



A Widowed Earl's Chance at Love (Whispers of Regency Love)

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Category: Historical

Description: Trapped in a loveless marriage and betrayed by her scheming sister-in-law, Miss Isabelle Sutton clings to her family's library, convinced that love exists only in books. Yet, beneath her quiet devotion burns a single goal: to destroy the Earl who stole her freedom.

At forty-one, Lord Henry Montague, Earl of Ashford, seeks solace in the novels at the Evergreen Library, weary of meddling relatives and a loveless past. Yet, when the fiery Miss Sutton pulls him into a game of revenge, solitude is no longer an option.

Their clashing worlds bring them to a crossroads: obey society's rules or risk everything for love. With the odds stacked against them, Isabelle and Henry must decide if true happiness lies in resisting their hearts or following them.

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Chapter 1

End of the season, London, 1812

Butterflies.

Isabelle Sutton glanced around the edge of the pillar and noted the many swishing movements of fans.

“Isabelle! You need to stop hiding!” Baroness Sinclair’s voice cut through her thoughts like a knife.

Wincing at having been caught, Isabelle appeared from behind a pillar and fanned her flushed cheeks. Her large brown eyes guiltily scanned the group of nearby debutants who shot disapproving glances in her direction.

She had been hoping to go unnoticed for the rest of the evening, yet nobody was ever more determined than a widowed aunt who wanted to see her niece married. Tendrils of her light brown hair tickled the back of her neck after escaping from the elaborate pins.

“Just look at your dress; you have all but ruined the muslin with your childish behaviour.” Aunt Alice vigorously fanned her face, attempting to hide her expression as she pursed her lips into a sour look of displeasure.

Her dark eyes matched the heavy fabric of her outdated brown dress, while her grey hair had been pulled tightly into her signature bun at the back of her head.

“I do not care what my dress looks like, Aunt Alice. I will not be made to dance with another gentleman. I would rather chop this dress into tiny pieces and eat it.” She tilted her head to the side defiantly and raised an eyebrow.

Aunt Alice opened her mouth to respond when she was interrupted.

“There she is, I am so glad that you found her.” Miss Caroline Sedgewick came strutting towards them with the many layers of her ruffled pink dress lifted off the floor. Her dull blonde hair fell flat against the flickering light of the many candles.

“It took me a while, but I tracked her down.” Aunt Alice shot her niece another disapproving glance.

“Isabelle, there you are.” Isabelle’s older brother came ambling towards them.

Richard’s brown eyes closely resembled Isabelle’s. His short brown hair had been combed to the side in a neat wave that matched the ruffles at the ends of his sleeves. The scars on his face were barely hidden by the powder covering his skin. Telltale signs of a childhood illness that could have taken his life.

Lifting her chin and looking down her sharp nose, Caroline addressed Isabelle as if talking to a petulant child. “Now that we have finally tracked you down, you will be pleased to know that Lord James has requested to accompany you during the final dance.” Her voice was high and annoying.

“Must I? I have already danced with every eligible gentleman at this ball. If I haven’t found an agreeable suitor by now, I hardly doubt that Lord James will sway my opinion.” Isabelle shuddered a little at the mention of his name as she felt the pit of her stomach clenching.

“Don’t exaggerate so, Isabelle. You hardly danced with all the eligible men this

evening. Besides, they would not seem so numerous if you actually made conversation instead of allowing your partners to drag you over the floor.” Aunt Alice fanned her face more forcefully as the touch of rouge on her cheeks and lips began to smudge beneath the thick layer of powder.

“It certainly felt like it was all the men,” Isabelle turned her head to the side and muttered under her breath. Why couldn’t they all just leave her alone?

Chiming in once again, Caroline admonished her a little more sternly. “Perhaps you should take our advice then.”

The endless pestering grew tiresome for Isabelle as her shoulders rose and fell beneath the effort of her sigh. Caroline hadn’t even married her brother yet, and it was already evident that she wished to marry Isabelle off to the highest bidder.

“You will want to check your countenance, Isabelle. The options for suitors will be few and far between once this ball is over. Winter is about to reach her icy grip into London and leech the city of all suitable men.” Caroline raised her thin blonde eyebrows in a warning.

“I will be thankful for the opportunity to read in silence once they leave.” Isabelle forced a smile and met her future sister-in-law’s gaze, unwilling to back down.

“You are almost twenty-four, Isabelle. Spinsterhood is knocking on your door faster than I think even you will care to admit.” Seething a little with rage, Caroline glared at her.

Isabelle was about to reply when her aunt cut her short, forcing her to swallow her words.

“Here comes Lord James now. Stand up straight, and I will thank you not to make

any of your witty remarks. Gentlemen do not like young women with smart mouths,” Aunt Alice snapped sharply, slapping her fan shut in the palm of her hand.

“Evidently, they prefer dolls rather than actual women,” Isabelle whispered to herself before looking up to see the man in question striding towards her.

Lord James Church, the second son of a marquess, met her eyes from across the room and smoothed his ashen blond hair over his head. His smirk, along with the arrogance in his stride, made her stomach churn uncomfortably with repulsion. His cunning blue eyes locked on her as if he were a bird of prey.

I guess that would make me the mouse.

She braced herself for the nauseating onslaught of charm about to be thrust into her unwilling arms. ‘Charm’ which, unfortunately, in the case of Lord James, meant endless talk of all his business ventures and wealth.

“Miss Sutton.” Lord James came to a halt in front of her and bowed, raising his head once again with an oily smirk.

“My Lord.” Isabelle hesitantly curtsied while forcing a smile.

“You seemed quite preoccupied this evening.” His tone was almost accusatory as his gaze moved over her wrinkled dress in judgement.

“I can assure you that I would have preferred to stay at home reading, Lord James. Dancing would have no place in a civilized Society if it were up to me,” Isabelle responded with a tired sigh.

Noticing the glares that her aunt and Caroline were shooting in her direction, she composed herself before being cut short by her aunt. “You must forgive our Isabelle,

My Lord. You know how overwhelming these balls can be for a young lady; she couldn't very well turn the young men down, even if she wanted to," Aunt Alice answered for her with a forced laugh.

Knitting her brow into a frown, Isabelle hoped Lord James would pick up on her demeanour and leave. Any fool with two eyes could see she didn't relish the man's presence.

"I understand, Lady Sinclair. Luckily, I am here now to save her from the hordes," Lord James addressed her aunt while keeping his eyes fixed on her.

Isabelle could feel the corner of her mouth twitching as she struggled to hold her smile in place.

"It would be a great honour if you would allow me to accompany you during the final dance, Miss Sutton." She grimaced at the charm dripping from his voice.

It wasn't the first time Lord James had singled her out at a ball and asked for a dance. On the contrary, he had been pestering her all season, and Isabelle wished he'd get the hint.

"I think ..." She had barely opened her mouth to reply when Caroline cut her off.

"She would be delighted to dance with you, Lord James. She has spoken of nothing but your presence all evening. I'm afraid that it may be the cause of contention for many of the other young men. Isn't that right, Isabelle?" She placed her hand on Richard's arm and turned to Isabelle with her eyebrows raised.

Richard, oblivious to her plight, simply smiled down at Caroline, leaving Isabelle with no choice but to accept.

“Certainly, My Lord.” The pit of her stomach churned once again when he took the card from her hand and filled in his name at the bottom. Even the flair of his handwriting made her grit his teeth.

“I hope that it will be the highlight of your evening.” He made sure to brush his fingers against her gloved hand as he handed the card back.

Wanting to run, Isabelle accepted the card and wracked her brain for a way to escape. She could say she felt ill or even faint due to the sweltering heat.

Yet she couldn’t help feeling that any such course of action would fuel Lord James’s delusions that she was a complaisant and willing participant. Knowing him, he would chalk her fainting up to swooning in his presence.

I need to escape.

The pressing need to be saved made her heart beat faster when Caroline added to the conversation.

“It will be delightful to see the two of you dancing again. It was such a treat at the last ball. Don’t you think they make a handsome couple?” Caroline looked around their tiny circle for support.

It’s too hot.

Isabelle unfolded her fan and began to wave it in her face as she placed a hand on her hip and shut her eyes.

“A most charming couple indeed,” Aunt Alice added, her voice swimming with awe and romance that didn’t translate to Isabelle.

Opening her eyes, Isabelle felt her chest beginning to constrict beneath her tight corset.

Lord James held her gaze and smirked, the corner of his mouth lifting into a near sneer as Richard echoed his approval.

“I know I certainly will not object to the match.” Her brother sealed her fate with one simple sentence.

I will not object.

The words echoed in the back of her mind like the dull thud of a hammer in the distance. The air in the room suddenly seemed far too stifling as she fanned her face even faster. The light fluttering of fans beneath the chatter of the rest of the guests suddenly seemed as if a swarm of butterflies were about to take flight.

Flight.

She began to panic as her chest rapidly rose and fell with every laboured breath.

Laughing heartily as if he had heard a joke, Lord James winked at her before turning back to her brother. “Careful, Lord Sutton, anyone listening may assume we are already engaged.” He raised his voice for everyone to hear.

A low susurrantion erupted among the nearby guests as Isabelle began to fan her face so vigorously that strands of loose hair flew past her ears.

“Heavens, that would be something.” Aunt Alice practically swooned as she looked past their heads with a dreamy gaze.

Caroline beamed as she lifted her chin triumphantly in the air.

Lord James's heart-shaped face and pointed chin swam in her vision until she felt as if she would faint.

This is going to be the rest of my life ...

Her eyes darted around the room at the many faces who seemed to be watching her every move. The pressure was almost unbearable when she looked back to James, who held out his hand with a smirk.

"Of course, we would need to keep a tight lid on your biting replies, Miss Sutton, but marriage will fix all of that in due time."

The quartet began to play a song as if on cue as her thoughts reached their crescendo. If she married Lord James, she'd have to spend the rest of her life suppressing her character and acting like a simpering and obedient wife.

The rest of my life!

"Shall we give the masses what they want, Miss Sutton?" Lord James raised an eyebrow in question.

"No." Isabelle finally snapped and shut her fan, eliciting a wave of gasps.

"I beg your pardon?" Aunt Alice asked indignantly, looking Isabelle up and down as if she had gone mad.

"I will not dance with Lord James, nor will I become his simpering wife!" She tore her dance card in half and let it fall to the floor at his feet.

Looking up in shock, his blue eyes suddenly seemed darker as his countenance changed.

“Isabelle, what are you doing?” Richard leaned closer and whispered to her when everyone continued to stare.

“Taking control of my life.” She held her head high and lifted the hem of her dress before turning from the group and running straight towards the open doors.

The gasps of shock filled the air with a hum of activity.

I will not be a simpering, obedient wife!

The cool evening air kissed her skin as she ran past the waiting carriages and down the street.

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Chapter 2

The low crackle of the fire did little to ease his irritation as Lord Henry Montague attempted to pay attention to his book.

“You have to get out there, Lord Ashford. It pains me deeply to see an eligible and wealthy man such as yourself secluded and alone.” Alfred Hampton shook his head in disapproval and sighed. His short-cropped brown hair had been combed back, although a few stubborn strands fell over his forehead.

Realizing that he would not be getting much reading done, Lord Ashford shut his book and looked up. His dark brown eyes, which boasted flecks of gold, glinted in the fading light of the fire despite his irritation.

The rest of the men in the club’s billiard room seemed far too taken with their conversations to pay attention. The low murmur of voices, along with the clinking of glasses, had always provided a safe space for Henry to read. That was until Alfred Hampton had come into his life. The man seemed hell-bent on saving Henry, even if he didn’t want to be saved.

“All I am saying is that a man of your title and wealth should not resign himself to a life of reading. There is still much that you have to experience.” The man waved the idea away with a flick of his hand in the air. His thin lips pursed into a fine line of disapproval, adding to the pinched look of his thin face.

“What if I prefer the solace of books?” Henry asked with a sigh before running his fingers through his thick mop of hair.

The brown had begun to turn grey in his early twenties, and by the age of forty-one, he now had more streaks of grey than brown. He'd long since given up on attempting to tame the wild spurts of growth.

Alfred scoffed before sipping his whisky. "No man wants to spend the rest of his life alone. I simply won't hear any of your excuses for solace and reading. We will find you a wife before the season is out."

"That would be quite a feat, considering the last ball of the season is being held at this very moment." Henry raised his eyebrow quizzically, somewhat amused by the man's plight to find him a wife.

"Oh," Alfred seemed to realize his blunder as he lowered his empty glass. "Well, then, we shall find you a wife by the end of winter. I have failed you thus far, but I shall prevail."

Feeling his irritation rising, Henry shook his head. "Has it ever occurred to you that I actually enjoy my solitude? I am a widower, Lord Hampton. My time as a husband has come and gone; I now wish to spend the rest of my years in peace."

"Stuff and nonsense." Lord Hampton made a sound of disgust at the back of his throat before continuing, "I do not believe you. Being a widower myself, I understand how lonely one can get. Nobody wishes to spend the rest of their life alone. Why do you think I have been dragging you along all these evenings since I met you all those months ago? We men have to be adventurous in our search for wives." He spoke determinedly with the air of one who knew that what they were saying was true.

Placing his hands on the armrests of his chair, Henry pushed himself up and stood. "If it is your wish to marry again, then may I suggest that you set your mind to it and leave me be. I will bid you a good evening, Lord Hampton; may you be successful in your endeavours." Henry bowed respectfully and hurried away before the man could

protest again.

“I will see you again tomorrow evening, Lord Ashford, do not think that I have given up on you,” Alfred called to him despite the cool tone and finality that Henry had used.

Feeling the kiss of the cool evening air, Henry breathed a sigh of relief when he stepped onto the street. It wasn't that he disliked the man; on the contrary, he thought of Lord Alfred Hampton as a well-intentioned man. He simply just never wanted to get married again. His marriage, while not unpleasant at the best of times, had left him feeling content on his own.

Turning his head with his book held tightly by his side, Henry took note of a few stragglers from the club, along with a few people returning from a hard day's work. The dimly lit street wasn't busy, yet it didn't exactly provide anyone with the feeling of safety.

He was about to search for his carriage when the sound of hurried heels clinking on the pavement drew his attention.

A swish of light green fabric appeared out of the corner of his eye.

What the devil?

His brow quickly knit into a frown as he spotted the thin young lady hurrying around the corner of a nearby alley. Her appearance was just as puzzling as it was startling when he noted the almost severe thinness of her frame. She was dressed like a young lady of the ton, yet her protruding wrist bones, thin arms, and slender neck spoke of poverty.

“Miss, can I help you?” he spoke up when she glanced down the alley for a moment

before hurrying in his direction instead.

Gasping with fright, she looked up just in time to stop herself from bumping into him. Her large brown eyes widened in shock when the hem of her dress snagged on the edge of a jagged crack in the pavement, causing her to fumble and step back.

The scene seemed to play out in slow motion as Henry acted quickly, reaching out as he placed his arm around her waist and gripped her wrist.

The sunken look of her hollow cheeks accentuated the shock in her eyes as her full lips formed a perfect, yet silent, 'oh'. Her porcelain skin seemed perfect and free of blemishes despite the lack of colour, adding to his confusion.

She's beautiful.

The thought caught him off guard as he recalled how long it had been since he'd taken notice of any young woman. Heat crept up the back of his neck when he realized how closely he was staring at her. Her light brown hair shone beneath the almost ethereal sheen from the lamp above their heads.

A sharp pain made him wince as heat shot up his right thigh and travelled down his calf, enflaming his old wound.

"Unhand me!" The maiden began to struggle when he winced, pushing his hand from her wrist as she attempted to come up straight.

Pulling her up as if she weighed nothing at all, Henry let out a breath and admonished himself for acting like a young fool. He swore under his breath before letting her go.

The fury in her beautiful eyes ignited his curiosity as she whipped around and began to walk back up the street.

“Miss! Would you wait for just a moment!” he called out to her after spotting a rowdy group of young men from across the street. Under any normal circumstances, he would have let her go, yet the dangers of London life at night would not allow him to leave her unaccompanied.

The girl never so much as looked back as she lifted the hem of her light green dress and hastened her pace. The heels of her shoes clicked furiously against the hard pavement as she went.

“Miss, if you would just allow me to walk you home. I can assure you that I mean well.” He caught up to her despite the pain in his thigh that aggravated his limp.

Whipping around once again, she glared at him furiously. “I can assure you that I do not need assistance, My Lord. It is entirely impertinent of you to assume the role of walking me home.” Her eyes wandered over his fine clothes before addressing him.

A moment of confusion passed over his mind as Henry wondered if he had seen resentment in her gaze. “I beg your pardon, Miss, but I was not being presumptuous. I merely meant to convey my concern for a young lady walking alone at night. The streets of London are no place for a fine young lady.” His gaze once again swept over the fashionable dress that seemed to stand in stark contrast to her almost starved appearance.

He wondered briefly if she hadn’t been trying to impersonate a wealthy young lady. It would certainly explain why she had been trying so hard to get away.

“I can assure you that I will be just fine, My Lord. Thank you for your concern.” She hurriedly curtsied and returned to her brisk pace.

She is far too fine not to be a lady.

The elegance in her mannerisms made him realize that she couldn't have just been impersonating a well-born woman.

Hurrying once again to catch up, he fell into step by her side. "Miss, I must insist upon accompanying you home. If you wish, we may take my carriage; it is just up the street in the opposite direction." He nodded back to where they had come from.

Stopping in her tracks, the young woman glared daggers at him. "What do I need to do to get the message across to you men? Is it so absurd that any woman would simply wish to be alone? Has the notion of anyone wanting solitude never crossed men's minds?!" Her cheeks filled with colour as she clenched her fists at her sides and raised her voice.

"Us men?" Henry asked in confusion, looking around to see if anyone else had been following her. Her rage towards him seemed entirely disproportionate to the situation at hand, at least in his opinion.

A look of realization came over her face as she opened and shut her mouth. "Never mind, I apologize for my behaviour, My Lord, but I must insist that you leave me to my own devices. Good evening." She curtsied once more and turned to leave just as a carriage appeared at the far end of the street, rattling uncontrollably as it sped over the uneven street.

"Oh no," she gasped and turned back to him, her face paling with fright.

"What is the matter? Is somebody following you?" He suddenly took up a protective stance and came to her aid, shielding her body from view as the carriage drew closer.

"It's ... It's just my family. I do not wish them to find me. I am begging of you, My Lord, please allow me to hide. You never have to see me again after this evening; just allow me this one courtesy this once." Her eyes were almost frantic as she glanced at

the dark alley to her side.

She's running away from home.

Realization dawned on him as he looked back at the carriage. "Are you in need of any kind of assistance, Miss? Has your family mistreated you or harmed you in any way?" Her malnourished appearance added to his suspicions.

She looked confused for a moment before answering. "Well, no, I simply do not wish them to drag me back to the ball."

Ah, there it is.

The young woman wasn't an ill-treated runaway or even a damsel in distress; she simply didn't wish to return to her family and the ball.

Turning back to her with a sympathetic gaze, he pursed his lips. "I can sympathize with not wanting to attend a ball. I myself detest them at the best of times, but I simply cannot allow you to walk the streets alone." Honour took over as he anticipated her movements and stepped in her path before she could enter the alley.

Her mouth fell open again for a split second before she glared at him. The fire in her eyes would have been intimidating if he hadn't just discovered that she was running away from a ball.

The carriage came to a screeching halt beside them as the horses neighed uncomfortably. The sudden tug on their reins creating discomfort.

"Isabelle Sutton, how dare you run away from us like that!" An older woman with wild eyes and wrinkled skin poked her head from the carriage, practically foaming from the mouth as she yelled.

Looking back to the young lady he now knew as Isabelle Sutton, he noted the lack of fear in her eyes, reaffirming that she wasn't in danger.

