

Houston, Texas

July 1889

Rosalind Harriston had never known such willingness to resort to cruelty as heard in the words her aunt had just spoken into existence before her.

“No. I cannot.” Her fists had turned to iron and her face to stone, like Medusa had frozen into eternity her expression of acute disgust.

Her aunt, Ingrid Harriston, remained nonplussed. “The arrangement is settled.”

Rosalind couldn’t breathe. “That’s it, then? You’ve stooped to become a person who’ll sell me to the highest bidder?”

Ingrid’s cheeks showed the barest flush of rising anger. “You will find eventually that this suits you. Hurst needs an heir. He won’t go into particulars about your,” she wrinkled her nose, “background,”

Of course. Rosalind rolled her eyes to hide the sting those comments still made deep in her heart. “Does it matter that I marry at all?”

“If it means you can leave my household for good, then yes.”

Rosalind swallowed the rising lump in her throat. So that was the truth. Ingrid, and with the undoubted support from her husband, Joseph, wanted the family shame out and gone. Wanted her Houston roots stripped from her, wanted her removal from her father’s birthplace, where her mother had grown up, where she’d been born.

“What if I leave myself?”

The question had bit and bit at her tongue until it finally came straight out in an almost unintelligible blur.

Ingrid blinked. “Yourself? By what manner would you accomplish that?”

Rosalind’s throat seemed to clog when she spoke two, freedom-synonymous words.

“Nursing school,”

Ingrid laughed. “They don’t accept women, let alone Chinese ones,”

Rosalind bristled. “They do, actually. Many,”

Ingrid stood. “End that ridiculous notion. The marriage will take place as soon as possible.” She side-swept Rosalind as she exited, whispering, “You truly are your father’s daughter. Head full of the same kind of ideas that got him killed.”

Rosalind burst into flames. “My father was brilliant! He wanted out of this soul-sucking life you and your husband lead!”

Ingrid’s nostrils flared in the middle of her pointy, pale face. “Three days. Then the contract will be signed, and you will be Hurst’s problem for good.”

Rosalind let out a cry and swept from her aunt’s parlor.

In a rage, in indignation, she stomped her way to the farthest end of the apartment. A mirror hung on the wall just outside her room, and she stared into it, pretending her face was her mother’s and she was beholding the woman she had barely known. Rosalind’s features were of her mother’s Chinese origin, and they shared the same color hair and eyes. For those reasons, she had grown fond of them. They were a badge of pride, symbols of the struggle for success.

Rosalind Harriston would get into that school wearing them unabashedly.

“Will!” she called out for her cousin, wondering, hoping he might already be back from his tennis lessons. “Will!”

The messy brown-haired sixteen-year-old, one year her junior, appeared around the corner. “You summoned?”

Rosalind snorted a laugh, despite her foul mood. Her cousin was a godsend, a good friend and companion made over years of shared experience with the now familiar Harriston malice.

Her eyes then darkened to flint. "It's time."

Will's cheerfulness disappeared. "What happened?"

"She's selling me off to some old, decrepit millionaire who took interest. Three days."

Will turned horrified. "So soon?"

"You know Ingrid. And thanks to your foresight, I sent the application weeks ago. I'm waiting on an answer. All I need is the—"

"A letter for you, Ms. Harriston." A maid approached them, setting an envelope of cream-colored paper in Rosalind's hand. *John Sealy Hospital and Training School for Nurses.*

That answer had arrived.

An unexpected fear bubbled in Rosalind's stomach. She wanted to leave more than anything, but now that the moment was here, what was this reluctance that plagued her? Could it be hesitation?

She fought it tooth and nail, ripping open the paper, and unfolding the letter. She only needed to read the first couple of words before those previous, unwelcome feelings were seared through with a blinding joy.

"I got in, Will. I'm in!"

Tears rose to her eyes. Liberation was but an inch from her fingertips. Finally, freedom had come to call on her, with flowers of congratulations in its hands.

Will grasped her hand. "You earned this. Anything you need, I'll help you."

Rosalind faltered. "A train ticket,"

"Done," Will said.

“Some kind of boarding situation,”

“I’ve found one and put a hold on a room,” Will assured.

“And tuition money,”

Will bit his lip. Rosalind already knew this was where their trouble lay. Three hundred dollars a year was too steep a sum to go unnoticed by his parents.

“I’ll think of something,” Will said. “I’m sure I will.”

Rosalind squeezed his hand. She would too. Their minds could fill this blank, someday.

“Will!” A shrill voice known too well to the two of them traveled through the hallway, followed by the short steps of the voice’s owner.

“Mother,” Will said.

Rosalind watched the woman approach, her full skirts silky and colorful, her hair powdered and styled, jewelry fine and shiny like new coins, her hands resting folded in front of her.

And on her right hand, she wore a ring of pure diamond, the most opulent piece of all.

