

As if my dour thoughts had summoned him, Ansel reappeared like the devil himself, flushed and tousled from a rousing quadrille, spectacles askew on his nose. Other than the glasses, which everyone knew were an affectation to make him appear more erudite, we could be siblings. Our fathers had been identical twins, with mine being older by nearly an hour.

Considering we were born barely a month apart, even our parents hadn't been able to tell us apart as babies. As children, we'd switch places to play pranks on new servants, or even tutors, with me attending maths lessons while Ansel ran off with his friends.

I'd loved that!

As we got older, people often mistook us for brother and sister, instead of the first cousins we were. We had the same sleek black hair with its striking midnight-blue sheen that was parted in the middle – though his was a good twenty inches shorter than mine – oval faces with light brown complexions, round cheekbones, plump lips, and expressive dark-brown eyes. We also had a similar rectangular build, whereupon my waist had to be severely cinched to be visible, and to compound things, we were of a similar height – five feet and ten inches – which I knew irritated my cousin terribly.

I sucked in a shallow breath. "I'm biding my time," I said with a toss of my chin.

"You won't find a husband standing here."

I glowered and rolled my eyes before I remembered that someone was always watching with the intent of spreading gossip, and that was the last thing I needed. "Go away, Ansel."

"Would you like to dance again?" he asked, and I narrowed my gaze at him in suspicion.

"Why are you being so nice?"

He shrugged. "Perhaps because I will be gone for several months, and you will be alone without me all season long. Though it might not seem like it, I will miss you, Roz. I want you to make a match and be happy."

"Don't pretend like you actually care," I told him sullenly. "And I've decided that the perfect gentleman is a mythical creature, as illusory as a unicorn."

Ansel pouted and peered at me with a puppy-dog expression. "Come now. You're my favorite girl cousin. Don't give me the cut direct in front of everyone."

"I'm your only girl cousin," I replied grumpily, and then relented. Who *would* take pity on me and ask me to dance when Ansel left? My waltzing options were dire . . . unless Ela and Zia forced Lord Ridley or Mr. Nasser to take pity on me. Pity dances were the worst. At least Ansel appeared to come on his own instead of being coerced. I might as well enjoy his company while I could.

"Fine, but don't step on my toes," I groused.

"I make no promises." Ansel grinned, and once more, I envied the reason he was so joyful. Who wouldn't want to go to France, Italy, Greece, Belgium, and Austria looking at art and architecture, and learning about history and culture? I would do anything to escape the parochial fate I'd been born into. Offer up an organ . . . sell my soul.

In reality, I wasn't *that* rebellious. I knew my place, so I could only hope to compromise.

Exhaling a breath, I concentrated on the three-beat count of the music and not flubbing the steps. This waltz had only just begun and already felt interminable. All I wanted to do was sulk in a quiet corner.

I'd researched every single eligible gentleman on the marriage mart with meticulous detail—preparation was the key to success—I knew the state of their finances, their family histories, their interests, their vices, their strengths, and their weaknesses. I was very well aware that my extensive *groundwork* was a touch extreme, but I knew what I wanted.

And marriage in the *ton* was for forever.

Until death, as they said.

I sighed. My carefully thought-out plan—a series of five tests that each marital prospect needed to pass—had thus far been a dismal failure. It wasn't even that difficult.

- *Scholarly aptitude and ability to engage in intellectual discourse – multiple questions in mathematics, physics, and philosophy*
- *Progressive stance on women's status and rights in the aristocracy*
- *Emotional breadth and depth – must be compassionate and kind*
- *Political views in favor of changing antiquated laws*
- *Physical compatibility*

Honestly, on the last test, were butterflies too much to hope for?

Every gentleman I'd met faced the same inquisition. If they failed, which many did, I quickly moved on. If they passed, other subsequent stages would weed out any prospects who might allow me only a modicum of educational and personal liberty. But season after season, not a single gentleman had ever met my full expectations.

It was entirely disheartening.

In fact, the only person who had come close to my impossible dream had been my best friend, Lord Blake Castleton . . . a flirt through and through, with an incisive brain he preferred not to use. He'd nailed my academic questions without blinking, and I'd been buoyed by his views on women—that they shouldn't be pigeonholed into archaic roles. He was compassionate *and* stood for change. My hopes had exploded, and the next step had been to see if we had physical compatibility.

Alas, there was none. Not a butterfly in sight.

Honestly, if falling in love was to be determined by kisses, I was positively doomed. My overly methodical brain had dissected our experimental kiss until it had become a clinical study—of touch, texture, and taste—observations that led to the conclusion that it was nothing to swoon about. That said, I'd been willing to accept Blake, even with the mediocre kisses, until I realized to my dismay that he was emphatically not inclined or ready to settle down with anyone.

Thereafter, I was forced to face the facts that I might be too picky, and my standards were unreachable. Was something wrong with me? Was my desire to find my perfect person so impossibly daunting? Certainly, I'd deterred the fortune hunters

and the suitors who didn't seem to have any interest in me as a person. But surely there was someone I might have some common ground with on a cerebral level or even some infinitesimal semblance of a spark?

With the way things were looking, it seemed being unapologetically myself meant being alone. A fact that was fine by me, but not with my parents. Or the *ton*, for that matter.

Finally, the everlasting dance ended. Ansel's gaze narrowed on my flushed face. "You're looking a bit peaked, Roz. Shall we get a drink?"