The door on the other side of the carriage opened and shut before a young man, who looked to be in his late twenties, appeared from around the back of the carriage.

"Isabelle, I can understand that you were overwhelmed, but that was entirely irresponsible of you." He breathed a sigh of relief after looking her over.

The stark family resemblance set Henry at ease as he stepped back and handed the situation to the young man.

Fuming with anger after glaring at him, Isabelle gave him a final stare before lifting the hem of her dress and entering the carriage.

The young man turned to him with an apologetic smile. "I hope my sister hasn't caused you too much trouble, Mr ..." His words trailed off as he waited for Henry to fill in the rest.

"Lord Henry Montague, Earl of Ashford," Henry politely informed the man before placing his hands behind his back along with the book. How he had managed to keep it in his hands was a mystery to Henry, but he chalked it up to years of combat training in the war.

"Ah, well, you have our thanks, Lord Ashford. I must now excuse myself as we need to get my sister home." The young man bowed respectfully before hurrying back into his carriage.

The horses broke into a fast trot almost as soon as the carriage door shut.

Angry voices could be heard from inside the carriage as it passed, yet the young

woman continued to glare at him through the pane of glass.

The angry look in her eyes as she passed made him chuckle to himself as he watched the carriage disappear down the street. The things that he saw in London never failed to amuse him. He was glad that his days of balls and frivolity had come to an end, although he did pity the young woman who seemed to want out.

“I’m just glad that it isn’t me,” he whispered before making his way back up the street.

The young girl had been quite beautiful and fiery, yet he was glad he never had to deal with such theatrics ever again. His days of having to bow to the norms and social expectations of the ton were far behind him. He would never see the young lady again and wished her well, or so he thought ...

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Chapter 3

I think the coast is clear.

Isabelle placed her hood over her head, staying out of sight as he hid beside the staircase. It had been a week since the night she had attempted to run from the ball, and nobody had given her a moment's peace ever since.

Looking around the empty entrance hall, she tiptoed towards the door before glancing over her shoulder.

Nobody heard a thing.

She breathed a sigh of relief and opened the door before stepping into the early morning sun. It had been difficult to escape again without having a footman or maid report back to her aunt. It was a rare opportunity to go out alone, and she intended to take advantage of it.

“And just where do you think you are going?” Aunt Alice gripped her arm and stopped her from taking a step.

Isabelle winced slightly at the surprising amount of strength that her aunt displayed despite her frailty. Tugging her arm free, she took a deep breath and fought back the frustration that began to bite at her patience. “I was planning on taking a walk or is that a crime? It wasn't the last time that I checked.” She removed the hood of her cloak after no longer having any use for it. Anonymity was no longer a friend now that she had been caught.

“It is just as serious as a crime while you are still unwed. It can tarnish your reputation far more than you realize.” Aunt Alice pursed her lips and looked down her nose at Isabelle.

Rolling her eyes in exasperation, Isabelle sighed. “I don’t care if my reputation gets tarnished. I do not wish to get married; what do I have to do to make everyone understand? In fact, I hope my reputation does get tarnished. Perhaps then my brother and his betrothed will give up on the notion of selling me to the highest bidder.” She shook her head in exasperation.

Pursing her lips until they all but vanished into a thin line, her aunt raised an eyebrow. “It is you who has to let go of this silly notion of spinsterhood, my dear. A life being shunned by the ton isn’t as glamorous as one would think.”

“It is freedom that I am after, not glamour.” Isabelle clenched her fists at her sides, reminding herself of the fact that her aunt more than likely had footmen stationed at every corner of the street. She would have been able to outrun her aunt but not a gaggle of footmen.

Cocking her head to the side, Aunt Alice chose to ignore her comment. “You seem to be looking remarkably well for someone who professed to be ill since the night of the ball. You must let the physicians in London know of your secret. You are too ill to receive callers but well enough to attempt escaping for the past seven days. Wonders will never cease.”

“Obviously I have not been well enough to succeed in my attempts, have I? Perhaps the London physicians might aid me in my endeavours.” She began to grow weary of the back and forth.

The day had already been spoiled, and she hadn’t even had her breakfast. She had wanted to be out of the house before another insipid calling card came from Lord

James. The man was more relentless than a hungry dog with a bone.

Almost as relentless as Caroline.

Straightening the cuffs of her heavy brown dress, Aunt Alice sniffed. “Since we are already up and dressed, and I have missed my breakfast, we shall have a walk. Where were you headed? I would like to stop for a spot of tea when you are done.” She waited expectantly for an answer.

“I was headed to the Evergreen; I wanted to order a new book.” Isabelle resigned herself to the situation with a sigh.

“Very well, I can’t say that I agree with all the time you spend with your nose stuck in books, but it is an agreeable compromise.” She reached for a cane that had been leaning beside the door and proceeded to make her way down the stairs without waiting for a reply.

I should have climbed out the window.

Realizing there was no other choice in the matter, Isabelle descended the stairs and followed her aunt down the street. She had wanted to purchase fruit from a cart for breakfast and visit the circulating library without a chaperone.

Yet she reasoned with herself that being chaperoned was better than nothing. At least her future sister-in-law wasn’t the one who had caught her.

If Caroline had caught her, then Isabelle would have undoubtedly been forced to accept a visit from Lord James.

She quickly fell into step beside her aunt and occupied her mind with the thoughts of books.

The walk to the library itself was pleasant. Aunt Alice lectured away about socially acceptable behaviour for a young lady while Isabelle tuned her out.

She couldn't help blaming the man who had stopped her on the street. She likely wouldn't have got very far even if he hadn't, yet she still felt angry over the interference.

If I ever see him again, I will give him a piece of my mind.

She promised herself revenge while her aunt prattled on just as they got to the library.

"I shall wait for you on this bench. I shan't go in; I can't stand those stuffy little buildings." Aunt Alice stopped beside a bench in front of the Evergreen circulating library and made herself comfortable.

"Yes, Aunt Alice." She was about to head inside and seek solace when her aunt put out her cane and stopped her.

"I won't be moving an inch; in case you were getting any funny ideas about escaping again." Her aunt pursed her lips in her usual look of displeasure.

"I would not dream of trying to pull the wool over your eyes for a second time in one day, Aunt Alice." Isabelle curtsied politely before hurrying into the shop.

The bell over the shop door tinkled lightly, announcing her presence to the friendly man behind the counter.

"Good morning, Miss Sutton." The old man with wispish grey hair and eyebrows that reminded her of an owl greeted her with warm familiarity.

Relief flooded her body almost as soon as she inhaled the wonderful scent of books.

“Good morning, Mr Charleston. Has the book I ordered come in yet?” she enquired before looking around the cosy room with its wooden flooring.

The Evergreen circulating library consisted of a main room with a counter and a few shelves of catalogues. All the available books were kept in a room behind the counter, while others had to be ordered.

“You are in luck; it came just this morning. I will pop back and get it for you.” Mr Charleston raised his knobbly index finger in the air and winked before slowly disappearing through a door behind the counter.

She took a moment to peek into some of the lounges just off the main room. The small nooks with sparse decorations provided enough privacy for any patrons who wished to linger for a while after receiving their books.

“Ah, here it is.” The old man came back after a few moments and handed her the book over the counter.

“Thank you. I can’t wait to get into it. I have someone waiting for me, but I think I will linger for just a little while.” She gave him a mischievous smile that elicited a chuckle from the old man.

Making her way into one of the nooks, she chose her favourite spot in an armchair that overlooked the rest of the shop. The position provided her with just enough coverage not to be seen while still affording her a view of the counter and door.

She had just settled in and opened her book when a familiar voice jolted her from her thoughts. Peeking over the top of her book, she noticed a tall man standing in front of the counter with his back turned to her.

“Good day, Mr Charleston ...”

A second customer entered the shop, muffling the conversation between the man and Mr Charleston.

It has to be him.

Her heart beat a little faster as she leaned over the side of her chair, trying to get a better look.

The thick mop of messy brown hair with plenty of grey unmistakably resembled the man who had stopped her. What had Richard said that his name was again? Lord Ashton, or possibly something like it. Her thoughts were once again interrupted when the man thanked Mr Charleston and left the store, causing the bell to tinkle above the door once again.

Seizing her chance, Isabelle slammed her book shut and shot up from the chair.

Mr Charleston was almost startled when she approached him in haste.

“Mr Charleston, who was that man who was just in here? I thought I mistook him for an old friend.” She quickly came up with a lie when she realized he may have misinterpreted her question.

“Lord Henry Montague, the Earl of Ashford.” He lowered his hand from his chest and ran his tongue over his wrinkled lips.

Ashford. That is what it was.

“Does he come in here often?” She smiled warmly at the man who was now regarding her with a slight amount of suspicion.

“Every other day, usually in the afternoons. It is rare for him to come this early.

Perhaps that is why you haven't seen him in here until now?" Mr Charleston raised an eyebrow.

Feeling an idea take root in the back of her mind, she allowed her smile to brighten even further. "Yes, I think that is the reason. I was pleasantly surprised to see him. May I ask what book he was ordering? He didn't seem to leave with one."

Mr Charleston narrowed his eyes slightly and reached for the leather-bound ledger he used for orders before raising his monocle. "It's a novel about war, but Lord Ashford did not place an order. He prefers to come in and read the books when they are available." He left out the title and author.

Novels?

She found it odd that an earl would read a novel, but she pushed the thought aside. "May I ask how many copies are available for ordering?"

Glancing back down at the ledger, Mr Charleston chewed the inside of his cheek. "Four, but I am sure that other sellers in London will have more."

"I would like to order all four," she blurted out a response a little too quickly.

Mr Charleston raised both eyebrows now as he looked at her. "You have never ordered one of these novels before." His words posed a statement rather than a question.

"It's for a book club I am thinking of starting," Isabelle said, thinking of a lie as quickly as she could.

"Very well, I will place an order for all four copies." He shut the ledger with both hands, causing a small cloud of dust to fly into the air.

“Thank you very much.” She gripped her novel a little tighter and rushed from the little shop before he could ask her any questions.

“What took you so long?” her aunt snapped almost as soon as she stepped out the door.

Isabelle clutched her chest as she jumped; she’d forgotten all about her aunt during the onset of her grand scheme. “My book was lost; they had to find it for me among the others.”

“Very well. We shall be going then.” Aunt Alice placed both hands on her cane and steadied herself as she stood.

Doing a quick calculation in her mind, Isabelle stopped her aunt. “Aunt Alice, do you mind if we make a few small stops on the way home? There is another book that I wish to find. After we have our tea, of course.”

It took her aunt a moment to respond before shaking her head. “Oh, all right. I guess I will have to accompany you lest you decide to run away again.”

“Thank you. I promise that I will be as quick as I can.” She offered her aunt a bright smile.

“As long as you do, we must hurry back home.”

The rest of the day passed in a whirlwind as Isabelle visited bookseller after bookseller. Her family would be angry with her when they realized that she’d spent all her allowance in one day. The fact would be difficult to conceal when they noticed all the packages arriving at home, but she reminded herself that everything would be

worth it in the end.

I wish I could be there to see the look in his eyes.

She pictured the deep pools of brown with flecks of gold swirling with anger. It served him right for meddling in her affairs.

Her pleasure was short-lived when she stepped into the entrance hall of their home and sighed.

“Isabelle, what took you so long? Lord James has been waiting for you.” Caroline informed her at once.

Taking a step back, Isabelle considered running, but she knew instantly that she had been led into a trap when her aunt placed her hands on her shoulders.

“Lord James, it is such a pleasure to see you. Isabelle has rushed through all of her errands so that she could see you. Isn’t that right, Isabelle?” Her aunt tightened her grip on her shoulders. “Thank you for taking care of Lord James while he waited, Miss Sedgewick.”

Swallowing hard, Isabelle relented to the situation at hand. “Of course, Lord James. I apologize for keeping you waiting.”

James puffed out his chest in a manner that Isabelle detested. “I am glad to see that you are looking well, Miss Sutton. I feared the worst when Miss Sedgwick wrote back to say you have been ill. Of course, it does explain your little outburst at the ball.”

Caroline jumped in again and answered for her in an annoying habit that grated on Isabelle’s nerves. “She was feeling very ill that evening, weren’t you, Isabelle?”

“I certainly was; my apologies if my behaviour struck you as rude.” Her fingers clutched the book in her hands as she apologized again.

“There, now that we all understand what happened, I think we should have our tea in the drawing room. I am quite parched, as I am sure you must be too, Lord James.” Aunt Alice gently pushed Isabelle towards the drawing room.

Glancing over her shoulder, Isabelle noted the smug look of triumph in Caroline’s eyes. If they had been alone, Isabelle would have retorted, but given the fact that they were in company, she decided to hold her tongue.

The afternoon that lay ahead promised to be a boring one where Lord James discussed nothing but politics and his plans for the future.

The only solace that Isabelle could take was the thought of Lord Ashford’s face when he realized what she had done.

Vengeance was sweet, even if she had to enjoy it from afar.

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Chapter 4

“How can all of the copies already be taken?” Henry frowned at the young girl behind the counter at the Evergreen.

It never took more than a few days for the books to come in once he’d enquired. A week at most, but never more than that. It was one of the reasons he frequented the Evergreen.

The young girl with doe-like eyes and pale skin gave him an apologetic look. “I have checked a few times, but the ledger says that we do not currently have any copies of the book. They have all been checked out.”

Running his tongue over his bottom lip in frustration, Henry proceeded to take a deep breath. His morning had started well enough when he’d ignored an invitation from Alfred Hampton. He’d been looking forward to fetching the new novel and starting it in the shop. Ignoring social interactions wasn’t nearly as fun if he didn’t have the book he wanted.

“I wish I could give you an answer, but I’m afraid that only my uncle will be able to tell you what happened, and he is out at the moment. He will be back later this afternoon if you wish to come by again.” She looked a little panicked when Henry grew increasingly annoyed.

“No, it is quite all right. I will purchase the book instead.” He grumbled a farewell before making his way from the store.

Who could possibly want all the copies?

He placed his hands behind his back and started down the road, headed towards one of the better-known booksellers in London. Although the situation struck him as odd, he made his peace with the fact that he could purchase a copy of his own. The morning was still salvageable, even if it wasn't perfect.

Mr Charleston would certainly not object to him reading a book at the Evergreen, even if he had purchased it somewhere else. After all, he had been a loyal patron for many years since his wife had died.

Entering the bookseller after a few minutes of walking, he greeted the man behind the counter and provided the name of the book he was after. The man scurried away and came back after a few moments.

"What do you mean that you have sold every copy you had? Is there some kind of book shortage in London that I am not aware of?" He grew increasingly impatient as he strummed the tips of his fingers on the counter.

The tall man with a thin frame and large nose cowered slightly at his words. "I do apologize, My Lord, but I have checked twice. The books in question were all purchased yesterday. We won't be receiving another batch for a few weeks."

Tilting his head in confusion, Henry began to wonder if he wasn't going mad. The kinds of novels that he liked to read weren't exactly popular. The fact that nobody else seemed to like them had been one of the selling points for him. That and the fact that he actually enjoyed them.

"Very well, I suppose there is nothing else to be done. I will just have to go and look elsewhere." He nodded a curt goodbye and left the shop.

At least it cannot happen a third time.

He reassured himself that the worst hurdles of the day had been conquered. It was strange to find the book out of stock at the Evergreen, and even stranger to find it missing at a seller. The likelihood of it being sold out at a second seller was damn near impossible.

Entering one of the smaller sellers down the street, he strode right up to the counter and provided the name of the book without hesitation.

“I am sorry, My Lord, but all the copies we had have been sold.” A plump woman who looked to be in her mid-thirties offered him an apologetic smile. Her short, red curls had been pinned to the back of her head in an elaborate style that added to her overall plumpness.

“What do you mean that you have sold all the copies? Have I suddenly become the victim of some grand jest?” He looked at her incredulously and shook his head. In all his years of becoming a social recluse, nothing like this had ever happened to him before.

The woman behind the counter seemed to have a little more gumption than the others as she stood her ground. “I am not sure what you are referring to, My Lord, but I can assure you that I am not aware of it.” She stared him down until he began to feel guilty for his outburst.

He lowered his tone to a more respectful volume. “Do you happen to recall who purchased all of the books?”

She seemed thoughtful for a moment as she stared into the distance. “A woman, a spinster of sorts. She said she was thinking of starting a book club or something like that. I did find it odd, but who am I to question a customer when they are paying?”

She shrugged, lifting her shoulders almost to the height of her ears.

“Indeed, it would not be proper at all to ask too many questions.” He held her gaze for a moment as he cursed the old bat, whomever she was. He pictured an elderly woman in a shawl with a hunched back, someone who hailed herself the guardian of her family’s meagre collection. It had to be someone with the means to purchase books in bulk.

“May I suggest Ben and Teller’s down the street? They are the largest booksellers that I know of in London. If they do not have any, then I am afraid you will have to wait until we get more.”

Taking a deep breath, he composed himself. “Thank you for your time. I think I will pay a visit to Ben and Teller’s.”

“Good luck, My Lord.” The woman nodded curtly while her eyes betrayed that she didn’t wish him any luck at all.

What does a man have to do for a book?

He shook his head in displeasure and headed down the street to one of London’s largest and best-known booksellers. The woman hadn’t been very sympathetic but had been right about his chances. If the books were not on their shelves, then none were left in London.

The thought served to heighten his anger as he practically fumed with displeasure.

Hurrying towards the shop on the bustling street, he lost his breath just as he came to the door, taking a moment to compose himself before barging into the shop.

A large bell announced his presence as he stepped into the larger, far busier

establishment. He wasted no time in pushing his way towards the counter and providing the man with the title.

“I’m sorry, My Lord, but I am afraid I sold quite a few copies just yesterday,” the young man, who looked to be in his early twenties, informed him with a bright smile as if the news brought him a great deal of pleasure.

Of course, he would be happy to have made a sale.

“May I ask if an elderly spinster purchased the books?” Henry’s patience began to wear thin as he fumed at the ears.

The young man’s light brown eyes seemed thoughtful for a moment while he tapped his lower lip. “It was a lady who looked as if she could have been a spinster, but she was by no means old. At least I would not describe her as old.”

The answer struck him as odd, as his brow creased into a frown. “Can you provide me with a description or perhaps even a name?”

“I do not recall her name, but she was a younger woman with dark eyes and brown hair. I can’t say that she stood out in any other way, but she did seem a bit on the thinner side.” He drew his mouth to the side in a thoughtful expression as his hand dropped to his side.

A sudden swish of light green fabric flashed across his mind, catching him off guard.

It can’t be.

“Did she happen to look as if she were too thin to be a lady, almost as if she were impersonating someone of status and wealth?”

“Yes, that is exactly how I would describe her.” The man nodded enthusiastically. “Although, I wouldn’t exactly say that she was impersonating a lady. The way she carried herself and spoke definitely hinted at a proper upbringing.”

Just maybe ...

A strange idea began to form at the back of his mind. The possibility was slim, but it was certainly there.

“Thank you for your time.” He bade the man behind the counter farewell and headed out the door. If anyone could confirm his suspicions, then it was Mr Charleston himself.

Retracing his steps from the entire morning, Henry headed straight back to the Evergreen shop. The sun was low enough in the sky for the man to have returned from whatever errands kept him busy.

It took him almost an hour before he reached his destination once more and entered the shop like a grumbling bear with a sore foot.

“Good afternoon, My Lord. I heard you were in here earlier looking for a copy of that novel. I am afraid I won’t be able to order another for quite some time,” Mr Charleston spoke apologetically as he looked up from his ledger.

Waving the apology away, Henry stalked right up to the counter. “May I ask if the person who ordered the novels was a Miss Sutton?” He cut straight to the point.

