouths.

Especially when, the second she had locked herself in the restroom, that small box from earlier had sprung open, bringing all its issues to the forefront once more.

When Mamma and Papa had approached her with the idea of going to America for a few months to find a suitor, Harriet had considered it a simple task. Her heart had been heavy, knowing it would mark the end of something, but when she'd boarded the ship, she'd believed it wouldn't be a complicated problem.

With her position, her father's money, her uncle's reputation, and her looks, she knew she had enough bait to lure a decent enough Yank.

Now everything was so twisted and distorted. She still had her duty; she refused to back down from it and let her family pay the price.

But her heart was heavier than before, because now it wasn't just the realisation that she'd never experience what it was like to be with a woman...it was the realisation she'd never experience being with *Rosalie*.

And oh, how her heart longed for that. Her body yearned for it. She hadn't lied when she said she wasn't certain how she felt—all she knew was that something had taken root inside her, whether it was lust or the promise of something more, as Rosalie had sung, she didn't know.

What hurt more than anything was that she would never find out what

seeds had been sown. She had come to New York for a fiancé, and she refused to go back home without one and see the disappointment on her parents' faces when she told them. There was no way they would still love and accept her then.

You've been here too long, her inner voice whispered, and so Harriet took another shaky breath and straightened, smoothing down the front of her frock before checking that her hair was still perfectly in place.

When she finally left the restroom and started to make her way back to the table, she began to wonder whether she and Charlie should even stay. What did the club have to offer except more pain?

Yet, when their table came into view, she found it no longer contained only Charlie. Rosalie and Jeffrey were there as well. Harriet slowed until she had stopped completely, staring at Rosalie's profile. She had her cigarette holder out, every now and then taking a draw of the cigarette but mostly letting it burn as she laughed and talked with her companions.

Her dark brown hair was straightened with the tips curling up at the ends and grazing her cheeks. From this angle, it was obvious that the cut was longer in the front than it was at the back. Her skin was flawless, her cheeks rosy, and that familiar shade of red painted on her lips. She looked like she should be in the pictures. It made Harriet's heart soar to think that someone as beautiful as Miss Rosalie Smith had been captivated by her.

Even though all Harriet wanted to do was go to the table and learn whatever she could about Rosalie, she knew she couldn't. After her conversation with Charlie, after all those thoughts that had kept her hidden in the restroom for so long, she couldn't pretend anymore. There was too much at stake, for both of them, that they needed to deal with first. And Charlie's grief was fresh and raw and he needed time to *adjust* to his father's ultimatum. He shouldn't be here, forced to pretend everything was all right.

With that in mind, Harriet swallowed as she stepped up next to the table. She saw Rosalie's lips stretch into a wide grin at her, and Harriet wanted to return it—oh, did she want to return it—but she couldn't make her face work. Everything seemed to have stopped functioning properly, and she merely stared at Rosalie, who seemed to notice something was wrong, for her smile faltered. And that fading smile hurt more than it should.

Still, she had to be strong.

Charlie and Jeffrey stood when they noticed her arrival. Harriet strode

past and reached for Charlie, placing a hand on the crook of his arm.

“My darling cousin, I don’t feel well at all. I felt rather dizzy whilst in the bathroom and needed time before I felt ready to move again. I thought it had eased but it struck again when I was returning to the table,” she lied easily, making her voice softer and weaker than usual. She turned her attention to Jeffrey, doing her best to ignore Rosalie and the deep frown that was etched onto that beautiful face of hers. “Forgive me, but I fear we need to head home.”

She had almost expected Charlie to protest a little but instead, he placed his hand atop hers and offered an apologetic smile to the others. “I am sorry but I must see my cousin safely home.” Harriet hated how formal the both of them sounded. “Goodnight.”

Without waiting to see how either Jeffrey or Rosalie reacted, or even give them a chance to say their own farewells, they turned. She had no doubt that both Rosalie and Jeffrey would be hurt. The guilt was already starting to seep in, and Harriet knew that it’d triple in weight by tomorrow. Yet in that moment, all she could focus on was putting as much space between them as she could.

When they finally stepped out of the shop and into the fresh New York air, Harriet drew in a deep breath. She hadn’t realised how tense she had been as she had left the club. It allowed her a brief moment to gather herself and try to release *some* of the guilt that came from her actions and lies.

“Thank you,” Charlie whispered, his breath appearing like smoke in the air. “I have no idea how you always seem to know what I need, but you do, and I never thank you for it. So I’m doing that now. Thank you for what you did there.”

Harriet gently smiled at him as she leaned in to his side. “I always know what you need, because we’re so similar. When I came back from the restroom, I realised that both of us need distance. Even if we do decide to come back, it needs to be with clear heads about how to continue on in a way that is fair to both us and them.”

“You do realise that probably means we will never see them again, don’t you? We’re both too fond of our families to disappoint them, and they’re too headstrong to be content with being the other person.”

Harriet pulled back and gave Charlie a teasing grin. “Did you just admit to being *fond* of your *family*?” She gave an exaggerated gasp of shock. “I had no idea!”

“I know, I know. I may appear this uncaring young man but I’m not.” The humorous light in his eyes disappeared as he grew somber. “My father’s approval means so much to me, Harriet. You saw how low I got after he said those things to me. It wasn’t the thought of losing Jeffrey—okay, maybe it was a little—but it was mostly the fact that I had disappointed my father. In all honesty, if he brought me home a woman and told me to marry her, I would—without a doubt.”

There was such an honesty to his tone that Harriet knew he spoke true.

Heaving another sigh, Harriet leaned her head against his shoulder. “Oh, my sweet cousin, what have we gotten ourselves into?”

He gave an unamused snort as they crossed the street. Somehow, the both of them had agreed not to bother with a cab. It would be a long walk back, yet they knew they needed it.

“Utter hell, that’s what we’ve gotten ourselves into. We’ve wandered from Manhattan into Dante’s Inferno.”

Harriet lifted her head to show her lips stretched into an easy grin. “At least we’re in it together,” she muttered before she returned her head to his shoulder and continued their walk home in silence.

Chapter Eleven

An unspoken agreement seemed to have been struck between Charlie and Harriet, for neither one of them acted as if the previous night had happened.

Charlie had started the next day by going to his father and telling him that he wanted to work at the newspaper. He explained everything as much as he could by avoiding the fact that he enjoyed the company of men, and his uncle was overjoyed to have his son finally being a part of his business.

Harriet felt a little bit saddened, mostly because it now meant that Charlie was away from morning until dinner, and so she hadn't really had someone to spend her time with, for even Aunt Elizabeth was busy with various charities.

So, Harriet had thrown herself into doing what was expected of her—she had called Henry to arrange the dinner date she had mentioned after their museum trip.

She didn't tell him that she'd be going out with Frederick that Saturday because she didn't expect it to make any difference. What she had seen of the man, she didn't really like, and the opera would no doubt be another blunder so that she'd finally be able to cast him aside.

She also assisted her aunt with paying some calls on her friends, as well as going for several walks around the park—though she had been there so often, she was certain she knew the layout of Central Park better than the gardens back home.

It made her miss her hometown, New Cumnock, more and more, seeing the trees and flowers starting to show the slightest signs of moving into autumn. It reminded her of how beautiful her home's gardens were at that time of year with their reds and oranges and golds, and all the leaves and petals that would fall into Creoch Loch.

She also did a lot of shopping, which Uncle John was *not* happy about,

but Aunt Elizabeth always backed her up when they returned with countless bags and boxes. By the time Saturday and her night at the opera had rolled around, she had purchased a new pair of shoes, two day dresses, a new night dress, and several necklaces, brooches, and hair jewels.

The dress she had bought for the opera was longer than she usually wore for her dinners, but it was a more formal occasion. It still showed a little of her stocking-covered legs but ended a few inches above her ankles.

It was dark navy with a dropped waist and scooped neckline with thick straps. The entire thing was heavily beaded with contrasting white diamond-shaped patches sewn around the waistline and creating a V on the bodice. The beading on the skirt followed the grain, and every time she twirled it looked like beams of light shooting from the waist.

She also wore a pair of white silk gloves and a thin diamond choker, which brought out the ones that Martha had pinned in her hair. The weather was still so nice that she didn't bother wearing a jacket, instead draping a sheer navy shawl over her shoulders, knowing that the opera house would be warm thanks to the bodies inside.

"My dear, you look beautiful," Uncle John declared as she descended the stairs. She found Frederick there waiting as well, his eyes flicking over her body, which served only to make her skin crawl.

Despite that, he did look rather dashing; the white tie he wore added more elegance to his features. His dark blond hair was slicked to the side, yet it still didn't lessen the softness of his features. He was such a handsome man...there was just something in his gaze that Harriet didn't trust.

She turned her attention back to her uncle and smiled. "Worth the money in the end?" she joked, lowering her voice a little.

Her uncle chuckled, leaning forward to press a kiss to her cheek. "Every cent." He then pulled back and turned his attention to Frederick. "I do hope you don't mind my insistence of sending you off with my chauffeur. I want to be certain she'll get back with no hassle."

"Of course not, Mr. Slater," Frederick said. "I understand completely. I'll be sure to look after her as well."

Harriet stepped forward and took his proffered arm, waving to her family as she was led out and into the car. She found him rather pleasant as they started the journey to the theatre, his first words being an apology for his behaviour at the last dinner. The rest of the conversation remained civil enough, though she still didn't feel quite comfortable.

It was strange how, with Henry, she rather felt like she was meeting up with an old friend. It almost made her even more sure that, whilst it wasn't her dream come true, Henry was a much better match. After the night was over, she would call things off between her and Mr. Holmes. Even though that would definitely mean she'd then have to start getting serious with Henry.

At the opera, Harriet lost herself to the story. The singing was nothing compared to Rosalie, but that didn't make it any less beautiful. She cried and laughed and applauded when the curtains fell and the performers took their final bows.

She waited until they had all disappeared behind the curtain before she moved, feeling Frederick's hand on her back as he directed her outside. With every step, it seemed to be drifting lower, and she couldn't tell if it was their different paces or if it was on purpose. Either way, it made her hairs stand on end, and she shifted uncomfortably.

When they reached the foyer, he drew to a halt and removed his hand, which flooded Harriet with relief.

"I'll be a few minutes, just need to..." He didn't finish his sentence. But when he jerked his head backwards, Harriet understood.

She felt her cheeks flush but nodded, moving over to the nearest seat to wait for him. Many couples passed her, and she smiled at the few she recognised from dinner nights and paying calls with her aunt. None of them stopped to talk to her, though, for which she was extremely thankful. The past few days had been such an emotional roller coaster, she just wanted to get home and rest.

When she finally saw Frederick reappear, she pushed herself to her feet. She glanced around and found that they were the only ones within the foyer.

"Shall we get going? The poor chauffeur will probably be—"

She didn't get to finish, for Frederick reached for her and pressed his lips to her own. For a long moment she was frozen in place, his lips still pressing against hers. It wasn't until she felt the tickle of his tongue against her lower lip that she was spurred into action. Her free hand came up and connected with his cheek at the same time she wrenched her head back.

"How *dare* you?" Harriet hissed, stumbling backwards to put more distance between them. "How *dare* you?!"

"Harriet, I—"

But Harriet didn't want to hear what he had to say. She knew that if she

looked at him for another second, she would launch herself at him and try to scrape his skin from his face for daring to touch her in such a manner. She clutched her shawl tighter around her body before she whirled around and ran, uncaring if she looked improper, to where the chauffeur was waiting.

He looked over her shoulder as she approached the car, no doubt wondering why she was alone.

“I’m afraid Mr. Holmes wants to find his own way home,” she declared as she climbed into the car and shut the door behind her, not bothering to wait for him to help her. She wanted to put as much distance as possible between Mr. Holmes and herself.

Thankfully, the driver didn’t think twice. He merely wound the vehicle up, got behind the wheel, and took off.

Harriet hauled her glove off and scrubbed the back of her hand across her lips in a desperate attempt to remove the whole thing from her memory. She knew it was futile, but it at least helped a little. How *dare* he touch her like that? Not even to *ask* first. To launch himself at her as if she was his to do with as he pleased.

Harriet still felt a bit impolite to have left him stranded but, after what he had done, she didn’t think anyone would care, not even his own family. She was more than certain that, had her father been there, he would have killed the man. No doubt Uncle John would have the same urge. And Charlie. Oh God, what would she say to Charlie to avoid him hunting the man down?

She’d tell Aunt Elizabeth about it, and she could deal with the best way to tell her uncle and cousin. She was thankful that working at the hospital had given her the strength needed to fend off unwanted advances from men. She might look weak but that didn’t mean anything—they never knew what lay underneath.

When the car finally pulled up outside her uncle’s home, Harriet thanked the driver and hurried inside, more than a little eager for a drink. It wasn’t until she entered the drawing room that she remembered.

“Bloody prohibition!”

“Don’t let my father hear you swear. He’d send you back to Scotland on the first ship.”

Harriet jumped a little, but the familiarity of the voice relaxed her a moment later. She took a step forward and found Charlie sitting on the couch in a rather slumped position. She joined him, copying his relaxed stance as she threw herself down beside him.

“Enjoy the opera?”

“I was, until that bloody fool forced a kiss,” Harriet blurted, forgetting her previous worry about Charlie’s reaction until it was too late. She licked her lips and added, in an attempt to soothe him, “I slapped him and left him stranded. I’m just angry right now.”

Charlie bolted upright, straight off his seat. “He did what?” His hands curled into fists as his eyes narrowed into a fearsome glare. Harriet had no doubt that he was considering going back to the opera and beating him to a bloody pulp.

She shook her head and grabbed his arm, drawing him back down onto the sofa. “It’s done and taken care of, Charlie. There’s no need to get so riled up. I’ll tell your mother tomorrow, we’ll call things off, and he’ll never be allowed back. Truthfully, I wish to pretend the entire thing didn’t happen.” She let her head fall onto his shoulder.

She felt him take a deep breath, no doubt trying to control his anger. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “Okay. But if he dares to show his face again, I will break it.”

Harriet snorted. “I think that’s a fair deal.” She gave his knee a soft pat. “Thank you for always being there when I need you.”

His lips brushed her temple. “Any time, Harriet. Any time.”

Chapter Twelve

“You seem miles away, m’lady.” The voice brought Harriet back to the present. She glanced into the mirror, finding Martha studying her with a gentle smile as she fixed her hair in place. “Are you feeling well?”

Harriet didn’t really know how to answer that question. It had been two weeks since the ordeal with Mr. Holmes and she hadn’t seen him since, for which she was thankful. Her aunt had been as horrified as she had been and applauded her for leaving him at the opera. She had taken a few days to get over the shock that someone would have even *tried* something like that. And the first time she had seen Henry again, she had been a little worried he would attempt something similar.

Of course, he had been as gentlemanly as always, which helped ease her mind a little. He had noticed her jumpiness, however, and had asked about it. Harriet had found his eyes so honest that she had confessed to what had happened. He had been as horrified and angered as her family had. And promised to never do anything or touch her without her express permission.

A promise he had yet to break, even for the slightest of touches.

Despite his gentleness and understanding making him the only suitor she had left, Harriet instead thought about Rosalie in the weeks that had passed. It seemed as if the saying “absence makes the heart grow fonder” was true, for whenever her mind was free, it immediately conjured images of Rosalie.

It definitely made the “forgetting and moving on” process more difficult. Especially when paired with the fact she refused to talk to Charlie about the constant thoughts because things were looking good for him. He had started working at the office with Uncle John and their relationship had perked up. She didn’t want to drag him back down the rabbit hole by reopening old wounds.

Harriet sighed, pushing all those complicated thoughts and feelings down.

“I am well, Martha, thank you. Just thinking...”

“About your Miss Smith?” Martha questioned as she finished fixing her curls in place before she stepped away to gather Harriet’s night clothes for washing. She had told Martha about Rosalie not long after first meeting her, and then again when Martha had walked in on her crying after deciding to stay away from The Lion’s Thorn for a time.

At the sound of Rosalie’s name, Harriet froze as she put on her earrings. Even though she had bid farewell to thoughts of her, Harriet felt her gaze unfocus as the room around her disappeared, painting Rosalie before her as if she were right there.

Her soft curves; her gentle smile that could turn seductive with the mere twinkle in her beautiful brown eyes; her long fingers, and the way her voice sounded both when she spoke and when she sang. It was so real, Harriet felt like she could reach out and touch her...

Then Martha spoke once more and ruined the illusion. “I’m sorry if her name upset m’lady.”

Harriet blinked rapidly, drawing herself back to the present. “It did and it didn’t. I fear her name will always upset me but, alas, what can I do?” Harriet mused as she finished fastening her earrings in place and stood from her vanity. She moved and allowed Martha to kneel before her, helping her into her shoes. She took a deep breath. “Would you mind being a dear and getting an outfit ready for later? Mr. Madson will be calling on me to take me to lunch. Nothing too fancy.”

“Of course, m’lady.”

Harriet gathered her cardigan and her parasol as she smiled at her maid before she hurried downstairs to make her excuses to her aunt and uncle.

...

As she walked around Central Park, her parasol resting against her shoulder to protect her from the strong, morning sun, Harriet let her mind wander. She didn’t really get the chance to go on many walks like this back home. In Scotland, there was always the fear of rain that meant she never risked it for long. New York was so different with its heat waves and gentle breezes. There was still rain, but it was summer showers, not the kind that could cut through your skin.

She smiled at passing couples also out for a morning walk, greeted the familiar faces but never stopped for a conversation. Everyone was too busy

for that in America, even the people in her class. It made her envious—she liked being busy, having things to do and places to be. It was one of those things she had loved about nursing.

Now? Now she didn't have much to do beside find her future husband, and that didn't really take a lot of time or effort on her behalf. Not with Mr. Madson getting serious about her. It stopped other men from calling and trying to court her. For all intents and purposes, she was already engaged to him, even if he hadn't asked her yet.

Harriet sighed, shifting her parasol to her other shoulder. She was too wrapped up in her thoughts, wondering how her life had taken such a drastic turn, that she wasn't paying attention to where she was going until it was too late.

Her now-free shoulder barged into someone, sending them both stumbling. Harriet's eyes widened as she lowered her parasol and turned to the woman she had knocked into, a train of apologies flying out her mouth...until the woman raised her head, brushing back the short brown hair that had fallen into her face, and her words died on her lips.

"Rosalie," she whispered, her breath leaving her lungs in a rush. She was pretty sure she was crumbling—her spine was collapsing one vertebrae at a time until she was mere inches tall.

Rosalie. Rosalie Smith is here in front of me again.

She was as beautiful as Harriet remembered, if not more so. Her memory hadn't done her justice—she was softer and more striking in person with those beautiful brown eyes and curvy figure that still managed to look gorgeous with the boxy dresses that were fashionable. She didn't have a parasol, instead wearing a cloche hat that complimented her short hair perfectly.

Rosalie's lips started to tug into a smile before she seemed to catch herself. Her entire expression shifted, and whilst the smile remained, it didn't reach her eyes. "Lady Harriet, how nice it is to see you again!"

Lady Harriet? Harriet frowned. It felt like she had been struck, hearing such a formal address from Rosalie's lips. She wanted to ask what she had done to warrant such cruelty...and then she remembered.

It had been nearly two weeks since she had last seen her. And the last time, she had run away with no explanation. She had cut her out of her life and now she expected her to act as if it hadn't happened? Tears stung her gaze, but she wouldn't let them fall in Rosalie's presence and guilt her into

any further conversation. If she wanted to leave, Harriet would do the good thing, the right thing, and let her.

But she had to try to explain everything first.

“Rosalie,” she started, noticing how the corners of Rosalie’s lips tightened at the familiarity. Harriet swallowed. She could fix this. At least she had to try.

“Yes?” Rosalie answered, her voice light but guarded. It gave Harriet hope, however, that she hadn’t made an excuse and turned away. She was so beautiful, it made Harriet’s heart stutter.

“I know I have no right to ask, and if you refuse I shall understand, but will you please walk with me so I can explain everything? So I can apologise? If, after you hear what I have to say and decide you want nothing to do with me, I won’t bother you again.” Harriet lowered her gaze and swallowed. “But know that you have been on my mind every day.”

Rosalie stared at her for a long moment—so long that Harriet genuinely believed she was going to say she had blown her chance and didn’t deserve another. She wanted to plead more but she knew better than to push it. No matter what, she was still the daughter of an earl, and earls didn’t beg.

So she kept her mouth clamped firmly shut until Rosalie huffed, closing her eyes as she nodded her head.

“Fine, but not here. My apartment isn’t far. We can go there,” she whispered. “After all, it means that I can throw you out without causing much of a scene.”

Before Harriet could say anything, Rosalie took off. Her brisk pace was fast enough that Harriet had to do a small jog to catch up with her, their heels clipping in tandem.

Harriet rehearsed everything in her mind, figuring out what to say and how to say it. She lost track of time, uncaring of where Rosalie was leading her, as she recapped all the points she’d need to mention: the reason she had been sent to New York, how she was being courted by Henry, and how she had found herself at The Lion’s Thorn that very first night which seemed to have happened *years* ago.

When they reached Rosalie’s home, she tried to distract herself by glancing around the apartment. It was unlike anything Harriet had ever seen before.

There was no more furniture than was necessary, and the most expensive piece was a gramophone—and even that looked secondhand. A large box

sat on the floor by its side, filled with records. Looking around at the rather bare apartment served to remind Harriet of the different lives they led.

Still, Harriet had to admit that the atmosphere was warm and cosy, rather like Rosalie.

Rosalie turned to her with a wave of her hand, beckoning her to start talking, and all of her well-rehearsed words escaped her mind. It came out in jumbled pieces, explaining one thing only to realise she had left out a vital part and so needed to backtrack for it to make sense.

It was the most disjointed and uncoordinated she had ever been in her life. It was a wonder that Rosalie managed to follow along. Harriet could only assume she did, for she occasionally stopped Harriet to seek clarification on certain points.

Even during those times her eyes were unreadable as she sat on her sofa, gazing up at Harriet, who sometimes found herself standing and other times sitting because she couldn't seem to stay still for too long.

By the time she finished, her heart was hammering a rhythm against her rib cage. She was more than certain Rosalie could have taken the tune and written a new jazz number to it.

Rosalie let out a long breath and Harriet lifted her head, finally turning it towards her. Her parasol lay forgotten on the carpeted floor of Rosalie's living room, yet she reached for it then and brought it to her lap, her fingers brushing at the lace as she waited for Rosalie to say something.

Eventually, Rosalie turned to her. "Why didn't you tell me that from the beginning? Did you think I wouldn't understand?"

Harriet let out a breath, keeping her gaze focused on her parasol. "I do not know what I thought, in all honesty." She sighed and raised her head. "I knew only that I was utterly captivated by you, and when you said you wanted to get to know me better, I had never been happier. But I was worried that would be ruined, that you wouldn't want to go on if you knew the truth."

Rosalie was silent for a long moment, giving Harriet a chance to study her. She was facing forward, looking away from Harriet as they sat. She felt her heart race in excitement. It was beating so loud she was certain Rosalie was going to hear.

As her eyes flickered around, she saw a photo frame with the image of a young man who Harriet could only assume was a relative of Rosalie's. She could tell by the similar features, from the strong hooked nose to the warm

eyes and the sharp cheekbones. A part of her wanted to ask about him but she knew it wasn't right—she wasn't even sure that Rosalie still cared about her enough to share anything about her life.

Harriet turned her head away and cleared her throat. The silence had stretched on so long that she couldn't stand it anymore.

"I am sorry, Rosalie," she said in a soft voice. "You have no idea how sorry I am about it all. And I promise that, should you allow me, I'll spend every single day trying to make it up to you."

Harriet felt the tears burning her gaze. She closed her eyes and willed them to disappear. She wasn't going to cry in front of Rosalie. She was not going to put that weight on those lovely shoulders.

Something soft and warm was placed over her hand, stilling her fiddling with the lace of her parasol. Her eyes shot open to find Rosalie's hand on top of her own. She swallowed, allowing her gaze to trail from her hand up her smooth arm to those shoulders she had been thinking of mere moments ago, up the curve of that elegant neck before landing on her beautiful face.

The second she met her eyes, Rosalie's painted lips tugged into a soft smile. It made her heart beat faster and faster until she was certain it was going to explode.

"I can't deny that I'm not upset and still hurt," Rosalie started before she laced their fingers together. "But I do care about you, Harriet. So..." She trailed off, her smile growing in size until it was the widest, truest smile Harriet had ever seen on her face. "I suppose you can have more days trying to make it up."

Harriet giggled. She couldn't help it. Just as she was unable to stop herself from placing a kiss to Rosalie's cheek. Her lips lingered, allowing her breath to fan across Rosalie's skin. Her smile morphed into something softer, more intimate, when she felt Rosalie shiver. She was acutely aware of how close her own lips were to Rosalie's, how one small turn of her head would press them together.

She wanted that. She wanted to take that leap and kiss Rosalie. However, a part of her feared it was too soon, and the last thing she wanted was to do to Rosalie what Frederick Holmes had done to her. She even worried that she had overstepped by kissing her cheek, something that was settled only when she saw Rosalie smile at the gesture.

Harriet pulled back an inch, but even that felt like too much distance.

"I promise I will. Every moment of every day." She squeezed Rosalie's

hand, feeling as if a fire were spreading from where their hands were joined, all through her body and settling in the pit of her stomach. Harriet felt her hot breath graze her cheek, felt their thighs brush every time they shifted slightly; every single touch was intoxicating.

When Rosalie raised her gaze to meet Harriet's, there was a raw, consuming hunger within their depths that set the fire in Harriet's stomach roaring. Every breath she took hurt. It sounded ragged to her ears, and she was almost puzzled that Rosalie wasn't asking her what was wrong.

Rosalie pulled one of her hands free, and Harriet worried it was because she couldn't stand to be near her anymore, that she had turned into such an awkward mess that she was going to take back everything she had said. Only when Rosalie settled that hand against Harriet's jaw, her fingers brushing her cheek in the process, did all her worries ease.

"Harriet."

The whisper of her name drowned out everything else. It was all Harriet could hear as she found herself drawn closer and closer to Rosalie. She had no idea if she was moving of her own accord or if Rosalie's hand was slowly guiding her forward.

"Harriet," Rosalie whispered again, even quieter than before, the sound blowing across Harriet's lips, and she longed to taste them.

"Yes?" Harriet was finally able to respond, grinding the word out through her lips. How could such a tiny word cause so much pain to her lungs?

A long second ticked on. It seemed to drag for an eternity as they sat there, noses brushing and eyes staring. Harriet's hands twitched. One was still wrapped firmly in Rosalie's and the other had wandered up Rosalie's thigh until it was resting where leg met hip.

"May I have a kiss, m'lady?"

Under any other circumstances, the title would have made her laugh, as if that were something that was asked of her all the time.

But this wasn't any other time. She *wanted* to kiss Rosalie. Nothing else seemed to compare to the very thought of pressing her lips against Rosalie Smith's. Her heart did somersaults, almost making her dizzy.

"Yes." She had to push such a small word out between her lips. Her lungs still burned, consumed by the fire that Rosalie's touch had started.

