

## Part 1

Dodo gasped at the transformation of the grand dining room of Beresford House that now glittered with candlelight and Christmas greenery. The huge table sparkled and twinkled as the flickering flames reflected on the cut glass and silverware.

The newly minted Mrs. Rupert Danforth took her seat across from her husband - *husband!* - smiling so hard her cheeks hurt.

"How's your head, darling?" she whispered.

"Throbbing magnificently," he replied with a grin. "But I wouldn't miss a moment of this."

The replacement fruitcake stood proudly on its pedestal. No one would ever know how close they had come to not having one at all, thanks to the mice.

"If anyone so much as breathes on that cake," Lizzie had whispered to Dodo earlier, "I think Mrs. Brown might commit murder herself."

A flurry of uniformed footmen entered, proudly holding enormous, china soup tureens. Dodo almost expected them to burst into a dance routine. Instead, they ladled oyster soup into their bowls.

Granny peered suspiciously into her bowl. "Oysters," she declared rather loudly. "In my day, we only served oysters at funerals. Are we mourning something?"

"Only your tact, Mother," Lord Alfred muttered into his napkin.

A gray-haired gentleman whom Dodo assumed to be one of the government ministers, waved his fork in her direction. She nodded back.

"Who's that?" asked Rupert.

"No idea," she responded, adjusting the heavy tiara. "One of Daddy's protege's I suppose."

The minister leaned toward his neighbor—a pinched-faced woman in purple silk—and said, rather too loudly, "Remarkable girl, that. Solved a murder, before breakfast, you know."

Dodo pretended not to hear, though Rupert's shoulders shook with suppressed laughter.

When he'd recovered, Rupert studied her like a love-sick school boy. "Do you know how beautiful you look?"

"Since you've told me seventeen times since leaving the church, I've got the message," she grinned. "But don't stop. A woman can never hear that sentiment too much."

She caught Renee's eye and nodded. The wedding dress was too spectacular for words and would thrust the designer high into the world of bridal design.

As the soup plates were whisked away, dressed crab replaced them. The artistry achieved by Mrs. Brown rivaled that of the best chefs in Paris.

The soup had triggered Dodo's appetite and she devoured the crab with gusto.

Rupert eyed her progress with incredulity. "It's so nice to see a girl who likes her food."

Reaching across the table she swatted him with her starched napkin. "I'm starving. Aren't you?"

A footman offered her more wine but she placed a hand over the glass. She did not want to be tipsy for the dancing later.

Further down the table, Julia reached eagerly for her wine glass, only to have Beatrice smoothly intercept it.

"You've had quite enough," Beatrice whispered.

"I've had one glass!"

"And you're seventeen."

"Almost eighteen."

"Almost doesn't count."

Julia slumped back in her chair with a theatrical sigh that rivalled anything on the West End stage.

After poached salmon in hollandaise sauce and a slice of beef Wellington that melted in the mouth, Dodo's dress began to feel a little tight.

Rupert had hardly touched his own food.

"Not hungry?" Dodo asked, knowing he was still in a great deal of pain after his ordeal.

"Too busy thinking about this evening, Mrs. Danforth." His eyes bored into hers and she felt a blush rise to her cheeks.

Mrs. Danforth checked her son's plate and noted to Lady Guinevere, "He's barely eaten. After his ordeal, he needs nourishment."

"Men never eat at their own weddings," Guinevere replied.

By the time the pressed tongue arrived, even Dodo could not eat another bite and merely pushed the meat around the plate with her fork.

Grandmama, who had been quietly observing the proceedings, leaned toward Dodo's mother. "Rupert looks dreadful."

"Mother! Keep your voice down. We'll reapply some powder to his bruises before the evening reception."

"Do I look that bad?" Rupert asked, fingers reaching for the blue stains on his face.

"Not to me," Dodo assured him.

With the arrival of the Charlotte Russe whose Lady Fingers stood guard around the center of cream custard, Dodo found more room. It was one of her favorites. She let the smooth cream slide down.