The man seemed taken aback but answered the question, nonetheless. “Yes, Miss Isabelle Sutton. She said she was thinking of starting a book club of sorts. Do you know her? She mentioned that you may have been an old acquaintance of hers. I did try and keep a copy for you when she came back, but she was most insistent on

having them all.”

“Yes, we have met,” he answered curtly before clenching his jaw and pursing his lips.

Angry eyes flashed across his mind as he recalled the look of resentment she had given him from the carriage. He would never have guessed it, but it seemed as if she had somehow launched a grand scheme of vengeance against him.

“Would you like me to let the young lady know you were looking for her? She does come in here quite frequently, usually during the mornings.” Mr Charles offered the information freely.

“Does she now?” A sudden idea began to form in his mind. If she wanted to play dirty, then he would be more than happy to oblige her in her little game.

Mr Charleston nodded. “Twice if not three times a week.”

“And does she get a new book each time she comes in?” Henry drew his lower lip between his teeth before letting it go and smiling.

“I would certainly say so.” Mr Charleston nodded once again.

Doing a few quick calculations, he came up with a plan. “Can I confess something to you, Mr Charleston?”

The man leaned over the counter conspiratorially and nodded more vigorously. His arm pressed down on the open ledger that had been lying open in front of him.

“You see, Miss Sutton and I are old friends. We have devised a little game between us, and I was wondering if you would be so kind as to tell me what book she took yesterday?” Henry narrowed his eyes as if he were making the man privy to some

great secret.

Hastening to look at his ledger, Mr Charleston quickly moved his eyes over the page. “Ah yes, it’s a novel from last year. Sense and Sensibility by A Lady. She had mentioned it last year, but there were a few other books that she wanted to read first. Seems to be an anonymous publication by some lady who has written her first novel.” He turned the book over in his hands as he eyed the cover wearily.

Of course, it’s a romance novel. And one by a lady to boot.

Henry caught himself just in time before shaking his head. “Do you perhaps have a copy I could take home with me now? I’m sure she would be delighted to discuss the book next time we see each other.” He couldn’t help smirking at his own plan.

Mr Charleston seemed thoughtful for a moment before hurrying to the backroom and returning with a small brown book. “Here we are; it is quite popular with the young ladies.”

“I’m sure it is; thank you for your assistance, Mr Charleston. You have been a great help.” Henry reached over and retrieved the small book before shoving it into his coat pocket.

“Of course, and I will keep things just between the two of us.” He shut one eye and tapped his nose conspiratorially. “I wouldn’t want to spoil the game.”

“Right, I will appreciate that. I bid you a good evening, Mr Charleston.” He hurried from the shop, realizing he had started something with the old man. All he had wanted was a copy of the novel that Miss Sutton seemed to want, but he had inadvertently started a conspiracy with the poor old man.

He made a mental note to rectify the problem in the future. Perhaps he would casually

mention that he and Miss Sutton had a falling out or that they had decided to end their little game. Either way, he would put an end to the tomfoolery and regain his life of reading in seclusion. Mr Charleston's meddling would be of little consequence after that.

None of that mattered to him now anyway as he hurried back to his home. If his calculations had been correct, he would have had exactly two more days to read the book before sending a note of thanks to Miss Isabelle Sutton.

He could just picture her face when she opened his note and read everything he'd have to say about the book.

The sun was low in the sky when he finally reached his home and headed straight for the study, where he made himself comfortable in an armchair and rang for tea.

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Chapter 5

Two days later ...

“Just where do you think you are going?”

Isabelle winced slightly as she shut her eyes, her hand frozen just inches away from the front door.

So close.

She clenched her fingers into a fist, taking a moment to compose herself before turning around to face her brother. “I was headed to my friend, Lady Danbury. I wanted to discuss the novel that I am reading.”

Richard stood at the foot of the stairs with his arms crossed over his chest as he raised an eyebrow. “Alone?” He tilted his head to the side expectantly.

“Yes, alone, it is not improper for a young lady to visit her married friends without a chaperone. Have customs changed since the last time I paid her a visit?” She matched his stance and tilted her head defiantly to the side.

“They have not, but you know that Aunt Alice made it clear that she will be your chaperone wherever you go until you are married. You know we can’t trust you after your little stunt the other night at the ball. You can’t just go traipsing about London as you please. Once you are married, your husband will tell you when and where you may call on your friends; until then, you must obey us.” He seemed tired as he sighed

and unfolded his arms.

“Am I to ask this fictitious husband for permission every time I wish to sneeze? Or will he be in control of my involuntary functions as well?” Her tone held an unmistakable note of mocking.

Sighing deeply now, her brother shut his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose between his finger and thumb. “I’m begging you, Isabelle, do not make things more difficult than they need to be. You must marry. You have known of this arrangement for quite some time. It is the way of things.” He opened his eyes and shook his head in exasperation.

Her fists clenched at her sides as her irritation grew. “Just because I have known of your wishes for quite some time does not mean I agree with them. Why do I need to marry if I already have a home? The same home where I have lived for all of my life?”

“Because life isn’t just about you, Isabelle!” Richard snapped before he could stop himself.

Looking away, Isabelle blinked back the hot tears of rage that had suddenly welled up in her eyes.

“I didn’t mean to snap at you. You know I have always held you in high regard, but this is the way of things. You must marry, just as I must marry Miss Sedgewick ...”

“For her money.” The words came out of her mouth without much thought.

The hurt in his eyes made her feel a slight pang of guilt. “I am doing what I have to do for this family. It’s about time that you did the same. Believing in a love match within the confines of marriage is fodder for romance novels. Perhaps you should

stop reading so much and play your part in the real world.”

“Forgive me for my harsh words, brother, but I do not wish to marry for money as you are planning on doing. Miss Sedgewick may want me out of the house once her ‘new’ money has taken up residence, but I refuse to be part of it. I will be a lonely spinster with a dwindling dowry, even if it means that you are no longer on my side. If that makes me selfish, then so be it.” Her breathing deepened as she noted the serious look in her brother’s eyes.

Richard’s jaw clenched as he stood a little straighter, causing a line of scarring to darken on the edge of his chin. “Lord James will be calling soon. You had better go upstairs and change into something more suitable to receive him. Aunt Alice will be down to chaperone, and I do not wish to hear another word of this foolish plan you have concocted. No sister of mine will become a lonely spinster.” He turned towards the stairs and began to make his way up.

“I assume that dearest Caroline was the one who accepted the calling card for Lord James,” she huffed under her breath and shook her head.

Whipping around, Richard halted halfway up the stairs and glared at her. “I accepted the calling card. Lord James is the second son of a marquess with ambitions to make his own way. Money may not matter to you, but it does to everyone else in the real world.”

Isabelle shut her eyes once again as her brother continued up the stairs, leaving her alone for a moment with her thoughts.

Why can’t they just leave things be as they are?

She barely had time to catch her breath when a knock sounded on the door behind her.

Oh, for heaven's sake.

She heaved a sigh and looked down the hall, waiting to see if the butler or one of the footmen were on their way. She reminded herself that it wasn't proper for a young lady to answer the door and almost escaped when the butler suddenly appeared.

The tall man in his black livery and silver hair bowed to her respectfully before making his way to the door.

A second knock sounded before the butler could open.

"I almost thought that nobody was home." Lord James sniffed in superiority and fixed his gloves when the door finally opened.

"My apologies, My Lord." The butler apologized and bowed, accepting the walking cane and hat thrust into his hands.

"In my house, the butler answers the door before the second knock. It is a rule that he lives by." Lord James sniffed again and removed his gloves, handing them to the butler before setting his gaze on Isabelle.

A shiver of disgust ran down her spine when he smiled at her.

"Miss Sutton, it is such a pleasure to see you waiting for me. For once. Your life is always so busy and eventful; it is usually me who waits for you." The corner of his mouth curled into a smile, exposing his white teeth.

Swallowing hard, she sucked her lower lip into her mouth before letting out a breath. "Good morning, Lord James. I am afraid you have caught me quite unawares. I was just about to go upstairs and change." She lifted the hem of her dress and turned, hoping to escape for a few moments.

Closing the distance between them, he placed his hand on her arm and held her back. “Forgive me, Miss Sutton. I do not wish to come across as improper, but I wouldn’t want to waste a single second with you now that we are here.” His eyes wandered over her plain brown dress and grey cloak. “Even if you aren’t dressed for the occasion.”

“Occasion?” She raised an eyebrow and pulled her arm free before taking a step back.

Lord James cleared his throat and stood up straight, fixing his lapels before answering. “Is it not a special occasion for any young woman when a gentleman calls?”

“It depends entirely on the reason and the gentleman caller in question, Lord James.” She noted the flash in his eyes when she spoke back.

“You do amuse me, Miss Sutton; so many young women these days never speak their minds. You are a breath of fresh air in the way you tease me.” He offered her a lazy smile that came off as smug.

“I was not ...”

“Goodness, Lord James, is that you? What a lovely surprise.” Aunt Alice appeared at the top of the stairs, making her way down as she shot Isabelle a warning glance. Her thin fingers slid down the banister, displaying an overly large amethyst that her late husband had given her.

Bowing low, Lord James placed one arm over his waist before coming up straight. “Lady Sinclair, it is such an honour to have you join us for tea. I couldn’t have asked for finer company in all of London.”

The charm that dripped from his voice made Isabelle uncomfortable as the pit of her

stomach churned.

“The honour is all ours, Lord James. It is such a pleasure to have you call on us. Is it not, Isabelle?” She reached the bottom of the stairs and raised a thin eyebrow.

Mustering every ounce of her strength, Isabelle rallied. Having one disagreement with a family member was enough for one day. “It certainly was a surprise.” The corner of her mouth twitched slightly as she forced a smile.

The heavy fabric of her aunt’s dress rustled over the steps as she reached the bottom and eyed Isabelle’s dress. “Were you headed somewhere?” The pleasant smile remained pasted to her lips despite the disapproval in her eyes.

How does she do that?

Isabelle had always marvelled at the way ladies of the ton could act. They could sell a horse to a traveller with a smile despite cursing them in the back of their minds.

She always felt as if she had been cursed with an honest face. Whatever she felt at any given time inevitably showed in her expression.

“I was on my way to Lady Danbury. If I had known of Lord James’s visit, I would have changed.” She left out the fact that it was her location that she would have changed rather than her dress.

“And what is it that you and Lady Danbury wished to discuss? If I may be as bold as to enquire.” The demanding tone in his voice didn’t go unnoticed by Isabelle.

“A book that I am reading, if you must know, Lord James. I have just finished the first two chapters and wish to discuss them with my friend.” The tips of her fingers rubbed against her palms as she fought against her frustrations.

A smirk curved his lips as Lord James shook his head. "I suppose reading novels is an almost agreeable activity for an unwed young lady. Just as long as the lady in question gives it up once she is married. I often find that novels can fill a young woman's mind with too many thoughts. Wives should be obedient rather than thoughtful."

And husbands should be non-existent.

Isabelle clenched her fingers into tight fists at her sides.

"Quite right, Lord James. Young ladies should practice embroidery, painting, and the pianoforte. Anything else clutters the mind with senseless notions," Aunt Alice added to the conversation when Isabelle looked as if she were about to retort.

"Quite right, Lady Sinclair." Lord James placed his hands behind his back and nodded, lifting his nose high in the air.

Taking a deep breath, Isabelle came up with a plan, placing one hand over her abdomen as she swooned.

"Miss Sutton?" Lord James rushed forward and gripped her elbow when it seemed as if she would faint.

"Forgive me, I'm not certain what came over me ..." She fumbled over her words and allowed him to help her back up. The feel of his fingers on her arms was nauseating, yet it was worth it if it allowed her to escape.

Aunt Alice narrowed her eyes in suspicion but didn't intervene.

Lord James held her up straight with one hand on her back and the other on her arm.

“You seem to have come over faint, Miss Sutton. Are you still not well?” He seemed pleased at her frailty.

“I ... I think I just need to lay down for a moment. The world suddenly seemed to spin as you spoke, Lord James.”

“I’m sure that it’s nothing that a good cup of sweet tea wouldn’t be able to fix.” Her aunt raised her eyebrows, glaring at Isabelle over her suitor’s shoulder.

Rising to the occasion, Lord James placed his hand over his heart with a flourish. “I would not dream of forcing Miss Sutton to sit through tea, even if her company would bring me great pleasure. She is obviously of a finer and more delicate disposition. Such ladies should always be treated with care.”

Isabelle’s eyebrows knit together in a disapproving frown for a split second before she caught herself. Raising the back of her hand to her forehead, she sighed. “It is as you say, Lord James. Everything has been quite overwhelming for me. I fear that I must lay down at once if I am to avoid swooning in your presence.” She opened her eyes just enough to see his reaction before shutting them again.

“You must go to bed at once and rest, Miss Sutton. I will not call on you again until you are completely healed from your illness. I will not hear any protests to the contrary,” he spoke with an heir of authority.

“Do you promise?” she asked a little too quickly before correcting herself. “I mean, I would hate to miss your company, but if you insist...”

Aunt Alice shook her head behind Lord James’s back, pursing her lips in disapproval.

“Not only do I insist, but I command it, Miss Sutton.” He puffed out his chest like a pigeon.

Clearing her throat with a heavy sigh, Isabelle lowered her hand from her forehead. “You are a young lady’s dream, Lord James. Not many men would so gallantly offer up their time so selflessly. I will do as you say and rest until I am completely healed. Even if it takes me months.”

“I’m sure it won’t take more than a few days, one week at most,” Aunt Alice intervened now, ringing a bell to summon the butler when Lord James reached for his hat and cane.

“I will be waiting for your letter to say that you are well again, Miss Sutton.” He reached for her hand and kissed the top before she could protest.

Aunt Alice looked away without protesting.

Yet she would interject if I were to behave inappropriately.

Isabelle removed her hand and placed it behind her back where she could rub it off against her dress.

The butler appeared on cue and helped Lord James with his gloves before seeing him out.

Her aunt rounded on her just as the door closed. “I’m warning you, Isabelle, any more tricks like this, and you won’t see any of your friends until after you are married. Even your little trips to the Evergreen will come to an end if you don’t watch yourself. I will give you a few days just so that Lord James does not suspect anything, and then you will have tea with him.” She waved her index finger in Isabelle’s face before stalking down the hall.

Watching her leave, Isabelle chewed the inside of her cheek. She couldn’t put Lord James off forever but would need something like a new suitor to convince her family.

It all seemed too much as she turned to the butler, who cleared his throat.

“A letter arrived for you this morning, My Lady.” He reached for a silver tray beside the door and handed the neat envelope to Isabelle.

“Thank you.” She took the letter and frowned, not recognizing the slanted writing as she opened the wax seal.

Dear Miss Sutton,

I’m sure you are wondering why I am writing to you, but I thought you would like to know that I found your little trick quite amusing.

It gives me great pleasure to inform you that Miss Elinor Dashwood married Fanny’s brother, Edward Farris. Miss Marianne Dashwood married Colonel Brandon instead of John Willoughby. I do hope that the ending of your beloved novel didn’t leave you too disappointed.

Yours unaffectionately,

Lord Henry Montague, Earl of Ashford.

Frustration flowed through her veins as she ripped the note into hundreds of tiny pieces, letting the shreds fall to the floor at her feet.

Stubborn, pompous, meddling fool!

She vowed to have her revenge if it was the last thing she ever did.

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Chapter 6

That will show her...

Henry smirked and shook his head as he looked out the window at the busy street. He relished the thought of Miss Sutton's face when she received the letter. She would more than likely want to take revenge.

He looked forward to seeing her response. Strangely, he enjoyed the little back and forth that added a smidgen of colour to his otherwise drab life.

"My Lord." The butler cleared his throat from the doorway.

Blinking as if he hadn't realized where he was, Henry turned to look and discarded his thoughts.

The tall man with thinning hair and long features often reminded Henry of a horse. His late wife had chosen the butler because he had been a footman in her parents' house. The man had always been loyal to the Fitzgibbon family and had continued to serve Henry quite begrudgingly after Edith's death.

"Lord and Lady Fitzgibbon to call, My Lord." The proud look in the man's sharp brown eyes sparkled as if he were receiving the king and queen.

"Send them in." The pit of Henry's stomach suddenly sank as he realized that the pleasurable morning was over. It wasn't often that his in-laws called on him, but when they did, it was always by surprise and without invitation.

The butler disappeared around the corner and reemerged moments later with Lord and Lady Fitzgibbon in tow.

“Lord and Lady Fitzgibbon,” the butler announced again, bowing so low that his head could have touched his knobbly knees if he had been younger.

Henry fought the urge to roll his eyes as he stood and forced a smile. “Please, come in and have a seat.” He gestured to the dark green chaise longue and armchairs.

The countess came forward first while the earl lingered slightly behind her. His plump figure and short stature starkly contrasted his wife’s tall and lean figure.

“Henry, dear, it’s so good to see you up and about at this time of the morning. Lord Fitzgibbon and I feared that you would still be in bed. We didn’t wake you, did we?” She allowed Henry to kiss her cheek before looking him up and down as if she were trying to see a hastily donned shirt or discarded nightcap.

Barely arrived, and the remarks are already flying ...

He kept the smile fixed on his lips as he greeted his father-in-law with a handshake. “It’s ten o’clock in the morning, Lady Fitzgibbon. I have always been an early riser. Lose an hour in the morning, and you will be looking for it all day, as my mother used to say.”

Despite what you may think of me.

The earl offered him a stiff smile in response before taking a seat.

“I didn’t mean to offend you, Henry dear. It’s hard to say what goes on in your life these days. You never attend any balls or venture beyond the fine walls of this old house.”

The countess smoothed the layers of her satin dress as she pursed her lips beside her husband. Her already pinched countenance soured a little as she glanced at the books beside the armchair.

Her long, greying hair had been pulled back into a tight bun, as was customary for so many elderly women of the ton. The earl, however, still seemed to have retained most of his black hair despite being older than his wife.

“I was not offended, Lady Fitzgibbon. I merely wanted to set your mind at ease. I often spend my mornings reading before venturing out for a walk in the afternoons.” He took his seat once again and gestured for the butler to fetch them tea.

His in-laws pulled up their noses as if they had smelled something foul. They had never approved of Henry’s habits. They had tried to change him for several years but eventually gave up after their daughter had passed.

“Reading again. I never quite took to it myself. My dearly departed father always said that reading was for doctors and solicitors. There is nothing for the nobility to gain in those dry old pages.” She sniffed importantly and pursed her lips while her slender fingers ensured every strand of hair was in place.

Glancing to the side, Henry noted the time on his pocket watch beside him on the table. Five minutes had passed since their arrival, and it already felt like an eternity as he strummed his fingers on the armrests of his chair. “I don’t think that I would have made a very good solicitor, Lady Fitzgibbon, nor would I have been adept at treating ailments. I read simply to pass the time, and I enjoy it.”

“Yes, you must be so lonely without poor Edith. This house was meant for children, and here you are all alone. You must miss her so desperately.” Lady Fitzgibbon raised her shoulders slightly in a shrug.

The earl seemed more sullen now as his face fell and his eyes darkened. “It’s such a shame that she never had a chance to pass on our bloodline, if not the family name. It was quite disheartening not to have been blessed with a son, but even more so to lose our only daughter who could carry on our legacy.” He looked up at Henry with sad eyes that barely hid the accusation.

“She would have been such a great mother.” Lady Fitzgibbon’s voice broke as she blinked back a few tears.

“It is a shame that our marriage was never blessed with children, but I like to think that she is happier where she is now,” Henry added stiffly just as the butler entered with the tea tray. He never understood why his in-laws insisted on bringing up the past.

The butler placed the tray of tea and cakes on the table and served the countess and earl first before handing Henry his cup of tea and leaving.

“You know, I can still feel her presence in this house. I’m glad that you decided to keep things as she left them. Edith always had such impeccable taste when it came to decorating.” The countess sipped her tea thoughtfully and looked around the small parlour that still boasted the elegant French style.