Rosalie moved forward, crowding even closer until they were pressed together in a long line. All of Rosalie's curves slotted with Harriet's, and before she knew it, she was tilting her head towards Rosalie's to connect

their lips.

Harriet felt the waxy texture of Rosalie's lipstick on her soft, plump lips, and fire returned to the forefront of her mind, burning and burning until she was sure she was a smouldering pile of ashes. Her hand on Rosalie's hip squeezed, and she hastily swallowed the moan that it ripped from Rosalie's mouth.

She almost wished her hair wasn't so perfectly styled. She wanted it loose, cascading down her back so that Rosalie could wind her hands in it; so her fingernails could scrape her scalp and maybe even give it a gentle tug to deepen the kiss.

The kiss was over long before Harriet wanted it to end, which was never if she was being honest. Yet both of them pulled apart at the same time and opened their eyes to find the other just as breathless. Harriet smiled and Rosalie mirrored it, giggling as Harriet reached up and touched Rosalie's hand still against her cheek.

Harriet sighed. "Thank you."

She wanted to ask for another. And another. She wanted to spend the rest of the night in the apartment, decorum be damned, so she could kiss Rosalie until the sun came up.

But she knew it wasn't possible. Her family was waiting for her to return. She was supposed to have left for only a quick walk, and she had an important lunch to attend as well. She couldn't dawdle anymore.

However, as she was about to say that, something came into her head... something that had the potential of ruining this comfort they had just managed to get back.

She swallowed thickly. "Do you mind if we...keep this between us right now? Charlie has improved so much—especially his relationship with his father—and I don't want to drag him back into this if it isn't what he wants. He'd believe he'd have to, and I don't want to hurt him."

Rosalie's eyes narrowed slightly, yet Harriet knew it wasn't directed at her. Not all of it, anyway. "Jeffrey is hurt as well, you know. He has no idea what happened or what he did wrong." Rosalie shook her head. "I won't sit idly by and watch his heart break—could you do the same with your own brother?"

"No, I couldn't," Harriet answered, not at all surprised that Rosalie and Jeffrey were so close they considered themselves family. "But this is between them. I don't want Charlie to feel pressured. I want him to make up

his own mind for once.”

Rosalie studied her for a long moment before she sighed, turning away from Harriet, whilst giving her hand a gentle tug to let her know it wasn't personal. She nodded.

“I understand that. I don't want to hurt Jeffrey more by thinking Charlie has decided against him, either, and didn't tell him...that's happened to him before—a lover moving on and not bothering to tell him to his face.” She sighed and lifted her gaze back to Harriet's. “So I won't say anything. It'll be our little secret.”

Relief washed over Harriet, only to be replaced by apprehension once more as she remembered the luncheon she was going home to. She gave Rosalie a tentative smile. “And you don't mind that I need to continue on with Mr. Madson?”

Rosalie licked her lips. “I can't say it won't hurt, but I suppose I count myself lucky knowing that your interest in me is true.”

Harriet grinned, turning away so she didn't throw herself into Rosalie's arms. She noticed a small pad of paper and a pen on the table, and an idea struck her. She reached for it and scribbled down a number. “You can phone me at my aunt and uncle's whenever you wish. If you ask for me, the butler will come and fetch me.”

She ripped the paper free and pressed it into Rosalie's hand with a smile, and watched as she studied the numbers before she pressed the paper over her heart. There was a little bit of hesitation in her face as she asked, “Won't Charlie wonder who's always calling you?”

Harriet shook her head. “He'll be at work and when he's not, I'll pretend it's Mr. Madson. He won't be so interested as to question the butler. It'll be fine, I promise. We can use that to arrange meetings.”

“I'll have to call you from the public telephone in the diner down the street, but I *will* call you. If you ever need to call me, you can call there and they'll send someone up to me. They're rather good that way.” Rosalie jotted down the number to the diner and handed the piece of paper to Harriet.

Harriet's eyes twinkled as she smiled. She slipped the number into the pocket of her cardigan. “I look forward to that immensely.” She then stood, a task harder than she thought possible, for all she wanted to do was stay on that couch with Rosalie's hand in her own. “I must go. Mr. Madson has plans to take me out to lunch, so I need to hurry back and get dressed.”

The slightest flicker of disappointment appeared on Rosalie's face before it faded. She stood as well and led Harriet towards the door. Her hand was on the doorknob, yet instead of opening it, she stepped closer. So close that had they been outside, no one would have had any doubts about their relationship. But they weren't outside, so Harriet found she didn't care.

Not as Rosalie rocked up onto the balls of her feet and pressed a petal-soft kiss to Harriet's cheek. She smiled a demure smile as she stepped away and put a more respectable distance between them, looking like she hadn't set Harriet's entire body aflame with a single kiss. All Harriet wanted to do was follow her.

"Then I will see you later, Lady Harriet," she said.

Rosalie pulled the door open and Harriet stepped over the threshold, her chest burning, her heartbeat erratic, and her cheeks sore from the wide smile on her lips as she reached up to brush them with her fingers, relishing the memory of her kiss.

Chapter Thirteen

When Harriet returned, it was to Aunt Elizabeth rushing up to her in the foyer. Her eyes widened and a footman stepped forward to take her gloves, hat, and parasol. She was briefly aware that Martha was there to take her belongings. She gave Harriet a look that she didn't really have enough time to decipher, for her aunt was taking her hands in her own.

"Aunt Elizabeth? Whatever is the matter? You look like you've seen a ghost!" Harriet gave her aunt's hand a gentle squeeze to try to calm her.

"Mr. Madson has come to visit you," Aunt Elizabeth replied, causing Harriet to frown.

"We are to have luncheon together. I thought he'd be a little later, but perhaps—"

"No, no, my dear," Aunt Elizabeth said as she pulled one hand free to place atop both of Harriet's. Her eyes met Harriet's and they were so earnest, it made Harriet a little uncomfortable. "He is here. With your *uncle...in the library.*"

Harriet knew exactly what she meant. Her heart raced and then faltered, then started to race again. *Why now?* She had just gotten things sorted out with Rosalie. And now this? *Why must God torment me like this?* Her hands started to tremble, causing Aunt Elizabeth to tighten her grip.

"I...I... What do I do?" Harriet asked, her voice naught but a whisper. It wasn't fair! She assumed she had weeks, months, before faced with this. That she and Rosalie would grow closer until she was certain Rosalie wouldn't leave her side and wouldn't bother about her marriage.

Now she'd have to tell Rosalie that it was happening sooner than expected and no doubt she would *run*.

"Well I'm afraid that you cannot avoid him, my dear, not now that he's waiting for you." Aunt Elizabeth reached up and cupped Harriet's cheek.

Her thumb brushed across her cheekbone, not making a comment about the rouge. “You must do what you believe is right. No matter what that answer is, do you understand?”

Harriet scoffed and her head reared back, removing it from Aunt Elizabeth’s touch. “I doubt Mamma and Papa would agree with that sentiment. They sent me here to get married, and now an eligible man is finally asking for my hand. If I refuse him, I have no doubt in my mind that they would disown me.”

A sad look passed over Aunt Elizabeth’s face, making Harriet feel so guilty.

“Do you truly believe that, Harriet?”

She knew the answer almost as soon as her aunt had asked the question. *No, I don’t.* After all, her parents hadn’t disowned her when she’d told them she liked women. And they wanted her married only to see her *safe*, knowing what would come if she remained unmarried and the rumours began to fly. Mamma and Papa loved her—she knew that by the way they had embraced her after admitting her inclinations. It was a crime and they hadn’t once tried to talk her out of them or said she would get over them.

It would be easier to pretend she was being forced into it—that she had no choice because she didn’t want to lose her parents—than admit that it was her decision. That she’d be the one to say yes or no and live with the consequences.

Harriet sighed, slumping her shoulders. Tears stung her eyes. Only a few minutes ago she had been buzzing from excitement at having Rosalie back in her life, and now she couldn’t even use that memory to bring joy back into her mind. It was as if all happiness had been sucked from her and had no chance of finding its way back inside her heart.

Raising her head, Harriet met her aunt’s gaze. “No. Of course I don’t believe that. Not at all.” She took another deep breath and raised her head, throwing back her shoulders in an attempt to appear confident. She put a smile on her face and squeezed her aunt’s hand. “Thank you, Aunt Elizabeth. I shall remember it when I head in.”

“I’ll stay out here. Say that I wish to talk to Uncle John, which will give you some time alone. He was in there asking permission, seeing as he cannot ask your father.” Aunt Elizabeth pressed a kiss to her forehead, stepping back with the softest smile. “And know that no matter what, your decision will be the right one. Everyone will be behind you, from your

uncle and I to your mother and father and siblings. Always believe that.”

Harriet smiled and stepped away from her aunt, moving towards the small library.

It was nothing like the one back in Creoch House. In fact, the size of it rather reminded Harriet of the servants’ rooms back home. She was pretty certain her uncle’s library could fit in her father’s five times over.

The thought of her father brought a gentle smile to her face as she reached for the handle. *I wish you could meet him and offer your advice. I could use it right now, Papa.* She drew a deep breath to prepare herself.

Her papa may not be here, but she was her father’s daughter. She would know what he would want.

Harriet opened the door and both her uncle and Mr. Madson rose as they saw her enter.

“Henry! What a surprise,” she lied easily, moving over to press a kiss to her uncle’s cheek. “I still need to change before we head to luncheon.” Before he could explain his early arrival, Harriet fixed her gaze on her uncle. “Uncle John, Aunt Elizabeth needs your help with something in the dining room.”

He gave her a knowing look as he pressed his own kiss to her cheek before he bowed his head to Henry and left them alone.

As soon as he was away, the tension in the room rose to an almost painful level.

Harriet’s throat was thick as she turned back to Henry, hoping and praying that her smile looked genuine. It didn’t matter how much she thought of her family or Rosalie or even her father’s dog, Anu, and her horse, Ice...she couldn’t bring any sort of joy to her heart.

“Did I really surprise you?” he asked with a teasing smile on his lips. “An impressive feat, I must say.”

Harriet returned his smile and sat down on the chaise lounge by the fire. It worked for two reasons: firstly, it was tradition for her to be sitting for the proposal anyway and secondly, she was afraid her legs would refuse to support her at any second.

“You did, yes,” she answered truthfully. *Though for a totally different reason.* “And it is an impressive feat, for I am not an easy woman to surprise.”

“Then I shall endeavour to keep surprising you...” He raised his gaze to Harriet’s, so strong it seemed to be bearing into her soul. “If you’ll give me

the chance to.”

And there it was. The start of it all. He really was serious about this—and he really wasn’t fooling around. He was going straight for the killing blow...and wasn’t that a pretty image for marriage?

However, the pause he took allowed Harriet the chance to study him, and she noticed how nervous he was. She was pretty darn certain that he was in a worse state than she. His fingers kept drumming against his legs, and he couldn’t look at her for too long before his gaze flitted away. She had spent a decent amount of time with the man lately and had *never* seen him like this. *It’s got to be because of the proposal...but if he isn’t ready for it...why on earth is he asking?*

“I know this may seem sudden, and you can have as much time as you wish to think about your answer.” He swallowed thickly, his fingers still drumming against his legs in an erratic rhythm that would have no doubt inspired Rosalie. “But, I have grown incredibly fond of you during our times together, Lady Harriet. I daresay I may even be falling in...in...love with you. And there is no...no one...I want to spend the rest of my life with.”

The words made Harriet frown, her thin brows pulling down as she repeated them in her mind. Henry seemed to notice her confusion, for he gave a startled laugh. “Apart from you. I meant there’s no one else I’d rather spend the rest of my life with.” He gave another shaky laugh. “Nerves is all.”

Henry lowered himself to his knee in front of her, taking a hand that had been resting in her lap. His hands were shaking so violently that it made her own tremble in response. She placed her free hand over his, trying to steady them both.

“Lady Harriet Amelia Cunningham, will you do me the honour of becoming my wife?”

Harriet tried to swallow, but there was a lump the size of a golf ball stuck in her throat. She felt her smile waver. She hoped it looked more like happiness and joy than fear and worry. Her breath came short and sharp, almost on the verge of a panic attack.

How was she supposed to answer? How *could* she answer? She didn’t want to marry him, not when she had finally sorted things out with Rosalie. And his behaviour during the proposal had made her even more anxious. He was hiding something, that much was clear, but *what?*

“Lady Harriet, are you well?”

That brought her back to the present. He was still kneeling before her and, oh God, how much time had passed? Was it too long to be considered polite? Shouldn't she have been throwing herself off the sofa into his arms with an exclamation of agreement? Is that what he expected or wanted? Because no matter what, she couldn't give him that.

She swallowed hard, forcing the lump down. It fell into her gut like a dead weight, but at least she was able to speak again.

“You're so kind to ask me, Henry. I've grown so fond of you as well.” It wasn't a lie. She *had* grown fond of him. Just not in the way he thought. “I do believe I need to think on it. I shall have to send a letter to my parents and talk it over with them. I don't think I can make this decision without their input—I hope you understand that?”

“Of course I do. I meant it when I said you can take as long as you like.” He rose from the floor to the seat beside her, their hands still entwined. His hands were no longer shaking quite as much, though she still felt them tremble.

“I reckon I shall have my mind made up by the end of the month, for I have no doubt my parents will respond as soon as they're able.” She smiled at him and squeezed his hand, hoping it was reassuring. She had no idea what he was thinking—the urge to ask was powerful but she tempered it down.

His smile in reply was breathtaking. “I shall wait with bated breath.” He stood from his seat and Harriet followed him, eyebrow lifting in confusion. “I shall go to give you some space for now. I...assumed you'd want to cancel luncheon to think that over? Which is perfectly all right with me. We can rearrange it for when you've made your decision. Luncheon is a good time for news, good or bad, I've found.” He seemed to realise he was rambling and clamped his mouth shut.

Harriet felt the first genuine smile appear on her lips since she had arrived to find him waiting. She had forgotten about the luncheon and felt a little ashamed at how glad she was to hear him cancel it. “Of course not! I understand completely. I shall give your question tremendous thought, you have my word on that.”

He reached for her hand and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. “I shall eagerly await your reply, then, my lady.”

Without another word, he dropped her hand and left the room.

Chapter Fourteen

Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle John reappeared as soon as Henry was gone. Harriet was still sitting on the chaise lounge, gazing at her hands that he had just been holding.

“What did he say?” Uncle John questioned, pulling Harriet from her reverie.

She swallowed and looked up at them.

They stood side by side, looking down at her with curious gazes. They had fallen in love first and then gotten married. The same had happened for her parents. They were spending their lives with people they knew they would always be happy with. Why did she not have the same luck?

“As you expected,” Harriet muttered in reply. She stood from her chair and walked over to the bell, pulling it to alert the footman. She could feel her aunt’s and uncle’s eyes on her but she paid them no attention as the footman appeared and surveyed the room. “Would you bring us some tea, please?”

“Of course, m’lady,” he muttered. She didn’t really *want* tea but she wanted a distraction.

Yet he was gone too soon, and Harriet knew she could put it off no longer. She sighed and turned towards her family. “He asked me to marry him.”

Speaking it aloud breathed even more realness into it, and Harriet was almost certain that she was going to keel over.

“And what did you say?” Aunt Elizabeth reached for Uncle John’s hand as if a show of their affection would inspire her. It made her want to laugh. *Yes, rub it in my face, why don’t you?* All her family, except her and Charlie, were considered the “norm.” They had no idea what it was like to struggle through their lives, knowing they’d never be truly happy. The world was

made for them.

She felt tears sting her eyes. She gritted her teeth in an attempt to distract herself. She wouldn't cry in front of them.

"I told him that I need to talk to my parents first and will give him my answer next week." She smiled tightly at them, unable to do much more. "He cancelled our luncheon date, since he thought it would be awkward without my answer." She smoothed down her dress in an attempt to distract herself. "Forgive me, I'm going to make a phone call right now. I'll be back for the tea in a moment."

Before they could say anything in reply, she took off towards the door and stepped into the hall. She headed for the phone, slipping the small piece of paper out of her cardigan pocket, and lifted the receiver, looking around to make sure the hall was clear before she gave the number to the operator. It rang for a moment before a voice announced that she had gotten through to the right diner.

Harriet licked her lips. "Hello, I'd like to speak to Rosalie Smith."

There was a brief pause. "I'll send someone up to see if she's home. Do you want to wait or should I get her to phone you back?"

Harriet pondered that, knowing that it'd look odd for her to spend so long on the phone, but it'd also look odd for her to head back into the library and then be called back out. And also, her uncle could afford the money for the wait, but she wasn't sure Rosalie would have the necessary amount to call her back.

"I'll wait," Harriet answered.

As she stood there, she heard the distant sounds of people chatting, and it somehow managed to comfort her and calm her, how people were living their lives as she went through her crisis.

She was unsure how much time passed. She saw the footman come with the tray, pausing with confusion when he spotted her at the telephone. She merely instructed him to take it into the library for her aunt and uncle and that she'd join in a moment.

He had just disappeared down the back stairs that led to the kitchen when a crackling filled her ears.

"Hello?" a familiar voice asked, a little breathless.

The second Harriet heard it, a smile broke across her face. "Rosalie," she sighed.

A small laugh broke free from Rosalie, and it was the most beautiful

sound Harriet had ever heard. “I thought it’d be you. It’s half the reason I ran. I dread to consider what they think.” She chuckled. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I...” Despite everything, Harriet couldn’t seem to form the words. It was one thing to say it to her family. It was another entirely to say it to Rosalie. “I...” she tried again, but the words failed her once more.

“What’s wrong? You sound...is everything all right?”

Harriet snorted. “Not really. I don’t want to talk about it over the phone. Can I...can I come to your apartment? Or are you working at the club tonight? I *need* to see you. Today. Rather soon, actually, if I’m honest. Today has gotten worse and worse, and I do not know if I’m coming or going anymore.”

“I do need to work but that’s not until later. You know where I live, my dear, so come down whenever you’re ready. This diner has good food. Unless you want privacy?”

“I do rather.” Harriet swallowed. “I’ll have luncheon and then come around. I’ll say I’m sending a letter so I can get out.”

Rosalie let loose a deep breath and Harriet pictured her nodding along. “All right. Keep calm and breathe. Everything will work out, no matter what it is. I can promise you that.”

Hearing Rosalie’s voice had managed to soothe her jittering nerves. It was strange how her body knew what she needed before her head did.

She drew a deep breath. “I’ll try to do that.”

Rosalie giggled softly. “Good, and I’ll look out for you. If I don’t answer but you hear music, let yourself in. Sometimes I practise and don’t hear anything else.” There was a brief pause. “And remember to keep calm, my sweet one, okay?”

My sweet one. The pet name ran through Harriet’s mind over and over again, sending thrills of joy up and down her spine. Nothing else seemed to matter except those words: *my sweet one, my sweet one, my sweet one.* It was such a beautiful purr in Rosalie’s sultry voice.

“I need to go,” Harriet announced after a long moment had passed.

It seemed to be the hardest words to say. She wanted nothing more than to stay there, listening to Rosalie’s beautiful voice. She wanted to say that the only time she didn’t feel stressed or inadequate was when she was in Rosalie’s presence. But she knew better.

Harriet had to return to talk about Henry’s proposal with her aunt and

uncle, and Rosalie had her own things to do. She couldn't keep her on the telephone, no matter how much she wanted to.

So she swallowed that desire down into the pit of her stomach and, after whispering her farewell, she set the earpiece down onto the receiver and placed it back onto the table.

She drew a deep breath and turned. A gasp broke free from her lips when she found Charlie descending the stairs. She had no idea how much he had heard—if he had heard anything at all—but she wasn't going to give herself away.

She had spoken true when she had said she didn't want to pressure him into doing something he didn't want to do. She didn't want him to think that because she had decided to be with Rosalie, he had to be with Jeffrey. She wanted him to make up his own mind for once.

"Ah, there you are." She smiled as she waited at the foot of the curving staircase for him. She took his arm and started to steer him towards the library. "Tea has already been served, and I'm afraid you've missed out on all the recent excitement."

It was easy to fake this now that she had spoken to Rosalie, now that she had the promise of spending time with the person she really wanted to be with. She grinned teasingly at Charlie.

"Does it have anything to do with why Mr. Henry Madson was calling on you so early?" he enquired, letting Harriet steer him into the sitting room where his parents were still waiting. They looked a bit confused, as Harriet had suspected they would—she had been gone for a good fifteen minutes or more.

"He proposed," she declared as she let go of Charlie's arm to start preparing her cup of tea—milk, two sugars—and then take it in hand. She didn't want her aunt and uncle asking who she had been calling, so she decided the best way to distract them was to talk of the proposal.

She turned back to face her extended family with a small smile on her face, letting them think her joy was over Henry, now that the shock had finally worn off. "I told him I would give him my answer by the end of the month after I talk to Mamma and Papa."

Aunt Elizabeth was still beaming at her, and there was a glimmer in Uncle John's eyes that spoke of his happiness. Only Charlie seemed a little tense—probably because he was the only one who knew her truth.

"We were told we were to speak with their voices," Uncle John reminded,

his smile faltering a little as Harriet dismissed his comment with a wave of her hand.

“I know that, Uncle John, and I do want your opinion as well! It’s just that I don’t think I can agree to marry a man without talking it over with my parents. You don’t mind, do you? I think I’ll send them a letter today after luncheon. Then that way they can get back to me and I don’t have to keep Henry waiting any longer than I said I would.”

“I completely understand,” Aunt Elizabeth jumped in after taking a sip of tea. “Accepting a proposal is a stressful time, even when you’re one hundred percent certain it’s what you want. You want to be around family and be advised by them. It’s only fair that she speak to her mother and father about it all.”

“And I’m more than certain Uncle Edward will have a million and one questions, to ensure Henry is suitable for his eldest daughter.” Charlie grinned before taking a sip of his tea. “We all know how utterly protective he is.”

Harriet smiled.

Aunt Elizabeth met her gaze. “Yes. We do.”

The look on her face made Harriet pause as she raised her own teacup to her mouth. She watched as Uncle John reached across and placed a gentle hand on her aunt’s knee, as if to comfort her. But why did she need comfort over that? It was true her father wanted what was best for his family and would do anything to protect them.

What had that to do with Aunt Elizabeth?

Harriet’s head tilted to the side in a silent question.

Aunt Elizabeth’s answer, however, was to break the stare and ask her husband his opinion on the proposal.

It meant that all Harriet could do was straighten herself and listen to the words of advice, even as she made a mental note to grill her aunt about it later.

Chapter Fifteen

Harriet had bought the fastest stamp, even though it still felt like it would take too long.

She hadn't really known what to *put* in the letter. It had seemed impossible to get the words out and ask for her family's advice when they didn't know much about Henry. It was up to her to fill them in, but as she wrote, she found that no words could truly capture how she felt. And that the one person she wanted to tell them about...she couldn't.

It was all so complicated, so in the end she had merely sent: *Sorry I haven't written in so long. Mr. Henry Madson, the lawyer I mentioned in my last letter? He has asked for my hand and I want to know what you think I should do.*

It was vague and no doubt her parents would be confused when they read it, but she also knew they would send a well-written, thought-out reply to make her decision easier. Even though she knew, deep down, what her answer would be.

Harriet made her way to Rosalie's apartment after she had delivered the letter to the post office. When she finally reached Rosalie's door, she wasn't surprised to hear music coming from inside. Harriet knocked and waited until she was certain Rosalie hadn't heard her, and then entered.

It wasn't really like coming home, for she had grown up in far different circumstances, but as she stepped over the threshold to the sound of the music and Rosalie's singing, the feeling that rose in her was quite similar. *I could get used to this.*

The apartment wasn't too large, so it took no time at all for Harriet to find her in the small kitchen. She was cutting up some vegetables, and Harriet was so shocked by it that she stood there for a long moment, watching. She looked so settled, so beautiful, even when doing such a mundane task.

Harriet was sure she could stand there for hours, watching Rosalie do nothing but cut up carrots.

However, when Rosalie turned, saw her, and promptly screamed, she realised that it hadn't been that good an idea to linger.

Her cheeks coloured as she stepped forward. "Sorry, I was just...I've never seen someone...cut vegetables before." *What does she even see in me? I'm a pampered girl who has no idea what she's been through.*

"Don't worry about it," Rosalie dismissed, one hand over her heart. She had thankfully put the knife down before she turned. Harriet didn't want to think of the carnage that could have ensued had she not.

Rosalie smiled, moving forward and reaching for Harriet's hand. "Come on, I'm prepping some things for dinner so I don't take as long later." She squeezed by Harriet and led her back through to the living room, pulling her down onto the rather uncomfortable sofa. "So what's wrong, Harriet? Whatever has you so worried?"

Harriet turned her hand over so she could thread her fingers through Rosalie's. She couldn't bring herself to look at her, focusing only on her thumb which was rubbing soft circles on the back of Harriet's hand.

"Do you remember this morning? How I told you about Henry? Mr. Madson?"

"Of course I do!" Rosalie snorted. "I have over fifty of my own songs in my head, along with countless others belonging to other people. I think I can remember the conversation we had this morning," Rosalie said, not unkindly, a teasing grin on her lips.

"He proposed to me," Harriet blurted out. She had hoped to ease into that, to give a little bit more story, yet it seemed that her mouth wasn't going along with the plan. "Today. When I got back from seeing you. He was waiting and he asked me to marry him. It was so sudden, I had no idea, Rosalie, none at all. I thought we would have more time and—"

Rosalie squeezed her hand before asking in a soft voice, "What did you say?"

"I told him I needed to talk things over with my parents first—which I do—and that I would give him my answer by the end of the month." Harriet didn't really want to think about how long it would take for her parents to get back to her. No doubt they would write their letter as soon as they received hers. She wished she could put it off as long as possible.

Rosalie hummed, raising her free hand from her chest to cup Harriet's

cheek. Her brown eyes studied her even as her thumb drew lines along her cheekbone. Harriet couldn't stop herself from leaning in to the touch. "And what answer are you going to give him?"

Harriet hesitated, the temptation to declare that she would turn him down for Rosalie almost overpowering her. But she knew better than to make promises she could not keep.

"I'm going to accept. He is nice. I may not love him—will never love him—but we could be happy and my parents definitely will be." She reached up with her hand and placed it over Rosalie's. "This is what I've been working towards ever since I stepped off the boat over two months ago."

And there it was. It was out there in the world now. No way of ever taking it back or pretending something different. She would marry Henry Madson and that would be her life. It hadn't really occurred to her until that moment that it would mean *moving* to New York permanently. She had no idea how she'd cope being away from Creoch for so long.

To stop her mind from spiralling, Harriet focused on Rosalie, who still hadn't said another word, her eyes darting over Harriet's face as if committing her to memory. It felt so much like she was painting Harriet into her mind, as if she was trying to remember her well enough before she said goodbye.

Then her lips, which were for the first time unpainted, Harriet realised, quirked up and she met Harriet's eyes again. "Will I be invited to the wedding?"

Harriet's mind short-circuited. She stared at Rosalie, eyes wide with disbelief. Did she really ask that?

Her mouth must have fallen open, because next thing she knew Rosalie's thumb was tracing along her lower lip, gently tugging it down to reveal teeth and then running along the inside. The intimacy of the touch sent shivers down Harriet's spine.