"Aren't you going to have any of this? It's amazing," she asked Rupert.

"Maybe just a little." He leaned toward her and she fed him from her spoon.

"Time for the cutting of the cake," directed her father, Lord Dorchester.

Rupert struggled out of his chair, and Dodo hurried around the table to help him.

"Thank heavens the vows include 'in sickness and in health'," he murmured with a smile.

As he limped, leaning heavily on her arm, a footman stepped forward holding a shiny sword across his hands. They both reached for it, the gold cord dangling. Gripping the blade together, they sliced into the bottom layer of the splendid tiered cake.

The room erupted in cheers.

As the footmen whisked the cake to the kitchen to be sliced for all the guests, Mrs. Brown appeared briefly in the doorway, watching its departure with the fierce pride of a mother sending her child off to school.

Dodo caught her eye and mouthed, "Perfect!"

Mrs. Brown's face broke into a rare smile. She dabbed at her eyes with her apron and disappeared back into the kitchen, no doubt to oversee the slicing.

Dodo and Rupert returned to their place at the head of the table.

"Got your speech ready?" she asked him.

Dodo felt Rupert tense beside her.

"Worried?" she asked.

"How can I possibly put everything I feel about you into a three minute speech?"

"I see the dilemma." She honored him with her most dazzling smile and he reached for her hand and kissed it gently sending shivers up her spine.

"How is Charlie feeling about his speech?"

"Terrified. He's been practicing for days. That's never a good sign."

Rupert tapped his wine glass and Charlie rose, smoothing his napkin with exaggerated care before pushing back his chair. A hush settled over the room, broken only by the discreet clink of cutlery being laid aside.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, lifting his glass, "it is my very great honor—as best man—to set the ball rolling this afternoon." His smile widened. "When Rupert asked me to take on the role, I was, of course, flattered." He paused, just long enough. "Though I must confess, when he extended the invitation, I had no idea the position would involve breaking and entering."

While Lord Alfred coughed into his wine glass, a ripple of polite laughter passed through the room—warmer and a touch more knowing from those acquainted with Rupert's recent brush with mortality.

Dodo's gaze flicked, unbidden, to Mrs. Danforth, whose complexion had paled, though her smile remained firmly in place.

"Now," Charlie continued, warming to his theme, "I've known the bride since she was a little girl—long enough to say with confidence that she has always possessed a remarkable combination of kindness, determination, and the ability to get her own way without ever appearing to do so." More laughter, this time affectionate. "Rupert, on the other hand, only came into my life last year. But some friendships are forged quickly, particularly when tested by circumstance. We became fast friends, and now are joined for life as brothers-in-law."

Rupert raised his glass.

"They say the course of true love rarely runs smoothly and their beginning was no different. In fact, I have it from the bride's own mouth that when they met she thought Rupert was a fool."

An amused murmur ran around the table.

"But in this case, the charge arose because Rupert had the misfortune to arrive in Dodo's life escorted by a woman she had every reason to distrust."

The murmuring turned to interest.

"Veronica!" mouthed Julia.

"But what Dodo did not know was that his appearance with said woman was a favor being repaid. A quiet act of loyalty to someone he loved."

Dodo glanced down the table at Beatrice who was studying the pattern in the tablecloth.

Charlie smiled at the bride. "To her great credit, and Rupert's relief, she revised those first conclusions once the truth came to light."

Dodo laughed outright, while Rupert dramatically wiped his brow before dropping his head into his hands.

So," Charlie continued, raising his glass once more, "this is a love story that began with suspicion, survived deception, and triumphed through courage, honesty, and the rare ability to admit one might—occasionally—have been wrong." He lifted the glass higher. "To Rupert and Dodo: proof that even the most unpromising first impressions can lead to the very best endings."

"To Rupert and Dodo," repeated the guests.

"And may your marriage be filled with love, laughter, and significantly fewer kidnappings," he concluded.

"Hear, hear!" the room chorused.

*To be continued...*