The walls were covered in light pink paper that boasted hundreds of roses, while the vases and ornaments had all been imported from France. Money wasting, in Henry’s opinion, yet he had never interfered with his wife’s plans.

“She would have made a wonderful mother.” The earl nodded before sipping his cup of tea.

“May she rest in peace.” Henry clenched his jaw, tired of the sharp remarks that his in-laws never failed to fling in his direction. If he had been in a position to speak his

mind, he would have told them that their daughter had never loved him enough to come back and haunt him.

The only reason he had kept the house unaltered was because he couldn't have been bothered to change it. The house was more a means of living for him than a home.

Lady Fitzgibbon seemed to sense his tone as she placed her cup back in its saucer and smiled. "Never mind all that now; Edith is happier where she is, as you say. We have come to see how you have been getting on. Just what do you do on these little walks of yours, Henry dear?"

"I visit the Evergreen." Henry sipped his tea, hoping their visit would pass sooner rather than later.

"And what is that, some kind of holiday resort?" the earl asked sharply, shutting one eye as he glared at Henry. The implication that Henry was spending their daughter's inheritance on frivolous nonsense was only too apparent in his tone.

"It's a circulating library, My Lord." The teacup clinked loudly against the porcelain saucer as he placed it back down.

"I have never heard of such a thing; does one have to pay for their services?" Lady Fitzgibbon matched her husband's sharp tone.

Sighing heavily, Henry ran his tongue over his lips. "Yes, one pays a small yearly fee for the privilege of borrowing the books. It is far more cost-effective than buying books."

A moment of awkward silence passed as his visitors eyed Henry with disapproval.

"I suppose there are worse things that the money could be spent on," the earl

grumbled and clenched his jaw, averting his gaze back to his lap. The sour look never seemed to leave his pudgy face.

Breaking the uncomfortable silence with a high-pitched laugh, Lady Fitzgibbon cleared her throat. "Quite right, Byron dear. Rather he spends his time and money at some book circus than entertaining some little piece of muslin," she said, meeting Henry's gaze while speaking to her husband.

Miss Sutton wandered into his thoughts despite the irritation he was feeling. What would his in-laws say if they knew he had not only met but started a game of sorts with a young lady?

There was no hint of romance between them, but seeing their reactions would have been interesting. Lord and Lady Fitzgibbon had often hinted at their disapproval of having Henry marry again. The money, in their eyes, still belonged to their daughter, even if she had died seven years prior.

Truth be told, he found Miss Sutton quite interesting and pretty in an unassuming manner. She didn't seem to be the type of woman who would spend her time throwing frivolous parties or gossiping over other members of the ton. He wouldn't have minded getting to know her better through their little game.

"You know, all the young ladies of the ton want money and status. None of them are after love. You are far better off spending your days at the Evergreen, even if it means you become a recluse. Just the other day I heard of one of the young ladies who married an older duke.

The poor man is utterly miserable while she spends his money and flits about the ton." Lady Fitzgibbon's voice dripped with sweetness that echoed her falseness.

"I agree, Lady Fitzgibbon," Henry suddenly snapped, having had enough of their

pointed remarks. The tea in his cup almost splashed over the rim as he banged it back down.

“You do?” The earl raised an eyebrow before exchanging a look with his wife.

Henry sat up straight and placed his cup and saucer back on the tray. “I do, as a matter of fact. I think it’s about time I left this life behind me.”

“Whatever do you mean by that, dear?” The countess parted her lips slightly as she raised her nose in the air, looking down at him as if he were an insect.

“I simply mean I no longer wish to reside here in London. If I am to spend the rest of my life as a widower, which I intend to do, then the life of a country hermit will be for me. I have been toying with the idea for a while. My ancestral home has long been empty. It’s about time I take up residence there,” he lied, having only come up with the idea in the heat of the moment.

He reasoned with himself that anything was better than having to suffer these constant visits from his departed wife’s parents.

Lady Fitzgibbon seemed shocked for a moment before nodding. “I think that’s a marvellous idea. You will be much happier in the country. A quiet life suits you.”

The earl seemed pleased as well as he merely nodded his approval.

“Good, I am glad that my plans meet with your approval. I no longer wish to live in a house where the ghosts of my past haunt me whenever they choose.” He left out the fact that he viewed them both as ghosts rather than their daughter.

“Perhaps you will even be able to save some money on all those books. Does your family home possess a library?” the Earl asked more enthusiastically as he ran his

tongue over the tea on his lips.

“It does.” Henry rubbed his finger against his thumb, fighting back the frustration as his leg began to ache from sitting in one position for too long.

Never missing a beat, Lady Fitzgibbon narrowed her eyes when he ran his hand over his thigh. “Is your leg still troubling you? The fresh country air will do you good. You will see, as soon you arrive on your estate, the better you will feel. You will more than likely never wish to leave again. Your afternoon walks will be so much more invigorating with the fresh country air.”

Henry took a moment to compose himself as he humoured them both. “Yes, you did mention the fresh country air.”

“When are you thinking of leaving?” the earl asked quickly, sitting up a little straighter.

“As soon as possible. I will only need a few days to put my affairs in order, then I shall be glad to see the back of London Society.” Henry quickly removed his hand from his thigh and flexed his fingers.

Lord and Lady Fitzgibbon exchanged a triumphant look as they sipped their tea. They hadn’t said as much in so many words, but Henry knew they were relieved he was leaving.

With him tucked away in the middle of the country, they would no longer have to worry about what he was doing. Their daughter’s precious inheritance would be safe from the clutches of the villainous young ladies.

An ounce of regret set in when he realized that the game with Miss Sutton would come to an end. He had been looking forward to seeing her response. Yet missing out

on the back and forth was preferable to having these visits.

Dark eyes flashed across his mind, making him wonder what she was doing.

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Chapter 7

“I can’t believe the nerve of the man!” Isabelle paced up and down, brandishing the remnants of Lord Ashford’s letter.

“Calm down, Isabelle. I think you had better take a seat and have some tea before you walk a path into the grass.” Lady Evelyn Danbury smiled warmly, pouring her friend another cup of tea. Her bright green eyes twinkled mischievously.

Isabelle stopped pacing and shook her head, sinking into the white, wicker chair. “He’s just so infuriating.” She placed the remnants of her letter beside the tray as she accepted the cup of tea. She wished she hadn’t been so hasty in tearing it up; having destroyed the evidence, she had to explain the situation to her friend.

The late afternoon sun shone through the rustling leaves of the giant oak. The glistening flecks of light caught the silver rims of the cups, reflecting the magnificence of the porcelain.

“Tell me again how it is that you met Lord Ashford?” Evelyn’s delicate, long fingers curled around her hot cup of tea as she sat back in her chair and smiled at Isabelle. Her bright blonde curls had been pinned back into an elaborate style, while her skin was just as pale as Isabelle’s.

Having married a duke, Evelyn enjoyed the freedom and lifestyle that Isabelle envied without wanting the hassle of a marriage.

“He interfered with my escape on the night of the ball.” Isabelle strummed the tips of

her fingers on the table as she lay her chin in her hand with her elbow on the armrest of her chair.

Evelyn's laughter rang out across the garden as she shook her head. The light summer breeze played with a few loose tendrils that hung down her neck. "I did hear of the incident at the ball. I was only sorry that I wasn't there to see it. Did you really tear up your dance card and let it fall to the floor? The retelling I heard sounded quite dramatic."

Glancing down at the shredded letter, Isabelle sighed. "Yes, it's a bad habit of mine."

Her words only served to add to her friend's mirth. "I'm sure Lord James didn't look kindly upon that, but enough of him. What does this, Lord Ashford, look like? I can't say that I've come across him before."

Drawing her bottom lip between her teeth, Isabelle could feel a strange fluttering in the pit of her stomach that she didn't understand. "He has kind eyes. He's quite grumpy and curt, but his eyes are flecked with gold. He certainly thinks of himself as chivalrous; otherwise, I don't see why he would have stopped me," she added begrudgingly.

"You seem quite taken with him," Evelyn added unexpectedly, making Isabelle realize she had been staring past her friend.

"I can assure you, Evelyn dearest, that the only thing I am taken by is the need for revenge. Lord Ashford will rue the day that he stopped me from escaping." She sat up straighter and reached for her cup of tea, allowing the hot amber liquid to fuel her rage.

"And what exactly are you planning on doing, or should I rather not ask?" The marchioness placed her cup of tea back on the tray and reached for a dainty pink

cake.

Eyeing the remnants of the letter, Isabelle once again strummed the tips of her fingers on the table while chewing the inside of her cheek. "I'm not certain yet. I visited the Evergreen this morning and tried to fish for information, but nobody seems to have anything good to say about the man. As much as I hate to say it, he's somewhat of a kindred spirit. The ton judges him for being a recluse and reading too many books. His life sounds like a dream to me if I am being honest."

It pained her to speak favourably of the man, but she couldn't deny the fact that he seemed to be misunderstood, much like herself.

"And you say that he is a widower?" Evelyn asked quietly.

Realizing that her friend was watching her quite intently, she sat up straight and cleared her throat. "Yes, from what I can understand, he never wished to marry ever again. I can't say that I blame him for that."

Evelyn bit on her lips but didn't say anything further as she sipped her tea, eyeing Isabelle over the rim of her cup.

"Maybe part of my revenge can be spreading gossip about him wanting to marry. I could say that he is looking for a suitable match and watch as the young ladies flock to marry him." She thought for a moment and realized how cruel it would be if he were indeed a kindred spirit. She resented courtship, especially when it was being thrust in her unwilling direction.

"Don't you think that spreading gossip is a little too malicious?" her friend asked with a frown.

"You're right; it has to be something far more subtle that will get under his skin. I

need to inconvenience his life without causing him actual trouble.” Her mind ran wild with all the things she could do.

“What if you read one of his novels and spoiled the ending for him? A little tit for tat?” Evelyn suggested helpfully, seemingly enjoying the fact that she could be part of the game.

Isabelle shook her head. “No, it’s too predictable. I need to take it up a notch. It has to be a little pettier than spoiling the ending of a novel while not causing him actual harm. Plus, I do not wish to read any of the books he enjoys.

Punishing myself while seeking revenge seems counter-productive. I can only imagine that reading my novel took great perseverance. I commend him for that, at least.”

“You could always intercept one of his books and glue all the pages together. Or you could write your own novel and make him the villain. Lord Ashford the Horrible. Rescuer of young ladies against their will. An ogre with kind eyes. I can see the title now.” The marchioness gestured in the air, teasing her friend.

“Do not mock me, Evelyn. You would be just as infuriated with the man if you ever met him. He’s a stubborn, sullen, busybody with a countenance to match.” Isabelle raised an eyebrow at her friend.

Biting her lips to suppress a giggle, Evelyn reached for a small cucumber sandwich cut into a triangle.

Isabelle rubbed her hands together and thought for a moment. “Although, you may be onto something. I do not fancy myself a writer, but I can send a letter to some author and request they use him as a villain in their next novel. It would make for an interesting read, provided the writer agrees to portray him in his true light.”

The marchioness's eyes danced with amusement as she watched her friend. "I know you dislike the man quite intensely, but it is good to see you so animated and passionate about something. You have been looking quite sullen ever since your brother got engaged."

Sighing heavily, Isabelle sipped her tea, which had begun to lose its heat. "I don't understand why I need to marry just because Richard is doing what he thinks is right. I understand it is the way of things, but I don't care if people view me as a spinster and gossip. I know Richard would have honoured my wishes if not for Miss Sedgewick pushing him to marry me off." She waved a hand in the air as if she were being swept away by Caroline's devious plans.

"She does seem like the kind of woman who wants to be the only lady of the house. She will rule the roost in her marriage; make no mistake with that." Evelyn seemed sympathetic as she, too sighed.

"I wouldn't challenge her in the least if they allowed me to live with them. All I have ever wanted was to live quietly while keeping an eye on the family library. I know it's hard to understand, especially for someone like you who married for love." A feeling of helplessness overtook her.

"It may be hard for me to understand, Isabelle, but there are like-minded people out there. Take Lord Ashford, for instance; he certainly seems to hold the same values as you do." The marchioness paused for a moment before cocking her head to the side. "Do you not believe in love at all?"

The question caught Isabelle off guard. "Truth be told, I did once hope for a marriage of love and understanding if nothing else, but time and observation have proven to me that things like that are rare. I would much rather spend my time in blissful spinsterhood than searching for a man that simply does not exist. Even if I did get married, I am hardly suited to a life of balls and fancy dinners."

Evelyn's eyes glistened with understanding as her expression softened. "I can't say that I hope you become a spinster. I think you have much to offer a man who sees your true beauty, but I have known you long enough to know that you cannot easily be swayed ... And what of Lord James? The last time we spoke, you mentioned that Miss Sedgwick was forcing you in his direction."

The pit of Isabelle's stomach churned at the mention of his name. "I'm hoping to put him off long enough to lose interest. A life tethered to a man like him is worse than having to marry someone like Lord Ashford and his sour countenance!"

The corner of Evelyn's mouth curled into a pleasant smile as she held Isabelle's gaze. "At least we know that Lord Ashford has some redeeming qualities, even if it is as an alternative to Lord James."

"I think you may have misunderstood me." Isabelle's brows knitted into a frown.

"Did I?" Evelyn sat back and sipped her tea with a knowing smile.

"Isabelle, could you come in here for a second?" Caroline's voice carried down the hall almost as soon as Isabelle shut the front door.

What now?

Expiration filled her lungs as she wondered if Lord James hadn't been summoned again. It had only been two days since she had last seen him and said she was ill, but that wouldn't deter Caroline in the slightest.

The sound of hushed voices from the parlour all but confirmed her suspicions. There was no use in lingering when her fate was sealed. If Lord James were there, she

would have to simper and smile to placate them all.

Removing her coat and gloves, she placed them on the hall table before making her way towards the parlour.

It had struck her as strange when her aunt had allowed her to visit her friend, yet she hadn't thought to question it at the time. She now realized that it may have been a foolish misconception to think that all was well.

"Come in and have a seat," Aunt Alice instructed as soon as Isabelle entered the room.

Surprise caught her off guard when she realized that Lord James wasn't present in the group, yet something still seemed off as she sat opposite her aunt.

The sullen and serious looks on all three faces made her pulse race as she took a deep breath and waited. Folding her hands in her lap, she waited expectantly and somewhat nervously for things to unfold.

"Is Lady Danbury well?" Richard asked after clearing his throat.

"She is; married life seems to suit her, although I can't say that I can relate," Isabelle answered while intertwining her fingers nervously and holding her head high as she feared what was coming.

Never had any 'meeting' with Miss Sedgewick gone well. It usually ended with Isabelle being thrust at some or the other suitor.

"That is good to hear." Richard nodded and ignored her remark.

The silence that filled the air became too much for her to bear as nobody seemed to

know what to say.

“Am I to guess at the reason for this meeting, or will you be telling me soon?” She looked from Caroline to her aunt, noting the sudden air of discomfort in her brother’s posture.

Aunt Alice pursed her lips in displeasure before looking at Caroline. “We have some news.”

The pit of Isabelle’s stomach knotted as her palms began to sweat. Either Lord James had voiced his displeasure with her behaviour and had given up on her, or something terrible was about to unfold.

The look of triumph in Caroline’s watery grey eyes made Isabelle think that it was the latter. “You are to be married. Isn’t that wonderful news?”

A feeling of being drenched with a bucket of ice ran down her spine.

How?

She thought back to the last meeting with Lord James and wondered how things had escalated so quickly. Had he not seen how unwilling she was to become his wife, or did it simply not matter to him how she felt?

Clearing his throat, Richard drew her from her thoughts. “Lord James paid us a visit in your absence. He was so concerned about your well-being that he didn’t want us to disturb you.”

“Isn’t that considerate of him, given the fact that you weren’t here? I am given to understand that you weren’t at all well the last time we arranged a visit.” Caroline raised an eyebrow and drew her lips into a thin line of disapproval.

“Lord James asked for your hand in marriage, and I accepted. We shall wait for a reasonable amount of time so as not to leave room for gossip or speculation, but you will be married in due time.” Richard sounded almost apologetic regardless of his harsh words.

Isabelle’s throat suddenly felt dry as she attempted to swallow.

How can this be happening?

Everything seemed to move in slow motion as her family’s voices faded into the background. It didn’t make sense to her. How could a man ask for her hand in marriage, and that was all it took? She suddenly realized that she had been labouring under the false assumption that her wishes would be respected.

I am not in control of my own story.

She felt a little queasy as she pressed her fist against her stomach.

“Surely this isn’t coming as a shock to you. We have been telling you for months that you should marry.” Caroline held her head high, speaking down to Isabelle.

“We, or do you mean you?” Isabelle lifted her gaze and looked at Caroline after glancing at her brother.

A veiled expression fell over Richard’s face as he avoided her gaze.

“I am only doing what is right for my future family, including you.” Caroline narrowed her eyes, openly challenging Isabelle to defy her. “I cannot be known as the sister-in-law of a spinster.”

“Yes, I can see how that would be the worst thing in the world for you. Poor Miss

Sedgewick and lowly sister-in-law-to-be. How ever will your reputation recover if I do not marry?" Anger raced through her veins as heat filled Isabelle's cheeks.

Caroline glared at her, narrowing her brows. "We will never find out, will we? Since you are to be married. The question in itself is a moot point."

"This is right, Isabelle. Lord James is a good man. You will be well looked after under his care. I will warn you that you must learn to curb your words and not speak your mind. Lord James will not suffer a disobedient wife," Aunt Alice intervened when the atmosphere between Caroline and Isabelle became too intense.

Taking a deep breath, Isabelle stood and fought against the urge to faint. There was no feigning illness this time. The nausea and light-headedness that flowed through her body was only too real.

"Sit down; we are not done talking," Aunt Alice snapped at her.

Regaining her voice, Isabelle stood her ground and lifted her head. "Oh, but I think we are. My presence does not seem to be required here when my future is being discussed." Her fingers curled into fists at her sides before she gathered the strength to leave.

"You can't just walk out on this discussion!" Caroline jumped to her feet and attempted to stand in her way when Aunt Alice silenced her.

"Ler her go, Miss Sedgewick. Isabelle knows very well that she has no choice in the matter. I will allow her a few days to process the news." Her aunt's voice followed her down the hall.

Making her way up the stairs, Isabelle realized that she was privy to a story she hadn't anticipated despite all the evidence. She wasn't a heroine on an adventure to

save herself from marriage. She was the sad and unfortunate maiden in a damned tragedy.

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Chapter 8

Taking in the crisp air, Henry sauntered towards the Evergreen for what he assumed but hoped was not the last time. All the packing and bustling from the servants had almost driven him insane. It had only been two days since his announcement to leave, yet Lady Fitzgibbon had insisted upon sending more servants to help him pack.

It did his heart good to know that he was leaving all of that behind, yet he couldn't help resenting that he was also leaving his beloved Evergreen.

The bell above the shop door tinkled, eliciting a strong feeling of nostalgia in his chest as he entered.

"Good day, My Lord. Was there something specific that I can find for you?" Mr Charleston provided his usually chipper greeting.

"Good morning, Mr Charleston. I think I would like just to sit in a corner and read today if you don't mind," he answered almost sullenly, taking in the rows of catalogues on shelves that had become part of his life.

"Of course, you are always welcome in here. Just give me a shout if you need anything at all." Mr Charleston ambled towards the room behind the counter and disappeared from sight.

Turning to the rest of the shop, Henry placed his hands on his hips and took a deep breath.

I am going to miss this.

His chest clenched with regret as he opened his eyes and took it all in.

Oh, Lord ...

Panic gripped him as he jumped behind a shelf and tried to hide. He couldn't have imagined it, but if he had been right ...