"I'm sorry?" Harriet found herself asking rather foolishly.

"Will you invite me to the wedding?" Rosalie repeated as she scooted a little closer to Harriet, moving so close that their chests pressed together.

It had been just like before. The fire was already starting to spread again. There was a curious expression on Rosalie's face that didn't come from her previous question—she was making sure Harriet was comfortable with this before she moved any closer.

Harriet let out a slow breath, words failing her. Instead, she slid her hands onto Rosalie's hips and held her close.

"If you want to be invited," Harriet replied, her voice a whisper. "If it wouldn't be too difficult for you."

"Not at all. Like I said earlier, I would know the truth. Maybe one day we'll get to be out publicly with the ones we love without the risk of imprisonment or being beaten to death. Maybe one day I could walk down the streets with your hand in mine and never have to worry. But this isn't that time. This is 1923 and the world hasn't realised we're no different because we're a different race or have a different preference or faith or whatever." She pulled back, her voice as serious as her words. She looked Harriet in the eye. "Being married to this man offers you protection—could even offer...us...protection, if we're still together then."

Harriet stared at her, no words forming in her mind or mouth. She was overcome with this feeling of amazement, a warmth that made her want to wrap herself up in Rosalie forever and never leave. How could someone be so positive in a world constantly trying to tear them down for daring to exist?

She leaned forward and pressed her forehead to Rosalie's. "You are... incredible."

Rosalie laughed that beautiful, tinkling laugh of hers. Harriet wanted to record the sound and play it back whenever she felt blue. It was sweeter than any music she had heard.

"I mean it. You inspire me. I fret over every little thing and worry constantly. And you take everything in stride and do so with a smile on your face..." Harriet trailed off, unable to put her feelings into words. Despite all the fancy words she had learned and the long books she had read, she couldn't find an adequate way to describe what Rosalie made her feel.

Rosalie laughed. "*I inspire you?*" Harriet frowned, causing Rosalie to reach up and smooth the wrinkles away. "My dear, you have been an inspiration for me the moment I met you."

Rosalie's gaze fell to her lap as Harriet mulled over those words, trying to understand exactly what she meant. And when her mind finally caught up, Harriet gasped. "It is about me?" Her eyes widened almost comically. "Your song 'Highland Bloom?' Truly?"

Rosalie gave a short chuckle as she lowered her hand, reaching for Harriet's so that their hands were entwined. Despite the fact they were still

touching, Harriet longed to have Rosalie's hand back on her face, cupping her jaw and touching her lips, looking at her through hooded eyes.

"Yes, Harriet." Rosalie shook her head. "How many 'highland blooms' do you think I know?"

Harriet gnawed on her lower lip, feeling heat flood her cheeks. "I... wondered that myself, but it didn't feel right to presume. After all, we had met only once. It didn't seem likely that I'd made that much of an impression to warrant a song..." Harriet trailed off, unable to raise her gaze from their entwined hands.

"If you're surprised, imagine how I felt when I couldn't get you—or the melody you struck—out of my mind all week. Since I saw you on the dance floor, your beauty captivated me."

Harriet's mind reeled at that confession. She wanted to say something equally as inspiring and sweet, yet as she had already noted earlier, all her words paled with how she felt. So, she settled for a fact she believed with her whole heart: that actions spoke louder than words.

She smiled. "May I have another kiss?"

Rosalie's lips tilted upwards. "I thought you were never going to ask."

She surged forward and pressed their lips together. It felt odd to be doing this so freely, without worrying about servants coming around the corner or a stranger with a camera. She didn't have to worry about anything but the feel of Rosalie's lips on her own.

Her fingers tightened their hold on Rosalie's plump hips, digging in so tight she worried she might leave marks. Rosalie whimpered softly and pushed further, her tongue coming out to tickle Harriet's lower lip.

It was rather similar to what Frederick Holmes had done, and that ought to have scared her, but she needed to open her eyes only a slither to see it was *Rosalie*. She trusted this woman and even though she had never kissed anyone like this—not even Susanna all those years ago—she found herself opening her mouth.

Rosalie guided her, showed her what to do and how to do it right. All Harriet had to do was enjoy the sensations it brought and the whimpers that lodged in both of their throats.

She was unsure how long they spent on the couch, losing themselves in each other and their kiss. When they finally parted, it felt like no time at all had passed, whilst also feeling like years had stumbled on and everything had changed.

Her heart beat rapidly against her chest and her free hand lifted to rest over it, feeling the erratic *thump thump thump* that spoke of her joy and pleasure. Her cheeks were on fire, and she found she couldn't meet Rosalie's gaze directly.

"Thank you," Rosalie whispered. She swallowed, gnawing on her lower lip as she pushed herself to her feet.

"I...I should get back or they'll start worrying." Harriet finally raised her gaze to meet Rosalie's. "Thank you, for everything."

Their hands were still entwined, so Rosalie squeezed her hand as she stood, too. "I know you'd be there for me. Not that I'd ever be in such a situation, but you understand what I mean." She laughed. "I'm glad to know that—"

Harriet didn't get to find out what Rosalie was glad to know about, for the door burst open, causing the two of them to spring apart. Not that there was much need for such an action as they glanced over and found Jeffrey there. He looked a little sheepish, as if he knew he had interrupted something.

"Sorry, Rose, I didn't realise..." He seemed to have a hard time looking at Harriet, who wondered if it was because she reminded him of her cousin. "We need to head down to the club for rehearsals soon."

"Don't worry, I need to get going, too." Harriet glanced over at Rosalie and offered her a smile, wishing she could give her a kiss farewell. She wouldn't risk it now, not with Jeffrey there. Even though he knew and accepted them, kissing in front of someone was still a no-no for her.

Her hand raised in an awkward wave before she made her way to the door, smiling at Jeffrey as he opened it for her. She wanted to say something to him, to let him know that her being here with Rosalie didn't mean Charlie had decided against being with Jeffrey, though she knew she couldn't say a word.

It wasn't her place.

As Harriet passed him, he placed a gentle hand on her arm, causing her to raise her gaze to his. His eyes were brown, yet a darker, richer brown than Rosalie's. Hers had specks of other colours hidden in them but Jeffrey's were like dark brown tourmaline. "If it's not too much to ask," he started, clearing his throat. He removed his hands from her arm and scratched at the side of his chin. "Would you let Charlie know that I understand what he's trying to do, but there're two people in a relationship. If he'd just talk to

me...”

Harriet had expected something like that, but how could she pass that message on without telling him about her starting things back up with Rosalie? How could she phrase it in a way that didn't make him feel like he *had* to see Jeffrey again?

Still, those were decisions for later. Right now, she knew she could say only one thing. “Of course I will.” She glanced briefly at Rosalie, wondering if she knew that she was lying. “Have a good show, you two. I'll see you both later.”

Harriet didn't want to wait around any longer and be caught in her fib, so she turned and strode away.

Chapter Sixteen

It was sixteen days after Harriet had sent hers off that her parents' letter arrived—sixteen days since she had bumped into Rosalie, as if fate had wanted them to be together. Sixteen days since they had shared their first—and second—kiss. She wished she could have said that she had had more kisses in the interim.

However, she couldn't sneak out of the house without Charlie and, since he didn't know about her and Rosalie, there was no way she could meet up with her beau at the club; and that she was considering a proposal meant that her chances to leave the house were getting slimmer and slimmer.

“What do your parents say?” Uncle John asked as Harriet ripped open the letter with the letter opener the butler had presented to her. Her eyes flickered over the paper, taking a moment to relish in her father's familiar scrawl before she began to read:

Dearest Harriet,

Your mamma and I are absolutely ecstatic with the news that you've received a proposal. Your aunt has been writing to us even when you've forgotten—not that I can blame you. It seems you've been busy—and this Mr. Madson definitely seems like a good match. Aunt Elizabeth says he's wealthy in his own right, with good prospects, that his business as a lawyer is stable. And his family is an old one...or at least, old in American terms, I guess. Nothing like old Lord Martin who always claims to trace his lineage back to the Conqueror, but old enough.

I understand your reservations, my dear, I do. In fact, we all do. If you've got any serious doubts about this man, then don't feel like you must accept. There are plenty more men out there. I know you may

never truly be happy with your marriage, but I'd rather see you content than miserable.

I do wish I could meet him before you had to give your answer, but I will meet him before you walk down the aisle, and if anything strikes me as odd, I will personally see the engagement dissolved, so don't fear. We may not be able to divorce, yet betrothals can end rather easily in our world.

It is down to your heart and mind, my darling one. I want you to be certain of everything.

*Your loving papa,
Lord Cunningham*

By the time Harriet had finished reading the letter, tears were falling down her cheeks. She wiped them away with the handkerchief Charlie pressed into her palm as she dropped the letter onto her lap.

"Oh dear, I hope it's not bad news," she heard Aunt Elizabeth murmur. Harriet shook her head.

She didn't want to give them the letter to read, knowing that certain things would raise questions. So she dried her eyes and declared, "No. Papa is being sweet, that's all." Her fingers traced over the words, paying special attention to his signature as if she could summon him here by mere touch. "I miss them all."

"I understand, dear, it's hard to move away. You'll be back for Christmas, though, and the New Year. And that isn't so far away." Aunt Elizabeth's words caused Harriet to smile. Her aunt always seemed to know the right things to say. It wouldn't be long before she'd get to stay in Scotland through the winter months. She wondered if it would be as easy leaving her family behind this time.

"So does the letter finally give you your answer?" Uncle John questioned.

The three of them looked at her. The past two weeks had been long for them all, it seemed. Not that she could blame them. It seemed like every day Harriet was asking if a letter from Scotland had arrived and then had to deal with her disappointment when they told her no.

Harriet swallowed. "Yes, yes it does." She folded the letter and stood. "Excuse me, I need to go and make a call."

Her heart longed to get to the telephone and call Rosalie instead. Yet, she knew she couldn't. She had priorities, loathe as she was to admit it.

So instead she phoned Henry.

"Hello, Mr. Henry Madson speaking."

She had asked to be put through to his office rather than his home, not wanting to speak with his parents. This was between them.

"Henry, it's Harriet." She put a smile on her lips so it could be heard through the telephone. "I've called to arrange that luncheon you mentioned a few weeks ago."

He went silent. Harriet's fingers nervously fiddled with the letter, desperate not to crumple it, but too anxious to keep still.

"Oh." He sounded like his breath had left him in a rush. "Oh! Okay! Uh, wh-when is good for you? I can, I can make any day, really, if I fiddle a few meetings and—"

He had started to ramble, the words falling from his mouth nonstop so that Harriet found herself cutting him off with a sharp, "Henry, I'm saying yes." She softened her voice and repeated, "I'm saying yes."

More silence fell over them, and Harriet wondered if maybe he had passed out on the other end. The only thing that convinced her he hadn't was the uneven breathing she heard. It once again made her wonder what the hell was going on in his head, why he had these reactions when discussing the marriage when it was *he* who had asked her this early on. She hadn't even hinted or mentioned marriage to him.

"You are?" His voice was softer now and a bit steadier.

"Yes."

Harriet almost expected him to descend into silence again, so she was surprised when he let out a loud, startled laugh. "*You are!* Oh, thank God, Harriet! Thank you!" He sounded as if he were thanking her for something else entirely. Harriet didn't give that much thought, though.

"Do you still want to have luncheon?" she asked, remembering why she had phoned in the first place.

"Yes, yes, I'd love to. How about Saturday when I'm off work?"

"That should be fine. We can discuss things like the announcement and such then as well, since my aunt and uncle will be joining us."

"Of course, of course. No doubt your Mr. Slater will relish the idea of announcing it in his own papers. It may make the front page." He laughed and despite herself, Harriet joined in.

"Perhaps it will," she answered, shaking her head. "I'll see you on Saturday then, Henry." She cleared her throat. "I don't want to keep you

from your work.”

A brief pause passed before Henry said, “Of course. I should get back to it, but Harriet?” He waited until Harriet hummed, letting him know she was still there. “*Thank you.*”

He sounded so sincere, so earnest, that Harriet felt guilt wash over her. She had no idea if he was nervous because he cared so much about her. And if that were the case, she felt awful for using him. She wished they lived in a different world where she could be with Rosalie without any fear of the consequences. That was all she wanted. Not marrying a man she didn’t love and would never know the *whole* of her, all because people would seek to ruin her and her family.

Harriet sighed. “No, Henry, thank *you*,” she replied instead, because really, she had to thank him. He maybe had no idea what he was doing for her, but the fact remained that he *was* doing it. She hated to think if she had to settle for the likes of Frederick Holmes or a life reenacting some sort of version of *The Scarlet Letter*. He was offering her a chance at a life here, for her and her family. She couldn’t forget that.

Before he could question her, Harriet muttered a hasty farewell and hung up. She let her head fall forward as her shoulders slumped in resignation. Her fingers still toyed with the edges of her father’s letter, and so she opened it once more, letting the familiar scrawl bring her a small amount of comfort.

Chapter Seventeen

Over a week later, Harriet was out at the pictures with Rosalie.

Neither of them had *planned* to go to the cinema. In fact, their plan merely had revolved around meeting at Central Park and then going on an aimless walk around the city. She couldn't really be seen doing much else, since she was now *engaged* to Henry Madson.

It hadn't been announced yet, but they were going to announce it in Uncle John's newspaper soon. It wasn't the most popular one but it felt right to keep it in the family. However, it wasn't to be done until *after* Henry's mother and father had hosted a dinner with all their friends and family to announce it themselves.

She tried not to think about how soon that dinner was—how the days kept creeping up on her. It had all been arranged for the 18th July, her aunt had told her that morning as she took her parasol and left to meet Rosalie.

"You look miles away," Rosalie declared as she shuffled in the seat beside her, trying to get more comfortable. The movie had yet to start and there were still people filtering into the theatre to find their seats. It wasn't busy, due to the time of day, which was all the better. No one would look at them and wonder what was going on between them. "I hope you're not upset with the choice of movie."

In all honesty, Harriet didn't really know which movie they were seeing. It had been during their afternoon tea at the first cafe they had spotted that this idea had even come up. Rosalie had been raving about the movie, saying how she longed to see it but sadly wouldn't be able to afford it. She had been so animated as she spoke of the actors and apparent plot that Harriet couldn't stop herself from offering to treat her.

"Not at all, my mind is where it always was this past week," Harriet admitted as she crossed her legs at the ankles, letting one foot brush against

Rosalie's leg in a way that everyone would assume an accident. Everyone except the very woman she touched, who smiled and brushed her fingers over Harriet's hand in return.

It was a game they had taken to playing—seeing how far they could go in public without anyone noticing. It allowed them the opportunity to feel like a courting couple without running the risk of appearing like such; the brush of fingers or a lingering look or being that bit too close to be proper.

“So that means you're either thinking about me, Charlie, or your upcoming engagement announcement.” Rosalie turned her head, her voice lowering as the lights dimmed and the film began. She tilted her head closer until Harriet could feel her warm breath on her cheek. “Which is it?”

“All of it,” Harriet answered, moving her fingers so that her pinky could hook around Rosalie's. It was as close as they would be able to get to holding hands in public, yet it always seemed to be enough. “Never mind it now. Watch the film, darling.”

Rosalie didn't need to be told twice and turned her gaze towards the big screen.

As the film progressed, Harriet found her thoughts constantly flickering between the three things Rosalie had mentioned: Charlie, the engagement, and Rosalie. It made her smile. *Already she knows me so well.*

...

When the lights returned and the screen went blank, Harriet couldn't have recalled a single thing about the movie. She listened to Rosalie rave about it as they left the theatre and continued their walk. Harriet had only a vague idea of where they were going, familiar buildings sometimes flashing by, yet otherwise she didn't pay much attention.

Harriet's gaze never left Rosalie, so it was no surprise that she found herself bumping into someone, causing her to stumble back. Pain lanced through her shoulder, as she turned with an apology on her lips for not paying attention...until she saw with whom she had collided. A strand of golden hair fell into tired blue eyes, no longer held by the gel he used to slick it back.

“Harriet?” Charlie questioned, astonishment colouring his voice. He stared at her with wide eyes, and Harriet hoped and prayed that his attention remained on her. If he focused on her and Rosalie kept walking, everything would be fine.

But of course things never did go smoothly for Harriet. Rosalie came to her side immediately to see if she were hurt and so drew Charlie's gaze. His entire expression shifted as he processed this information. His eyes narrowed, and when they returned to Harriet, they had hardened in a way Harriet had never seen before.

"Is this really happening?" he asked, his voice low in an attempt to appear distant, but she could still hear the hurt and accusation. It made her entire body tremble. She wanted to reach for him but knew better than to touch him when he was this upset. "How long have you been lying to my face?"

Harriet recoiled at that, taking a step forward because she needed him to understand. "Charlie, please, I never meant to—"

"Never meant to lie? Is that what you were going to say?" He scoffed. "All those phone calls and long walks that you've always brushed off? You've been meeting up with her, haven't you? Every time I asked you, you *lied*, Harriet. And you knew you were doing it. So don't say you *never meant to*."

Before Harriet could try to find the best way to explain her misguided intentions, he pushed past her. Her eyes darted around for a second, cursing herself for not paying attention. They had wandered onto a street rather close to her uncle's offices and she knew that Charlie always worked late on a Friday, giving his father a chance to spend some time with his wife. No doubt he had been stepping out for either a quick bite or even to walk home, since it was such a nice day.

I have been such a fool, her mind hissed before she finally thawed and took off after Charlie at a run. People looked at her and no doubt judged her, yet Harriet didn't care.

The second she was able, she dove forward and grabbed a hold of his arm. The combination of surprise and Harriet's strength was enough to slow him, allowing her to push herself in front of him, planting both hands on his chest and stopping him from taking another step.

"Charlie, stop and listen to me!" she demanded, her hands curling into the lapels of his coat. He kept his head raised, refusing to look her in the face, which hurt more than any of his previous actions or words. "I'm sorry! I know it was wrong to lie to you because not only are we cousins, we're friends; you're my *best friend*. I should have trusted you, but I didn't want you to feel like you had to come back into this with me. You were finally

making decisions for yourself and you seemed happy.” She drew a deep breath. “And be honest, if you had happened upon Jeffrey in a similar manner, you would have done the same thing.”

That brought his gaze snapping down to her face, his eyes on fire as he narrowed them at her.

“No, I would have told you.” His voice was deadly, causing Harriet to flinch. “No matter what had happened or how Jeffrey and I got back together, I would have told you. I would have told you rather than lie to your face.” He gave another grating scoff. “Wasn’t it you who said we needed space? Wasn’t it you who talked me out of seeing Jeffrey for my own good? You know how much I adore him and yet you said it was best to get some distance. And then you went running back and didn’t say a word! How is that *fair*, Harriet?”

Deep down in her heart, Harriet knew what he said was true. She knew she had no real defence, which was no doubt why she lashed out instead. She released his lapels with a shove, almost as if she couldn’t bear to touch him any longer. Her eyes brimmed with tears, of hurt or anger, she couldn’t say.

“You were the one sobbing about how you were disappointing your father after he threatened to disinherit you! I didn’t force you to do anything. We both needed distance, and we had it, and when I saw Rosalie again, I chose to go back to her.

“You’re a bloody man, Charlie. If you really adore Jeffrey like you say you do, you could have gone back to him at any time. Don’t put the blame on me for not telling you just because I have the guts to be with the person I want, regardless of circumstances, and you don’t.” She felt a tear fall and scrubbed it away with her hand. She didn’t want to look at him any longer, for she knew she would say worse things to him.

However, as she turned away, something entered her mind and no matter how hard she tried, no matter how much she knew it would probably hurt him further, she couldn’t keep it in.

“And I have a message for you from Jeffrey: he said that whilst he understands what you’re trying to do, there’re two people in a relationship, and if you just talked to him...” She gave a disgusted shake of her head. “So maybe examine why you’ve not spoken of your worries to him before you chastise me. At least I had the courage to talk to Rosalie about my situation and work things out.”

Without waiting to see his reaction, Harriet turned and marched back towards Rosalie, who had been standing a few feet away, watching the whole thing unfold with wide, shocked eyes.

All Harriet wished to do then was take her hand, find some comfort in her touch, but they were still in public with hundreds of people around them. And no matter her anger or pain, she couldn't risk any rumours starting to fly that could end up reaching Henry.

So instead she walked past Rosalie, letting their fingertips brush so she knew that Harriet wanted her to follow as she strode down the street with no real destination in mind. The only thing she knew was that she had to get away from Charlie.

She knew she had been gone for so long and had originally planned to go home after the movie, but she couldn't do that now. Home was Charlie's home, and she couldn't be around him until she had calmed down.

So she steered them towards the only place she knew he wouldn't be: The Lion's Thorn.

Chapter Eighteen

Harriet had no idea how long they had stayed at The Lion's Thorn.

It could have been an hour, it could have been five. All the songs seemed to meld into one, and the drinks that she and Rosalie ordered never seemed to end. Her sweetheart had sat there, listening to her rant, holding her hands and rubbing soothing circles whenever needed—she hadn't said a word, for which Harriet was thankful. And when the anger finally started to ebb, it had been Rosalie's suggestion to go home and make things up with him before she went to sleep, even if it meant waking him from his.

Harriet had agreed, leaving Rosalie at the club with a kiss and a promise that nothing would change. Her feelings were growing every day, and she adored the woman. No matter what happened with her cousin, Harriet wasn't going to let it come between them. As she left, she promised to call her tomorrow to give her an update.

It was strange making her way home from the club without Charlie, and she was thankful that the cab driver didn't question why she was out alone. Nor try anything untoward. He merely dropped her off, took his money, and then drove off again, all without saying a single word.

Harriet stared up at the three-storey house before deciding it was best to use the back entrance that all the servants used. She had no idea what time it was, yet she knew it would be unlocked, for several servants snuck out at night, according to both Charlie and Martha. It also meant that, should she be caught by any of them, she had the perfect leverage to convince them to stay quiet. Her aunt and uncle may have been furious at her, but that would be nothing compared to what would happen to a servant.

Not that Harriet wanted someone to lose their job, but she wasn't above a little blackmail to try to keep her secrets safe.

Thankfully, she made it through the house and up to the floor where the

bedrooms were without any issue. A part of her was so tired that all she wanted to do was collapse into her bed, yet she knew she needed to make amends, otherwise it would only fester.

Taking a deep breath, Harriet gently knocked on the door, mindful that her aunt and uncle slept only a few rooms away.

“Charlie?” she whispered, her gaze darting down the corridor to ensure no one was coming to investigate.

There was no answer, so she knocked again.

“Charlie? I want to apologise.” Harriet pushed the door open, wondering if maybe her cousin was asleep. He did have a habit of going to bed late, but maybe that had changed now that he’d started working.

She stepped inside hesitantly, worried she was maybe going to see something that would scar her for life. However, when her eyes landed on the bed, all thoughts left her mind. Her gaze hastily scanned the room to clarify what she already knew. It was empty.

Why the hell wasn’t he home? Where was he? What was he *doing*?

Harriet took off, making sure to close the door behind her as she descended the stairs once more. All thoughts of slumber left her mind as she made her way to the servants’ quarters, walking into the one that Martha slept in. She moved slowly so as to not wake the other woman who shared the room—a housemaid—and made her way to Martha’s bed.

Her maid woke after one shake of her shoulder, thankfully making little noise. At seeing Harriet, her eyes widened. She slipped from her bed, lifting her dressing gown and shrugging it on as she followed her lady out of the room.

When she closed the door behind her, she prompted, “Is everything well, m’lady? You look like you’ve seen a ghost!”

“Mr. Charles. He’s not home. Why are my aunt and uncle in bed when their son hasn’t returned home?” Harriet didn’t even question why they were abed when *she* hadn’t returned home. All she could focus on was Charlie.

Martha’s face turned into a deep frown. “Mr. Charles is not home?” Harriet shook her head, trying not to seem too impatient. Her maid *had* just woken up, after all. “He was when we all retired. He came back and seemed rather flustered. He retired to the sitting room himself after Mr. and Mrs. Slater went to bed. He did question the butler about your whereabouts but I...perhaps that’s where he went, m’lady? Searching for you?”

As soon as Martha said it, Harriet knew she had her answer. No matter what had transpired between them, they loved each other so much that, when she hadn't come home, he would have worried. And no doubt he had covered for her with his parents to keep her safe.

"Of course," Harriet sighed, reaching for Martha's hand and squeezing it. "Thank you, Martha, go back to sleep and I'll see you in the morning."

"Are you sure, m'lady? I could come and get you—"

"No, go back to sleep. You deserve a rest." Harriet leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Martha's cheek. "Sweet dreams." She then turned and strode away.

As Harriet made her way back to the hall, she turned over a million different plans in her mind.

She knew that his first port of call would have been the club, yet she couldn't recall seeing him there. And it hadn't been so busy that she wouldn't have noticed him. Then again, it would depend on when he'd started his search—if he'd arrived after Harriet had left, then she'd have no way of knowing if he were still there.

Before she realised it, she was walking over to the telephone and lifting the receiver.

Yet the second she did, she set it back down. She couldn't phone a *speakeasy*. She had never seen a telephone in the bookstore that acted as its cover and there was no way an illegal club would have one. There would be no way of contacting them to see if they had seen Charlie.

The only person she could *think* about calling was Rosalie, who had no doubt made it home. But even that wouldn't work. She didn't have a telephone in her home, and the diner that she used would be closed by now. And anyway, she didn't want to keep Rosalie awake any longer—she had already dragged her to the speakeasy on her night off in an attempt to drown her sorrows. It seemed only fair to let her get as much sleep as she could.

In all honesty, Harriet was tempted to go back out and try to find him. It was only a sensible voice in her head (which sounded so much like her papa) that kept her from doing so.

She felt so useless. Harriet turned and braced her hands on the cabinet, bowing her head as she closed her eyes. She had no idea where he was or whether he would even come home. What if something had happened to him? It wasn't safe to be wandering the streets of New York City at such a time.

She started to move towards the sitting room, ready to haul a chair out to start her watch, yet a noise distracted her. She had no idea who else she could have been expecting, yet when she saw the familiar blond waves and met those blue eyes, she couldn't stop herself.

She had a brief second to take in the dishevelled nature of his clothes and the deep creases around his eyes, before she rushed towards him and threw herself into his arms with a squeal of, "Charlie!"

He grunted as he caught her, his hands tightening around her back as he let out a breathless huff. His head buried into the crook of her neck for a moment before he reared back. "Where the bloody hell have you been?"

Harriet gave his chest a small smack. "Language!" she admonished, before she sobered at the look of concern on his face. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I wanted to say that when I got back and I went to your room, but you weren't there! And I got so worried! I've been so worried about you, Charlie!"

Charlie shook his head. "Don't start that. You were the one who stormed away from me. You should be lucky I still love you after those things you said, Harriet. A part of me didn't even *want* to, you upset me so..."

There was a lump in her throat that she couldn't seem to budge, no matter how many times she swallowed. And every time she tried, tears appeared in her eyes until she was choking and drowning in them. When they fell free, trailing down her cheek, she finally managed to gasp, "Sorry! I'm so sorry!"