I nodded. That sounded like a capital idea. Perhaps afterward I could slip away unnoticed. As he escorted me toward the refreshments room, I peered at him, a wave of envy washing through me. "Are you excited for your trip?"

"Beyond," he replied. "It will be magnificent, and I shall return a sophisticated, mature, and cultivated man."

"So you say," I muttered. "I envy you, you know."

"Why?"

My brows drew down. "What do you mean why? In what world do you see me getting to do something like that?"

"Well, it's not safe, is it?" he said matter-of-factly as he handed me a glass of water. "You're a girl. You could not travel on your own. Who would look out for you?"

"Women are just as capable as men," I replied, and sipped. "I bet Lady Zenobia could hand you your pride with fencing, and some of her friends, like Miss Sorenson, could probably wipe the floor with you, using just her fists."

"But you're not them, Roz," he noted, the light reflecting

off the clear lenses of his spectacles in a way that hid his true thoughts. "Besides, Auntie Susu and Uncle Lan would be lost if something happened to you."

My stomach roiled. "And yet, they're frantically trying to get rid of me and marry me off by the end of the season. An egregious irony, if you ask me. I'd rather take my chances on the Continent. Maybe I could even become a pirate like Anne Bonny or Mary Read. Did you know they both pretended to be men on the high seas?"

"You would make a dreadful pirate. You get seasick, remember?" Ansel pursed his lips, forehead scrunching in thought. "They only want to see you settled. All parents want that for their daughters, especially in the *ton*. You know how this works, Roz." He refilled my glass from a pitcher before handing it back to me. "What's really the matter?"

"It's not fair," I murmured. "You get to go off on your adventures while I'm stuck here. All because I have a bosom."

He snorted. "Not really, if we're being objective."

"Ouch," I said in fake outrage, but it wasn't as though he was wrong about that either. Most of my stays had been tailored with cleverly lined bust enhancers to supplement my distinct lack of curves. I wasn't *flat*, but I certainly wasn't going to win any décolletage contests.

My utter lack of an ample chest, cinched waist, or curvy hips had always been points of insecurity for me, though my self-confidence had blossomed in the past two years with my dear friend Ela at my side. Poppy Landers used to tell me I resembled a tall, shapeless potato and was lucky I had a pretty face.

I was glad she was gone, ousted for trying to ruin Ela's reputation. Twice! Poppy was a terrible person with an ugly heart . . . and she was also the reason I didn't have many friends, outside of Ansel and Blake and, more recently, Ela and Zia. It was hard to trust people when someone had made me feel small for so long. In hindsight, Poppy had done that on purpose—kept me isolated so I would have no one else but her.

Pink blanketed my cousin's cheeks. "I beg your pardon," Ansel said. "Not that you don't have *them*, but that they're not obvious." When my brows jumped even higher, he released an aggravated noise, going even redder with mortification. "It's just, you're hardly buxom, so if you weren't in a gown, we could be twins." His cheeks were practically on fire now. "That came out wrong . . . Oh, sod it. You know how we used to pretend to be each other as children in the schoolroom? You could be me and not a soul would guess."

Regrettably, I understood. "I'm only teasing you, I remember." But as I sighed, the childhood memory of our underhanded switch also inspired a rather brilliant, albeit completely scandalous, idea. One that made my heart thump with illicit excitement, because I still *could* be him . . . with no one the wiser. If a woman like Émilie du Châtelet could do it, why couldn't I?

Only the real Ansel would know, and he'd be far away on the Continent, having his fun and living his best life. I could be living *my* best life, too.

If I took his place at Cambridge University as Lord Ansel Chen.

Facing him, I smiled with every ounce of charm I possessed.
“Cousin. *Cousin.*”

He peered at me, dark eyes going wide, and immediately shook his head. “No. Whatever it is you’ve concocted in that devious brain of yours, the answer is no. I *know* that look.”

“You didn’t even hear what I have to say,” I protested.

“I don’t have to,” he said. “You’ve got mayhem written all over your face.”

I arched a brow. “Fine, then. I’ll just let it slip to Papa and Mama that their precious nephew is taking a secret trip to the Continent.”

“Roz, you wouldn’t!” He looked so betrayed that I felt a rush of guilt, which I squashed immediately. He would have no such compunction if our roles were reversed.

I wrapped my arm around his. “Let me be you, Ansel, just for the term while you’re gone. You know I’ll probably get better marks than you. It’s a win-win. No one will worry about your whereabouts or contact the duke about your absence, and I’ll get my adventure.”

Ansel’s brows crashed together. I could see him considering the merits of the idea, but then his face fell. “We might look alike, Roz, but we’re not identical. People who are acquainted with me will *know.*”

My mind raced, mulling over potential options. “What if you switched campuses for this term? I know it’s quite untoward to move between colleges within a university, but you’re almost done anyway. No one would care, especially if the instruction

came with Papa's ducal seal. How about . . . Trinity? It's close enough to St. John's. And it's still under the Cambridge University umbrella."

Ansel shook his head, looking reluctantly impressed. "You are diabolical, cousin."

"I prefer quick-witted," I said, hope soaring inside. "So, you're in?"

He didn't answer for a beat, but then he nodded. "Fine, but do *not* get caught, or it will be my hide as well. Roz, I am serious. This could end badly for both of us."

"I won't get caught, I promise. No one will suspect a thing!"