Peering around the edge, he noted the young woman sitting in one of the reading nooks with her face buried in a book. Her face was sullen and downcast, yet it was unmistakably her.

Miss Sutton.

His pulse raced a little faster when he withdrew once again, utterly certain that it was her. He'd found it strange that she hadn't yet made her next move, but he'd reasoned that she had been biding her time while she came up with the next grand plan.

Taking a deep breath, he smoothed his hair back and straightened his coat. If she was planning her next move, then he wasn't about to let it slide. He would make his presence known to her and hopefully avoid any traps she may have set.

Stepping out from behind the shelf, he strode past her, keeping his eyes fixed on the opposite wall.

Nothing.

A frown creased his brow when he reached the other end of the shop and realized that she hadn't so much as looked up. If she had seen him, then she hadn't let on.

Not wanting to lose at the game he had started, he strode by again, making sure to make a little more noise with his boots on the floor.

Nothing.

Frustration took over again when she didn't stir.

Two can play at this game.

He endeavoured to repeat his actions, striding past her until she snapped her book shut.

"You had better stop pacing. Unless you want Mr Charleston to think that you are drunk and have you thrown out?" Her chest rose and fell with a sigh as she glared at him. Something in her eyes seemed far more listless than the last time he had seen her, yet her fighting spirit was still there.

"I am not drunk, thank you very much. I was just stretching my legs before I settled down to read." He retorted with his head held high.

"Did your walk to the shop not provide you with adequate exercise, or did you take a carriage?" She looked him up and down with the same resentment as the first night they had met. "Perhaps you were carried here by your servants?"

Feeling his hackles go up, Henry glared at her. "I can assure you, Miss Sutton, that I am not as feeble or pompous as you make me out to be."

Flames seemed to ignite in her eyes as she jutted her chin out and glared at him. "Then I do not understand your stance, My Lord. Were you hoping for another feeble damsel in distress despite her unwillingness to be helped?"

“Madam, if I could go back in time, I would certainly leave you to run wild on the streets of London!” He glared at her, feeling a need to win the argument that he had, in essence, started.

“And I would thank you for it!” She raised her voice but bit back her words when someone appeared at his side.

Shutting his mouth, Henry stepped back and placed his hands behind his back, stunned to see someone he recognized.

“Lord Ashford, I am surprised to see you here. How are Lord and Lady Fitzgibbon these days? I am afraid I haven’t called on them as often as I should.” Lady Sinclair forced a smile, looking from him to Miss Sutton with an air of suspicion.

“They are quite well, Lady Sinclair, I will pass on your regards the next time I see them.” He cleared his throat uncomfortably and crossed his fingers behind his back.

The last thing he intended to do before leaving London was start a conversation with the very people he intended to leave behind.

Looking him up and down, Lady Sinclair smiled. “I am glad to see that you are looking so well, Lord Ashford. I have heard that you have not married again; your loyalty to your late wife is commendable.” Her words seemed pointed, yet he didn’t understand why.

Had she been conspiring with his mother-in-law? It didn’t seem likely, given her remark of not seeing them that often.

A frown crossed Miss Sutton’s brow as she looked from him to Lady Sinclair. “Do you know each other?” she asked in confusion, her hands gripping the edge of her book.

Lady Sinclair returned her frown. "I am acquainted with the family of Lord Ashton's late wife. Lord and Lady Fitzgibbon are old friends." She turned her gaze of suspicion back on Henry. "I was not, however, aware of the fact that the two of you knew each other beyond that night of the ball."

"I can assure you that that night was the first time we ever crossed paths, Lady Sinclair," he informed her, realizing that she didn't believe him. Did the woman think that he stalked young ladies in his spare time? It wouldn't surprise him in the least if that were what she was thinking. All the women of the ton constantly had one thing on their minds. Marriage.

Raising an eyebrow, she looked at Miss Sutton. "Is that so? The two of you seemed to be quarrelling when I came along."

"We were discussing a book that we have both read. Is that against the law, or am I not to have any conversations anymore? Should I be writing to Lord James to ask his permission to breathe?" Miss Sutton glared at Lady Sinclair until the old woman clenched her jaw.

"And what book might that be?" Lady Sinclair placed both of her hands on the head of her cane and cocked her head to the side.

Taking a deep breath, Miss Sutton looked at the book on her lap before answering. "It's a novel where the heroine is unwillingly thrust into a marriage of convenience. Whether she will go ahead with the marriage remains to be seen. Perhaps she will become so overburdened by her family's demands that she decides to defy them."

Henry felt a little lost but decided not to intervene on matters that seemed a little personal. Yet he couldn't help wondering if she was referring to herself.

"Very well, you may continue your discussion, but I will be watching from across the

room.” She looked Henry up and down before nodding a greeting and heading back towards the front of the shop.

“A relative of yours?” Henry asked her with a half-smirk.

Shaking her head, she massaged her temple with her thumb. “My aunt, you may as well have a seat now that we have come this far. It will only raise more questions if you leave now.” She gestured to the seat beside her.

Hesitating at first, he glanced back at Lady Sinclair before taking the seat.

Miss Sutton seemed quieter than the last time he had seen her. Her eyes were a little duller, and her shoulders more stooped. Making his own conclusion from the book she had described, he wondered again if she wasn’t the heroine in question.

“This book you and I are supposedly reading, does it end well, or am I to expect a letter spoiling the ending?” He tried his best to coax a smile from her and ease the tension between them.

Looking up, she met his gaze and sighed. “I am afraid that is a tragedy. The young lady has no choice but to marry the man her family is selling her to.”

“Selling her? Seems to me like a tale of slavery rather than marriage.” He enjoyed the tilt of her chin when she defiantly looked him in the eyes once again.

“Aren’t all marriages a form of slavery where the wife is expected to act in a certain way? I can think of only one marriage I know of that was entered into willingly. Can you think of another?”

The hint of exasperation in her voice tugged at his heart. Was she being forced into a marriage against her will? As much as he had resented her at first, he never wished

her such an ill fate.

Clearing his throat, he sat back in his seat and looked to the front of the shop where Lady Sinclair sat glaring at him. "I must admit that you have me on that score. I cannot think of a single example. Yet if I have learned anything from the many books I have read, there is always a way of escape."

Lifting her head, she allowed her lips to curve into the faintest of smiles. "Oh?"

"Oh, yes, there is always a way of escaping, no matter how dire the situation may seem." He nodded triumphantly and crossed his arms over his chest as if he were an expert on the matter.

His reply seemed to spark something within her as she sat up a little straighter. "And if the heroine were looking for a means to escape, which path would you suggest?"

Her question caught him off guard as he suddenly began to enjoy her company. "I'm not certain; I would have to know more about the heroine in question. Is she wealthy enough to run away and start a life on her own? She could assume an alias and live abroad. Scotland, or even France comes to mind."

A look of sadness came over her face once again as she sighed. "And if that was not an option? If the heroine in question did not have her own money and needed the approval of her family to live the life she wanted? What is she to do then?"

He momentarily allowed his gaze to linger on her face, taking in the perfect lips, large eyes, and all too hollow cheeks. "Then I think she should explore more options until she finds one more applicable to her circumstances. She could find a more agreeable match if the man she is being forced to marry is truly as horrid as she says."

"I never said that the man in question was horrid." She raised an eyebrow with the

faintest of smiles as she looked at him.

Feeling his pulse race a little faster, he looked into her eyes, noting the depths that beckoned him like a deep pool in the middle of an abandoned mine. “Is it not reasonable to assume that the man is horrid if the heroine is so adamant about not marrying him?”

“The heroine could be spoiled, wanting a way out so she may spend the rest of her days as a pampered recluse. Or perhaps she simply does not wish to marry because she is that selfish.” Her eyes filled with emotions that drew him in.

“Perhaps, but I don’t think that either of those options is true.”

Her lips parted slightly as she seemed to take a deep breath. “How can you be so sure if you haven’t even read the book? Surely one would need more facts to draw an adequate and fair conclusion.”

“I can’t be sure, but I pride myself on being a good judge of character. I think that the heroine in question has valid reasons that will make her audience sympathize with her. In any case, I would like to know more about this heroine and what she will choose. If anything, I am a stickler for a happy ending.”

A distant tinkling of the shop bell drew Henry out of his daze just as he caught himself leaning closer. A light breeze entered the shop, wafting over them both as the sweet scent of vanilla perfume filled his senses.

“Isabelle, it is time to go!” Lady Sinclair barked from the front of the shop, slamming the door behind her as she left. The thick fabric of her dress swished over the floor like a final curtain call.

Jumping a little, Miss Sutton twitched and clutched the book in her lap. “I ... I had

better go; my aunt will not stop until I do.” She cleared her throat and looked around the shop as if seeing it for the very first time.”

“I understand.” He stood alongside her and bowed, watching as she brushed a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

“Until we meet again, Lord Ashford.” She lifted her gaze and looked at him with an unreadable expression before leaving the shop.

The scent of vanilla wafted through the air again as he watched her leave.

Something in the way she had spoken made him view her in an entirely different light. He had been vexed by her before, yet he now realized that she harboured a rich character and broader worldview.

He thought of how interesting it would be to speak to her again and even more interesting to find out who the man was that she was refusing to marry. Everything about her character and life seemed interesting to him, alluring even as he pondered the scenario.

Making his way out of the shop, he took his time walking back home. Nothing gave him greater joy in life than seeing someone prove him wrong. Despite his penchant for competitions and winning, he relished that Miss Sutton was more than she seemed.

He arrived home just in time to be confronted by the butler, who was waiting expectantly for his return. The halls were still filled with boxes of books, trinkets in tissue paper, and clothes.

“I hope your walk proved satisfactory, My Lord?” the man asked him out of formality rather than anything else.

“Yes, thank you, it was quite refreshing.” He allowed the butler to take his coat and gloves.

“A note arrived from Lady Fitzgibbon, My Lord. She wished to know when you will be leaving London. I suspect that she wished to say farewell before you go,” the butler asked him.

Out of celebration more than anything else.

“Oh, I don’t know. I don’t see why I should rush things; the move after all will be permanent. Perhaps I shall stay a few more days, just to see how things pan out.” He ignored the look of confusion on the butler’s face and began to climb the stairs.

Who knew? Perhaps he would see the happy ending of a feisty heroine before he left the ton behind him for good.

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Chapter 9

The following day ...

“Isabelle, if you could just put your book down for a moment.” Richard came into the parlour and shut the door behind him.

A sigh ran through her body, raking her lungs as she shut the cover. It hadn’t been easy to read since her engagement was made known to her, but it was even harder when her brother, aunt, or even Caroline insisted on monitoring her every second of the day.

She felt like a flightless bird trapped in a cage, doomed to sing the same joyless songs day after day.

Taking a seat on the settee opposite her, Richard leaned forward and clasped his hands between his knees. “Is it a very interesting book? I thought I saw you reading the same one last week.” He forced a smile, although it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Quite unusual for you, I would say.”

“I wouldn’t know; I haven’t been able to enjoy my life, given the trajectory it is being forced into.” Her fingers curled over the edge of the book, pulling the spine closer to her abdomen as she clutched it on her lap.

It was Richard’s turn to sigh as he shot her a pitying look. “I know this isn’t easy for you, Isabelle, but like I have told you before, we all have a part to play in this life. Society demands it.”

“I understand that. What I don’t understand is why I can’t determine the part I play on my own. How would you like it if someone told you that you weren’t allowed to marry Caroline? That you must marry a woman of somebody else’s choosing?” She lifted her head defiantly.

A strange look flashed across his eyes before he stiffened. “I hesitate to remind you, but you were given the opportunity to choose your own husband. It was you who decided that nobody was good enough for you. And I shall thank you not to speak on matters that you know nothing about. You spent the entire season avoiding your obligations rather than finding an agreeable husband.” The sharpness in his voice made her pause as she pondered their meaning.

Had he wanted to marry Caroline Sedgewick? She did think her an odd choice for her brother, but the engagement had happened so quickly that she had never thought to question the matter.

The tired look in his eyes now made her wonder what she had been missing. Did Caroline and her brother actually want to get married, or were they in a situation much like her own?

Raking his hand through his thick hair, Richard shook his head with a tired expression. “There are things in this world I am trying to protect you from, Isabelle. It isn’t always up to me. If Caroline and even Aunt Alice decide to throw you out once I am married, there is little that I can do about the matter. You aren’t as entitled to the family fortunes as you think you are.”

“And why not? Were your mother and father not my parents as well? Aunt Alice may have moved in here, but she is not our mother. We do not have to jump every time she says we must,” she snapped at his words, feeling as if nobody in the world understood how she felt.

“She may not be our mother, but she has offered up several years of her life to ensure we are looked after. Had mother and father not perished from smallpox, they would have been encouraging you to marry just the same.” His voice was stern while his eyes pleaded with her to see things in a different light.

They hardly ever spoke about the time when their parents had died. Isabelle was a baby while Richard was five at the time. The illness had been quick, taking their parents in a matter of weeks.

Aunt Alice had taken care of Isabelle back then, but she wished Richard would open up more and tell her about the parents she never knew.

“I think that Mama and Papa would never have considered a match from a man like Lord James!” She lost her temper and discarded her unread book beside her on the settee.

Jumping to his feet, Richard towered above her as he thrust his thumb into his chest. “I am the one who suffered the illness alongside our parents; you know nothing of the debts that needed to be repaid after their passing. It is my face that bears the scars of the past, yet you insist on going against me no matter what decisions I make for this family!” His face turned slightly red as he raised his voice, making the scars on his cheeks bulge like angry white ropes.

Leaning back in her seat as if she had been slapped, Isabelle suddenly noticed the wrinkles around his eyes. The scars from his illness had always been apparent, yet she had never noticed the thinly etched lines of concern. When had he got those lines?

Swallowing hard, she took a deep breath and composed herself. “I am not a child, Richard. I know there are things in this world that you are trying to protect me from, but I can’t help feeling that forcing me to marry someone against my will is wrong.

You may have known Mother and Father longer than I did, but I do know that they loved us dearly ...” her words trailed off as sadness clutched at her chest.

Why does the world have to be so cruel?

Here she was arguing with her only sibling when all she wanted was her own little piece of happiness in life. Even if her wishes went against everyone else’s expectations, why couldn’t they just leave her alone?

Relaxing his face, Richard allowed his shoulders to slump in defeat. “I don’t want to see you shipped off to a nunnery or even sent to a convent to work in the kitchen, but you should know that those are your options if you choose not to marry. Your dowry is not so large as to provide you with a comfortable life as a spinster. Lord James will be coming for dinner this evening along with a few other guests. I want you to be on your best behaviour. You may not agree with everything I say, but I do expect you to obey me. And once you are married, you will have to obey Lord James.”

Tears filled her eyes as she turned her head to the side.

Why can’t he see how much this is hurting me?

None of the arrangements made sense to her at all, yet she was expected to simply and obey.

Shaking his head as if he had wanted to say something else, Richard shut his mouth and left the room, leaving Isabelle to her thoughts.

He had come to tell her that the hour of her demise was almost upon her. A dinner with her betrothed marked the start of their engagement becoming public.

It wouldn’t be long until the announcement was made in the papers; everyone would

be expecting a wedding in the coming weeks.

There has to be something that I can do ...

The endless chatter of dinner buzzed over her head as Isabelle ladled soup into her mouth. The hot broth poured down her throat with a tangy sting that did little to improve her mood.

Her heart longed for the freedom of a spinster, while her mind wanted nothing more than to speak her objections. Why did the world look so poorly on women who spoke their minds when men were allowed to say and do as they pleased?

“They do make such a lovely couple. When will the engagement be announced?” Lady Herminia Keen ladled the tomato soup into her mouth and smiled at Caroline as if Isabelle’s opinion didn’t matter at all. Her long blonde hair had been piled atop her head in a bun that distinctly reminded Isabelle of a beehive.

“I was thinking of hosting a ball in a fortnight. It gives them both a chance to get to know one another a little better. Strictly chaperoned, of course.” Caroline shot Isabelle a warning glance over her spoon. The message conveyed by her look was all too clear.

Don’t you dare go against anything that I am saying.

“How lovely.” Lady Keen wrinkled her snub nose and smiled at Isabelle while pursing her thin lips. Her dull brown eyes sparkled as if she were the one getting married to the man of her dreams. “You must be so excited to finally be getting married. How old was it that you said you were, dear?”

Placing her spoon back in her bowl, Isabelle sat back in her chair and forced an uncomfortable smile. “I didn’t, Lady Keen. I am twenty-three. I will be twenty-four in a few months.” She refrained from commenting that talking about age wasn’t a polite topic of conversation.

Lady Keen and Caroline exchanged a knowing look but didn’t add anything more to the topic.

Feeling a slight tap on the side of her foot, Isabelle looked up to see Lord James smiling at her before winking and sipping his wine.

Withdrawing her foot as quickly as she could, she crossed her ankles under her chair and shivered, feeling the pit of her stomach clench with repulsion.

What is it with him and winking?

She pointedly returned her focus to her soup, keeping her head low to avoid meeting Lord James’s gaze.

Richard seemed to be paying close attention to them as his fist clenched around his spoon, making Isabelle frown as she glanced to the side. The dinner had started easily enough but quickly seemed to delve into a realm of awkwardness. Caroline’s friends didn’t seem to think too highly of Isabelle or Richard as they pulled up their noses and spoke directly to Caroline.

Clearing her throat, Lady Keen again decided to start the conversation. However, her husband never seemed to bother adding anything to the conversation. Choosing instead to keep his bald head lowered over his bowl as he inhaled the contents like a squat little toad.

“Lord James, what is it that you said you do to occupy your time again? Surely the

second son of a marquess can't just be busy with the lands he manages all the time.” Lady Keen fluttered her eyes at him as if her lashes could lull him into telling her everything she wanted to know.

Lord James simply waved the idea away as if he were chasing a fly. “A little bit of this and that. I like to keep my business ventures as quiet as possible. You never know who is listening to gain information,” he said pointedly while glancing around the table.

“Good man, that.” Lord Keen raised his head and nodded, interjecting for the first time. His double chins wobbled in agreement along with his head. The wart on his chin drew Isabelle’s attention as she wondered what would happen if it accidentally got nicked while shaving.

Lord James raised his glass slightly in the air and winked, smiling to himself as the conversation once again ended abruptly.

What is it with the winking?!

Isabelle shivered slightly in disgust before her brows knitted together in a frown. What was it that Lord James did for a living? Everyone who had spoken to her in that regard had always mentioned his ambitious nature, yet nobody had ever specified exactly what those ambitions were.

A tense feeling of unease gripped the pit of her stomach as she stole a glance in his direction. The whole purpose of marrying her off was to have a man who would look after her for the rest of her life. Lord James spoke a good game of ambitions and fortunes, but what would come of her if he were all talk and nothing else? Surely her brother could see how suspicious the man’s behaviour was.

“Has everyone finished their soup?” Caroline interrupted her thoughts, looking less

than pleased with how the dinner was going.

“I think we can call for the main course.” Richard dabbed the corners of his mouth with his napkin before placing it beside his plate.

Caroline gestured in the air and watched as the butler bowed and gave instructions to the footmen. She wasn’t even married yet, and already she ran the house as if she were Lady Sutton.

“I hear you like reading, Miss Sutton, have you heard of this new scandalous novel that has the ton buzzing with displeasure? Some are saying that the heroine calls off her engagement and runs away to make her own way in the world. Have you ever heard of anything so scandalous? I don’t think that publishers should allow such things in novels.” Lady Keen pursed her lips in displeasure as the roast chicken was served.

Perking up, Isabelle lifted her head and looked directly at Lady Keen, ignoring Caroline as her body instantly stiffened. “I do like reading, Lady Keen. I have not had the pleasure of reading the novel in question, but I must say that I disagree with your stance. Authors should be allowed to publish whatever they choose. Stifling a writer’s creativity will only prove to strangle good literature. Freedom of speech must be practiced in writing, if nowhere else.” She turned her head back to Caroline and gave her a pointed look.