Before she knew what was happening, his arms slid around her and tugged her towards him, her face pressed against his chest. She wrapped her arms around his back, holding on for dear life as she repeated her apologies over and over again, quieting only when Charlie hushed her, one hand petting the back of her head as the other drew soothing circles on her back.

Eventually, he pulled her back, smiling softly as he reached up to wipe the tears away. He opened his mouth to say something, but whatever he had planned to say, Harriet never found out.

"What is this?!" a voice demanded from behind them.

There were sounds of footsteps coming downstairs, and that was enough to spur them into movement. Harriet and Charlie broke apart, putting a good foot or two between them before they turned. Harriet's fingers twitched nervously against her sides as she watched Uncle John and Aunt Elizabeth stalk closer to them.

They both had their dressing gowns on and despite the strength in Uncle John's voice, they both looked like they had *just* woken up. Her aunt was blinking blearily at them as if her mind still hadn't really caught up with her yet.

"I don't want to hear any excuses," Uncle John ground out, his eyes flickering between the two of them. "Tell me what is going on. Why are you two even up at this time? And Harriet, what on *earth* do you look like!"

She was grateful that her trip to the speakeasy had been impromptu. She hated to think how they would react to seeing the clothes she *normally* wore for such an outing.

Harriet opened her mouth, flailing like a fish out of water as she tried to rack her brain for answers. She turned her head and met Charlie's gaze. No matter what happened, if she didn't speak up, Charlie was going to get blamed for this. He had kept his word of not going out, of getting more serious with his life, and they wouldn't believe him now because of her.

"I was out at a club," Harriet answered as she saw Charlie accept his fate. "Perhaps Charlie told you that he saw me?"

Aunt Elizabeth nodded. "He said you were going out to a late, impromptu dinner with some friends." Her eyes turned to Charlie, no doubt questioning why he had lied. Harriet needed to remedy that.

"Well, that is what I told him. I lied. Yet as time passed he started to worry and after you both went to bed, he came out to find me. I don't know how he managed to track me down; you must be teaching him some secrets, Uncle John." She gave a smile that no one returned. Harriet awkwardly shuffled. "He came to the club and brought me home. Said if I didn't go with him, he'd drag me out regardless. To be honest, it worked out for the best, as some man was starting to make me uncomfortable. Charlie quickly put him in his place, though. He was rather my knight in shining armour in the end."

She turned and beamed at Charlie with a thankful smile.

"Is this true, Charles?" Aunt Elizabeth asked, her voice soft in her disbelief. Both she and her uncle turned to Charlie, gazing at him expectantly.

Now all she needed to do was hope and pray that Charlie went along with her lie. Her cousin had an awful habit of taking the blame even when it wasn't his. She wanted some way to repay him for everything he had ever done for her and make up for all the hurt she had caused him over the past

several weeks.

“You know me,” he finally said after a long moment, turning his gaze away from Harriet and back to his parents. “Anything to help a damsel in distress.”

Harriet giggled hesitantly, even though the tension in the room hadn’t disappeared and still seemed to be trying to choke her.

“I must confess, I am surprised at you, Harriet,” Uncle John admitted with a sigh. He shook his head and glanced over at Aunt Elizabeth. “We shall have to talk about this, decide whether or not to tell your parents. They sent you here, trusting us to take care of you. I’m not sure I can allow this secret to be kept from them.”

Harriet prepared herself to placate them. She hadn’t thought they’d go so far as to tell her parents, and she wasn’t sure she could stand disappointing Mamma and Papa as well as her aunt and uncle.

Then Aunt Elizabeth stepped forward. She slipped her hand into her husband’s and smiled softly, almost reassuringly. “But we will not decide until the morning. It is late enough as is. Both of you head to bed and we’ll discuss this tomorrow.”

Harriet didn’t need to be told twice. She knew an olive branch when she was extended one. She quickly muttered her goodnights, pressing kisses to their cheeks even though her aunt and uncle were still stiff to her touch, and then scurried upstairs.

As she reached the top, she couldn’t help but turn back, glancing down to see how things were playing out now that she had departed. The sight she witnessed warmed her heart. Uncle John was shaking Charlie’s hand, a huge smile on his face which seemed to be enough to put one on Charlie’s. When they separated, Aunt Elizabeth stepped forward and enveloped Charlie in a fierce hug.

Harriet smiled fondly, happy that she had played a tiny role in bringing them closer together.

Chapter Nineteen

When Harriet awoke the next morning, she was sorely tempted to play ill and ask for a tray in her bed. It was on the tip of her tongue when Martha appeared to get her ready for breakfast. Anything to put off facing her aunt and uncle.

But she knew she couldn't do that. No matter how much she wished she could hide, she knew she would have to face them at some point.

"How did everything go last night, m'lady?" Martha questioned as she floated around the room, organising the clothes Harriet had carelessly thrown to the floor once she had been allowed to go to bed. She sighed and threw the covers from her body.

"Horribly," she announced as she slid from the bed. "Mr. and Mrs. Slater caught me and have yet to decide whether they are going to tell his lord and ladyship."

Martha stared at her for a long moment, the dressing gown she held in her hands momentarily forgotten. Harriet would have almost giggled had her stomach not been doing flips and making her feel like a ball of live wires. She genuinely did feel like she was going to be sick now that she stood upright.

After a moment, Martha seemed to recollect herself with a blink, and she scurried to assist Harriet with the dressing gown.

"That sounds horrible, m'lady. Do you think they will? Surely, they won't do that to you."

Harriet groaned as she turned around and faced her maid again. "I do not know. I didn't have to admit to being with Rosalie, which was something. They think I was out on the town. I don't think Mrs. Slater will want to inform my parents, but you didn't see Mr. Slater. He was furious. I wouldn't be surprised if he makes me pack after breakfast and sends me back to

Scotland on the next ship.”

She said it as a joke, but now that the thought was in her head, she couldn't help but fear that maybe he would. What would she do? She would never see Rosalie again. There was no way her family would let her come back unsupervised. And Rosalie couldn't abandon her life here to follow Harriet across the ocean...

The fear continued to roil in her stomach as she washed and dressed. She studied her reflection in the mirror as Martha put the finishing touches to her hair—it was a simple look, since Harriet didn't feel well enough to deal with a full up-do. She had brushed the waves and then braided the remainder of her long hair and pinned it around the base of her skull.

She also noticed some dark circles under her eyes as she had watched Martha do her hair, which she ultimately decided to leave visible instead of covering up with makeup—it may have been wrong of her, but she wanted to look as horrible as possible so they might take some pity on her.

It might lessen her punishment a little.

“Are you ready, Lady Harriet?”

Harriet licked her lips, giving herself a final glance in the mirror. She had gone for the most Edwardian thing she owned—a long navy skirt that brushed mid-calf and a simple blouse. Anything to show them that she *did* know how to dress, and banish the previous night's image of her from their minds.

She pushed herself out of the stool at her vanity table. “As I'll ever be.” She offered Martha a smile. “Thank you for your support. I honestly don't know what I'd do without you.”

“You're stronger than you give yourself credit for, m'lady,” Martha replied as she nodded her head in a customary bow before she turned on her heel. She pulled open the door and Harriet took a deep breath to ready herself to face the wrath of her aunt and uncle.

By the time she made it to the dining room, her legs were like jelly. She wasn't even certain how she was still upright. She managed a smile at the footman who opened the door for her but she was more than certain it was a wobbly, uncertain thing that did more harm than good. No doubt he'd head below to start gossiping all about it.

As she entered the room, she almost expected to be greeted by screaming.

Thankfully, it seemed that her aunt wasn't down yet, and Uncle John and Charlie were casually talking. They rose from their seat when they noticed

her, sitting down only when she waved her hand.

Only Charlie offered her a smile—Uncle John didn't even turn to look at her. It definitely confirmed that they hadn't forgotten, but Harriet was thankful that at least it wasn't quite the pitchfork-and-fire fiasco she had drummed up in her head. Maybe Granny had been right, she really needed to stop reading those novels that made her imagination work overtime.

She silently crept to the table, making her way to her usual seat. It felt rather rude to not say anything by way of greeting, especially since they knew she was present. Though they hadn't said anything to her, so it couldn't have been that rude.

However, if she thought she could pretend to be invisible whilst waiting for her aunt to arrive, that illusion was quickly shattered. The conversation between her uncle and cousin ceased almost immediately as they turned towards her. Charlie still seemed to be in shock over what she had done last night, if the wide-eyed expression was anything to go by. The hint of gratitude made Harriet smile despite herself.

It was too much for Uncle John, it seemed, who shook his head at her. "And what are you smiling about, young lady? I should think you'd be grovelling and explaining yourself. Not sneaking in here and smiling."

Despite his words, his tone wasn't harsh or unfriendly, which lessened the sting a little. It was enough to make Harriet's smile disappear completely, however. She wanted to keep staring at her plate...though she knew that would only anger him further, so she raised her gaze to his.

"I honestly am sorry, Uncle John. I came over here and took liberties with your trust and kindness. You have no idea how sorry I am."

He studied her for a long moment before he sighed, returning his attention to his newspaper.

Harriet stared at him, wondering what his reaction, or rather *lack* of reaction, meant. When she turned her attention back to Charlie, he smiled gently before mouthing the word "mother."

Suddenly, Harriet understood. Uncle John wasn't going to say anything until Aunt Elizabeth appeared. That made Harriet's heart relax a little. If he was waiting for Aunt Elizabeth, it was probably going to be something that wouldn't cause her *too* much trouble. She had no doubt her aunt could be harsh, but she was always more forgiving than her husband.

As she ate her breakfast in silence, she allowed her mind to drift to last night, thinking back to everything that had led to her getting into this mess.

Her anger had brought all of this about. She knew she had no one to blame but herself. Then the door opened and Aunt Elizabeth strode in.

She moved to stand behind Uncle John, who folded his paper, peeled the glasses from his nose, and fixed her with a stony stare that made her throat dry. Both of them stared at her, and Harriet set her cutlery down. The disappointment she found in their stares made her throat clench.

She really hoped that they had decided to keep this secret amongst themselves and keep it from her parents, because if this is how she felt seeing the look of disappointment from her aunt and uncle, how would she cope with seeing it on the face of Mamma and Papa?

“We discussed everything in great detail last night,” Aunt Elizabeth started, her voice rather soft, which gave Harriet hope. “And again this morning. We weren’t entirely certain what our decision was going to be until then. We’re very disappointed in you, Harriet. You were sent here for a purpose. Your mother and father put trust in you and in us. Whilst you are here, you still represent your name—your father’s earldom! What would have happened if you had been recognised and scandal came for you? After an entire life of dedicating their lives to keeping you happy and safe, this is how you repay your parents?”

If Harriet thought the guilt on her delicate shoulders couldn’t get any heavier, she had been wrong. She was almost buckling under the pressure, certain that her back would give out at any second. How did her aunt know exactly what to say?

“I am sorry,” she whispered. And she was. The guilt that was coursing through her veins felt like poison, draining her life away from her. Even though she didn’t regret her time with Rosalie—even though she wasn’t ready to give her up—there was no way in hell she was going back to The Lion’s Thorn. At least, not without her uncle’s permission, which he would, of course, never give.

There was a beat of silence where all Harriet heard was the sound of her heart hammering in her ears.

Then her aunt sighed. “And we truly believe that.” She paused again, looking down at her husband. They seemed to have a silent conversation before they turned their attention back to Harriet. “Which is why we are not going to tell your mother or father about this. Not now, at least.”

“You’re not going to blackmail her, surely?” Charlie asked, speaking for the first time since his mother had appeared. His willingness to defend her

after everything she had done warmed her heart, and she offered him a smile, hoping she wouldn't be reprimanded for it this time.

"Of course not, Charles! Don't be so dramatic." Aunt Elizabeth rolled her eyes. "All we mean is that as long as you behave yourself for the remainder of your stay, your secret will be safe with us. My brother has enough stress without adding that of his daughter being a bit of a flapper to it."

"I am not a—" Harriet started to protest before she bit her lip, falling silent from the look Aunt Elizabeth sent her.

"You also must bear in mind that, whilst it has not been announced yet, you are engaged to be married to Henry Madson. It wouldn't look good for any of us if you are seen gallivanting at some club mere days before things are out in the open. After the announcement, you'll be spending more time with him, and so I should hope your desire for excitement will fade. And if not, at least he will be by your side." Aunt Elizabeth's look meant there was no room for argument or even a single word to be said.

So Harriet folded her hands in her lap and tried to show how grateful she was. Then Uncle John stood from his seat and pressed a kiss to his wife's cheek. "Now I must start my day. I will see you all later. Charles, don't take too long."

When her uncle disappeared, the door closing behind him, Harriet's aunt sat in the chair beside her. She smiled warmly, no hint of judgement in her gaze as her hand reached for Harriet's.

"You are young, my dear, and believe it or not, I know what it's like to be young and wishing for change. We aren't going to stop you from ever leaving our house. If you want to go out to some sort of dancing club, you may, as long as you have a suitable chaperone with you."

That seemed a decent price to pay after the trust she had broken between them.

She smiled in reply and leaned forward, wrapping her aunt in a soft, brief embrace. "Thank you so much, Aunt Elizabeth."

Pulling away, her aunt smiled before she stood as well, bidding them both a good day and a promise to see them at dinner, if not at luncheon.

As the door closed again, Charlie blew out a loud breath. The second she met his gaze, she couldn't help herself. She started giggling.

"I think you're suffering from shell shock, my sweet cousin," Charlie quipped, but she heard the humour in his voice. She knew that he was fighting back laughter as well.

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” she answered between giggles, reaching up to blot the tears of mirth that had fallen free. “I’m so relieved they’ve promised not to turn me over to my parents. I couldn’t handle their disappointment. It would honestly kill me.”

She reached for her glass of orange juice and took a sip, ready to focus on eating her breakfast.

It wasn’t until she was finished and was washing it down with the remnants of her orange juice that Charlie spoke again. “I haven’t really thanked you.”

“Thanked me for what?”

“For what?” Charlie shook his head. “For what you did for me last night. You didn’t need to do that. My parents are used to being disappointed in me; it wouldn’t have been hard to believe I had led you astray.” He pursed his lips as he lowered his gaze. “Which I technically did.”

“Hush now,” Harriet snapped, not wanting to hear another word. “You did nothing of the sort. I walked quite willingly into the outer circle of the inferno. And it was my way of making things up—I lied and stormed off and left you after saying some horrible things. If there was a way to make up for that, I was going to take it, no matter the consequences. We’ve got to stick together.”

“As cousins?” Charlie questioned, arching an eyebrow.

“As cousins. As sinners.” Harriet waved her hand. “Now, away with you before Uncle John starts to think I’m holding you away from work as well!”

Charlie chuckled as he stood and strode for the door, stopping only when he pulled it open. “I’ll be home for luncheon. And we’ll go for a walk to catch up.”

Harriet offered him a warm smile. “That sounds wonderful,” she answered truthfully, watching him disappear from the dining room with the thought of how wonderful it was to have her best friend back in her life. She had missed him.

Chapter Twenty

As the car drew to a halt outside the home of Mr. and Mrs. Madson, mother and father to Mr. Henry Madson, Harriet felt like her head was going to explode. It felt like someone had placed their hands on either of her temples and then started *squeezing and squeezing*.

Closing her eyes and drawing a breath, Harriet tried to ready herself for what was coming. Henry's parents had invited all their friends and family to a huge dinner, and then they were going to announce the engagement. It wasn't *that* scary. It wasn't like she was being dragged down the aisle yet... even so...

How can this be a right decision when you feel like you do? a treacherous voice whispered in her head, but Harriet pushed it away.

Right decisions didn't always mean happy decisions. The War had taught her that—how many men had she seen amputated to save their lives yet they had woken up feeling like it had ended? She shook her head. She couldn't think of such things. This was a happy occasion and she needed to act like such.

Her mind drifted back to earlier that day—though it seemed a lifetime ago—when she, Charlie, and Rosalie had met for a picnic in the park. They had joked and laughed and it had been so good to have her two favourite people together again. Charlie had even suggested going to the movies that night...until Harriet had reminded him of this very dinner. Not that it mattered; Rosalie had a private gig and so wouldn't have been able to go, either.

She had the memories of the day to help her though this dinner.

A hand covered her own, drawing her from her thoughts. Her eyes flew open, finding her aunt staring at her with a soft smile on her lips.

"It's all right to be nervous. I'd be more worried if you weren't, actually."

And just like that, Harriet once again found herself wondering what had really been going through her aunt's mind when she accepted her uncle's proposal.

Charlie left first, waiting at the door for her and his mother, but Harriet couldn't hold back her curiosity any longer. She needed answers and advice and, for some reason, her aunt seemed to understand more than she had ever let on before.

"Give me a minute," she whispered to Charlie before she closed the door again, locking her inside the car with her aunt. She could see her uncle step up beside Charlie, no doubt wondering what was happening.

"I've always been told you loved Uncle John very much—that you couldn't contain your excitement when he proposed. What really happened?"

Her aunt smiled warmly, squeezing Harriet's hand once in a reassuring gesture. "I did love your uncle very much. I do love him. When he proposed, it was the happiest day of my life."

Harriet was confused. "Then how do you always seem so understanding? It can't merely be empathy speaking..."

"Because your uncle had nothing. He didn't have a single penny to his name, and he wanted to marry the daughter of an earl. Your grandfather protested every step of the way. His daughter deserved better than some Yankee whose only promise was his newspapers *maybe* taking off." She took a deep breath. "When he proposed, that happiness and excitement soon gave way to fear and worry and panic. I suddenly had to make this huge decision—do I pick making my family proud or do I choose love?"

"And you chose love?" Harriet asked, her voice wavering, suddenly understanding. Her aunt didn't know *why* Harriet was so hesitant about Henry, which didn't really matter. "Do you regret your decision?"

"Regret is a strong word," her aunt answered after a brief pause. "But sometimes I wonder. I often believe that, had I chosen to stay home and marry whomever my father wished, I would have been happy—eventually. I could have learnt to love him. But walking down the aisle with the knowledge that I was heading to a man who really loved me—that was also an exquisite experience."

Harriet's frown deepened. "Grandfather must have come around eventually. You're still part of the family."

Harriet didn't really remember much of her grandfather. In fact, she

didn't really remember much of either of her father's parents. They had both died when she was very young.

Aunt Elizabeth's expression turned sad then, her gaze falling to their entwined hands. "No, he never did. He relented to the proposal only because your father managed to persuade him, but he didn't give me away. He didn't attend the wedding at all. He never saw me until I got the letter saying he was sick and wouldn't get better. I made it just in time, and even then he didn't apologise or forgive me. He was rather glad to see me, I do think, but not even the fear of death had changed his mind. It was only your father inheriting the title that brought me back into the family. Before your grandfather died, I hadn't been to Creoch House in ten years."

Harriet shook her head, feeling tears prick her gaze. Her throat was raw as she spoke. "How could you stand that? How could you lose your father when you believed that you could have fallen in love again with someone else?"

Her aunt shrugged elegantly. "I took a leap of faith. I believed in my heart, I believed in the man I loved. That was enough for me. And I realised that my father couldn't have loved me as much as he said if he was willing to cast me aside for this decision."

There was a lump in Harriet's throat that seemed like it would never dislodge. She opened her mouth, tears almost falling, truths almost spilling from her mouth, but then there was a knock at the window.

They both turned to find Uncle John opening the door. "I'm sorry to interrupt this little moment, but we really must get inside, otherwise we're going to be later than acceptable." He glanced over the top of the car. "And no doubt people are wondering why our car has been here for ten minutes and yet we haven't entered."

Aunt Elizabeth giggled before she pulled her hand free from Harriet's. Charlie took Harriet's hand, helping her from the car, and when she turned, she saw her uncle assisting her aunt. Only, instead of letting go, he reached up and straightened her coat for her, pressing a kiss to her knuckles and a final, fleeting kiss to her lips before stepping away.

That's love, Harriet thought as she turned her attention to the house she was about to enter. It looked no different than Uncle John's. The stone was a slightly different colour but that was it. *Is this to be my future home? If I choose family over love?*

Yet as she thought that, she realised that her choice wasn't as simple as

her aunt's. All her aunt had risked was losing her family. It was a serious thing, Harriet knew, but it paled in comparison to being put in jail because of the person you loved. Her love was illegal. Her aunt's had been only an inconvenience to her grandfather's life.

She knew what her decision had to be. Her heart didn't—couldn't—come into this.

She had already met Henry's parents, yet she was reintroduced to them as soon as she entered. She spent the entire mingling process at Henry's side, being introduced to relatives and friends in a never-ending stream. It was almost a relief when dinner came, for it gave her a respite and a chance to ease the ache the constant smiling had given her cheeks.

Yet she still managed to make enough small talk through the meal, and by the time the announcement came, she had relaxed enough to not seem totally petrified when all attention turned to her. It had been his mother who had done the honours, though what she had said, Harriet couldn't recall.

She sat there, smiling, her hand in Henry's. She had no doubt that her grip was causing him pain, but he didn't protest or flinch.

And when his mother sat, he stood. "I want to thank you all for being here to celebrate my engagement to such an amazing woman." Henry beamed down at her, and it was such a warm smile that she felt her viselike grip loosen. "I wanted to honour such an occasion by doing something that would make my wonderful fiancée happy. So without further ado..."

He nodded to the butler who disappeared through the door. And a moment later, music floated through from the large sitting room. Harriet's eyes widened as she heard the instruments strum together in a seemingly uncoordinated beat. Henry grinned at her.

"Shall we dance?" he asked and Harriet nodded, finally allowing herself to stand. Her legs were still like jelly but she managed to remain upright as Henry led her from the dining room to show her the band he had booked.

A giggle broke free from Harriet's mouth as she trailed behind him, thinking to herself that maybe happiness could be hers with this man. It seemed impossible, the thought of giving Rosalie up, but perhaps somewhere down the line she could have both love and her family with this man. She wouldn't have to pick one and sacrifice the other.

She let Henry lead her forward, even as her gaze landed on the makeshift stage that had been erected. And mostly the woman in the middle, fingers cradling the microphone stand.

She was already singing by the time Harriet appeared, her voice a low, sultry hum that spoke of lust and sorrow. She was magnificent, her dress the most glorious Harriet had ever seen her in: the underdress was black, yet there was a chiffon overlay in a beautiful burgundy that looked gorgeous against her pale skin. There was some beading along the dropped waistline, which made it far plainer than the other dresses in the room, yet Rosalie's beauty more than made up for it.

Of course, Harriet thought with a silent scoff.

Henry led her to the centre of the dance floor—though it was more like the furniture had been pushed away to create space for them to dance—and still all Harriet could focus on was Rosalie. Harriet cursed fate, wondering how it was fair that the second she started to believe she could have a life without Rosalie, she turned up and captured Harriet's thoughts once more.

She met Rosalie's gaze across the room, floored that she didn't seem at all disturbed by this turn of events. She kept singing as if nothing was amiss. It made Harriet wonder if she had known she was going to be coming here. If she had known that she'd be singing at Harriet's engagement party...why she hadn't she said anything at the picnic earlier? At least then, Harriet would be prepared and not acting like a fool, barely following along with Henry's lead.

"Are you surprised?" he asked after a moment, drawing Harriet's attention back to him.

She wanted to scoff. *You don't know the half of it*. She swallowed and nodded, returning her gaze to the band. She had almost expected to see Jeffrey there as well, since he always seemed to play with Rosalie...but she supposed they wouldn't have considered it "proper" to have a Black man in an upper-class home.

"Terribly so. You're making quite a habit of surprising me." Her gaze flickered away from the musicians and briefly met Rosalie's eyes before darting away, afraid their relationship would be picked up on if she lingered for too long. "The band certainly seem talented. How did you hear about them?"

She hoped that didn't sound too obvious...then again, why should it? He didn't know that the woman on the stage was the woman Harriet adored.

"Oh, through a friend of a friend," he answered. "I had nothing to do with it, really. He handled everything—I don't think he even told them my name. Just gave them my address, the date and time, and that was that. He's a

great man, but that's his way of doing things. I'm glad they're as good as he said. He can sometimes be a bit eccentric in taste—though Father will not be happy that the singer is a woman.”

Now it definitely makes sense why Jeffrey isn't present, Harriet thought before she leapt to Rosalie's defence as she said, “At least she's a good singer. I can imagine he'd be more upset if she hadn't been.”

He laughed as he weaved them in and out of the couples who had also joined them on the dance floor. No matter how Henry spun or twirled her, she always knew where Rosalie was. She was drawn to her like some sort of magnet, being pulled into her orbit and unable to break free—and what disturbed Harriet more than anything else was that she wasn't sure she wanted to be pulled free. She wanted to be near her and bask in her attention.

As the song wound to a close and another started up, Charlie appeared at their side. They slowed to a stop as they turned towards him. “Mind if I cut in? Haven't danced with my cousin in too long.”

It was a lie; they both knew it, but Henry didn't. He bowed his head and let go of Harriet's hand, pressing a soft kiss to her knuckles almost as an afterthought. He then turned and strode from the dance floor, leaving Harriet with Charlie.

“Did you know?”

They both asked at the same time, answering the other's question. Harriet groaned as she rolled her neck, tempted to bang her head against Charlie's shoulder over and over again. If it weren't so improper, she was quite sure she would have.

“What do I do?” she asked, her voice a whisper. She closed her eyes, trusting Charlie to lead her through the dance without any fumbling. “I can't believe she's here. I want to touch her and speak to her, but how can I do that? You don't talk to *singers*.”

“That sounds like something your papa would say,” Charlie quipped with a short laugh. “So you know how utterly snobbish that sounded.” He jolted her enough to make her eyes fly open, then grinned down at her when he met her gaze. “Look, the music has to end at some point—they've got to give Rosalie's voice a rest. They can't usher her back downstairs. Use this as a chance to show them what a wonderful wife and host you'll be for Henry. Swoop in and introduce yourself to the singer, show her around the room, and let her meet my mother and father. That will be fun.”

Harriet raised her eyebrow. "Tell me you're not serious."

The expression on his face showed he was anything but. She scoffed so loudly that she startled an elderly couple dancing beside them. She offered them an apologetic smile and continued only when they were out of earshot, "Oh, I'm sure that will go down well with your parents, you fool!"

Charlie shrugged with one shoulder. "Perhaps I am, but to be honest, you either choose my option or you snub Rosalie." He grinned as if he knew the pain he had inflicted with those words. "Which one seems more likely to you?"

Bowing her head, Harriet conceded. She couldn't ignore Rosalie, not now that she knew she was here. Even though she didn't *have* to talk to her, Harriet knew that she couldn't act as if Rosalie wasn't worth her time. She knew it would hurt her...and if Rosalie was hurt, so was Harriet.

"If this gets me in trouble, I am going to find a way to throw you under the bus as well, cousin dearest," Harriet growled in his ear before she pulled back and tilted her head. He got the message quickly and led them from the dance floor to the side.

Harriet knew that sooner or later she would be called to the floor again with Henry, but right now, she lay in wait, preparing for the best way to approach Rosalie Smith once she had finished singing.

Chapter Twenty-One

The second Rosalie stepped off the stage, Harriet was the first to greet her.