The Harriston heirloom ring. A fifty-year-old circle-cut diamond, surrounded by smaller blue cuts of the same fifteen-carat stone.

And worth just over three hundred dollars.

Rosalind had been desperate many times over. But she’d never once considered something so drastic. Something that could send her behind iron bars for the better part of life.

The ring hung in her vision, danced in her eyes all afternoon. Like some taunting temptation with all the hallmarks of her ruin but full of the glitter of her rising.

The idea kept her up that night, long after the moon rose in the sky and the snores of her uncle could be heard in the parlors and the dining room. She stared out the window at the moon,

wondering what it would look like shining down over the Galveston sea as she looked from the nursing school, from her boarding house.

This would give her the chance to prove them all wrong. To get out unscathed and unchained, the wounds on her conscience be damned. What was one wrong against a person who'd wronged her thousand times over? Stealing the ring wasn't stooping to Ingrid's level. It was Rosalind using her resources wisely, albeit with a small side motive of revenge.

But what was that regret, that same reluctance from earlier returning? Nursing school was all she wanted, all she hoped for. What held her back? What was she waiting for?

Rosalind looked at the city below bathed in moonlight and knew. She was scared, terrified to leave this all behind and seemingly leave her parents behind with it.

But her parents had been travelers. They'd known what it was like to leave it all in exchange for the world's wonders. For freedom.

Rosalind wrapped her mother's pink dressing gown around her, like the woman's phantom protective, encouraging embrace. Her mind had been made up.

“How much?”

“\$350. Take it or leave it.”

Rosalind tried to keep her euphoria from exploding onto her face. “Done.”

The man handed her the bills, big and green and new, unlike the rest of the pawn shop displays around her.

Sweeping out the door, her escape in her pocket, Rosalind sent the three hundred in the mail at that moment, keeping the fifty for school books and supplies. Her train left tomorrow. Her things were packed.

All that was left was a single goodbye.

Will handed Rosalind the train ticket, the Galveston Henderson line transport leaving at seven sharp the next morning. “But how?”

“Your mother’s ring,” she said without trepidation. Any of that had been taken out of her the moment she’d left her aunt’s jewelry box one item short.

Her cousin now wore the stare of someone connecting the dots. His mother had turned hysterical earlier that day when she found the ring missing. Rosalind had not come to see him off to tennis. And she knew her sudden readiness to leave had come without one ounce of the expected struggle of the two of them to get her tuition money.

“Oh,” he whispered. “Well then,”

Rosalind could feel guilt trying to float its way to the surface, but her resolve beat it back below the waves. “You’ll send rent every couple of months?”

“Yes,”

“Then it’s farewell for now,” Rosalind stated. What was the point in trying to soften the blows of her departure? None, not when it became an inevitability the moment Ingrid had uttered the word *marriage*.

Will swallowed. “It is,”

They embraced shortly, swiftly. By morning, she'd been gone. Houston society would be in an uproar, for Ingrid's secret foreign niece had been somewhat of a scandal brewing in the back of everyone's mind, waiting for some new development to build it into an entire explosion.

When he parted from her, Will looked like a boy who'd seen a childhood playmate grow up without him. As if this experience had somehow parted the two cousins not only by location but by worldview. By a kind of knowledge of the way of the world Rosalind had discovered and Will was only beginning to realize existed.

They didn't speak again that night.

Rosalind had been both too overcome and too exhausted to watch the rising buildings of Houston fade from the window of her train car. She was awake, however, to catch the odd sight of exactly three oak trees on the very edge of the island to the right of the train tracks as she passed. It seemed too specific, almost purposeful, like a monument. Like three ghosts set in stone, destined to watch people come and go, but never be able to enjoy the pleasures of living themselves.

The train arrived at the station not a minute later.

Rosalind let her thoughts cease amongst the hustle of the station, but once she emerged into the sunlight, blinking, her soul was eclipsed with beauty. The rising buildings set against the blue water and the smoke of docking ships, cruises, transport carriers, and fishing boats. It wasn't the gray monotony of Houston, a city barely off its feet. This was the colorful explosion of might, of greatness, on a scale she had never before fathomed.

This was a place that any price was worth paying to get to.

Rosalind began her way down the street, Strand street, as a sign read. She saw women, children, workers, businessmen, and people of all races mingling in this beloved space. It was a freedom-soaked town at first glance, with a relaxed nature of the rich and poor who lived harmoniously among one another. It was the type of city where just about anyone could thrive.

She caught a trolley car headed in her boardinghouse's direction, a sea breeze catching her cheek as she boarded. They went further down Strand street, and there, on her left, was the John Sealy Hospital, and the medical school building. The stately, intricate, grand structures caught her gaze and held it tight as Rosalind passed; they were pure hope that had crystallized into powerful beacons, melting away any guilt or regret that might have been left in her.

That ring had been a pure diamond, but Galveston, but freedom, was what the true wealth of life was made of.