Richard almost choked on his wine as he quickly placed his glass back on the table and dabbed the corners of his mouth.

“But the ideas that such literature could place in impressionable young ladies’ minds ...” Lady Keen seemed flabbergasted as she raised her hand to her pearls.

“But if it is a work of fiction, then surely there is no harm to be done. Besides, I don’t

think that a young lady making her own way in the world is as bad as everyone seems to think,” Isabelle spoke her mind, ignoring the warning looks coming from her brother and Caroline.

Lord James placed his glass back on the table with a loud clink that drew the conversation to an end. “Am I to understand that you agree with this novel? Is it proper, in your opinion, for a young lady to call off an engagement?” His eyes were dark with displeasure as he glared at her, tapping his fingers against the side of the glass.

“Yes, for the sake of honesty, I can’t say that I disagree. Calling off an engagement should rest entirely on the circumstances. And young ladies should have far more say than society grants them at present.

If a man were to be less than honourable, then a young lady should be granted the choice of calling it off,” she stated with conviction despite the furious pounding of her heart.

An awkward silence fell over the table, engulfing the group in a blanket of stillness. Even Lord Keen seemed to lose interest in his food as he looked from Isabelle to James with his spoon suspended in mid-air above his bowl.

The rest of the dinner continued in stunned silence as Isabelle contemplated her decisions. It wasn’t until Caroline cleared her throat that she finally looked up from her plate.

Placing her napkin beside her plate, Caroline intervened. “Well then, I think we had all better gather in the drawing room. I hope you don’t mind, but I have arranged for cakes and tea to be served instead of dessert this evening. I thought it might liven things up a little and give us an opportunity for conversation.” She stood, barely concealing her rage towards Isabelle as her cheeks filled with colour.

“Not that talking has got us anywhere,” Richard grumbled under his breath before following suit with a shake of his head.

The group awkwardly stood and exited the dining room, but not before Isabelle caught a snippet of something Lord James said to her brother.

“I will be having a word with you before I leave this evening.” His voice carried a distinct tone of displeasure.

Making her way from the table, Isabelle decided that whatever happened would have to happen. It was too late now to take back her words, even if she had wanted to, which she did not.

If Lord James could not handle her speaking her mind, she doubted he’d enjoy spending the rest of his life with her. It was better for Lord James to see her now for who she was rather than have him change his mind right before the wedding. Scandal, in her opinion, was best avoided sooner rather than later.

The rest of the evening passed in long pauses and awkward silence until Lord and Lady Keen decided to end the evening. Caroline and Isabelle were just coming back from seeing their guests off when raised voices carried down the stairs.

“I hesitate to remind you, Richard, but my promise to help your family’s finances only stands if your sister agrees to marry me. I will not be embarrassed like this again! If you cannot control your sister, then our little arrangement will come to an end! And don’t think that I will remain quiet if the engagement gets called off. I shall personally make sure that this family is ruined!”

Isabelle paused in the foyer, exchanging a glance with Caroline as the blood in her veins turned to ice.

What is he talking about?

For once, Caroline didn't seem to be judging her but instead gave her a look of concern.

A door in the distance slammed, forcing Isabelle and Caroline to hurry into the drawing room, where they watched from behind a half-closed door.

Lord James came hurrying down the stairs like a bear with a sore foot while Richard gave chase.

"I implore you to see reason, Lord James. My sister was simply tired this evening. It's all the excitement of the engagement." Richard seemed almost out of breath by the time he reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Well, she certainly has a funny way of showing it!" Lord James was red in the face as he once again raised his voice.

Caroline turned to Isabelle with a pleading look as a moment of understanding passed between the two women. "Isabelle, you must go now." She searched Isabelle's face before opening the door and stepping aside.

Realizing that there was far more at stake than just her freedom, Isabelle drew up the courage to step into the foyer. "Lord James, I hope you weren't leaving without saying goodbye?" She forced an air of sweetness into her voice that almost made her gag.

Surprise filled his eyes as Lord James eyed her with suspicion.

"I hope you weren't too taken aback by my little joke this evening; I was simply teasing Lady Keen. I realize now that it may have been done in poor taste." Her mind

reeled with confusion as she came with the lie, making her heart beat faster.

Why am I doing this?

She knew instantly why she was going ahead with the lie as she glanced at the worry in her brother's eyes.

I am doing this for his sake.

She swallowed hard and let out a shaky breath before clutching her fists at her sides in an attempt to hide the tremor.

Lord James lifted his head with pride, his eyes searching her face.

Coming to her brother's side, Caroline gripped Richard's arm and pulled him towards the door. "Why don't we give them a moment alone to say goodnight? Surely it isn't too improper now that they are engaged." She smiled sweetly at him.

Glancing over his shoulder, Richard looked at Isabelle before disappearing down the front steps.

A moment of silence passed between them before Lord James reached for her hand and kissed the top.

Isabelle's stomach once again jumped with disgust, yet she scolded herself for wanting to pull back.

I need to play my part.

She suddenly realized there was so much more at stake than her freedom. Her family would be faced with ruin if she did not go ahead with the plan.

Pulling her closer as he came up, Lord James looked into her eyes before she could protest. “I will forgive you this once, Miss Sutton, but I warn you that I won’t be so lenient in the future. Soon, you will be a marchioness, and hopefully, all of your wilful behaviour will be a thing of the past.”

His words struck her as odd, and she tilted her head to the side in confusion. “A marchioness? How will that be possible when your brother is the future marquess?”

A strange look flashed in his eyes as he placed his hands on her hips and held her in place. “Never mind that I misspoke.” He dipped his head and kissed her lips, making her body shiver with disgust when his moustache tickled her nose.

Drawing back, he winked at her again before reaching for his coat and top hat and leaving the foyer.

Not wasting any more time, Isabelle turned on her heels and ran, heading straight for the kitchen, where she proceeded to rinse her mouth with water and salt.

This will be the rest of my life.

She felt the bile building up in her throat as she placed a clenched fist against her stomach.

Chapter 10

Henry sat at the back of the Evergreen, reading the note he'd unexpectedly received that morning. He'd never paid much attention to letters and invitations to off-season balls, yet his interest had been piqued when the butler had handed him the note.

Unfolding the little slip of paper, he allowed his eyes to wander over the slanted words.

Dear Lord Ashford,

If you wish to know more about the helpless maiden and the troubles that plague her, I shall be at the Evergreen this afternoon at three. If you do not wish to meet me there, then I shall assume that you have been taken away by some fairies and let the matter rest.

PS. I have told my aunt that I wish to choose a book for the maiden's betrothed.

Yours truly,

Miss Isabelle Sutton.

The corners of his mouth hooked into a smile as he folded the note and placed it back into his breast pocket. The butler had mentioned rather disapprovingly that the maid delivering the note had been rather discreet, yet the clandestine nature of the matter had only proved to pique his interest.

“Lord Ashford,” Miss Sutton curtsied as she reached the table.

Henry had been so focused on the letter that he hadn’t heard the gentle tinkling of the bell above the door. Clearing his throat, he stood and bowed, noting the look of displeasure on Lady Sinclair’s face. He had been hoping for a different chaperone, but the sour-faced old prude was better than not seeing Miss Sutton at all.

Gesturing to the empty chair, Henry took his seat again and signalled for the girl behind the counter to bring them some tea.

Miss Sutton smiled politely at him, ignoring the grunt of displeasure that her aunt gave her when she realized that the only other chair had been placed a few steps away by a single table.

“I hope you don’t mind, Lady Sinclair, but there wasn’t enough space at this little table. I thought you might like to read a book while Miss Sutton and I discuss the ones that I have chosen.” He gestured to the stacks of books on the table that almost partially blocked them from view.

Pursing her lips, Lady Sinclair approached the table and sat, eyeing them both with suspicion. “I shall be quite comfortable listening from here.” She emphasized the listening as she settled her skirts.

Exchanging a smile, Isabelle and Henry settled down just as the tea was placed before them on the table.

“So, Miss Sutton, you mentioned more troubles. Am I to take it that the maiden has not been able to escape her problems? Please do elaborate on the matter.” He smiled at her from across the table and noted the slight blush in her cheeks.

“Well, it would seem that there are far more circumstances than the maiden was

aware of. The maiden was forced to sit through an endless dinner where she was almost bored to death by her captors' choice of guests." She heaved a sigh and reached for the pot, pouring each a cup with graceful movements.

"Captors? Is the maiden being held somewhere against her will in the novel?" Henry raised an eyebrow in amusement as he watched her closely. The delicate manner in which she moved intrigued him. She could be feisty and outspoken but never missed a beat when it came to carrying herself in public.

"Yes, she is being held as a captive by two members of the fairy's royal court and one ... ogre that guards her every move." She finished pouring the tea and sat back.

Henry's eyes danced with amusement as he watched her flushed cheeks.

"The dinner in question was a thoughtless ploy to get the maiden to accept the evil prince. She obliged begrudgingly when all seemed to be working against her." The slight shake of her head and slump of her shoulders conveyed her exasperation with the matter.

"I thought you were reading a tragedy. It's sounding more and more like a fairytale to me," he teased her gently before sipping his tea.

Lifting her chin defiantly, she glared at him over the rim of her cup. "Have you never heard of a tragic fairy tale, Lord Ashford?"

"I can't say I have, but I am interested in hearing how it ends. Please do continue." He nodded encouragingly.

"Well, the capricious prince held her captive all evening at dinner while the rest of the masked guests pestered her with silly questions regarding propriety." Her eyes darkened slightly as she glanced to the side. "The only solace of the evening was the

fact that the guard had made other plans; otherwise, I think the maiden would have had to suffer far greater consequences for speaking her mind.”

Suppressing a chuckle, Henry lowered his cup. “You mean the ogre?”

“Of course, I mean the ogre. Did I not mention that the maiden’s guard was the ogre?” She narrowed her eyes at him.

“You most certainly did. I was just making sure. Please continue with the maiden’s defiant statements; you didn’t mention what they were.” He barely hid his smirk as the annoyance danced in her eyes.

Crossing her arms over her chest, she leaned back in her chair and rolled her eyes. “Are you critiquing my storytelling?”

Henry shook his head quickly. “I would never dream of doing such a thing. I was merely adding clarity to the narrative.”

“Well, don’t.” She seethed a little before unfolding her arms. Her body language seemed to relax a little as she let out a breath. “Like I was saying, the evening proved to be quite tedious until the end when the vile prince took liberties with the maiden. She would have walloped him right over the head if hadn’t been for a question of her family’s honour.”

Henry’s body suddenly froze as his brow creased into a frown of concern. “What do you mean that the prince took liberties with the maiden?” His tone was low and concerned as he examined her face. It was all well and good if they were talking about her life in code, but if something had happened to her, then he wasn’t about to idly sit by and let it slide.

Isabelle stiffened as her eyes darkened, and she pursed her lips uncomfortably. “I

misspoke; it wasn't anything serious. He simply overstepped the boundaries of propriety. It is neither here nor there now that their engagement is to be announced." Her lips quivered slightly as she attempted to hide her sigh.

"Very well, if you are certain, but please know that it would not be unreasonable or even irregular for the maiden in question to seek help if the prince had forced himself upon her. Such things should never be taken lightly." He fought the urge to reach across the table and touch her hand.

The subtle hint of vulnerability on her face tugged at his chest, making him want to protect her despite having only met her a few weeks prior. Something in her eyes drew him in, making him realize just how infallible he was when it came to the fairer sex.

Her demeanour seemed to change when she clammed up and sipped her tea. "You haven't told me very much about your life, Lord Ashford. My aunt mentioned before that you are still loyal to your late wife?" She raised an eyebrow and deflected the conversation.

I can't press her any further.

He took the hint after searching her face for a moment. "I was married for several years to a wealthy young lady. Her passing was sudden and unexpected after contracting a fever."

Isabelle's expression filled with surprise as she looked him in the eyes. "I am sorry to hear that; do you miss her terribly?" The question caught him off guard.

"Suffice it to say that I am content with my current situation in life. It is always sad when someone passes before their time, but one must go on with life." He wasn't even sure why he had answered in the manner he did, but it was too late to retract his

statement when she narrowed her eyes.

“It seems like the maiden isn’t the only one living in a tragedy.” The hurt in her eyes made him regret his response.

“What are the two of you discussing?” Lady Sinclair barked at them from her table, bringing an end to their conversation.

Isabelle rolled her eyes once again and shook her head in displeasure. “We are discussing which book will best suit my fiancé, Aunt Alice. Surely such discussions are not classified as a crime?”

Lady Sinclair pursed her lips but kept her eyes fixed on them as she sipped her tea.

Wanting to alleviate the tension, Henry steered the conversation back to the maiden. “Does the maiden not have any other options other than the prince? Surely, she could have her pick of young gentlemen?”

Isabelle seemed to swallow hard as she searched his eyes. “The maiden was foolish in thinking she had more time to escape.” She glanced to the side before carrying on. “It would be easier to explain the matter if the ogre wasn’t constantly keeping watch, but the maiden has recently realized that there is more at stake than just her happiness.”

“I think I understand; the maiden and her family could be faced with ruin if she does not go ahead with the plans.” Things seemed to be falling into place as Henry chewed the inside of his cheek and considered her tale.

Nodding solemnly, Isabelle allowed her face to soften for a second as she, too, chewed the inside of her cheek. “Even if the maiden considered finding a match at this point in the story, the captors would not allow any such thing. Not when the prince has threatened them with ruin.”

A moment of understanding passed between them as Henry once again resisted the urge to reach across the table and comfort her. He wished there were something he could do to offer her an escape from the terrible situation.

“I think I had better go before my aunt glares a hole into the back of your head.” Isabelle suddenly broke the moment between them and stood, knocking the pot of tea over in the process.

“Careful!” Henry jumped to his feet and gripped her wrist, holding her back before the tea could burn her hand.

A silent gasp passed between her lips as they parted while her eyes widened in shock.

The feeling of her soft skin as he moved his thumb over her wrist sent an unexpected jolt up his arm.

“What is happening here?” Lady Sinclair barked sharply, narrowing her eyes at them both as she approached the table.

Pulling back quickly, Isabelle placed her hand behind her back and blushed. “I knocked over the tea; Lord Ashton was simply keeping me from getting burned.” She seemed to be avoiding his gaze.

“I think we had better leave before you make an even bigger spectacle.” Lady Sinclair seemed to be directing her words towards Henry rather than Isabelle. Lifting her nose in the air, she sauntered towards the exit, gesturing for Isabelle to follow.

Lifting her gaze, Isabelle mouthed a farewell before lingering for a moment.

He wanted to ask when and if they would be seeing each other again, but Isabelle had already lifted the hem of her dress and rushed after her aunt.

Strange maiden indeed.

Henry lifted his hand, staring at the tips of his fingers where the heat from her skin still lingered.

Very strange maiden.

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Chapter 11

He was so gentle...

Isabelle's heart raced as she sat at tea the following day. What had she been feeling at that moment when Lord Ashford had touched her wrist? Her cheeks once again filled with colour as she recalled their afternoon in the Evergreen.

The tender look of care in his dark eyes filled the pit of her stomach with a strange fluttering sensation. She had to concede that he was handsome in a roguish kind of way when the corners of his mouth dimpled with every smile.

"Isabelle, Lord James is talking to you." Caroline summoned her gently, gesturing with her eyes to their guest when Isabelle looked up.

"Hmm?" Isabelle panicked slightly when she realized she hadn't been paying attention.

Everyone in the room, including her family and guests, were staring at her with stern looks of expectation.

"I hope you were dreaming of our wedding and not some cad. I would hate to have to challenge anyone to a duel." Lord James smirked, bristling his moustache over the rim of his cup as he winked.

Laughing nervously, Aunt Alice lowered her cup and saucer to her lap. "Of course, she wasn't. Isabelle was just telling me this morning that her head is spinning with all

the fine wedding plans. Isn't that so, Isabelle? She can hardly think of anything else." Her aunt's tone carried a warning.

Regaining her composure, Isabelle sipped her tea and turned to Lord James. "Yes, of course. I'm afraid I haven't been able to think of anything else." She forced a stiff smile and repeated her aunt's words.

Her response seemed to please him as Lord James slurped his tea and smacked his lips. "I can't say that I fault you there, Miss Sutton. I'm sure you have been dreaming of this day for many years. Just the other day I had to rebuff the flirtatious advances of a young debutant, not that someone her age would ever make a good match. I have you, after all, Miss Sutton." His laughter grated against Isabelle's ears as she winced.

"I don't think I quite understand your meaning, Lord James. Did the young lady's age count against her? I was given to understand that the sooner a young lady found a match, the better it would be for her and her husband. Is youth not something that is sought after in a wife?" Isabelle raised an eyebrow, watching Lord James's reactions quite closely.

Placing his cup back on the tray in front of him, Lord James reached for her hand and patted it gently. "Never fret, Miss Sutton. Your age is one of the things that captured my interest most keenly. Younger women have less experience in life and are more likely to die while giving birth. It was your advanced age that made me decide to propose."

His words hung in the air like a dagger as the room suddenly filled with an uncomfortable silence. Even Richard seemed to react quite strongly to his words as his grip tightened on his cup.

Caroline and Aunt Alice seemed even more uncomfortable as they exchanged a few glances and sipped their tea.

Isabelle removed her hand and placed it on her lap despite the questioning look that Lord James gave her before speaking again.

“But that is just my opinion. Perhaps you would agree with me? Lord Sutton? Do you not think that it is better to wed a more, shall we say, mature woman rather than a young lass? They are less prone to stupidity than the first-time debutants.” Lord James didn’t seem to pick up on the atmosphere at all as he smirked.

Placing his cup back in its saucer, Richard lifted his head. “I do not think that it is proper to discuss ladies’ ages, Lord James, not when we are in the presence of such fair ladies.” He shot a half-hearted smile at Caroline.

The gesture remained unreturned as Caroline averted her gaze, looking instead at the stand of cakes as if they held a particular interest for her.

Isabelle began to wonder what Caroline was thinking when the awkward silence in the room seemed to intensify. She had never endeared herself to Caroline, yet her behaviour was beginning to spark a small amount of sympathy in Isabelle.

Do they love each other?

She glanced at Richard’s look of displeasure with the whole situation and then the uncertainty in Caroline’s eyes.

Perhaps I am not the only one being forced to wed against my will.

She thoughtfully sipped her tea as Lord James prattled on about his latest business venture that promised to bring him mountains of wealth. Again, It struck her how he never mentioned what that business venture entailed. He could have been smuggling goods in the harbour for all she knew of her soon-to-be husband.

Her bones ached with tiredness as Isabelle made her way up the stairs. The afternoon tea had dragged on for so long that she barely knew how she had made it through dinner. She longed for her bed and a better chance of escaping tomorrow. Perhaps if she wished hard enough, she would wake up in a different life than the one she was forced to live.

Turning the entire scenario into a story for Richard seemed damned near impossible to her without bending the truth to make it more interesting.

She was just about to turn into her chambers when she noticed a faint light coming from down the hall.

The door to her father's old study stood ajar as soft light filtered into the hallway, casting flickering shadows across the carpet.

I wonder why Richard isn't asleep yet.

She turned away from her own door and headed down the silent corridor.

"You're up late," she said softly after pushing open the door and tiptoeing inside.

Richard looked up and blinked a few times in the dim light of the candle on his desk. "There are a few things that I wanted to go over before turning in. Have Caroline and Lord James gone home already?" The tired expression on his face hinted at the intense concentration he had been giving to his ledgers.

"You would know if you hadn't made yourself so scarce after dinner." She shut the door behind her before taking a seat in front of the desk.