She had no idea if it looked out of place, but she had spent too long watching from the sidelines, letting her beautiful voice wash over her and drown her in longing. She had occasionally been drawn onto the floor, usually by Henry, sometimes by Charlie, and once by Uncle John, yet all she really could focus on was Rosalie.

And now that she had the chance to *speak* to her, she was going to take it.

Rosalie bowed her head as Harriet approached her. “Lady Harriet, what a pleasure to meet you. I’ve heard so much about you.”

Harriet almost rolled her eyes until she remembered exactly where she was and who she was with. This wasn’t some private meeting in The Lion’s Thorn. She had to play the role of the earl’s daughter here, and she couldn’t falter lest she ruin everything.

“Darling, that is no way to address your social superior, I’m afraid,” Harriet declared in a soft voice that no one except Rosalie could hear. “And if you believe that I can even *pretend* to have just met you, then you are a fool. I may be a decent actress, but that is asking the impossible.”

Rosalie’s lips twitched. “Whatever my lady says.”

This time Harriet did roll her eyes. She couldn’t help it. “Please tell me that you had no idea you were coming here for this event.”

“Of course not. I would have told you if I had!” Rosalie looked a little insulted that Harriet had doubted her. Harriet felt her fingers twitch, ready to reach for her hand in an attempt to reassure her. She caught herself at the last second. “It was Jeffrey who arranged most of it—he knew a person who knew Mr. Madson. I didn’t find out the name until we got here, and by then it was too late. I would have done anything to prepare you for seeing me here.”

Harriet smiled. She knew that would have been the likely scenario, yet hearing it from Rosalie's lips lifted a weight that Harriet hadn't even realised had been on her shoulders. It wasn't until that worry disappeared that she felt the stares coming from the others. And she realised she had been spending far too much time in solitary conversation with Rosalie. She swallowed.

"Would you like to meet my aunt and uncle?"

"Do they wish to meet me?" Rosalie's voice sounded only a little hesitant. Her eyes, on the other hand, spoke volumes, those beautiful brown eyes laden with panic and worry.

"I think they'll struggle through some polite conversation even if they don't—we cannot be stuck in a corner together, no matter how much I may wish we could." She smiled. Oh, how she longed to be able to take Rosalie's hand. "Come with me."

They moved over to where Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle John stood with Charlie, in conversation with Henry's mother and father. She hadn't really *planned* for Mr. and Mrs. Madson to be there, and a part of her was tempted to turn around and see if someone else was available. Until her aunt saw her and she was trapped. There was no way of escaping now.

"Harriet, there you are! We were beginning to wonder where you had gotten to." Her aunt pressed a kiss to her cheek as Harriet stepped up by her side. Her eyes then fell on Rosalie, who was hovering behind Harriet. "Ah, our entertainer for the evening. Your voice is beautiful, my dear. I've never had much care for music, but gracious, you have some talent, I know that much."

Rosalie quickly glanced at Harriet, who nodded discreetly, before she turned back to Aunt Elizabeth. "You're far too kind, Mrs. Slater."

Harriet was more than relieved that Rosalie had addressed her aunt correctly, and to avoid any further complications, she introduced them all.

A voice was screaming in her head, informing her that mixing these two worlds would end only in catastrophe. Yet that voice was quickly silenced as Rosalie started talking and jesting with her aunt and uncle and Charlie. Even Mr. and Mrs. Madson seemed to enjoy her company before they had to pardon themselves to make their rounds.

It had felt so very natural and right.

It was that thought alone that kept her rooted to the spot instead of trying to hide in the nearest corner.

“How do you two know each other?” Aunt Elizabeth asked and just like that, the roots vanished and Harriet wanted to flee again.

Why hadn’t she thought of a story before she had introduced them? How could she come up with something that her aunt and uncle would both believe and respect? If they found out about the real way they had met, they would send Harriet back to Scotland, and Rosalie would be cast from this house without a second glance.

“We met in a bookstore. We both reached for the same book,” Rosalie answered, her glance darting between Charlie and Harriet as her lips stretched into an easy smile. “We talked for a few minutes and parted ways. I was so shocked when I saw her come through the door; you wouldn’t think New York City could be such a small place!”

Harriet was in awe. She had managed to do what Harriet could never had done.

Her aunt and uncle engaged her in conversation, breaking apart only when they had to shift their attentions elsewhere. Charlie was a steady presence by Rosalie’s side, guiding and whispering instructions in her ear whenever Harriet had to be swept back to the dance floor or it was Rosalie’s time to return back to the stage.

When she finally declared that it was time for the final song, Harriet couldn’t stop the wide smile that came across her face when the familiar tune filled the air. It had been a long time since she had heard “Highland Bloom” played, yet Harriet recognised it instantly.

As it finished and Rosalie was helping the band pack up, Harriet was led out to the foyer to get her coat. She didn’t get a chance to say a final farewell, yet their eyes met across the room, and Harriet knew it was enough.

Henry walked her to the car, pressing a kiss to her cheek before helping her into the back seat. After that, Charlie and Aunt Elizabeth shuffled in whilst Uncle John slid into the front.

Her attention couldn’t leave the memory of having Rosalie interact with her family. No doubt her aunt and uncle thought she was so quiet because she was reliving the moment the engagement was announced. They didn’t need to know any better.

By the time they returned to the house, Harriet felt ready to drop. She was pretty certain she’d be out cold the second her head hit the pillow, and she didn’t want to put it off any longer than she really needed to. So she bid

goodnight to her aunt, uncle, and cousin, and then dashed off to her room.

Yet she had no sooner closed the door and started to remove her jewellery when there was a knock at the door. She thought maybe it was Martha, so she gave a quick, "Enter," and continued to unfasten her necklaces. "I think I'll head to bed, Martha, and deal with everything else tomorrow."

She turned, expecting to find the familiar sight of her maid already bustling around the room and getting everything tidied up and organised.

Instead, her aunt stood there, still in her coat. She had her hands clasped in front of her and a warm smile on her face.

"Aunt Elizabeth! What a surprise! What's wrong?"

Her aunt gently shook her head. "Nothing, my dear. I wanted to say that...I rather thought your friend was a nice girl. You wouldn't know she wasn't upper class from the way she acts. She's a lady through and through."

Harriet stared at her aunt, looking for signs of an upcoming reprimand or judgement. There was no sign of that, though, only that steady, gentle smile.

"My...my friend...? I...I just met her tonight, Aunt."

Aunt Elizabeth chuckled softly, moving over to sit at the foot of the bed. She patted the space beside her, and Harriet found her body complying long before her mind realised.

"I thought you met in a bookshop?" She shook her head. "If you expect me to believe that you just met that girl tonight then you must think me a fool."

Harriet lowered her gaze. She didn't know what to say. She wondered if she should keep pressing the issue, but she knew better.

"I don't think you a fool," she said, her voice soft.

She felt her aunt's fingers softly grip her chin, gently tilting her head upwards.

"I thought as much. Don't worry, my dear. I won't tell Uncle John." She smiled. "But I meant what I said. I rather enjoyed her company. And you did, too. I don't think I've ever seen you quite so relaxed or smiling as much before."

All the cells in Harriet's body were screaming at her to deny this. It had been dangerous enough admitting to knowing her beforehand, but this was something else entirely. It sounded far too intimate, and it terrified Harriet to think it had been so obvious.

This isn't strangers, though, this is your aunt who has always been there

when she could. So whilst Harriet didn't confirm her statement, she didn't deny it, either.

"So, I was thinking," Aunt Elizabeth continued, oblivious to Harriet's inner turmoil, "that you may like to invite her to the next dinner party we throw. It seems only fair that you have a friend around here, Harriet. I didn't give it much thought beforehand how isolated it must feel to have been thrown into the deep end with the suitors and then your courtship with Henry. It's really no wonder you sneaked out—you deserve a social life as well."

Harriet had no idea what to think. Her eyes darted over her aunt's face, amazed that these words were spilling from her mouth. She almost wondered if she had fallen asleep in the car and this was all some very realistic dream.

"And I have the perfect occasion for it! Your uncle's birthday is coming up soon. And he's going to be sixty this year, which is a rather good age for a special celebration such as a huge dinner with friends from Chicago." Aunt Elizabeth beamed, love in her eyes as she spoke of her plans to surprise her husband. "I had planned on asking for your help to plan it, though I was going to wait a little closer to the date. Yet this seemed like too good an opportunity to miss. The next time you speak to Miss Smith, ask her if she'd like to come."

"I—" Harriet tried, but before she could form words, the door opened. Martha stepped in, stopping on the threshold when she realised that Harriet wasn't alone.

Her eyes widened. "I'm so sorry, m'lady!"

She started to back out of the room but Aunt Elizabeth stood. "Don't worry, Martha, I must go." She strode over to the door, stopping before she left. "We can start planning everything tomorrow. And my dear, I've always believed that, since we're told that what happens before a man walks down the aisle shouldn't matter, the same should be said for the woman."

"Aunt, I..."

But her aunt was already gone, a cheerful "goodnight" thrown over her shoulder as she shut the door behind her, leaving Harriet utterly bemused.

"What was that all about, m'lady?"

Harriet laughed breathlessly. "Honestly?" She stood and turned, allowing Martha access to the back of her dress to start unbuttoning it. "I have no idea."

Chapter Twenty-Two

20TH AUGUST 1923

The second Harriet stepped over the threshold of The Lion's Thorn, she couldn't quite believe she was really there. Both with Henry in her company and with her uncle's blessing.

Her uncle's birthday dinner had gone off without a hitch. He had been pleasantly surprised by the entire thing, pressing a passionate kiss to his wife in thanks, and then bringing both Charlie and Harriet into a fierce embrace. The dinner had been full of all of her uncle's favourite dishes, finished off by a chorus of "He's a Jolly Good Fellow" as a beautifully decorated cake had been brought in.

It had been a little difficult, trying to find the perfect balance of being with Henry and spending time with Rosalie. Especially when both of them had been together. She had felt like she was being evil as she had stood by Henry's side, her arm through his, whilst Rosalie had stood across from her. And even though Rosalie had said that it didn't matter, for she knew how Harriet really felt, it had still felt like a betrayal.

It had been an hour or so after the end of the dinner that her uncle had declared that the young ones could go out rather than spend their time amongst the "old fuddies." Harriet, Charlie, and Rosalie had shared a look and known exactly where to take the four visitors who had agreed to come along.

It felt strange to combine her two worlds so thoroughly, yet Harriet could see the benefit. If Henry reacted well to this club, then perhaps further down the line, she could possibly share her truth with him and not have it be an issue.

Harriet glanced over to Henry, taking in his reaction, and was amazed when he didn't seem confused or disgusted by the place. He merely took

one look around, saw the men dancing with men and Black women courting white men, and nodded his head. That had managed to get Harriet more on board with spending a lifetime with him than anything else could have.

It had been Charlie who had officially suggested the club, claiming to have heard about it from a friend, which meant that, should anyone notice the mingling and complain, none of the blame would fall on Charlie.

Not that anyone *did* complain. There hadn't been many of them to begin with: Harriet, Charlie, Rosalie, and Henry were of course there. There was also Mabel Sheen, Archie Collins, and William Grey, children of Uncle John's friends from Chicago who had come up for the occasion. There had been more "young people"—as Uncle John had called them—at the dinner, yet they hadn't wanted to come along. Harriet suspected the only reason the Chicagoans tagged along was because they wanted to see some of New York.

And from the way they spoke, they had seen much more in Chicago, so this was nothing to them.

They made their way to their usual seats, trying to act as if they had just spotted them. It didn't matter that the engagement had now been announced. Harriet had no doubt that no man would wish to marry a woman who attended clubs regularly.

Harriet took her seat, squeezed in between Rosalie and Henry. Charlie was on the opposite side of Rosalie with Archie and William next to him, and then Mabel in between William and Henry. It proved a rather tight squeeze, though none of them seemed to mind. Charlie asked what they wanted and headed to the bar, not wanting to risk being recognised by the wait staff, which would give the game away.

He returned a few minutes later with a waiter following behind with a tray full of drinks, giving the directions for who wanted what. Harriet grabbed her glass of whisky and took a tentative sip.

Harriet's gaze couldn't seem to settle. Sometimes she found herself staring at Rosalie, as she usually did, then she'd remember and her gaze would flicker over to Henry. Every time she turned, she found his eyes on the dance floor, eyes wide and never settling as they swooped over the band and the dancing couples.

She had nearly finished her first drink when Henry suddenly turned to her. "Do you want to dance?" he asked, his eyes flitting back to the dance floor for a second.

She knew she should, but this wasn't her uncle's house; this was The Lion's Thorn, the one place she was able to truly share with Rosalie, and it seemed like the biggest betrayal to go to the dance floor with Henry when he was able to do it everywhere else.

She shook her head. "Sorry, Henry, I feel danced out from earlier." He looked a little hurt at her answer, and whilst it wasn't enough for her to change her mind, it was enough for her to add, "However, I do believe I saw Miss Mabel's head perk up at the mention of dancing. Perhaps she'd like to go with you?"

Henry turned to Mabel, who had a pretty blush spreading across her cheeks. She was two years younger than Harriet, yet she had a strength about her and a determination in her eyes. It made Harriet wonder what she had witnessed back in Chicago, especially when she seemed more at home in this club than she had in her uncle's dining room.

"I'd love to," Mabel answered, her voice low and husky. "If it's all right with you, Lady Harriet."

"Of course. My fiancé enjoys dancing. I'd hate to take that from him. Have fun!" She waved them off as Henry stood and took Mabel's hand, leading them towards the dance floor.

The two men, William and Archie, quickly left the table to dance as well—Harriet couldn't be sure whether they found willing partners or if they were each other's. She wouldn't have been surprised by the latter with how focused they seemed on each other.

And it wasn't long before Charlie cleared his throat and said, "I'm going to go and find Jeffrey." He fixed his bow tie, adjusted his cuffs, and then took off.

Harriet also saw him smooth his hair and ensure the buttons of his jacket were all right as he approached his former beau. He had been one of three saxophone players on stage, yet when he saw Charlie, he stopped, leaned down to hear what he had to say, and then took his hand and led him backstage.

"I hope they make up," Harriet declared, leaning over to say the words in Rosalie's ear. She moved closer than necessary, her lips brushing the shell of Rosalie's ear with every word. She could feel the shiver that ran through Rosalie's body and couldn't stop herself from pressing a gentle kiss to the lobe.

"Your fiancé could return at any time, you know," Rosalie whispered as

Harriet pulled back, ready to take another sip of her drink. She had only a small mouthful left and quickly drank it. The second she saw a waiter flitting around the tables, she waved him down and ordered another round for herself and Rosalie.

“I doubt that,” Harriet answered once she had given the waiter the order. “He seems to rather love dancing, and I do believe that Mabel has taken a fancy to him. They do make a cute couple, don’t you agree?”

Probably not something every woman says about their fiancé, Harriet thought with a grin. She reached for Rosalie’s hand.

She couldn’t have said how much time had passed. William and Archie came back for a drink twice, disappearing the second they had drained their glasses. Charlie and Jeffrey came back together, hands entwined, and joined their conversation. Mabel and Henry were still on the dance floor, from what Harriet could see—her attention did occasionally flit out to check. Though more to see whether she was at risk of being caught than anything else.

She had just checked to ensure his attention was focused elsewhere before leaning across to press a kiss to Rosalie’s lips, when the music stopped suddenly. Harriet jerked upright, turning her attention to the stage, her eyes narrowing to adjust to the sudden brightness as all the lights were switched on.

A man stepped onstage. There was no microphone, but he didn’t need one to be heard as the entire bar fell silent. “We’ve been made. The coppers are upstairs. Ol’ Jim’s distracting them but it won’t be long till they come down. Everyone keep quiet and head to the bar. There’s an escape route there. Move!”

Whilst some chatter did start up, there was no screaming to draw attention. The sooner the police got down here, the more likely they were to be arrested. And that was the last thing Harriet could deal with. She doubted that her position and her blood would mean much here. Especially with all the crimes being carried out in the club.

Harriet found herself on her feet, swaying a little, either with fear or from the alcohol.

Charlie gripped her hand as her other reached for Rosalie’s, her grip no doubt painful. None of them cared about their coats or hats as they took off. There was a huge crowd around the bar, all of them eager to get out. She wondered whether this “Ol’ Jim” would be able to distract the police long

enough for everyone to make it out.

“Where’s Henry?” Harriet whispered, glancing around even as she let Charlie and Rosalie drag her onwards. “And Mabel and William and Archie?”

“We’ll think about that *after* we get out of here, Harriet!” Charlie hissed, craning his head over his shoulder. She kept glancing around, hoping to see some sign of them, with no luck.

As they finally stepped up to the escape route, Harriet’s entire body was trembling as Charlie and Rosalie removed their support and she staggered. The man holding the hatch open steadied her with one hand.

“Climb down the ladders, miss, and when you reach the bottom, keep walking until you see another,” he said. “The hatch there should be open with the others being through it but if not, knock twice, wait, then knock three times. You’ll be out in the dry-cleaners next block over. They’ll usher you out the back door.”

Even though she still felt jittery, Harriet didn’t think twice as she lowered herself to the ground, swung her legs through the hatch, and climbed down the ladders. When her feet touched the bottom, Harriet stumbled, her hand slamming against the wall to steady herself. Her breathing was coming out short and sharp, and she had to close her eyes to try to ease the dizziness.

A hand pressed against the small of her back.

“My sweet one, we need to move,” Rosalie murmured as Charlie jumped off the last rung. He reached for Harriet’s hand again, the other entwined with Jeffrey’s, and started to lead them down the hidden pathway.

Her mind was racing as they jogged down the dark passage, her high heels causing her to trip and stumble with the uneven surface. It was after the third occasion that she stopped, wrenched her hand free, and pulled the shoes off. She had planned to leave them there, but Jeffrey took them and resumed walking.

After that, it was easier—there was the odd stumble and she was certain it was mostly Charlie’s and Rosalie’s steady and sure grips on her that stopped her from tumbling and breaking her neck. Her feet were aching and she wondered how she’d explain it tomorrow when she found she couldn’t walk without wincing.

That’s if you see tomorrow, Harriet, a voice whispered, and Harriet’s breath caught in her throat. The journey down the corridor seemed to last forever, the darkness closing in around her, wrapping sharp claws around

her neck. Tears fell and dried on her cheeks, and she felt as if one more thought like before would send her into a full-blown panic attack.

Mercifully, before that could happen, Charlie smiled and pointed forwards. Harriet had never been more relieved to see a set of ladders, and she wanted to weep when they climbed them and found the hatch already open. She couldn't even remember what the barman had said to gain access to the laundromat.

After that, everything seemed to blur in her mind.

They crawled through the hatch and found Henry and Mabel, who informed them that Archie and William had made it out safely. She remembered Charlie saying that he needed to get Harriet home, as she was in shock. She wanted to kiss her cousin in that moment—she didn't think she could have survived any time in Henry's presence at that moment, and was thankful when he decided to make sure Mabel got home safe.

They then rushed through a maze of alleys, emerging what seemed like miles from the club, and hailed a taxi.

The driver didn't bat an eyelid. *What do these drivers see, that nothing seems to faze them?* she wondered, one hand in Charlie's and the other in Rosalie's. She was aware of Jeffrey squeezed in on Charlie's other side, the four of them packed in like sardines.

Rosalie rubbed soothing shapes on the back of her hand. She leaned her head on Harriet's shoulder.

"Copy my breathing, love. In. Out. That's good. In. And out." Her tone was soft, gentle, enough to calm Harriet down so that, when they finally made it back to the house, she no longer felt on the verge of crying and screaming and tearing her hair out.

They entered through the back door, silently climbing the stairs and emerging at the bedrooms on the second floor. And it wasn't until then that Harriet truly realised where she was and who she was with.

"Oh, Rosalie, I'm sorry..." Her eyes darted to Jeffrey. "And you too, Jeffrey...there's, uh, rooms and..."

Jeffrey raised a hand. "We've already been offered. Everything's dealt with, Lady Harriet." He gave her a warm smile. He really was a beautiful man, Harriet realised. She hadn't really spent much time around him to have noticed before. He had plump lips, a broad, strong nose, a sharp jawline. His hair was a little longer than it had been before, and she wondered how he would look if he let it grow out.

“Oh, good.” She could think of nothing else to say, really.

“Come on, let’s get you to your bed,” said Rosalie as she softly squeezed Harriet’s hand.

There was a small voice in Harriet’s mind telling her that she should protest, that it wasn’t right for Rosalie to be escorting her to bedroom at this time. Until she realised that, if she went alone she could run the risk of passing out before she got there, or falling asleep in her dirty clothes. And if she were honest, she didn’t think she could pull her hand from Rosalie’s, even if her life depended on it.

She was certain the only reason her hands had stopped shaking was because of how firm and reassuring Rosalie’s grip was.

So, instead of being the perfect little lady her governess had raised her to be, Harriet nodded her head and led Rosalie Smith to her bedroom.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The walk didn't take too long and, as Harriet tried to open the door, she was thankful Rosalie was there with her, for her fingers trembled, making it impossible to turn the knob. Rosalie simply nudged her aside and pushed the door open, leading her into the room with an arm wrapped around her waist.

"This is a pretty room," she breathed, almost as if she had no idea what to say.

Harriet blinked as she raised her head to meet Rosalie's gaze. She couldn't see any signs of uncertainty in her gaze, only open admiration. It was then she remembered Rosalie's apartment—no doubt she was feeling a little overawed by the room with its fancy wooden antique furniture, all the rich textures, from the carpet to the wallpaper, and the bottles and jars that littered her vanity. It was also, quite probably, the size of Rosalie's living room and kitchen combined.

Yet none of that mattered to Harriet in that moment. All she could think about was how, if things had been different, one of them might not be standing there at that moment. What if they hadn't gotten out of the club in time? What if the police had come through the doors a little earlier? What if they had opened fire or given chase? They had been so lucky.

Without saying another word, Harriet cupped Rosalie's face and pressed their lips together in one swift move. Rosalie seemed startled by this sudden change, especially as Harriet gently shut the door before she pushed Rosalie up against it, pressing her entire body along the length of Rosalie's. She didn't care if this was improper. She wanted to taste Rosalie on her tongue in every way imaginable.

She pulled away after a solid minute of kissing. Rosalie stared at her with wide eyes, her mouth hanging open in surprise, her lipstick smeared over

her chin and under her nose. Even then she looked beautiful. Harriet traced her thumbs along the elegant lines of Rosalie's cheekbones, smiling down softly.

"There's something I want to say, and after tonight, I *must* say it." She drew a deep breath, letting a blink last longer than needed, before fixing Rosalie with her gaze. "I think I'm falling in love with you." Somehow, saying *I love you* still didn't seem quite right, but she needed to say something. There had to be better words for how she felt but she couldn't think of them. She needed Rosalie to know that she cared deeply for her.

Rosalie swallowed, her lips stretching into a smile. "I think I'm falling in love with you, too," Rosalie replied, a teasing grin on her lips as if she understood exactly what Harriet had meant. It was that smile that made Harriet surge forward and bring their lips together again.

One hand slid around the back of Rosalie's neck, curling her fingertips into her dark hair. The other wandered down her neck, along her shoulder, following the curve of her arm. She threaded their fingers together and brought their joined hands above Rosalie's head, pressing her even further against the door. It was as if she wanted to melt into Rosalie and make them one.

Her hand moved again, like it needed to explore every inch of Rosalie's body, and so it traced her gentle curves; her breasts, the dip of her waist, the curve of her hips, and stopped when she reached her thighs.

Harriet drew back. "How far do you want to go?" she whispered against Rosalie's lips. "Just no matter what, please promise that you'll stay tonight. After everything, I can't bear the thought of falling asleep without you beside me."

Rosalie brushed a strand of hair away from Harriet's face. "I'm fine with anything you want to give me," she admitted with an almost shy smile. "But I would very much like to make love to you."

Harriet's lips quirked up at one corner. "You read my mind, then," she muttered before pressing their lips together again. Rosalie groaned and finally pushed away from the door, her hands pawing at Harriet's hips.

She walked them backwards until Harriet's legs banged against the bed. They buckled a little but Harriet stayed upright, endlessly carding through the short hair at the nape of Rosalie's neck. She felt Rosalie's hands in her own hair, ruining the perfect finger waves Martha had spent hours creating.

When Harriet felt her hair cascade free from the pins and fall over her

shoulders, she took that as a sign to move her own hands. She reached for the buttons on the back of Rosalie's frock, deftly unfastening them, trailing her fingers over every inch of skin that became available to touch. The second the buttons were free, she pulled away so she could push the dress down over Rosalie's shoulders until it fell in a pool around Rosalie's feet.

Harriet took a moment, stepping back with her hands on her hips as she regarded the corselet that adorned Rosalie's figure. She gave a small huff of laughter. "Do you want to work on that and I'll undress myself?"

Rosalie joined in with the laughter. "That may be best. No awkward fumbling then." Her hands went straight to the fastenings on the corselet, and Harriet had to pull her gaze away to focus on her own clothing.

Usually Martha undressed her, but she wasn't so incompetent that she didn't know how to do it herself. Her hands worked deftly at unfastening her dress before removing her pale pink panties and brassiere that lay under the slip. After those were gone, she removed her shoes and stockings and turned her attention back to Rosalie, who removed the slip that had been underneath the corselet.

Harriet's figure was boyish enough for the fashion that she didn't need the aid of a corset to hide her curves. Most women didn't bother with them, either, but she understood why Rosalie did—in her business, one had to keep up with the fashion to keep getting hired, regardless of how utterly wrong that was.

Rosalie raised her hungry eyes to Harriet's, who had a tiny urge to cover herself from Rosalie's inspecting gaze.

But that all disappeared when Rosalie raised her gaze and smiled at her.

"You are beautiful," she breathed, nothing but truth and lust to be found in her eyes and voice. Harriet couldn't stand the distance between them any longer, so she pushed herself forward, kissing Rosalie senseless, losing herself in the sensation of her skin brushing Rosalie's.

"Join me in bed?" Harriet whispered against her lips, and when Rosalie nodded, she entwined their hands and sat down on the edge. She then shuffled back to the centre, bringing Rosalie along with her, who crawled on top of her when Harriet finally stopped moving.

Rosalie went to kiss her, but Harriet drew back, cupping Rosalie's cheek and running her fingers along her soft lips.

"I have something to admit," Harriet murmured, swallowing the lump in her throat and silencing the voices that said her confession would ruin

everything.

“What is that?” Rosalie prompted when, after several seconds, Harriet still hadn’t spoken. She pressed a soft kiss to Harriet’s fingers that were still caressing her lips.

Harriet wanted to close her eyes and hide; she wanted to pretend she had never brought up the subject. But she couldn’t. If she was going to do this, she needed to be open and honest.

“I’ve never gone this far before,” she admitted, catching her lower lip between her teeth. She let her hand fall away from Rosalie’s face. “So, if you still want to...I need you to guide me and tell me what you like.”

“Oh, love.” Rosalie reached for Harriet, her hand cupping her face. She pressed a brief yet passionate kiss to Harriet’s lips before pulling back. “Of course I still want to. It doesn’t change a thing. And talking and guiding is half the fun! It’s how it should be all the time—the communication between us as we strive to please each other is all part of it.” She smiled seductively. “So I’ll guide you as long as you return the favour and guide me.”

Feelings Harriet couldn’t name surged through her then, and she gave a dazzling smile in reply before she tilted her head and captured Rosalie’s lips.

Her hands tentatively landed on Rosalie’s bare waist, fingers pressing against the soft folds there. Her mind hissed at her, urging her to move faster, yet she ignored it. She wanted to relish every moment of this.

Slowly, she smoothed her hands down over Rosalie’s hips until they reached her backside. Rosalie pulled away from the kiss and smirked at her. “You can grip me harder, my dear. I won’t break.”

Warmth flooded her cheeks but Harriet complied, squeezing Rosalie’s rear with a stronger grip until she moaned softly. The sound rocketed through Harriet’s senses and so she repeated the motion, pleased when Rosalie moaned once more.

Rosalie licked her lips. “Have you ever touched yourself? To explore your desires?” She glanced at Harriet with a raised eyebrow, her smile growing when Harriet timidly shook her head. “Well, that just means we’ll need to try everything to see what you like best.”

Before Harriet could ask what she meant, Rosalie’s lips landed on her neck, sucking and nipping at the spot where it met her shoulder. Harriet gasped as her hand further tightened on Rosalie’s rear.

“Neck seems to be a good spot,” Rosalie hummed, mostly to herself.

Harriet let out a breathless laugh. “Darling, I think, with you, everywhere will be a good spot.”

Rosalie chuckled, a low, husky thing that set Harriet’s body aflame, the warmth spreading through her and settling between her thighs.

“We’ll see,” Rosalie whispered against her skin. Her tongue trailed a hot line from Harriet’s neck down over her collarbone. Harriet knew exactly where her destination was, and her eyes fell shut, her breath lodging in her throat in preparation.

The first touch of Rosalie’s tongue on her nipple sent bolts of lightning through Harriet’s skin, and she groaned, arching her back upwards, desperately seeking more contact. Rosalie chuckled and rewarded her with another small lick, followed by a gentle blow of air across the damp skin.

Harriet lost herself to the sensations of Rosalie’s tongue and fingers against her breasts, enjoying the contrast of the soft caresses and suckling to the sharp, verging on painful, pinching and nibbling.

She wondered if she should be doing more, touching Rosalie in some way to make her feel as good as she was making Harriet feel. But she was so utterly lost to Rosalie’s touch that she could do no more than paw at Rosalie’s backside.

Eventually, Rosalie started to move again, her lips trailing away from her breasts—though one of her hands remained to fondle, keeping the sensations alive—down between her ribcage and over her stomach, which hollowed out as she realised where Rosalie was heading.

Her entire body stiffened, breath stuck in her lungs, and Rosalie noticed, for she raised her head, brown eyes full of concern, and asked, “Is everything all right?”

Harriet swallowed thickly. “Yes. Sorry. I just...I’m nervous, I guess. About you doing *that*.” Harriet’s brows pulled down as she realised how she probably sounded to Rosalie.

Rosalie crawled up her body until they were face-to-face. “Then we can save that for another time, when nerves aren’t already so frayed.”

Rosalie reached up and brushed her fingers through Harriet’s hair. She trailed them down over her face, along her neck, dancing back and forth across her collarbone. Each touch caused Harriet’s breath to hitch as her nerves eased and she melted back into the mattress.

Rosalie shifted, lying on her side and facing Harriet, who rolled onto her side as well. Her hand found itself on Rosalie’s hip again, smiling to herself

as she realised it was already her favourite spot.

As Rosalie's hands continued to explore, Harriet slowly found herself mirroring the touches. She cupped Rosalie's breasts and rubbed her thumb across the stiffened nipple, feeling pride swell when she heard Rosalie's breath catch in her throat. She longed to recreate the sensations Rosalie had given her with her tongue, and so she leaned down and did just that, her smile growing at the moans that broke free from Rosalie's lips.

It seemed like no time at all had passed before she felt a hand wind through her hair and draw her head back up to meet Rosalie's lips. It made her wonder whether Rosalie was perhaps more sensitive there, and made a mental note to remember that for next time. And oh, how her mind soared when she realised there would be a *next time*.

The kiss grew hasty, almost sloppy, as Harriet's hands grew bolder, no longer repeating what Rosalie had done to her, but finding new places to touch, filing away which areas got the best response from her lover.

No one was more surprised than Harriet when she was the first to slip her hand between Rosalie's thighs, a groan breaking free as her fingers touched the wetness there.

Rosalie broke away with a curse, her forehead pressed against Harriet's and a steady smile on her face. "Up a little," she guided, reaching for Harriet's wrist and guiding her to a spot that made her body tighten as she sighed, "Right there." A small crease appeared between Rosalie's brows as Harriet started to circle the nub that Rosalie had guided her to. "You don't need to...go inside...does nothing for me," Rosalie informed between impatient moans, her hips already starting to thrust in time with Harriet's fingers.

"As you say," Harriet replied, feeling herself grow wetter at the sight before her. Rosalie's hair was damp, clinging to her slick skin. Her eyes were clenched shut, her head thrown back, mouth open with a never-ending stream of moans breaking free.

She was so focused on taking in every single thing she could about Rosalie that she didn't realise what Rosalie's hands were doing until she felt fingers brush her own centre. Her movements faltered for a second as she lost herself to the overwhelming pleasure that rocketed through her as Rosalie used her exquisite fingers to stroke her.

Her own hand began to move again, spurred on by Rosalie's actions. Everything was consuming her—Rosalie before her, her eyes now open and

locked firmly with her own, the wetness between her thighs and on her fingers, the flames spreading through her veins.

It seemed to grow and grow, until it was almost painful, smothering her. She felt something build in her lower belly, a pressure that seemed to expand until it was all she could feel, until it was all she knew. Every inhale hurt as she drew in ragged breaths and panted out whispers of Rosalie's name.

She wondered, briefly, if she would even survive such consuming pressure, when everything seemed to snap. She could no longer stroke at Rosalie's core, her entire body seizing up as the pressure lifted, sending waves and waves rocketing through her body.

A choked sob broke free from her mouth and she turned her head, burying her face in the pillows, trying to silence it as her body jolted with tremors.

It was either a second or an hour when she returned to herself, sensation slowly coming back. The first was the stimulation down below and she had to shuffle her hips away from the awkward feeling. She then felt lips on her forehead, hands on her hip, and even though it took much effort, she opened her gaze and found Rosalie smiling down at her.

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't say a word. But she didn't need to. Her fingers started to move again and she watched as Rosalie lost herself to the very same feeling she had mere moments ago.

Afterwards, Rosalie rolled onto her back and Harriet shuffled forward, resting her head against her lover's shoulder. She had no idea if they dozed or if they just sat in silence until Harriet found that she was able to use her voice again. "Rosalie?"

She was answered by a hmm, which told her that she was awake and listening.

"When you said, 'We can save that for another time...'" Harriet started, her fingers brushing along Rosalie's collarbone. She heard Rosalie moan, once again letting her know she had heard her. Harriet raised her head from her shoulder and continued, "Would *now* count as such a time?" she asked, a teasing grin on her lips that only grew as Rosalie let out a bark of laughter.

"I've created a monster. An insatiable monster."

"Perhaps." Harriet pursed her lips. "You didn't answer my question, though."

Instead of saying another word, Rosalie rolled Harriet onto her back and

started to kiss her way down her body.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Harriet stirred when light filtered in through her eyelids, drawing her from slumber. She groaned and rolled over, pushing herself further into the warm, soft body beside her. Her head found the perfect place buried in the crook of Rosalie's neck, and her arm was draped over her bare stomach.

However, no sooner had she gotten comfortable than she felt Rosalie's entire body tense beneath her. Her lips, pressed against Rosalie's throat, felt the erratic thud of her pulse, and when Harriet was about ask her what was wrong, she felt a hand rapidly beating against her arm.

Groaning loudly so her lover knew how much she resented being awoken like this, Harriet pushed herself onto her elbow and wiped at her eyes with her free hand. She blinked blearily at Rosalie a few times to get her bearings, trying to get the sleep from her eyes.

The second her gaze focused, however, she found her breath lodging in her throat. *She's so beautiful*, Harriet thought as she stared down at her. Her dark hair was lightly curled due to their lovemaking and the light coming in gave her a beautiful golden glow. *I could get used to waking up to her every day.*

Yet when she finally raised her gaze and met Rosalie's, the illusion of harmony and peace shattered. Her brown eyes were blown wide and there was such panic there it made Harriet's heart race. A brief part of her wondered if she had woken up and regretted everything...

And then Rosalie raised her hand, pointing over Harriet's shoulder.

"What are you...?" Harriet finally sat fully upright, turning to see what had gotten Rosalie in such a state.

Then she spotted Martha milling about, gathering their clothes over her arm and sorting them into two bundles. That explained the light that had flooded the room mere moments ago, for the curtains had definitely been

drawn when she fell asleep.

It took Harriet's sleep-addled mind a few seconds to figure out why this had caused Rosalie to panic, but eventually it clicked: Martha was a servant who had seen them together. She was worried that she might talk.

Chuckling, Harriet allowed herself to flop back down onto the bed beside Rosalie, her head landing level with Rosalie's. She reached over and stroked her cheek. "That's my lady's maid, Martha, and we can trust her. She has similar inclinations in her choice of lover and is a dear friend to me. We don't need to worry."

Even though she felt Rosalie relax a little, she could still see the hesitancy in her eyes. Her eyes kept flickering over to the maid, as if waiting for her to whip out a camera in an attempt to blackmail them. Harriet leaned over and pressed a kiss to Rosalie's cheek, then rolled onto her back.

"She speaks true, Miss Smith," Martha spoke up, even as she continued working. She draped Rosalie's clothes over the back of a chair whilst setting Harriet's aside to take to the laundry room. "In times like this, when we have to hide who we are, I'm thankful whenever I hear of two people such as yourselves finding happiness. I'd never dream of ruining that."

Harriet smiled at Rosalie. "Told you so," she mouthed, her grin widening when Rosalie rolled her eyes.

When Martha was finished sorting out the clothes, she straightened and turned towards them both with a kind smile on her lips. "I would, however, recommend you getting dressed as soon as possible, Miss Smith. The maids are cleaning downstairs so I'll have a better chance of sneaking you out now before they start preparing for breakfast."

Harriet knew that it would have to happen. She couldn't really have her aunt and uncle discovering that Rosalie had stayed the night. It wouldn't have been too bad if she had a change of clothes. They could have pretended she had slept in a separate room. Yet, if she came down in the same clothes she had worn the night before, it would have been too odd. And the maids wouldn't find a guest room disturbed, which would also raise questions.

So even though Harriet wanted to tell her to stay and break her fast with her and then go on a walk and pretend this was her life, she knew she couldn't.

"I guess she is right," Rosalie declared, looking over at Harriet with a soft smile, chuckling when she saw the pout on her lips. Her hand came up and

she brushed the back of her knuckles over Harriet's cheek. "Last night was wonderful, my darling."

"I'll give you two a few minutes, m'lady, but we mustn't be too long," Martha said before she slipped out of the room with Harriet's dirty clothes draped over her arm.

Harriet rolled over to face Rosalie, pressing their lips together. She wanted to lose herself to the kiss, lose herself in Rosalie. Forget that this was something they needed to hide, something they couldn't really have. Yet it didn't last long—Rosalie didn't allow it to. She whimpered, yet pulled away all the same, sliding out of bed in one swift move to put some distance between them.

Harriet merely continued to pout.

"Don't look at me like that," Rosalie chastised as she began to dress. She started with her stockings, brassiere, and knickers, then the thin slip she wore underneath her corselet. "If I had kissed you any longer, I would never have left."

"Perhaps that was my plan." Harriet grinned, rolling out from underneath the covers and striking a seductive pose. She saw Rosalie's eyes darken some, yet still she continued to pull on her clothes.

"Then it was a very silly plan, I'm afraid, for I have amazing willpower," said Rosalie with a wink as she started to work on the buttons of her dress. Harriet was amazed as she watched Rosalie's arms contort to fix the buttons in place all by herself. She had a slight urge to move and assist, anything for one final touch, yet she couldn't seem to move, too mesmerised by her flexibility.

After fastening the final button, she turned back to Harriet, moving over to sit on the edge of the bed and running her fingers along the curves of Harriet's waist and hip. "Last night really was everything. I'm not simply saying that. It was incredible."

Sighing at the touch, Harriet reached for Rosalie's hand, drawing it to her mouth to press a kiss to her knuckles. "I feel the exact same way."

She wanted to say more, say that it was everything she had ever wanted and that she hoped it wouldn't be a one-time-only thing. She wanted to thank her for being there for her, for bringing her feelings of pleasure she had never imagined possible.

There was a knock at the door.

Harriet swallowed her words down. *There'll be time for that later*, she

thought. “That is Martha.” She pressed a final kiss to the inside of her wrist and then released her. “You must go, otherwise you’ll be caught. I will talk to you soon. I promise.”

Rosalie leaned down and pressed a quick peck on Harriet’s lips before she turned and walked to the door. She stopped briefly to blow a kiss before she opened the door and was gone.

Harriet had no idea how long she lay there, her face buried in the pillows, inhaling Rosalie’s scent. It made her mind spin as she thought of last night, remembering the feel of hands, lips, teeth, and tongue all over her body. She had never expected it to be as consuming as it had been. She had sometimes found herself regretting not giving in to Susanna’s advances, but she somehow knew that it would never have been as good with her as it had been with Rosalie.

As she wondered whether Rosalie perhaps felt something similar, the door opened and Martha reappeared.

“Miss Smith got away with no problem. Even saw her safely to a taxi.” Martha moved over to the bed, extending a letter out to Harriet. “This came for you. Mr. Jackson was going to take it to the dining room for when you came down, but I convinced him to let me bring it to you here.”

“You are a saint,” Harriet answered as she pulled herself from the bed after accepting the letter. Martha helped her into her dressing gown, which was secured with a sash around her waist to ensure she wasn’t lounging around naked. She then went over to her vanity and grabbed the small letter opener she kept there.

“Miss Smith seems lovely, m’lady, if it’s not out of turn for me to say. She kept thanking me as we went downstairs,” Martha informed as she started bustling about, organising the clothes for Harriet to wear that day. “She was also marvelling at the house, and I told her she should see Creoch House. That would give her a shock, I say.”

Harriet gave a giggle, even as her eyes started to dance over the letter—it was from her father. A general update on life back in Scotland, it seemed to her. “She really is adorable. I would *love* to see her reaction to Creoch; it would be a picture. It’s actually been in my head for— oh!”

“M’lady?” Martha’s head whipped towards her at her exclamation. Harriet was vaguely aware of her maid rushing to her side, hands fluttering nervously about as if she were looking for something to do but didn’t know what. “Is everything well back home?”

Harriet let out a joyous laugh. “Mr. Thomas has finally proposed to Lady Elsbeth!” Harriet rose to her feet and grabbed Martha’s hands in her own, not caring that she was squashing the letter between their palms. She beamed down at her maid with tears in her eyes. “My baby brother is finally getting married!”

Chapter Twenty-Five

“When will the wedding be, m’lady?” Martha asked as she buckled the belt around Harriet’s waist.

She pursed her lips, pondering that question. She felt lightheaded, between the news of her brother’s engagement and the memories of the night with Rosalie. She wondered how she wasn’t floating.

“They don’t say, actually. I don’t think they’ve set the date but he does say he wants it to be a winter wedding. And I don’t think they’ll want a long engagement, since they had such a long courtship, so it’s bound to be this winter.” Harriet scanned the letter for what seemed like the millionth time before she folded it and finally set it on her vanity. “It may be best for you to start packing my things. I’ll need to see when the next ship leaves for home, but I want to leave on the next one, so we need to be ready in case it’s soon!”

“We’re leaving so soon?” Martha questioned as she stepped back to survey Harriet and make sure she was decent. There was no real emotion in her voice—no excitement of going home or disappointment for leaving New York. It was as if she was scared Harriet might change her mind.

“My brother is getting married. I want to be there for every step of the way. Lady Elsbeth has asked for the wedding to be at Creoch rather than her home. Not that I can blame her, she lives in Edinburgh, and a city never seems like a good place for a wedding, if you ask me.” She waved that thought away with her hand. “I want to be there to help plan things! And I don’t want to miss a single decision!”

“Of course, m’lady, I’ll get started at once.” Finally, a little hint of relief and happiness came into Martha’s voice. It was at that moment that Harriet realised how difficult this whole trip must have been for Martha. She had no one in New York except Harriet. For all Harriet lamented not having her

immediate family, at least she had Aunt Elizabeth, Uncle John, Charlie, and Rosalie.

Harriet tried to think of something to do for her maid to show her how much she appreciated her, when Martha stepped back with a nod. The action meant that Harriet had passed her maid's inspection and was fit to leave. She set her thoughts of gratitude aside for now and hastily scrambled from her bedroom down to the dining room, beaming as soon as she walked through the door to find Uncle John and Charlie already there.

Uncle John shook his head in amusement. "I'm guessing by that smile you've already heard the news?"

"Papa wrote me a letter telling me all about it! I had started to think he would never do it!" She passed the food and made her way to her seat. "I have told Martha to start packing my things. My plan is to catch the next ship home—if that's all right with you?"

Uncle John's lips spread wider then. "The tickets are already booked, my dear. You have a cabin on the ship leaving tomorrow morning."

Harriet felt her heart stutter and before she knew it, she was out of her chair and throwing her arms around her uncle, even as he still sat in his chair. "Oh, Uncle John, thank you, thank you, thank you!" She pressed a kiss to his cheek in between every "thank you" before finally pulling back as his words truly sunk in. "But how did you know this was coming?"

There was a twinkle in his eyes and a smile on his face that made him look so utterly soft. "Your father hinted at it in his last letter. He even gave me the date Thomas planned to propose so I could get you the next ship, because all of us knew you would want to go back to plan. I'm pleased his letter arrived before I had to find a reason to put you there without spoiling the surprise." He lifted his gaze away from the newspaper. "The mail was rather pushing it, however. Could have ruined everything!"

"But it didn't!" Harriet gushed, pressing a final kiss to his cheek. "Everything worked out perfectly!" She straightened and dusted her skirt down. "I'll go and inform Martha. Then I'm going out for a walk to say goodbye to New York. Tell Aunt Elizabeth I shall be back before luncheon."

"Aren't you going to eat breakfast?" Charlie called out after her, as she turned on her heel and strode to the door.

Harriet giggled, shaking her head as she stopped at the threshold. "I am far too excited to eat! I may pick something up during my walk if I start

feeling peckish.” She offered them both a smile and a small wave. “I will see you both later.”

After quickly heading upstairs to get her coat and tell Martha the news, Harriet found herself on the streets of New York. She did want to say goodbye to the city, yet as she walked, there was really only one destination that was of paramount importance.

She found herself at Rosalie’s apartment before she realised, making her way up the stairs and standing outside the familiar door.

She knocked against the door three times, shuffling and fidgeting with her fingers. She couldn’t decide if it were nerves or excitement making her jittery.

When a few moments passed and Rosalie still hadn’t answered, Harriet tried knocking again. With no answer. Worry began to eat away at her heart, yet she remembered what Rosalie had said when she had called, begging to see her after Henry’s sudden proposal. That if there was music playing, then it meant she was home and she could enter. Harriet cocked her head and heard the faint hum of her gramophone.

So, taking a deep breath, Harriet tried the door handle.

And sighed when it opened.

“Rosalie?” she called as she stepped into the room, glancing around to see if there were any signs of her there. She wondered, briefly, if Rosalie had gone somewhere else instead of coming home first, before she remembered that the music was playing. She must have made it home, changed, and then headed somewhere else.

The fact that the music was still on gave Harriet hope that she wasn’t going to be away for long.

“Rosalie?” Harriet tried again because she couldn’t stand the thought of not getting to say goodbye. It couldn’t end like this. She knew that she could always pass a message on with Charlie, so Rosalie would know she hadn’t abandoned her, but that didn’t feel right.

No matter how much she wanted to say goodbye in person, Harriet knew that this was her only chance. There would be no other excuse to leave once she had returned back to her uncle’s home. She couldn’t stand the thought of leaving without letting her know that she tried to say goodbye. That she hadn’t cast Rosalie aside when her family had called her home.

Glancing around the room, Harriet’s eyes landed on a familiar notebook with a pen beside it. It was the same one that they had both used to scribble

their numbers on, all those weeks ago. It brought a smile to her face and so she moved over to it, sitting down on the sofa and resting it on her knees.

It took her several turns to find a blank page, all the others dotted with lyrics and pieces of music that Harriet had no idea of the meaning. She knew that, since Rosalie had come up with them, they were no doubt beautiful.

It was that thought that warmed her as she began to write:

My dearest Rosalie,

I am so sorry that I cannot tell you this in person and that our final goodbye has to be through paper and pen. Although, it is not really our final goodbye. I will be back, my love, I need you to know that. It's just...I need to go home. My little brother is getting married and I need to be there. I adore my family, my brother especially, and this occasion is too special for me to miss.

I hope you understand.

I shall take my memories of last night with me and I hope and pray that you'll allow me to write to you. I've included my address at the bottom of the letter so you may send your own. I'll leave the decision to you—if you're open to correspondence, you can write your return address. If not, I will understand.

I want you to know that, last night, when I said I was falling in love with you, what I really meant was that I do love you. You are...there are no words to describe what you mean to me and how I truly feel about you. I feel like those three words pale in comparison, but they're all I have for now.

Hoping to hear from you soon,

Yours forever,

Harriet Cunningham

Harriet folded the paper over twice, writing Rosalie's name in the little square, and then stood. She looked around the room, wondering where to put it so Rosalie would see it. It didn't take her long to settle on the gramophone.

She had just placed it by its side when the door opened.

Harriet jumped back, heart lodged in her throat and stifling a screech. It

was a relief when the person finally stepped through and revealed herself to be the very woman she had been looking for.

“Rosalie,” Harriet sighed in relief.

“Harriet?” There was confusion on her face but it quickly morphed into a smile. “What a pleasant surprise! How long have you been here?” She then seemed to realise that something must have happened to have brought Harriet out to her apartment when they had parted a couple of hours ago. She frowned. “What’s wrong?”

Harriet swallowed down the lump in her throat, her eyes flickering back to the letter. Rosalie followed, noticed the paper and then turned back to her with hurt in her eyes. It took Harriet a moment to realise how it might look.

“Oh, no, no, Rosalie.” She strode over to stand in front of Rosalie, taking her hands in her own and squeezed them. “Nothing bad. My brother, remember how I told you he’s been working up the courage to propose for years now?” Rosalie nodded. “Well he’s finally done it! And I need to head back to be a part of the wedding. My uncle booked me passage on a ship that leaves tomorrow.”

“So you’re leaving?” Rosalie’s voice was soft. Guarded.

“Yes.” It hurt to say. “But I’ll be back after the New Year. I know it’s some time to wait before we see each other again, but I left the address in that letter there. We can write to each other all the time. And you don’t need to worry about me staying over there because I *need* to come back, after all. I am still engaged to be married and well...” Harriet took a deep breath, knowing that if she didn’t say it now, she’d regret it. “And well, I lied. About what I said last night. About thinking I was falling in love with you?” She shook her head, oblivious to the flash of hurt in Rosalie’s eyes. “Because I *am* in love with you. Perhaps it’s soon and foolish of me to say it, but I am. I *love* you, Rosalie Smith. And I think it’s only fair that you know that before I go.”

There was a long, pregnant pause, and Harriet was beginning to worry that maybe she’d overstepped, that despite everything they’d shared, it was still too much for Rosalie to hear.

Then Rosalie’s hands fisted in the lapels of her coat and tugged her forward to seal their lips in a fierce kiss. It ignited a fire in Harriet’s blood, making her wrap her own arms around the back of Rosalie’s neck and cling on for dear life. *It feels so right. How can anyone think this is wrong when it feels so right? So pure?*

There were tears stinging her eyes when they finally parted. Tears of happiness and joy and sadness and pain and anger. They were kept at bay, for no matter how many emotions that coursed through Harriet's body, she refused to let them ruin this moment.

"I love you, too," Rosalie replied and Harriet found she could do nothing but laugh, a startled, beautiful thing.

"I promise I'll come back. And I'll write as often as I can."

Rosalie snorted. "I know you will." She pressed a final kiss to Harriet's lips, smoothed down the lapels she had been gripping so tight, and then stepped back. "I best let you go. You probably have a lot of things to do. And Henry to say goodbye to."

Truthfully, Harriet hadn't even considered that. And when she said as much to Rosalie, she shook her head. "You are quite possibly the worst fiancée ever."

Her words startled a laugh from Harriet, who had made her way over to the door. She stopped at the threshold, glancing back to imprint Rosalie's face and features into her mind, to carry with her during the cold Scottish winter. It was going to be a long six months without seeing this woman again. She almost wished she had known sooner so she might have asked for a photograph to take with her.

Maybe I can ask for one when I write her, she thought, which reminds me...

"Don't forget about my letter," Harriet prompted, before she opened the door and made her way back to her uncle's house.

Chapter Twenty-Six

21ST AUGUST 1923

Harriet,

I read your letter. It nearly broke my heart, I hope you know. I can't believe you thought I'd not want to write to you! It was a rather magnificent experience to both hear those words and read them in your lovely script. I also feel like I should apologise right now on behalf of my horrible handwriting—I never did learn how to do cursive properly.

I hope this reaches you as you step off the ship and back onto your home ground. I hope you have a wonderful time back home, seeing your family again. It's clear whenever you speak of them how much you love them—I hope they're well aware of that and treasure it.

I have written my address on a piece of paper inside the envelope, so that you may write me back. You did promise numerous updates, so I rather expect them, my dear.

Let me stop this letter here, so that it doesn't seem too excessive. I just wanted to write something quick to send to you so you knew that I, of course, want to hear all about the wedding plans and what happens whilst you are at home. It would make me feel as if you haven't left.

*Yours,
Rosalie Smith*

Chapter Twenty-Seven

1ST SEPTEMBER 1923

Rosalie,

Your letter was nothing short of a relief. I had begun to worry that perhaps you had changed your mind. That maybe you had said that you wanted to write to placate me. My parents initially suspected it to have been a letter from Charlie, as I smiled so much whilst reading it.

You asked for all the updates and I have many. The second I returned, my family were waiting for me. They had arranged a special dinner with some neighbours to celebrate my return. It was rather glorious—every meal was one of my favourites. Though Papa did joke that he worried I would soon be favouring American food with all its grease. His words.

It was wonderful to see them again. Papa and Mamma brought me up to date with the goings-on of the estate and the distillery, which was rather good. They also informed me of some gossip surrounding our peers—an old viscount neighbour of ours has apparently married some young woman. Mamma thinks she's after him for the money, not realising that he doesn't have any. The house is lovely, we've had several dinners there, but we've long suspected it will be sold in a few years because he can't afford the upkeep. The servants have slowly been leaving it and he's been unable to replace them...

Oh, listen to me beating my gums. I doubt you care about such things.