The rows of leather-bound ledgers and rolled-up parchment reminded her of her father and the endless evenings he would spend in the study.

Even the smell of linseed oil used to polish the mahogany desk took her back to the past, where she had lived a simpler and far more certain life.

“I’m sorry if you felt abandoned. I just couldn’t take any more of Lord James’s stories. The man lacks propriety at the best of times. Between his prattling and Aunt Alice’s encouragement, I didn’t think I would make it through the rest of the evening.” Her brother leaned back in his leather chair and stretched, using the back of his hand to stave off a yawn.

Cocking her head to the side, Isabelle looked at him. “Are you changing your mind about the engagement? You won’t hear any protesting from me if you are.” A tiny spark of hope ignited in her chest.

Richard allowed his mouth to curve into a lazy smile as he looked at her. “You know I can’t do that. I won’t act coy and pretend you didn’t overhear our conversation the other evening. The arrangement with Lord James must go ahead. He is your burden to bear as much as Caroline is mine.”

His words shocked her, making her raise her eyebrows. “Richard, I have never asked, but do you love Caroline? I know it was Aunt Alice who pushed the two of you together, but you always seemed so complacent with it all. I saw the looks or lack thereof during the tea this afternoon. I guess what I am trying to ask is, are you happy with her?”

“I am as content as I am allowed to be under the circumstances. It was Aunt Alice who chose Caroline. You are correct in saying that, and you, of all people, know how adamant she has been in finding us both suitable matches. Caroline and I may not be the best of matches as far as love and companionship are concerned, but we will

make an agreeable one in the eyes of the ton.”

Her mind swam with exasperation as she shook her head in disbelief. “I don’t understand, Richard. How can you be this cavalier about spending the rest of your life with someone you do not love? It burdens me every day that I am to marry Lord James.”

Richard cocked his head to the side and examined her closely. “Would you not go ahead with an unagreeable match if it meant that you could save the family library? I know how much those old books mean to you; it is why I am bequeathing them to you once you are married. Just as much as you care about those old books, I care about the family name and finances. I would like to think that you would do the same in my shoes.” He gestured to the ledgers lying open before him.

“Just how bad are the family finances?” Isabelle decided to push aside the feelings of discomfort that her brother’s words had created for her. He was making a good point; she just didn’t feel as if she could face the reality of it all, not when she was tired and still looking for a way out.

Running his fingers through his hair, Richard allowed his tired eyes to fall back on the pages before him. “There isn’t any left. Apart from your dowry and a little sum that Aunt Alice has provided, we are all but ruined. I tried for years to salvage the debts that Father left in our name, but there is nothing left to sell. All the extra businesses and properties have been sold. You and I would have been on the street if Aunt Alice hadn’t stepped in as she did.”

The truth shook her as she listened to his words. She knew very well that the family finances were meagre, yet she hadn’t thought they were as bad as he was saying. Luxurious foods had certainly been cut back on over the years, while Aunt Alice had favoured new dresses and suits. All in the name of finding suitable matches for them both.

“Isn’t there anyone else who can help our family? I know that Lord James has offered his help, but I just don’t understand how it is that he’s helping you. I don’t even know what he does for a living. Surely there is a long-lost relative or some kind of funds we can tap into. A more agreeable man who can become my husband.” She almost lost her breath as she pleaded with him. “If you call off the wedding rather than me, it won’t be so serious. You can say that you found Lord James to be lacking in character.”

“Isabelle, please stop!” He raised his voice slightly, shutting his eyes in aggravation before massaging his temples.

“I was only suggesting that ...” She spoke more softly after his reproach, feeling as if they had lost a moment of bonding.

Why do we have to miss each other like this?

Her eyes welled up with tears after having thought they were getting somewhere.

“You heard what Lord James said the other night. He will ruin us if anything goes wrong with your engagement. Short of ruining the man before he does it to us, there is no possible way to call off the engagement now.” The tiredness in his voice was all but apparent when Richard sighed.

“But if you could only tell me how he plans on helping the family ...” she tried again, pleading not to be left in the dark.

“That is a subject for men and men alone; you are not to concern yourself with such matters. Go to bed and dream of your wedding day. There is no escaping it now that it has been decided.”

Hopelessness filled her chest as she shook her head before hanging it in disbelief.

Perhaps I will be better off just accepting my fate.

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Chapter 12

“My Lord, there is a note here for you.” The butler cleared his throat and waited patiently with his nose in the air.

Perking up instantly, Henry sat up straight in his chair. It had been two days since his tea with Isabelle, and he hadn’t heard from her again. Taking the note off the tray, he quickly undid the seal and read while his heart beat with anticipation.

Dearest Henry,

I hope this note finds you well. Lord Fitzgibbon and I wish you all the best and hope you will let us know once you are settled in the country.

Yours sincerely,

Lady Fitzgibbon.

His heart sank with disappointment as he crumbled the note and held it in the palm of his hand.

“Will there be a reply, My Lord?” The butler raised an eyebrow in expectation while glancing disapprovingly at his hand.

“No, not at present.” Henry shook his head and settled back in his chair, sighing in disappointment. He had hoped that Isabelle would at least let him know how things were doing. She didn’t owe it to him, but he liked to think they were becoming

friends.

The butler didn't seem pleased at all with his answer as he scowled and bowed before leaving.

Just how much did the man know about his situation with Lord and Lady Fitzgibbon? Henry had suspected for quite some time that the man was a spy, yet he wasn't certain to what degree they used him for information. It wasn't unusual for the man to wait for a reply, but he seemed more expectant than usual.

Lord and Lady Fitzgibbon weren't letting up either with their less-than-subtle notes and comments. He fully expected them to make an appearance at some point and check on his progress.

Isabelle's large brown eyes slipped into his mind. He didn't have many friends in the world, but it did seem as if she could become someone he could talk to.

Her aunt didn't seem very pleased with the friendship, but Lady Sinclair had never been a fan of his to begin with. It had been mentioned to him on occasion that she had been one of the people spreading rumours of his infertility with his late wife.

The memory of his past pain sent a jolt through his body. Things he'd rather forget always seemed to creep up on him at the strangest of times. As if he ever needed reminding of what the doctor had said ...

Deciding he needed a change of scenery, he placed his hands on the chair's armrests and pushed himself up. The Evergreen seemed too likely a place to run into Isabelle again, yet he felt like he needed some time to devise a plan.

Why do I feel so compelled to help her?

He shook off the thought and left the room, reassuring himself that he would have done his utmost to help anyone else, even if they weren't as intriguing as Miss Isabelle Sutton.

Clouds of smoke covered the ceiling as Henry stared into the corner of the dimly lit room. The club wasn't usually this busy during the day, yet he found the low chatter and noise comforting as he mulled over his thoughts.

A nagging feeling at the back of his mind urged him to devise a plan to help Isabelle. Perhaps it wasn't proper of him to be getting involved in such a delicate situation, but it wasn't as if he was trying to win her affection. He didn't think of her in that way.

Her eyes are so kind ...

The unwanted thought crept in like a thief in the night, making him frown. It did seem improper for him to be spending time with an engaged woman, but all he cared about was her well-being.

"It's a pleasure to see you here at this time of day. Have you finally seen the light and decided to end your years of segregation?" Alfred Hampton sank into a chair beside Henry and smiled, drawing his thoughts away from his troubles.

"You seem awfully chipper this morning?" Henry forced his lips into a smile, reassuring himself again that his efforts were purely platonic and chivalrous, nothing more.

Waving his hand in the air, Alfred dismissed the words. "Ugh, I've just come back from meeting my future bride's parents. The father has quite a nice collection of brandy. Have you ever had such a good glass of aged brandy that you can't say no to

another?" He tapped the side of his nose conspiratorially and winked, looking more than just a little dishevelled.

Cocking his head to the side, Henry frowned. "You are getting married again?"

Alfred seemed disappointed at Henry's lack of interest in the brandy and sighed. "Timid young thing, her parents are desperate to marry her off before she becomes a spinster. I mean, you would have to be desperate to consider an old codger like me for a husband." He laughed heartily before shaking his head.

Something in Henry's chest clenched as he sat up a little straighter. "A young girl, you say?" His throat suddenly felt a little too dry as he ran his tongue over his lips.

"Blonde girl, a Miss Sally Beuford or something of the sort." He waved his words away again as if he had little to no connection with the subject.

Relief flooded Henry's chest as his shoulders slumped.

Why did I think it was Isabelle?

He suddenly realized how protective he was being towards his new friend, but once again chalked his reactions up to chivalry. It didn't sit well with him that any parent would be fine with marrying their daughter off to an old codger like Alfred, to use his friend's words. The ton, in his opinion, operated on a set of rules that baffled any sane mind.

"Forgive me, Lord Hampton, but I can't see why you would want to marry such a young lady. I wouldn't be able to commit again." Henry shook his head and sat back in his chair, curling his fingers over the armrests.

"Commitment, business venture, it all depends on how you look at the matter. A

twenty-one-year-old wife seems like a small sacrifice to make given her father's business connections." Alfred shrugged and made a non-comital face.

There it is.

Henry sat back and examined Lord Hampton closely. The man was at least his age, if not more. Was that all he saw in a young woman with her entire life ahead of her? Just a business venture. It angered him greatly that Isabelle was possibly being forced to marry a man like Lord Hampton.

If he had ever been blessed with a daughter, he knew for certain that he would never force her into any kind of marriage.

"Do you not think that a young wife would require more than just a little bit of your time? I may not be an expert on the matter, but a good marriage needs attention if there is happiness and unity in a home." He dug his nails into the armrests while trying to keep his cool.

"My dear man, that is what tea parties and balls are for. We, men, handle the business side of things and fret our time away in places like this while the women partake in frivolity. She will be just fine once I give her a child or two. Good Lord, one would think that you were never married at all. Have you forgotten how these things work?" Lord Hampton smirked before gesturing for a footman to come and take his order.

Seeing red, Henry took a deep breath and clenched his jaw. How had he never seen Lord Hampton for who he truly was? He hadn't known the man for very long, but he certainly had never seen him act this way in the past.

"Enough of this talk about marriage; that is something I will face in the coming months. What do you say to a game of billiards? We could start a round here and then head somewhere else to slake our thirsts?" He licked over his lips before hungrily

rubbing his palms together.

A tense feeling of disgust made his stomach churn as Henry narrowed his eyes and stood. “Forgive me, Lord Hampton, but there is somewhere that I need to be.” He didn’t wait for a response before heading towards the door.

“You aren’t better than the rest of us, Lord Ashford. Mark my words, you are just as fallible as anyone else!” The amount of brandy Lord Hampton had enjoyed suddenly became apparent as he raised his voice and fumbled over his words.

Heads turned to watch as Henry left, making him pick up the pace as he hurried towards the door.

Outside on the street, he breathed a sigh of relief as he shut his eyes and turned his face towards the early afternoon sun. There was a slight coolness about the breeze, nothing too terrible to warrant warmer clothes. Yet the unmistakable scent of autumn was in the air. He’d have to decide fairly soon about going to the country.

Isabelle ...

It troubled him deeply to think of her trapped in a forced marriage to someone like Lord Hampton. She seemed like such a free spirit whenever she spoke of things she liked. Her eyes shone with passion while her chin jutted defiantly in the air. Would her spirit be broken if she were forced into a loveless marriage?

His chest tightened again at the thought of Isabelle Sutton marrying Alfred. Logically, he knew that it wasn’t Lord Hampton, but the nagging feeling that it was someone very much like him wouldn’t leave him alone.

Shaking his head, he set off back towards his home, not wanting to think of the fate that awaited his friend in her marriage.

Using the back of his hand to stifle a yawn, Henry stretched out his arms and fought off the fatigue. He hadn't got much sleep after leaving the club the previous day. His dreams had been troubled with images of Isabelle marrying Lord Hampton as tears streamed down her face.

He looked out the window at the bustling people starting their day in the early morning sun.

There has to be something that can be done.

He pulled his lower lips between his teeth as he thought of her smile; she hadn't smiled much in his presence, yet he wanted to see the corners of her eyes crinkle with mirth.

I want to see her happy because she is my friend.

His thoughts became troubled again when his chest clenched at the thought of her situation. She was certainly an unfortunate heroine in her own story.

"My Lord, Lady Fitzgibbon is here to call," the butler spoke up from the doorway.

"What is it now again?" Henry snapped without thinking as he turned away from the window with a scowl.

Pursing his thin lips in displeasure, the butler placed his hands behind his back and lifted his nose in the air.

Sighing until his lungs hurt, Henry raked his hands through his thick mop of hair. "Please show the countess in." He braced himself for the conversation that was to

come.

“Henry, dearest, I was afraid I would wake you, but judging by the state of your hair, I am assuming it was a close call.” The countess sauntered into the room and took a seat without being asked. It almost seemed as if she had been waiting in the hallways. Her eyes swept over him with an air of disapproval as she fixed her dress around her ankles.

“I was not sleeping, Lady Fitzgibbon,” he reassured her for the millionth time since his wife had passed. He would never understand why her parents always assumed that he slept his life away.

She wrinkled her nose in disapproval before glancing around the room. “I see that you haven’t got to this room yet. Nothing has been packed. Would you like me to delegate the staff or send more maids to help? Packing can be such a tiresome chore when one is doing it alone.”

“No, Lady Fitzgibbon. I do not think that it will be necessary. I will leave London when I am good and ready,” he answered defiantly and stood his ground.

“No?” The countess placed her hands in her lap and raised her eyebrows in a question.

“No,” he repeated his statement firmly.

“Is there any particular reason why you are delaying your move?” Her words held a tone of accusation that only served to further his annoyance with her meddling.

It occurred to him that his tea with Isabelle in the Evergreen may have spurred a visit by his in-laws. Yet, he would not have any evidence without addressing the matter directly.

“None that would cause either yourself or the earl any inconvenience, Lady Fitzgibbon. I simply wish to tie up all my loose ends in London before I bid the ton farewell. Surely, I am to be granted that courtesy if nothing else? I would hate to leave for the country only to return shortly when I discover something has been left behind.”

The countess searched his face with a deeply rooted look of suspicion before once again pursing her lips. “Very well, I shall keep my peace and not interfere with your plans. I must warn you that the earl and I will not look kindly on any behaviour that could besmirch our good name.”

There it is.

Henry felt as if they had reached the crux of her visit. It would have been too much to ask of Lady Sinclair not to run to her friends with any kind of gossip. Under normal circumstances, he would have left just to keep the peace, but something about Isabelle’s story stuck with him.

He needed to know how it ended before he could move on. Something inside of him knew that he would never be able to rest if he didn’t know how she was doing.

“I can assure you, Lady Sinclair, that any motives I have for delaying my move are purely noble.” He met her gaze, standing his ground for the first time since his wife had died.

“Very well, Lord Fitzgibbon and I will patiently await your note. You will still be letting us know when you leave?” She lifted her chin in the air and looked down her nose at him.

“Trust me, Lady Fitzgibbon, you will be the first to know when my business is handled. I wouldn’t dream of keeping you in the dark.” He turned his head back

towards the window and placed his hands behind his back.

All he needed to know was that Isabelle was fine; if he knew that, then he could spend the rest of his life in blissful peace.

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Chapter 13

“Isabelle, may I have a moment of your time?” Caroline came into her chambers without waiting for a reply and shut the door behind her.

“Certainly,” Isabelle answered dryly and shut her book, shaking her head at the intrusion. Was there truly nowhere in the house where she could find a moment’s peace? If it wasn’t her brother or aunt cornering her in the parlour, then it was Caroline dropping in announced.

Clearing her throat, Caroline looked around the small room and turned her nose up at the sparse decorations that consisted of a bed, a dresser, one table for writing, and a basin to wash. Isabelle’s room was by far the smallest in the house, yet she loved having a small corner she could call her own. That was until Caroline had come into the picture.

Her soon-to-be sister-in-law would more than likely turn the space into a dressing room for her many fine dresses once Isabelle had moved out. The thought made her almost ill as she held her breath.

“I wanted to have a word with you about the upcoming ball.” Caroline perched quite uncomfortably on the edge of the bed when Isabelle turned in her chair to face her.

“Ball? I thought the season was done. Why would there be another ball?” Isabelle’s brow creased into a frown.

“I did mention the other evening at dinner that I would give you both some time

before the announcement is made. Given the little incident and Lord James's unease, I thought it prudent to move things up a little. A ball will be held to announce your engagement. It is only fitting now that the season has ended." She placed her hands in her lap and met Isabelle's gaze with a pointed look.

I can't stop this now.

Her heart suddenly beat a little faster as she realized the seriousness of Caroline's words. She had gone against her family's advice and was now facing the consequences of her actions. If she had only kept her opinions to herself, she would have had a little more time to come up with a plan.

"Will I be able to invite whomever I choose?" Isabelle swallowed hard and took a deep breath.

Giving her a curious glance, Caroline frowned. "I do not see any harm in that. As long as your guests are noble members of the ton." She paused for a moment before carrying on. "I must say, I am pleased to see that you are no longer fighting the match with Lord James. Has he done something to win your favour?"

The memory of the kiss sent a shiver of repulsion through her body.

"No, I can't say that he has." She shook her head.

A moment of understanding seemed to pass between them, and Isabelle almost felt prompted to ask Caroline if she was happy. She seemed hell-bent on becoming the lady of the house, yet she never seemed to show any other interest in Richard.

"Well, I hope you know that what your family and I are doing is only in your best interest. Lord James will be able to provide a comfortable life for you. You will never want for anything, and I'm sure he will leave you to your own devices once you

provide him with an heir.” Caroline nodded approvingly before standing.

Oh God, an heir ...

Isabelle’s skin suddenly felt cold as the thought passed through her mind. She had resigned herself to the idea of marrying Lord James, yet her mind hadn’t ventured as far as what that would entail.

Gesturing towards the door, Caroline forced a smile. “I shall leave you to your thoughts. Lord James has confirmed the date of the ball and said that he will be sending you a new dress. At least you won’t have to worry about that.” She paused for a moment as if she wanted to say something else but pursed her lips instead and left the room.

Sitting alone at her desk, Isabelle shut her eyes and attempted to still the violent beating of her heart.

There is no use in panicking now. What is done is done.

She turned back to her desk and reached for the copy of *Sense and Sensibility*. The memory of Henry ruining the end for her brought a smile to her lips. She would miss his company when she was married, but perhaps she could see him again, just one last time before she faced the gallows.

Reaching for her quill, she dipped the tip in the ink pot before scribbling a note across an empty scrap of paper.

Dearest Lord Montague,

I hope this note finds you well. I am writing to inform you of the bitter ending to our heroine’s story. The lady is to attend one final, dreary ball before resigning herself to

her fate. After much consideration, she has come to the conclusion that she must follow through with her family's plans.

I hope this ending brings you some resolution and comfort, as it has left the heroine with none. You have been a true friend, and while I would have hoped to say goodbye, I realize this letter will have to suffice. May this book serve as a reminder of the friendship we have garnered in our short time together.

Yours affectionately,

The Heroine.

Tears welled in her eyes as she blew on the note, watching the ink dry before carefully folding it and placing it inside the book.

She had thought of inviting Henry to the ball and saying goodbye, but it seemed like a better idea to end things in the same manner they had started.

One week later ...

"You look simply marvellous." Aunty Alice practically swooned as she looked at Isabelle's reflection in the floor-length mirror.

Placing her clenched fist against her stomach, Isabelle fought against the nausea threatening to escape. The heavy purple gown with frills and yards of silk made her feel like a sick peacock that had lost its way to the menagerie. She had never thought of herself as a pretty woman; in fact, she had always relished being plain and never standing out.

The dress, in her opinion, was one of the most garish and ugly garments ever created.

“Lord James certainly has fine taste in clothing.” Her aunt clasped her hands in front of her chest and sighed with delight.