Thomas is as happy as I've ever seen him. The love shared between him and Elsbeth is wonderful. The plans are well under way. Elsbeth has booked a fitting for her dress, and we've been working out ideas of

what to include and what not to. This is the first wedding for which I've ever been a part of the planning, and you'd never suspect there was so much to do! Guests, flowers, rehearsals, dresses, best men, the church, the menu for the wedding breakfast. Thomas did confide that he wished I could be his best man but alas, it's not possible. It does warm my heart knowing that's his wish, however.

I also had a recap of Maria's first season, of which she was an utter success, which does not surprise me. My sister truly is a beauty, though I did have a rather interesting conversation with her on the night I arrived, and dear, forgive me for ever bringing that up. It's her secret and I wouldn't break her trust...I just get so lost when I find myself talking—or writing—to you. She's been enjoying gardening more and more. Our gardener is planning to retire, and I believe Maria will take over from him. My sister was not meant for a sedentary life, let me tell you that.

How have things been with you? I do miss you so.

I fear I've rambled on for long enough, so let me end it here. It seems as good a place as any.

*Yours,
Harriet Cunningham*

Chapter Twenty-Eight

14TH SEPTEMBER 1923

Harriet,

You certainly sound like you have your hands full! And I'm all ears for the gossip, it's so vastly different from the kind that I'm used to, so feel free to share more!

I am pleased that you're enjoying being home. To hear you speak, it's like you never left, which is how it should be. I do rather love the sound of your family. It seems like such a tight-fitted unit. I've never really had that. I had it for a bit, before my father died, though those memories are hazy. Mother had to work and it was only me and my brother, fending for ourselves mostly. Until Oliver had to get a job, too, so we kept our home...then the War came...and he died in 1917. So close to the end, it always makes me angry whenever I think of it.

Mother died three years later. I always say it was grief and heartbreak that killed her.

...Dear me, I rather have cast a gloom upon this letter, haven't I? Forgive me.

I finally found a club willing to give me a shot. I'm one of three singers there, and I also have to dance more often than not with the other dancers. It's a bit of a dive, yet they pay well. And from what I've heard, it's less likely to be stormed by the police. Apparently the owner has them in his pocket.

It's nothing like The Lion's Thorn. I suspect it'll be a couple more months before anything like that pops up again. Not that it matters

much. I'll always have the memories that club gave me...and the fact it led me to you.

I'm not sure if you've heard from Charlie, but I'm pleased to announce that he and Jeffrey seem to have worked things out! Jeffrey says that they had a long talk before the raid, and another that night after we all went back to your uncle's home. He won't tell me the exact details of their conversation, merely that they had one and things seem sorted out. Perhaps your cousin will indulge you the details and you can pass them on to me. Or is that too rude of me to suggest?

Waiting for your next letter,

*Always,
Rosalie Smith*

Chapter Twenty-Nine

25TH SEPTEMBER 1923

Rosalie,

I have had several letters from Charlie. He did mention that he had made things up with Jeffrey, yet no matter how often I pester, he doesn't mention anything else. I'll keep trying, though, I definitely want to hear more about what happened between those two. Though I am relieved to hear that he's happy again! Things were hard for him without Jeffrey, that much was clear, but he needed to really think about it and decide what he wanted.

I'm glad he realised that Jeffrey is what he wanted.

He'll be over in a few weeks for the wedding, so even if he won't put it in writing, I'll pester him when he gets here. Charlie is much more reluctant to put anything personal down in ink. It's rather smart, if I'm honest. I should learn from him.

Then again, that would mean ceasing correspondences with you, so I guess not.

Today, I finally got to ride for the first time in months. It was such a relief to saddle Ice, my horse, and let loose. I hadn't even realised how much I had missed it until Maria asked me out for a gallop around the fields. It was good to race with her.

She's talking about entering in the next point-to-point, since one of our local courses has finally allowed women to enter. Though that would mean riding astride rather than sidesaddle, and Papa will not be pleased with that. Then again, I think he's starting to realise Maria will

always be his wild child.

I do wish you could see Creoch House, it's bonnie this time of year. The flowers and trees are wilting, but their leaves are beautiful shades of red and orange and gold and yellow. Sometimes, Maria and I sit out and paint the loch, it's that beautiful. Though neither of us are very good painters. It's mostly an occasion to chat and enjoy our home.

I'm glad you have a new place to work, even if it'll never be the same as The Lion's Thorn, it's still security for you. Especially if this owner really does have the police on his side. Though I guess that offers new layers of problems. In which case, I hope you merely sing, dance, and then run far away from the club once you've collected your money. I need you safe, my dear.

And on that note, I shall stop this letter. I'm needed for a fitting for my own dress.

*Yours,
Harriet Cunningham*

Chapter Thirty

9TH OCTOBER 1923

Harriet,

Forgive me for not writing you back sooner. Life has been rather hectic. The new club is busier than The Lion's Thorn (which I suppose is to be expected, since it's not catering towards us minorities) and so they need me more often.

Maybe one day I'll be able to see your home. I'd be honoured for such a thing to happen. And we never know what the future holds. It does sound rather beautiful. I remember your maid, Martha, telling me that Creoch House would dazzle me. I don't think anything I picture could really compare with the real thing. Your uncle's house seemed like a castle to me, so I have no idea what your Creoch House would do to me!

What are you wearing for the wedding? I always like you in darker colours, but I assume that's not really fitting? Then again, it is a winter wedding, perhaps you could get away with it?

Sorry this letter is so short. I've only gotten home but wanted to write you something before I went to bed and then forgot to do it the next morning.

*Your (very tired),
Rosalie Smith*

Chapter Thirty-One

20TH OCTOBER 1923

Rosalie,

Don't worry about it, my dear! I told you to make sure you're safe, that includes looking after your well-being. And don't feel you must write me twenty pages worth every time you write. Just knowing that you're thinking of me is enough.

Truthfully, my time to write is getting shorter as the wedding draws closer. I'm not sure if I ever told you, but the date of the wedding is the 29th December, after Christmas. Thomas doesn't feel right not spending time with his family for Christmas, so both he and Elsbeth wanted to wait until after. That way, they could leave on honeymoon without any real worry. They're heading to India for their honeymoon! I believe it's an attempt to get some heat and sun, since everywhere else will be covered in snow! I think both of them would have been happy in a small cottage in the Highlands, but Elsbeth's father insisted on giving them an extravagant honeymoon as a wedding gift.

Now, I may be biased, but my dress is rather beautiful. The underdress is a dark burgundy with a lighter scarlet lace overdress. There's a sash around the hips in the same burgundy colour as the underdress, which also goes with the ribbon on the hat. It's very simple and elegant, which I love, and was chosen to match the Cunningham tartan which Papa and Thomas will be wearing. Maria is in something similar.

Papa received a letter from Aunt Elizabeth saying they've booked their crossing. It will be only her and Charlie—apparently Uncle John can't get time away from his work, which is a shame, but I suppose he has to

put his earning first. They will leave New York on the 30th and will get into Glasgow on the 7th. After that, it's a short drive down to Creoch, which, depending on when their ship gets in, will be the same day or the next morning. Either way, I'm counting down the days. I can't wait to see them again.

Though I so wish it was you who was coming over...

Harriet

Chapter Thirty-Two

31ST OCTOBER 1923

Rosalie,

No doubt you're very busy. I just miss your letters and—

Chapter Thirty-Three

2ND NOVEMBER 1923

Rosalie,

We were listening to the music bands today and all I could think about was how they all paled in comparison to you. I know you're probably busy. It's hard, when the letters come and there's not one from you. Did I do something? Have you met someone else? I...

Chapter Thirty-Four

5TH NOVEMBER 1923

Rosalie,

It's proving painful to write your name. I wish I knew what was wrong. If there was something wrong or if things have gotten on top of you. I suppose that's easy enough to happen. I miss you terribly. I hope you haven't met someone else and—

Chapter Thirty-Five

8TH NOVEMBER 1923

Harriet stared at the words on the pages of the book she was supposed to be reading. In truth, she hadn't been able to take in a single word in the thirty minutes she had been sitting in the library. She was pretty sure she had read the same sentence eleven times in the past five minutes. No matter how hard she tried to focus, her mind always wandered back to where it had been for the past week: Rosalie.

She had drafted many letters to her, yet had sent none, fearing that, if Rosalie had decided to call an end to their relationship, it would appear desperate. And she was Lady Harriet Cunningham—she *was not* desperate.

A part of her had wanted to write a letter to Charlie, to see if he could check in on Rosalie to make sure she was safe. All her thoughts about the new club were causing severe panic in Harriet's mind. But that wasn't possible. Her aunt and cousin were already on their ship. In fact, she was more surprised that they weren't here *already*.

Harriet slammed the book shut and set it aside on the wooden table that stood beside the chaise lounge she was stretched out on.

She wished it were summer, for then she could get lost walking on the acres that made up her father's estate. Instead, she had to settle for getting up and walking over to the window, only looking out at the frost-covered scenery. It was a rather beautiful scene, she had to admit.

It wasn't officially winter, yet Scotland never truly got the memo about all of that. She wondered if there'd be snow for the wedding, and if it did fall, hoped it wouldn't be too deep to stop certain people from arriving. The band was coming in from out of town, after all.

"Why do you seem so troubled?" a voice asked, yet Harriet didn't turn. She waited until her sister stepped up beside her before she craned her head

away from the sight and looked over at Maria. Her hair was pinned to her head in a messy chignon. Whilst her sister dressed fashionably when out and about, around the house for everyday things, she liked a relaxed, almost Edwardian look to her style.

“I...” Harriet wanted to tell her. It had been hard keeping Rosalie a secret from them all. She didn’t want to risk their shock, or worse, deal with them telling her to set Rosalie aside in case it ruined her chances with Henry.

Before she could think of something to say, however, Mamma’s head peeked around the door with a huge smile on her face. “Aunt Elizabeth and Cousin Charlie have arrived! Come on, girls! Thomas and your papa are already outside.”

Despite everything, Harriet felt a smile tug at her lips. She reached for Maria’s hand—even though she noticed her sister looked disappointed at the interruption—and led them out towards the main hall. It had been almost too long since she had seen Charlie, and it had been the one ray of hope she had when Rosalie’s letters had dwindled.

Harriet, Maria, and Mamma appeared as Aunt Elizabeth was getting out of the car. She turned and took a moment to look at her childhood home before she stepped forward and embraced her brother.

Harriet’s gaze, however, was focused on the car, waiting for Charlie to step out and come to embrace her, yet the second his feet touched the pebbled entrance, he turned back to the car and offered his hand.

“Who is that?” Maria whispered, but Harriet couldn’t really hear.

Her attention was focused only on the woman Charlie was helping from the car. The pale skin and stylish hair, and when she met those familiar warm eyes, Harriet was certain she was dreaming.

She watched as Charlie tucked Rosalie’s hand into the crook of his elbow and walked up to his mother’s side. He reached for her father’s hand, shaking it firmly.

“I’m sorry my father couldn’t make it,” he said, “but something came up with the business. He asked me to send his sincerest apologies and warmest regards to the soon-to-be newlyweds.” He then turned, bringing the entire reason Harriet felt like she was in some sort of dream or nightmare into focus. “I also hope you didn’t mind that I brought a very dear friend of my own. Uncle Edward, Aunt Margaret, this is Rosalie Smith. Rosalie, this is my aunt and uncle, Lord and Lady Creoch. These are also my darling cousins, Lady Maria, Mister Thomas, and Lady Harriet, whom you already

know from her time in New York.”

Rosalie’s eyes were wide as she took in the family and the house and probably everything that came with Creoch House. Harriet knew it was a lot to process—even for those used to being among the upper class.

It really looked like some sort of fairy palace, and for someone who had grown up in a city such as New York...well, she had probably been right when she had said nothing she imagined could compare to the real thing.

After a long moment, Rosalie finally managed to plaster a smile on her face as she turned towards them. She nodded her head. “Of course I remember Lady Harriet.” There was a tease at the corner of her lips that made Harriet’s body flood with heat. Harriet nodded as Rosalie continued, “It is lovely to meet you all. I hope this isn’t an imposition.”

Harriet’s father recovered himself quickly, which she was rather proud of. Then again, this sort of thing did happen quite a lot—they were perfectly positioned that when people of the peerage were coming up from the borders, they often called in at Creoch to break up the journey instead of spending the night at a public house.

“Not at all, I’m happy to meet any of Charlie’s friends! Especially a beautiful young woman such as yourself.” Her father smiled warmly at Rosalie and waved her forward. “Fáilte. We’ll prepare another room for you. I’m sure Harriet will be glad to see you both—she’s been rather down since coming back from New York. I think she’s caught Yankee fever.”

Harriet laughed as she waved both Rosalie and Charlie into the house as her father turned his attention to his sister. Maria and Thomas stayed outside with their parents which confused Harriet to no end...until she realised that they probably noticed her melancholy and wanted to give her a chance to interrogate the people who no doubt caused it.

Harriet led them through to the sitting room, closed the door behind her, and asked the footman to get some tea and coffee ready for everyone.

When he was gone, she finally turned to them.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded, the accusation clear in her voice.

“It’s lovely to see you, too, Harriet,” Charlie retorted as he moved over and threw himself down onto the sofa. He crossed his legs and grinned up at her, which served only to infuriate Harriet further.

She took a deep breath, grinding her teeth to stop herself from truly losing her temper with him. Her attention instantly landed on Rosalie, who

was standing off to the side, wringing her fingers nervously. She had her lower lip trapped between her teeth, causing Harriet to notice that they hadn't been painted, no doubt with Charlie's advice that it would be improper for her to show up with as much makeup as she usually wore.

"Are...are you not happy to see me?" she asked in a small voice, refusing to meet Harriet's gaze.

Just seeing her so defeated made guilt gnaw at Harriet's heart. She rushed over to Rosalie, taking her hands and squeezing them. Should her family walk in, they would no doubt think it was joy at seeing a friend again.

"Of course not. I...I cannot believe you're here. You know it's been a dream of mine to have you here and show you around. I'm a tiny bit upset because I had no idea!" She glanced down at their entwined hands, feeling her cheeks redden. "I haven't gotten a letter in so long, I was worried that perhaps you met someone else. Or that something happened."

Charlie chose that moment to butt in. He pushed himself from his seat and moved over to stand by their side. "Yes, but then it wouldn't have been a surprise, now would it?"

Before Harriet could retort, the door opened. Harriet dropped Rosalie's hands as her family started to enter the room, stepping forward to envelop her aunt in a warm embrace and press a kiss to her cheek.

"Sorry for running off, but I got the tea ordered! It will not be long!" Harriet said.

"Good! That drive was far too long! I'm parched." Her aunt settled down on the sofa, and Mamma and Papa joined her a moment later. Harriet, Rosalie, and Charlie took the one opposite and Thomas sat in the armchair that sat off to the side, with Maria perched on the armrest.

The footman appeared a moment later with the tray, setting it down on the table before leaving. Maria rose then and started handing everyone a cup, before sitting herself back down on the arm with her own teacup and saucer resting in her hands.

Harriet almost expected Papa to make some sort of comment about that, but he merely raised his cup, took a sip, and then fixed his gaze on Rosalie.

"So, Rosalie, tell us more about yourself!"

Chapter Thirty-Six

Before Harriet knew it, the wedding was upon her.

And she knew that the sole reason she had lost track of time was because of Rosalie. It had been a surreal experience to walk her through the grounds of Creoch, showing all the nooks and crannies. She had even introduced her to Ice, her grey thoroughbred, and Anu, her father's sleepy beagle. There had been one glorious afternoon where Harriet had had the groom saddle Ice and Percy, the oldest gelding in their stable, so that she could take Rosalie out on a little ride.

Her lover had been a nervous wreck, and she had been glad that she'd been riding Percy—any other horse would have fed off her nerves and become jumpy. It had been hilarious, watching her try to work out how to make the horse go, all while Harriet cantered circles around her.

And then there had been Christmas, a glorious occasion at Creoch House regardless, but made all the more wonderful with Rosalie by her side. Her family had also included her in the gift giving, and Harriet could see the tears in her eyes as she'd opened the beautiful ornate brooch that her parents had gifted her.

So when Martha woke her up to get her ready for the wedding, she was a little shocked to find it had come around so soon.

Harriet couldn't seem to stop her tears as she waited for Thomas to reveal himself in his kilt of Cunningham tartan, paired with doublet, waistcoat, and shirt. His sporran was made from horsehair with the cantle engraved with Celtic knots. And he had a sgian-dubh tucked into his hose, the very same one Papa had worn when he'd married Mamma. He looked so dashing and grown up that Harriet teared up when she wrapped her arms around him, unable to believe he was getting *married*.

When he was sent off to the church with Papa, Mamma, Charlie, Aunt

Elizabeth, and Elsbeth's brother, Frank, it left only the girls. Harriet had treated Rosalie to a rather extraordinary dress for the occasion, which Rosalie had deemed the most expensive thing she had ever worn. Despite all of Harriet's urgings to put her in a colour similar to what she, Maria, and Mamma wore, she knew she couldn't. Instead, she had settled on a duck egg blue of a similar style with a lace embellishment.

"Here comes the bride!" Martha called out as she descended the stairs, the bride's bouquet in her grip. Elsbeth appeared a moment later, slowly coming down the stairs to mind her long veil and the train of her dress.

She looked stunning. Harriet felt tears gathering in her eyes. She had no idea how Elsbeth's mother and father were managing to remain dry-eyed.

Elsbeth's dress was white and mid-calf in length and she had her blond hair in pin curls around the base of her skull, creating a chignon effect. Three strings of pearls were draped over the top of her head, securing her veil in place. The official neckline of the bodice was rather low, but it was made decent by the overlay of silk organza that created a crew neck, and long sleeves that ended with a sharp point that reached her knuckles. The organza covered only the bodice, allowing the silk of the skirts to drape against her curves.

"You look...marvellous," Harriet gushed, leaning forward to press a kiss to Elsbeth's cheek.

The bride beamed. "Thank you. For your constant support."

Harriet didn't reply to that in fear she would start bawling, so she allowed Elsbeth a moment with her parents and retreated to the car with Rosalie, Maria, and the two flower girls, Elsbeth's nieces.

When it came time for Elsbeth to walk down the aisle and for the couple to say their vows, Harriet's father jested that she was crying more than Mamma. That lasted only for so long, however, for as soon as they were pronounced husband and wife and walked down the aisle as such, Mamma couldn't seem to staunch her tears. Her face was practically always hidden behind her handkerchief in an attempt to limit the damage done to her makeup.

The emotional high from the wedding didn't seem to wane during the next week or so. It felt a little odd, to be around the house and not meet Thomas or to attend dinner without him. Yet every time she remembered the reason, she felt so proud and happy that it settled the strangeness that came from his absence.

It also helped to have Rosalie by her side. She had ingrained herself in life at Creoch so easily that it seemed strange to think of her leaving. The only good thing was that Harriet would be going back with her, so they would still be together.

She toyed with the idea of telling her family who Rosalie really was, so that, when she left for New York once again, there were no secrets between them. She hated having this huge part of her hidden from her family, especially when she knew how much they would accept her.

She hated that they might try to make her see reason...she was tired of reason.

Harriet stepped a little bit closer to Rosalie, allowing her fingers to trail over Rosalie's. It reminded her of the games they used to play, when they had been out in public in New York, seeing how far they could go without being caught.

Then again, the stakes weren't as high this time around. It was only her, Rosalie, Charlie, and Maria, walking back from a luncheon they'd had with a neighbour. Mamma and Papa had been invited but had been too busy to attend so had sent the adult children along in their stead.

And of course, due to the snow, the car had gotten stuck on the drive up to Creoch House on the way home, so they had to walk the long path up to the house whilst the poor chauffeur and the ground staff tried to free the car from its trap.

It was nothing but relief when they finally stepped into the warm and toasty house, the footmen rushing forward to help remove their coats. They had just turned away to take the articles of clothing to their rooms, when Mamma stepped out of the library and headed straight for them, a solemn expression on her face.

Both Harriet and Maria frowned, stepping forward and asking at the same time, "Mamma, what's wrong?"

Before she could answer, a familiar face stepped from the room.

His grey eyes were heavy, brown hair no longer slicked to the side but falling about his cheeks in a mess of waves. His face was grim, darkening the atmosphere so much, that when Aunt Elizabeth came dashing from the library and headed for the stairs with her hand covering her face, Harriet felt like she was choking.

"Henry? What are you doing here? In Scotland? At my house?" Harriet's words sounded soft and weak to her own ears. None of this made sense.

Henry stepped closer to her but didn't touch her. His eyes were solemn as they met hers, then moved over her shoulder to land on Charlie's. He took a breath and moved to stand in front of him, a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"I'm so sorry, Charles," he started, making Harriet's heart leap to her throat.

Henry took another breath and continued. "But your father, Mr. Slater, has passed away."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Aunt Elizabeth had composed herself the day after they had received the news, to start arranging things.

Harriet had heard her talk to her father, who had asked if she wanted to return to America to deal with everything—but Aunt Elizabeth had refused. She needed to be around familiar surroundings with family and loved ones. And that wasn't in America.

Henry had informed them that Uncle John's business partner had started to plan the funeral, since Aunt Elizabeth wasn't there to do it and it would take too long for her to return. Aunt Elizabeth and Charlie were upset with the fact that they'd miss the funeral, but that eased a little after Papa suggested holding a memorial service for him at the local church.

It had been a rather bittersweet affair—Aunt Elizabeth and Charlie and Papa speaking with fond memories of her uncle. Henry had sat by her side, holding her hand, and it had been nice enough, but all she wanted was to take Rosalie's hand instead. She wanted the comfort of the person she truly loved.

It had been a heart attack. So sudden. That's what Henry had said. There was nothing that could have been done. Harriet had no idea how to feel—she had loved Uncle John, but their relationship had been a strange one. In the end, she grieved more for Aunt Elizabeth losing her husband than she did losing an uncle.

As they finally approached the house, the butler was there to greet them. He had the silver tray in hand which was always used to present letters to Papa. However, as they approached, he bypassed her father and settled in front of Charlie and Aunt Elizabeth. *That makes sense, I suppose. After everything.*

Harriet drew to a halt with the rest of her family, watching as Aunt

Elizabeth took the letter and opened it, reading it once before passing it to Charlie. Her aunt's face had closed up with the letter, and it seemed to have the same effect on Charlie, who crumpled it in his hand when he was finished reading and stormed away with his jaw clenched.

Without a care about how it looked, Harriet took off after him, knowing from the sound of a second pair of heels that Rosalie was following her. She heard her aunt tell the others to "give them a minute," which did not ease Harriet's mind at all.

She followed Charlie into the library, waiting until Rosalie was inside before closing the door and rounding on her cousin. She raised an eyebrow, the concern written plainly on her face.

"Charlie?" she started, stepping up to his side. He said nothing, merely pushed the letter into her hand and stalked over to the table where Papa's whisky was kept. He poured himself a glass as Harriet read.

My beloved son Charlie,

If you are reading this, it surely means that Hunter has delivered it to you because I am no longer with you. He'll no doubt have told you that I have changed my will, and I know you will be cursing me as you put me in the ground, but I want you to know that I do it out of love.

I have seen what your lifestyle can do to men and that is not the life I wish for you to have. It was all fine and well when I was there to manage things, but I cannot have you running our beloved home and business into the ground. Think of your mother if you're too busy hating me to think I'm not speaking sense.

It hurts me to say but I know that, had you kept down this road, you would have ruined the business and lost everything we've worked so hard for. And it would have torn you apart when you realised there was no way back and you would have to give it up.

You would lose the house, the position, the respect with which you had grown up. And I know that it would have torn you apart for such a thing to happen. That newspaper is my legacy, my son, and I want nothing more than for you to carry it on.

Find yourself a loving wife who can give you sons and can support you. Find yourself a woman who is capable of controlling you and dampening your lust. Find love, my boy.

This was not an easy decision. You may not believe me, but it wasn't. Still, I have decided that the estate will be passed on to you only after you've married.

I do it out of love, and I hope, when you have a son of your own who infuriates you to no end, you will come to understand and forgive me.

Until we meet in the land of God, my son,

I will always be your loving father,

John Slater.

Before Harriet could say anything about the letter's contents, to try to put words to the shock running through her, the door opened and Charlie's mother walked in.

Harriet stepped beside Rosalie, drawing her away a few steps. She didn't want to leave but wanted to give the illusion of privacy between mother and son.

Charlie turned to his mother with wide eyes. "Did you know about this?"

Aunt Elizabeth walked over to him, her hands reaching for his, but Charlie shrugged off her touch. He paced to the opposite end, putting as much space between them as possible. It made Harriet's heart ache to see them like this.

"I knew that he had put that clause in his will, yes," Aunt Elizabeth started, causing Charlie to scoff. He made a move towards the door, no doubt ready to storm away, but his mother continued, stopping him in his tracks. "But he had plans to change it! He spoke about doing it in the New Year when things were settled. He was going to remove it after seeing how well you've been doing. His...death was so unexpected...he never got the chance to make the amendments. I'm sorry, Charlie."

Charlie turned back towards her.

He hesitated for only a second before he moved over to her, taking her hands in his. He stared down at her, watching as she fought back tears. He seemed to realise that his mother was feeling the loss, no matter how strong she appeared. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her tight against his chest.

"Is there no way we can fight this? If he told you of his intentions, surely..."

Aunt Elizabeth merely shook her head. "I'm sorry, Charlie, but no. We discussed it only briefly. He never wrote it down in a way that couldn't be

challenged in court. It would be my word, and compared to his will...it would mean little."

Charlie shook his head, his grip tightening on his mother's back. Even from this distance, Harriet could see the pain and astonishment on his face. She wanted to say something to him, yet nothing she came up with seemed *enough*. He let out a long sigh and pulled back.

"Then I suppose it shall have to be enough that he wanted to change it. Before he..." He trailed off, closing his eyes to stop the tears from falling. Harriet watched as he leaned forward and pressed a kiss to his mother's forehead, then pulled away. He moved to the sofa and sank down onto it, burying his face in his hands as he let out a long sigh.

Finally thawing, Harriet sat down beside him, wrapping her arm around his back. She pressed her forehead against his shoulder.

"I am sorry, Charlie," she whispered.

"As am I, my son," Aunt Elizabeth declared as she moved to stand in front of him. She pressed a kiss to his hair, lingering for a moment. She then straightened, smoothed down her skirts, and gave the three of them a sorrowful smile. "I will go back out and make your excuses. Stay in here for however long it takes. No one will disturb you."

And with that, his mother turned on her heel and left the three of them alone.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

The silence dragged on for a long time.

Harriet kept her arm wrapped securely around Charlie's shoulder, rubbing soothing circles on his back in an effort to keep him calm. She had no idea what to say to him, so instead of saying something that would make it worse, she chose to stay silent.

Until she couldn't bear it anymore.

She lifted her head, drew her arm back until her hands rested in her lap, and turned to him with soft eyes.

"What are you going to do, Charlie?" Harriet asked, her voice a whisper.

It seemed like a silly question now that the words were out of her mouth, but she couldn't take them back. It wasn't fair! He had lost his father—even though it still didn't feel *real*—and now he was causing problems from beyond the grave with a will that he had wanted to change. Charlie didn't deserve this. Especially from his father.

Harriet heard Charlie swallow before he laughed incredulously. He ran his hands through his hair, tugging at the ends before he vaulted from the seat. He started pacing back and forth, shaking his head as he spoke. "I have no idea what I'm going to do, Harriet! What *can* I do? It says I need to be *married* to get my inheritance. If I have no access to his estate, the business, how can I keep things running? No doubt he's set money aside for Mother—no doubt he'll not want the newspaper to go down the drain so he'll put that in the hands of a caretaker. It's only me he didn't give a damn about."

Hearing it put into words made Harriet all the more furious. How could Uncle John be so foolish? Yes, Aunt Elizabeth had said he had planned to change it eventually, but surely a good businessman would always keep things up-to-date, even when he did look to be in perfect health!

"I have no idea what I'm going to do. I..." With a loud grunt, he fell back

down onto the couch and buried his face in his hands. “I have no idea. I’m completely lost. All I know is that I can’t get married...”

For the first time since they came into the room, Rosalie spoke. “Why not?”

Both Harriet and Charlie turned to her with frowns on their faces.

She had only slightly forgotten that her lover was there, too focused with Charlie’s problem to think of anything else. No doubt their reactions looked ridiculous to her—she’d grown up with less and had always lived with the risk of losing her home. Charlie was able to go out and find some other way to earn money.

Yet here she was, still trying to help.

“What do you mean?” Charlie prompted.

Harriet had intended to ask that question, but then her mind answered it for her and she really didn’t like where it was taking her...she really hoped Rosalie wasn’t going to volunteer. She knew it was completely selfish of her, but the idea of her cousin having the ability to call Rosalie his wife and she never would...

“Well, you’re a handsome young man with good prospects—no one needs to know that you’re marrying to access your fortune, after all. You are attracted to any and all genders, if I recall correctly, so it’s not like you share my problem with the idea of marriage. So, why can’t you find a pretty little wife who will unlock your inheritance for you? If you keep your head firmly on your shoulders and look after the business, I’m sure she’ll be content to stay by your side—and I don’t think either of you would protest the...requirements needed to make a child.” Rosalie tilted her head to the side as she considered Charlie. “So, why can’t you get married?”

Charlie was silent for a long moment.

“Because...” he started but trailed off. He took a long moment to gather his thoughts. He kept his gaze down, focused only on his hands. “Because I love Jeffrey. And Jeffrey isn’t like you, Rosalie. When we talked, he told me that he isn’t content to sit around and watch me live happily ever after with someone else. I’m either with him and only him, or I...I lose him. And I had been fine with that because Father was seeing me becoming more serious. I could have flirted with a few women to keep his beliefs that I’d eventually settle down, then change my mind about the girl. It would have kept everyone happy.” He rubbed at his eyes with the heel of his palm and added in a soft voice, “I can’t lose him.”

He shook his head before finally raising it to look at them again. His eyes were red-rimmed, glistening with unshed tears. He looked a complete state, so sorry for himself that Harriet had to give him another hug in order to try to cheer him up. She wanted to curse Jeffrey for that ultimatum, yet she couldn't bring herself to do so. He was still his own person and, no matter how it hurt her cousin, it was up to him to decide what he wanted from his life.

"Oh, my darling cousin," she sighed as she pressed her lips to his temple. "I am truly sorry. This is horrible."

Rosalie nodded, moving to sit on his other side. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to push...though I should have known. It does sound so much like something Jeffrey would do."

That got the slightest smile out of Charlie. "It does." He scrubbed his arm over his face in another attempt to stave off the tears. "My father poured his life and soul into his company with hopes that I'd take over one day. It seems wrong to give that up for my heart."

Harriet sighed. "So Jeffrey was absolutely adamant that you can't marry out of duty?"

"Yes. He said that, in the end, I'd end up falling in love with her and casting him aside. He didn't want that. He refused to be that person...and I can't blame him. I did try to tell him that I would never feel for someone else as I feel for him. He wouldn't believe me."

Harriet supposed she could understand that. He'd always be sneaking around with Jeffrey because he was a Black man. After Charlie got married, his time with Jeffrey would dwindle as he was spending more time with his new wife. Feelings would definitely shift and change. Harriet guessed that Jeffrey was protecting himself before that happened.

Rosalie hummed, her head tilting to the side as her brown gaze flickered over both Harriet and Charlie. The sound was so drawn-out that Harriet knew what it meant immediately. She straightened, looking at her lover through eyes narrowed in curiosity. "What are you thinking, Rosalie?"

"Well, it's...what if you marry someone that both you and Jeffrey *know* you'll never fall for? You'll still get to be with him and he won't have to worry about anything."

Charlie scoffed. "I don't think there's anyone out there who would convince him of that." He shook his head. "He's a stubborn fool. If I didn't love him so much, I'd hate him."

“Hang on,” Harriet muttered, because that previous thought was coming back to her mind and this *couldn't* be happening. Not at all. Rosalie was sweet and loving and an excellent friend...but even this was off-limits. Right? She kept her gaze locked on Rosalie's. “Who did you have in mind?”

Rosalie's lips twisted into a teasing grin as she replied, “Why, you, of course.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Harriet was the first to react. She let out a loud gasp as she withdrew her hand from Charlie's shoulder as if his touch burnt her. Her face contorted in disgust as she stared at Rosalie.

"Me? You cannot be serious! He is my first cousin!" She dove to her feet, to put even more distance between them and further stress how *awful* an idea this was.

Rosalie shrugged one elegant shoulder. "Don't act like it doesn't happen. Your Queen Victoria married her first cousin. Everyone accepted that with open arms—her descendant sits on the throne." Rosalie turned her attention back to Charlie with a gentle smile. "But it would be a marriage that would give you your inheritance and a marriage that Jeffrey would know would never end in anything but your love for him. He knows you see her as your younger sister, so he won't have to worry. He'll *know* it's only a marriage of convenience."

Harriet stared at Rosalie for a long moment, then turned her attention to Charlie, who was staring at her in return. He had a calculating look in his eyes and Harriet knew that he was seriously considering this.

"We could say that we fell for each other whilst you came to New York. It wouldn't be out of the realms of possibilities," he said.

I may be sick, Harriet thought, glancing down at the two of them.

They were both staring at her, waiting for her answer. Charlie's expression was imploring. She swallowed. "You two do remember that I am engaged to Henry, right? If—and right now it is a *big* if—we go through with this, it would mean calling things off with him."

"You never wanted to marry him anyway, Harriet," Charlie reminded her, as if that thought hadn't crossed Harriet's mind every second of every day since she had said yes to the man.

She pursed her lips. "That may be, but..." *but it's better than marrying the man I think of as an elder brother.*

Yet as her eyes darted between Rosalie and Charlie, taking in their hopeful, pleading expressions, she couldn't deny that it was a good idea.

It would be the closest thing to a happily ever after the four of them could get. It would grant Harriet the protection from rumours and a chance to be with Rosalie forever; Charlie would get his inheritance and wouldn't have to worry about Jeffrey leaving him to protect his heart. And it wasn't like medieval times where they had bedding ceremonies. People would believe they had consummated their marriage and that they hadn't been blessed with children...a lot of couples weren't.

Gnawing on her lower lip, Harriet heaved a long sigh. How could she say no to this? How could she deny this chance when it was the best they could hope for?

"If we do this...we tell my family *and* your mother the truth."

Charlie frowned a little, no doubt concerned, but Harriet knew that Aunt Elizabeth would be fine with it. She had hinted at her knowing Rosalie was someone more to Harriet than a friend, and when it came to it, Charlie was still her son. And she was a loving mother who would accept him no matter what. It might have been different had Uncle John been alive...but if he were, this wouldn't have been necessary.

Eventually, Charlie nodded his head in consent, striding over to her side and taking her hands in his. He pressed a kiss to her knuckles. "All right. But I want you to know that you are the most wonderful woman I know by doing this for me."

Harriet snorted in a most unladylike manner that was rather out of place for the situation. "Yes, yes, I know I am. And I expect to be spoiled rotten as your wife." She laughed as he agreed, lowering her hand. It was taken up a second later by Rosalie, who beamed at her and whispered her thanks, no doubt on her best friend's behalf.

"We'll tell them after luncheon. They'll come in here afterwards. However, there is something important that I need to do before then."

"What's that, my love?" Rosalie questioned as she brushed her thumb over Harriet's knuckles.

"I must break things off with Henry. It seems right to do it sooner rather than later, so he doesn't have to hang about here afterwards. It also would make *our* engagement look in bad taste if he's just left when it comes out."

There was a moment of silence, and Harriet lost herself to the sensation of Rosalie's fingers trailing over her skin. Rosalie then raised her head, a frown etched on her beautiful face. She looked pained as she asked, "What are you going to tell him?"

Harriet smiled, reaching up to rub the lines away with the tip of her finger. "He is a good man. He deserves the truth, so that's what I'll give him." She saw them both begin to protest, so she added, "When we went to The Lion's Thorn, he didn't even blink. He accepted it all with open arms and even *danced* amongst them. I trust myself to be a good judge of character, and I do like him. I'd love to be his friend, just not his wife. And as a friend, I'll tell him the truth."

She could tell by the glance they shared that they were still a little skeptical. She didn't care. She knew, deep down in her gut, that Henry understood her plight more than he let on. She knew he would understand.

Getting time alone with him, however, proved more difficult than Harriet had originally thought. She should have known better, of course. They were to be married. They wouldn't be allowed anywhere without a proper chaperone. If they had known what her plan was, they wouldn't have worried.

She managed to persuade her parents to allow the two of them to go out for a walk of the gardens without anyone to accompany them. Her father hadn't been too happy, but after she had pointed out that it was a cold Scottish winter, they would have countless layers of clothing on, and nobody would try anything improper in that weather, her father relented with an adorable flush on his face.

Henry and Harriet walked in silence, stopping when they reached a bench that was to the south of the loch. They sat down with a decent gap between them which she was thankful for—she was more than positive her father was watching from the library.

Taking a deep breath, Harriet decided that the only way to do this was to dive straight in. "Henry, I have something I need to talk to you about..." She trailed off when he turned to her with a curious expression on his face.

She found it nearly impossible to continue the longer she looked at him. *He's so sweet and kind. How can I hurt him like this?* Harriet cleared her throat. This was the one time in her life she deserved to be selfish. She raised her gaze to his, vowing to do this and watch every emotion that he felt. So that if she proved to be wrong about it all...she'd be able deal with

the consequences. Such as by throwing him in the loch.

"I'm...I'm afraid we must dissolve our engagement," she said, her voice a whisper. She maybe had the strength to look him in the eye, but that didn't mean she had the strength to speak louder. "I'm..." There was no hurt or annoyance in his gaze, which made her take a leap of faith. "You seem like a nice man, Henry. Honest. And when we took you to the club, you didn't bat an eye at what went on in there. So, I believe that you know what it is like to...have to hide a part of yourself because the world does not accept or understand it."

He said nothing, but the silence wasn't awkward or unkind or judging. His eyes sparkled to life a little, enough of a sign for Harriet to press on.

"That woman that my cousin came over with? The one he is claiming to court? He's not. I love her. She's my everything. And my cousin... He's in a predicament that I can't mention because that isn't my secret, but the only way we can all lead a happy life is if I marry him. And for that to happen, I must break off our engagement."

It sounded like a jumbled mess as she spoke. So much so that she had to turn her head away from him, allowing the beautiful sight of the loch to soothe her. It was her happy place. Not Scotland or Creoch House but this very loch. This was where she would forever wish to be.

Henry stayed silent for such a long time that Harriet's mind started to worry that she had read him wrong and that it was going to end in utter disaster...but then he let out a breathless laugh that Harriet could describe only as *relieved*.

She turned to him, wanting to see how he appeared, and was pleased to find him with a bright smile on his face.

"I am so thankful, Lady Harriet, truly, I am." He took her hands in his. "Your instincts do you credit, but my secret is not quite the same as yours. I have no interest in romance or sex. Not with a man or a woman or anyone really. Much like yourself, my parents expected me to find a wife and have a family. I was willing to try it with you, as you seemed like a sweet soul, but I have been a mess, worrying that I was deceiving you, so I am thankful for your courage."

Harriet joined in when he laughed again.

"I'm glad that I could help ease that worry," she said. "I felt rather similar, if I'm honest. It's not fair that we're forced into situations that make us uncomfortable because society says we are the irregular." Harriet

squeezed his hand. “I hope we may stay in contact? I have enjoyed your company, Henry, even if it’s not the way everyone expected it to be.”

“Of course. I’d be honoured, Lady Harriet.”

He released her hands and Harriet gave him a teasing grin. “And please feel free to lay all the blame at my feet when you share the news with your parents. I don’t mind.”

Henry gave a hearty laugh, even as he shook his head. “I would never do such a thing. I think it’s time that I take a stand. You are willing to do what you must to be happy—you put yourself on the line sharing your truths with me—and so I must do the same.” He raised her hand and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. “I will book my crossing the moment we return to your house. And I’ll get my man to pack so we may move to the nearest hotel—”

“No, Henry, that’s really not—”

“I would prefer it,” he stated with a kind smile. “And it would look more realistic. Who would stay in the house of their jilted fiancée? Even if they did need to wait until they could find a ship to take them home?”

Harriet couldn’t exactly deny that. She just felt terribly rude for the expense and complication.

After a moment in which they shared another smile, Henry stood. He fixed his coat as his eyes darted to look over at the house. He then returned his focus back to her with a warm smile.

“Thank you again, Lady Harriet, and I wish you the best of luck,” he whispered, bowing his head before turning on his heel and making his way back to the house.

Harriet watched him go for a few seconds before turning her attention back to the loch, watching the gentle ripples with a smile on her face.

Chapter Forty

By the time Harriet arrived back inside, Henry was nowhere to be found and the rest of her family had made their way into the sitting room for tea as she had suspected. Charlie and Rosalie were already there, apparently waiting for her, judging by their shared look when she arrived.

“Where is Henry?” Mamma asked as Harriet stopped by Charlie and Rosalie, trying to gather as much strength from them as possible.

Harriet said nothing as she turned to the footman who stood beside the tea tray. She put a smile on her face. “Would you mind giving us the room, Andrew? Thank you.”

With a slight nod of his head, he turned and strode from the room, closing the door behind him. A tense silence fell over the room as Harriet, after taking a deep breath to steel her nerves, pulled back her shoulders and raised her head. Her parents knew that whenever the servants were asked to leave the room, it meant something serious.

Well, might as well go for it.

“Henry is booking his crossing back over. We have decided to call off the engagement.”

Mamma and Papa gasped, Charlie and Rosalie merely studied the room, and Maria and Aunt Elizabeth didn’t seem too surprised. It occurred to Harriet then that, despite her aunt seemingly knowing her secret, this would be the first time she would say the words aloud in front of her.

She believed her earlier assumption, that her aunt would be understanding, but it didn’t make it any less frightening. She swallowed hard, raising a hand to stop her mother’s and father’s protests at her news.

Harriet decided that perhaps her best course of action was to pretend that Aunt Elizabeth wasn’t there as she said, “Look, you all know about...about my inclinations. You know I prefer women and all of you have been

supportive about that.” Mamma and Papa fell silent, no doubt understanding that her words were important to her. That she needed their full attention. “Well, whilst I was in America, I did do as you expected me to—I found someone to love. Only it wasn’t Henry...it was Rosalie.”

Silence continued to fill the room as they all processed that. Everyone’s eyes flickered over to Rosalie, who had eyes only for Harriet. Her cheeks were flushed rather beautifully, and Harriet couldn’t stop herself from smiling. She was rather proud of Rosalie for continuing to stand there as her family scrutinised her.

“If you truly want me to be happy, you’ll understand that there is no way I can marry someone I don’t love.” Her eyes found Aunt Elizabeth’s, which were open and loving. And when her aunt offered her a smile, Harriet felt her worry ease. “Someone once said that sometimes, a choice has to be made between love and family—but I hope that’s not that case for me. I don’t want to choose between Rosalie or you, because I adore you all. I don’t want to live without any of you...”

The silence seemed to creep on forever. Enough for the worry to start clawing forward again, until Harriet started to fear that they wouldn’t be as supportive as she had thought. That, ultimately, they’d make her choose between her family and Rosalie.

Her train of thought was broken when her father cleared his throat. “Darling, we’ve never once wanted you to be unhappy, and if things were different, I would gladly accept Rosalie as my daughter, but if you remain unmarried and spend your time with only one woman, people will talk and gossip will circulate. When we wanted you settled, it was to stop such vicious things following you—that was all.”

A smile crept across Harriet’s face at her father’s words. It wasn’t quite what she wanted to hear, but they were getting there. They still had to hear how Charlie came into this.

“I understand that, Papa, truly. I love you both so much for always wanting what’s best for me.” She offered them a smile before clearing her throat. “Luckily, I have a rather splendid plan to avoid such a thing.” She waited a moment, gathering the courage to say the words because it was still a rather strange—and frankly awful—idea. “I shall marry Cousin Charlie.”

Maria let out a snort which Harriet was rather thankful for. She had missed her sister’s teasing tone. Maria then followed it up with a guffaw of

laughter that she quickly smothered with a hand over her mouth after Mamma sent her a chastising “tsk.”

Charlie stepped forward then. He looked a little nervous when faced with his mother, uncle, and aunt. He had to clear his throat twice before he was able to speak. “My father added a clause to his will—I’m not allowed to inherit unless I marry. Only...I love someone else. Someone who, well, the situation is rather similar to Harriet’s. I won’t bore you with the details, but the best way for me to get my inheritance and follow my heart is for Harriet and I to marry.”

Harriet would have laughed at his bluntness under any other circumstances. Instead, she kept her gaze on his, offering him a constant, reassuring smile.

Eventually, he took a deep breath and moved over to Harriet’s side. “I understand your hesitation, but I do rather believe this is the best way for us *all* to be happy.”

Once more, an encompassing silence fell over the room.

Harriet held her breath as she watched her family process the onslaught of information. Not that she could blame them—it was a lot to come to terms with, but she already felt better including her loved ones in this decision. The only person missing was Thomas, which didn’t really bother Harriet—she knew her brother would find out as soon as he returned from his honeymoon. And would instantly be on her side.

Rather surprisingly, it was Aunt Elizabeth who was the first to stir.

She pushed herself to her feet and moved over to stand in front of her son, reaching up to cup his cheeks with both of her hands, making him look her in the eye. She gave him a watery smile.

“I am proud of you for finally admitting these things,” she said. “I hate that you never felt safe enough to do so with your father, but I’m glad there’re no secrets between us now.” She leaned forward, wrapping her arms around him and resting her chin on his shoulder. She craned her head to the side and whispered in his ear, “Your father loved you and I believe, in time, he would have accepted this, too.”

Harriet pretended not to hear, no doubt in her mind that she wasn’t really supposed to. She turned her attention back to her mother and father, who finally seemed to thaw. Her father shrugged softly at her mother, who then stood and moved over to Rosalie.

There was a question in her gaze that Rosalie answered with a nod, and

Harriet saw Mamma envelop her lover in a warm embrace.

“Thank you for making my daughter happy, Rosalie,” Mamma whispered, pulling back and pressing a kiss to her cheek. “I’m delighted to have you as part of the family.”

A single tear fell over the curve of Rosalie’s cheek, and Harriet watched as Mamma wiped it away before leaning in for another hug.

Her father finally stood as Maria came over to join the little group as Rosalie and Mamma parted, with Charlie and Aunt Elizabeth separating moments later. He stopped by Harriet’s side, reaching for her hand.

“We will need to leave the announcement a few months for the air to clear. Thankfully, we didn’t tell many people here about your engagement to Mr. Madson, so that shouldn’t be a problem. It’ll be more the Americans, but things always seem to move on quickly for them.” Papa laughed as Harriet squeezed his hand, thanking him for taking it all so well.

Her mother raised an eyebrow as she stepped back, taking Papa’s arm. “What plans do you have for your living arrangements?”

Harriet cleared her throat, trying her hardest not to think about that. She really didn’t want to discuss anything like that with Mamma, especially with Papa standing at her side.

“Truthfully, we haven’t thought that far ahead—we wanted to get your approval first before we started considering it a reality.” Harriet gnawed on her lower lip as she felt her smile begin to grow. “But we’ll figure it out. Right now, knowing we have your support is all that matters to me.”

Her father turned towards her then, a serious look on his face. He looked her deep in the eyes. “My darling girl, you will always have our support, no matter what.”

Unable to stop herself, Harriet threw herself into her father’s arms, her smile only growing when she felt the others join in for a warm, family embrace.

Epilogue

6TH JUNE 1926

Harriet gripped the fur of her coat collar tighter between her fingers.

Even though it was technically summer, the Scottish weather hadn't seemed to realise it yet. Not in temperature, at least.

The gardens showed definite signs of making the move into summer; all the flowers had blossomed, filling the scenery with pinks, yellows, oranges, reds, and purples. And a million other shades in between. Wildlife flitted among the greenery, and the loch was sparkling with a myriad of beautiful flowers on its banks.

It was a scene she would never grow tired of, and she was thankful that she never had to.

Her free hand played with the wedding ring on her finger, twirling the golden band around and around. It had been a strange moment, having it placed on her finger with the world assuming it tied her to Charlie. They had no idea that Jeffrey had chosen the one she had given to Charlie, and Rosalie had selected the one Charlie had given to her. And that they themselves wore the matching band on their left hand as well.

So, for all intents and purposes, if anyone had to closely examine, it would show that Charlie was truly wed to Jeffrey, and Harriet was married to Rosalie. And if they didn't, they would see Mr. and Mrs. Slater befriending a young woman whose husband had died during the War, and a young man whose wife had been killed by the influenza in 1919.

The first few months of their marriage hadn't been too difficult. Harriet had moved to America and pretended to be his wife, but as the months dragged on, she had realised that she missed Scotland. It took some serious planning, trying to come up with a reason that would explain Harriet not being by her husband's side, but in truth, no one had cared that much. It was

easy to pretend that Harriet was required in Scotland to assist her father in the running of the estate, and whoever heard that excuse didn't bother asking questions.

She and Rosalie moved back to Creoch House, and Charlie and Jeffrey stayed in New York. Her "husband" came over every few months, so their marriage didn't look like a complete and utter sham, but mostly Charlie did that to visit his mother, who found it too difficult to return to America after losing her husband.

"You look very deep in thought," Rosalie called, and Harriet turned away from the beauty of the loch.

Harriet smiled at her when she stopped by her side.

"Why do you say that?" Harriet enquired with a teasing grin, reaching for her hand automatically and threading their fingers together. The press of Rosalie's wedding band on her hand still sent shivers down her spine.

"Well, you were supposed to be watching Anu...and she came back to the house five minutes ago."

Harriet's eyes widened instantly as her head spun around, looking for her father's beagle...only to find not a single sign of the dog anywhere. She felt her cheeks redden as she turned her attention back to Rosalie. "Maybe I was, then."

"What were you thinking of?"

Her smile widening, Harriet squeezed Rosalie's hand, relishing in the dig of their rings against her fingers. "Oh, nothing." Her smile turned wistful as she turned her attention back to the crystal blue loch. "I was thinking how lucky I am to have such happiness in my life, that's all."

Rosalie returned her smile before she raised their entwined hands and pressed a kiss to her cold fingertips. She then gave a chastising tut and turned them both, starting the long walk back to the house.

Earlier on, they hadn't dared to walk in such a way, but with the changing times, the staff had shrunk and shrunk until only a few trusted souls remained—ones who Harriet knew would never betray their family, as they had dedicated most of their own lives to them.

"I know exactly what you mean," Rosalie replied after a moment. They both drew to a halt as they stared up at Creoch House. "I never thought my life would be like this. I'm forever thankful I met you."

Harriet gnawed on her lower lip. Even after two years of marriage, she still felt that doubt. Not at being with Rosalie, she could never doubt that.

But that she had brought Rosalie into a life she didn't want, to deal with rules and situations she wasn't accustomed to. "You...don't regret it? Or miss singing? I know how much you loved your position at The Lion's Thorn."

"I sometimes do, but I love you so much more." Her face showed no sign of deceit. There was openness and honesty and love written plainly across her beautiful features. Her smile then turned teasing. "And anyway, your family has made use of my talents whenever we throw a large party. So, it's not like I gave up singing for good."

They both shared a laugh as Harriet reached up and pushed a strand of Rosalie's brown hair behind her ear. She had been growing it out as the fashion moved away from such a short style.

"I love you," Harriet whispered, still finding it rather surreal to be able to say those words to her. Though it was nothing compared to how sweet it was to hear Rosalie say it in return.

"I love you, too," Rosalie said as she leaned down and captured Harriet's lips in a gentle kiss as the sun peeked out from behind some clouds to shine down on them.

When they parted, Harriet pressed her forehead against Rosalie's, wishing nothing more than that she could stay in that moment forever. It was so serene and beautiful.

Until loud barking interrupted their moment together, followed quickly by the sound of a car horn. Harriet snorted, pulling away as she turned her attention over her shoulder to confirm her suspicions. "But for now we must hurry back...my darling husband has arrived."

And after sharing a knowing smile, they threaded their arms together and walked back to Creoch House.



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Acknowledgments

First and foremost: gran, this is the book I always wanted you to read. The first book deal I ended up with. I wanted you to have an entire shelf of my works and be proud of every single one...but I know you're going to look down on me and always feel that pride, no matter what. And you'll always have a place in my acknowledgements, because I wouldn't be who I am without you. I love you and I miss you.

I think it's safe to say that this book wouldn't exist as it is without the help of Jen—an amazing editor and an even more amazing friend. I'm forever thankful for you taking a chance on me and believing in me and my talent.

To my family: Mum & Dad, Papa, Greg & Jenna and Jack & Tammy. My number one fans and my favourite future moochers. Yes, if I make millions, I'll buy you all a house. And I can't forget all my fur-babies, Izzy, Smudge, Clyde, Ollie and Rico.

For my niblings, Emily, Jack and Rosie, who can't even read yet but are the main reason I'm still here. And still fighting for everything.

My best friend, my person, the one who has stuck with me through everything. Tiana, I don't know what I'd do without you, girl.

Kristina and Amber—the only good thing that came from that college course. With you two I've found my people, and I will forever be happy of all those night-outs, regardless if we cried through most of them over silly love interests.

All the friends I've made through Book Twitter. I adore you. I know sometimes I'm distant but the second I see you on my timeline I light up. So even if I don't reply, you always make me smile and I'm always sending you love. Shout out to: Liv, Lilya, Diana, Esther and Shelby because know it or not, just knowing you has helped me a lot.

The Entangled Team—thank you for supporting my work and characters, and giving my sapphic heart a chance to share its love. And for continually giving me beautiful covers.

And lastly, and maybe even most importantly, to you for picking up my book. You are the reason this book exists. And know that you are wonderful. No matter what people say.

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[Charlotte Anne Hamilton](#) is a blue-haired mermaid-wannabe who lives in Ayrshire, Scotland with her two fur-children, Izzy (chocolate lab) and Smudge (queen cat). She is currently studying Astronomy and Planetary Science and in her spare time she enjoys reading and gaming, as well as dabbling in all forms of art and her craft as an eclectic witch. Her main source of inspiration in writing and in life is the popular phrase: “but make it gay”.

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