“Does he?” Isabelle managed two words despite feeling ill. The rich fabric clashed with her skin, making her look like someone suffering from consumption.

Aunt Alice seemed annoyed at her response as she pursed her lips. “Hush now. I have been telling you for years that you need to get rid of those dull, earthy tones you are so fond of. You need to stand out at your engagement ball, not blend into the background.” She began to fuss with the hem, making sure that everything was perfectly in place.

Not that Isabelle could tell where the dress started or ended. All the fabric seemed to flow into one giant monstrosity of tulle.

How many fabrics can be on one dress?

“You look beautiful, and I have every confidence in Lord James that he will look after you. You are lucky to have made this match, Isabelle; never forget that,” she said sharply while narrowing her eyes.

“I won’t.” Isabelle gave her sickly reflection one final glance before stepping down from the dressing stool and facing her aunt. “Shall we go? I would hate to keep Lord James waiting after he’s gone to such trouble with the preparations.” She took a deep breath and let it out, trying to hide the tremor in her voice.

Coming forward, her aunt placed her hand on her cheek and smiled. “There is no need to be nervous, child; soon you will be a woman, and then you will see why we have been urging you to settle.” She lowered her hand before smiling sadly at her

niece. “We have all felt this way when facing the daunting prospect of marriage, but things will get better once you are settled.”

Will they?

“If I had been blessed with a daughter of my own, I would have hoped that a man just like Lord James would marry her.” Her aunt’s eyes filled with tears as she sighed.

“But what if your daughter never wanted to marry?” Isabelle searched her face, noticing the pain that flickered in her eyes.

“Then I would hope that she understands just how foolish she is being. Marriage and children are the only hope that a woman has for happiness in this cruel world.” She pursed her lips in disappointment, making Isabelle wonder why she had never asked what Aunt Alice had gone through in her marriage. She had never had children of her own, which perhaps was why she felt so strongly about Isabelle and Richard getting married.

Sometimes, it felt to her as if the world were spinning madly out of control.

The guests gathered around Isabelle almost as soon as she entered the lavishly decorated hall, offering their hearty congratulations as her aunt stepped back. She decided to calm herself by smiling and nodding while looking around at the lavish decorations.

What seemed like thousands of white roses had been placed in garlands on every available surface. Greenery hung from the pillars while candles glistened on the large chandelier.

“There you are, my beloved.” Lord James came striding towards her, parting the crowd around her.

My beloved?

The words made Isabelle wince as she offered her hand for his greeting.

Bowing his head, he placed a single kiss atop her gloved hand before coming up straight and winking. “Never fear, we are to be married; all is fair in love and war now that the arrangements have been made.”

Bursts of laughter resonated through the crowd as women fanned their faces and men looked on with pride.

Must he always make such a scene?

Isabelle felt a little faint when he reached for the dance card hanging from her wrist and proceeded to fill out his name on every line. Shocked at his forward behaviour, she waited for the rest of the guests to move on before speaking in a lowered tone. “Lord James, I am afraid it will not be proper for us to dance more than twice. Even if we are engaged, we must not be rude to our guests.” She forced an encouraging smile.

“Look at it as a romantic gesture. I will show every man present that you are mine.” He winked at her again and pulled her into his arms as soon as the quartet struck up the first waltz.

Isabelle hardly had time to breathe before he began to sweep her across the floor with his arm firmly positioned around her waist.

“Have I mentioned how lovely you look in your purple gown? Your appearance is

positively royal this evening; I am honoured to call you my queen.” He stood on the hem of her dress, eliciting a sharp gasp from her lips as she almost stumbled.

Recovering quickly, she forced a smile. “You have not, Lord James, considering the fact that I have only just arrived, there wouldn’t have been any time.” She fought back the urge to ask him not to call her his queen.

Her words made him laugh, filling her ears with a grating sound that worked on her nerves. “You can hardly blame me, my beloved; one moment with you feels like a lifetime.”

I can relate.

Isabelle chose to hold her tongue as he clumsily swept her across the floor, chattering about politics, hunting, and various topics that Isabelle had never cared for in the past. The dance seemed to last for a lifetime before it stopped, and he released her waist.

“Where do you think you are going?” Lord James gripped her wrist and pulled her to his side.

“I was going to get some refreshments. Dancing has left me quite parched.” She winced a little at the pressure when he tightened his grip.

“I shall go with you. I wouldn’t want to waste a moment of our time together this evening.” The dark look in his eyes ignited fear in her chest that she couldn’t explain. Why was he so concerned about letting her out of his sight?

“I can assure you that I am perfectly capable of finding the refreshment table on my own, Lord James.” She pulled her wrist free and took a step back.

His eyes darkened to deep pools of ice that sent shivers of fear down her spine. “When I tell you to do something, I expect ...”

“Lord James! I was hoping to meet your betrothed.” An older woman with her husband came sauntering towards them.

The cool look in his eyes suddenly switched to the sickly charming demeanour that usually oozed from his personality. “Lord and Lady Bridgeford, it’s such a pleasure to see you here this evening.” He turned towards them with a warm smile that left Isabelle stunned.

What was that look in his eyes?

Her pulse raced with uncertainty as she looked around the room to see that nobody else had even noticed the interaction. Had she imagined it, or had Lord James just shown her a glimpse of his true personality?

“It is so lovely to make your acquaintance, Miss Sutton.” The older woman with greying blonde hair and brilliant green eyes curtsied, drawing Isabelle’s attention away from her racing pulse.

“Yes, it’s ... it’s lovely to meet you, Lady Borenstein ...” Isabelle struggled to compose herself as she curtsied.

“That’s Lady Bridgeford, my beloved.” Lord James touched her elbow, correcting her as he laughed.

Swallowing hard, Isabelle let out a shaky breath. “My apologies, Lord and Lady Bridgeford. I am quite flustered this evening.” She placed a hand on her chest and smiled, willing her heart to slow.

The couple laughed in unison, causing the short man's large belly to bounce as he moved. His balding blond head shone in the flickering candlelight, giving Isabelle something to focus on rather than her fears.

"It is completely forgivable when you are a bride-to-be. I know I was simply overcome with the jitters during the weeks leading up to our wedding." Lady Bridgeford laughed with a dreamy, faraway look in her eyes. "Oh, Lord James, I heard about your brother's accident. How is he doing now?" She cocked her head to the side in concern.

"Accident? You never told me about any accident?" Isabelle turned to Lord James with a frown.

"It's nothing. I didn't want to worry you." He smiled at her before turning back to their guests.

"I'm sure that Lord James wanted you to enjoy the evening without concern. My apologies for my wife's thoughtless remark. Come now, my dear, I think we should let the happy young couple get back to their dancing. It never helps to crowd people when they are nervous." Lord Bridgeford smiled at them both and led his wife away.

The couple had barely disappeared into the crowd when Lord James rounded on her once again, hissing under his breath. "I will be having a word with your brother about this later this evening."

"And what have I done other than want a drink of punch?" She stood her ground despite the fear in her chest, not caring if anyone around them heard. If Lord James was going to treat her like a possession, then she wasn't about to back down.

Hot anger flashed in his eyes as he towered above her and pushed her into a corner. "When I give my future wife an instruction, I expect her to obey me. And don't think

I have forgotten that little remark about dancing with other men this evening. I don't care how the rest of the ton perceives it; no wife of mine will play the whore ...” His words trailed off when someone tapped him on the shoulder.

Relief flooded her body when Isabelle looked up and met Henry's gaze.

“I hope you will pardon the intrusion, Lord James, but I was hoping to ask Miss Sutton for a dance.” He held his head high, barely towering over Lord James as his eyes locked on Isabelle's.

Henry.

Isabelle's heart sang with relief as the pit of her stomach fluttered uncontrollably.

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Chapter 14

Henry watched as Isabelle's wrist slowly slipped from the man's hand. The angry look in her betrothed's eyes hardly intimidated him as he pulled Isabelle into the middle of the floor. Placing his hand on her waist, he gripped her fingers and stared into her eyes as he waited for the string quartet to start.

The air seemed loaded with anticipation as they both waited to see what would happen next.

Soft music filled the air as they began to move easily and effortlessly, as if they were walking on clouds.

"You came," Isabelle whispered almost breathlessly, her cheeks filling with colour as she gazed into his eyes.

Had she been anticipating his arrival even though she had said goodbye in a letter?

"I found your note at the Evergreen." He pulled her slightly closer, holding her gently out of fear of hurting her delicate frame. She felt like a feather in his arms, soft and gentle, susceptible to the slightest breeze.

Her lips parted slightly when he spun her around and brought her back in. Their eyes spoke a thousand words without the need for more. He wondered what she was thinking and if she regretted sending the note.

He wasn't even sure what he had been thinking when he put on his finest suit. The

emerald fabric shone in the shimmering light of the chandelier as they moved. All he knew was that he had felt the need to get to Isabelle before the candle she was about to marry snuffed out the flame in her soul.

Hurried whispers reached his ears above the music as he tightened his fingers over hers.

“Who is that?”

“Isn’t that the son-in-law of Lord and Lady Fitzgibbon?”

“It can’t be; he hasn’t left home in years.”

The hushed words meant nothing to him as he felt Isabelle tightening her grip on his hand.

What is she thinking?

He looked deep into her eyes, feeling his pulse race when she took a deep breath. She was more beautiful than he’d ever seen her. Despite the hideous colour of her dress, her cheeks were flushed with colour while her eyes sparkled magnificently. She was like the diamond in the rough after an endless day of digging in the dirt.

Their breathing seemed to be in sync as their movements matched in perfect synchronicity.

Tearing his gaze away from hers, he looked to her betrothed, violently whispering to the man he assumed was Isabelle’s brother. His hands flailed about in the air as if he were expecting the man to stop the dance mid-song.

The baron looked intently at them, watching their every move as he seemed to be

putting things together in his mind. He looked so much like Isabelle that Henry wondered if he was anything like his sister.

He didn't seem fazed at all by the man at his side but rather mesmerized by what his sister was doing.

"Why did you come?" Isabelle drew his attention back to their dance. Her voice carried a note of confusion amidst the soft lilt.

I could listen to her speak for a thousand years.

He moved his fingers over hers, feeling the softness of her skin.

"I wanted to see you again. I didn't like the way the story was ending." He wanted more than anything to pull her against his chest and tell her that everything would be fine.

He wanted to say he would protect her from the evil prince, but how could he when he wasn't even a side character in her main story?

"There isn't anything that I can do about that." Her voice quivered slightly as she sighed. The fear and panic in her eyes tugged at his chest. If what he had seen was a preview of the rest of her life, he didn't blame her at all for being scared.

Flexing his fingers on her waist, he spun her around, pulling her back as the rest of the ton faded into the background. "Let's not think about that right now. Just focus on the dance." He took a deep breath, inhaling the sweet scent of vanilla.

Nothing was more beautiful to him than the delicate way she moved in his arms. She was like a breath of fresh air after a cool summer shower.

Her eyes locked on his gaze, conveying a silent understanding as they danced their troubles away. Nothing needed to be said anymore as both of them got lost in the richness of the waltz.

Time and rationality stood still as everything else in the world lost its meaning. Two hearts melded as one, reaching out to one another in a desperate plea for absolution.

He was just about to lean in when Isabelle shut her eyes, tilting her head slightly to the side as she took a deep breath.

The music ended, bringing with it a moment of clarity as Henry blinked back the thoughts in his mind.

What am I doing?

Isabelle opened her eyes, widening them in shock, when she realized what had almost occurred between them. Her pulse beat a little faster beneath his grip as she held her breath.

Henry suddenly became all too aware of the fact that a hushed silence had fallen on the room. Stepping away, he cleared his throat and watched as Isabelle cast her eyes to her feet, allowing her naturally long lashes to brush against her cheeks.

“Isabelle ...” her brother suddenly spoke up, reaching for her hand as he pulled her away.

Her eyes remained on Henry as she allowed herself to be dragged from the ball. Fear and longing mingled with the same confusion that Henry felt within his soul.

All eyes were on him now as Isabelle disappeared, leaving him alone in the middle of the floor to face the hordes.

What have I done?

He suddenly felt anxious as his gaze fell on the man arguing with Isabelle. His bright blue eyes darkened with rage as he clenched his jaw and stood up straight.

Taking his cue from the deathly silence, Henry set out towards the exit, walking with ease as the crowd parted like the sea before him.

Everyone treated him like a lepper, taking at least five steps away from his path. Judgement loomed heavily in their eyes, following him closely out the hall.

He hadn't been planning on interrupting Isabelle's evening, yet he hadn't been able to contain his rage when he saw how she was being treated.

The man carried on as if she were a possession rather than his bride. He had been paying close attention to everything until the man had gripped her wrist and held her back.

Every fibre of his being had wanted to knock some sense into him but doing that would only have caused Isabelle more harm than good. Instead, he'd moved her away from him as quickly as he could.

The look of surprise in her eyes had made his chest ache. She had been so relieved to see him that he had almost taken her hand and ran for the door.

What then? he asked himself as he stepped into the cool evening air and began to walk. He wouldn't be able to sweep her away to the country and offer her a sanctuary to live, not without marrying her first ...

The thought stopped him in his tracks, and he froze. Never in a million years did he think he would ever get married again, and that hadn't changed. Shaking his head, he

headed straight towards the gentlemen's club. At least, there, he would be able to clear his mind.

The dimly lit room calmed his nerves as Henry settled in his favourite chair. Hardly anyone ever chose the spot in the corner. The hustle and bustle mainly centred around the middle of the room, where a large billiards table took up the bulk of the space.

He called her a whore.

Rage filled his mind as he thought back on the events of the evening and how shamefully her betrothed had treated her. Men like Lord James should never be granted the option of taking a wife. If he had his way, he would have all like-minded men locked in the prisons where they belonged.

Henry was about to call for a footman when his name rang out across the room.

“Hey! Look who it is! It's my old pal Henry Montague!”

Henry sighed when Lord Hampton came stumbling towards him with a drink in his hand. Large drops spilled over the rim of the glass as he ambled forward, creating stains on his suit as well as the carpet underfoot.

“Where the devil have you been man? You left so abruptly the other night that we hardly had a chance to speak.” Alfred hiccupped, falling into an adjacent chair and sloshing amber liquid over his suit.

The heavy scent of spirits filled Henry's senses, making him wince as he spoke. “I take it you haven't left?” he asked irritably, drawing his lower lip into his mouth.

Laughing uproariously, Alfred threw back his head. “If I had things my way, I would never leave,” he finally managed to say through his laughter while shaking his head and swallowing the remnants of his wasted drink.

“And what of your bride to be. Will she be happy with your presence here?” Henry snapped, clutching the armrests of his chair. The weight of living in an unfair society where women were nothing more than mere commodities was beginning to wear on him.

Frowning deeply, Alfred seemed to sober up slightly. “Do you think I am a terrible man, Lord Henry?” he asked in a somewhat more even tone.

Regarding the man’s drinking in a new light, Henry cocked his head to the side. “That depends, Lord Hampton. Do you think of yourself as a bad man? It matters not what I think but what you think of yourself.”

The man blinked a few times as he struggled to focus his eyes. “Sometimes I honestly can’t tell. Do I want to marry the young lass with her golden locks and abundant innocence? No, I can’t say that I do. I have been forced into a corner by her father. I am to marry his daughter or lose the chance of improving my finances.” Alfred shrugged, catching Henry off-guard. “And if I don’t, he will just fob her off to the next sorry excuse of a man who comes along.”

Henry had been resenting the man under the assumption that Alfred wanted to marry. It had never occurred to him that the man who had become an acquaintance had more difficult circumstances than he realized. “I would not marry the girl unless I could provide her with everything that her heart desired. And if I found myself with little to no choice in the matter, I would at least spend the rest of my life ensuring that I make her happy, in part if not fully. She’s already at the mercy of her father; there is no need for her husband to do the same.”

Tears suddenly welled in the man's eyes as he placed the glass beside him on a small table. "You are a good man, Henry. I wish I were half the man that you are. I let myself get sucked into the business proposition of a lifetime, but since I saw you the other evening, I can't help thinking how evil I am being. Even if I wanted to call things off now, the girl's reputation would be ruined." He hung his head in shame, speaking more clearly as if he had been putting on an act.

It took Henry a moment to realize that he'd judged the man a little too harshly the last time they had spoken. Unlike himself, Alfred had never longed for a life spent in solitude, but that didn't mean his actions were justified.

"What should I do?" Alfred looked up with a sorrowful look in his eyes, seeming more lost than ever before.

"You go back home. Sober up and stop drinking to numb the pain. It's too late now to back out by your own admission; you will ruin the girl if you don't go through with the agreement," Henry answered as honestly as he could, watching the man closely to see if he were taking any of it in.

The man seemed inebriated, but not so much so that he wasn't able to control himself. "And after that?" Lord Hampton seemed to be sobering up as they spoke.

What happens after that?

Henry found himself thinking of his own predicament and the choices he had made. If he could have gone back in time, he reasoned with himself that he wouldn't have done anything differently. The look in Isabelle's eyes when he had saved her meant the world to him.

Taking a moment to consider his position, Henry looked him in the eyes. "You try and be the best husband that you possibly could. Speak kindly to her and listen to

what she has to say. Never hurt her in any way, physically or otherwise. She has been thrust into this situation against her will. You can either be a blessing or a curse on her life; choose to be a blessing.”

He couldn't help thinking that he had been the curse in Isabelle's life when all he had wanted to be was the blessing.

The best of intentions can sometimes lead to the detriment of others.

A strange look that closely resembled understanding flashed across the man's face before he stood. “Well, I think you have given me a great deal to think about. I had better get home and sober up.” He ran his hand over his tired face while wobbling a little.

Henry nodded, realizing he had made more of an impression on the man than he had even realized.

“I will see you again, Henry.” Lord Hampton waved over his shoulder as he ambled from the room.

At least I could help one young girl.

The scared look in Isabelle's eyes flashed across his mind as he gestured for a footman to bring him a glass of brandy. He had tried to be a good husband to his late wife, yet she had rejected his affections.

At least he knew now that he could try and make the world a better place for one young girl, even if it wasn't Isabelle Sutton.

Chugging the brandy, he stood before handing the empty glass back to the stunned footman who watched him leave.

Nothing good ever came of drinking a person's troubles away. Lord Hampton was a sterling example of that.

He left the club and ambled towards his home, hoping to find even a shred of clarity in the cool evening breeze. There wasn't much that could be done about the evening – that ship had sailed.

People would spread the gossip like wildfire before the sun had time to rise in the morning. He would need to decide what his next plan of action would be.

Leave the ton and Isabelle forever or stay and fight to keep her friendship.

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Chapter 15

I can do this.

Isabelle took a deep breath and placed the palm of her hand against the dining room door. The wood felt cool and solid beneath her palm, giving her something to focus on as she stilled her mind.

Her dreams had been troubled after the ball—fast-paced and confusing. His hands had been strong and gentle on her hips, holding her close while never imposing on her freedom.

She had wanted the dream to continue when he was about to say something to her, yet the roar of the rest of the ton had drowned out what he was trying to say.

Why did it feel as if she had been alone with him at the ball? Her lips curled into a smile but quickly faded when she wondered what waited for her beyond the door.

The silence in the carriage ride after the ball had caused her a great deal of concern. It wasn't like her aunt and brother to let things slide. She just knew that a fight was imminent.

Composing herself, she pushed open the door and stepped into the room.

Aunt Alice and Richard looked up from their cups, following her movements as she sat at the table in her usual place with Richard at the head.

The awkwardness that filled the air caused the skin on her palms to itch. She suddenly wished she'd stayed in bed, feigning illness after a long evening.

"You slept late this morning," Richard broke the silence after clearing his throat. His tone was even and cool, yet his eyes betrayed the anger that was seething below the surface.

"I was quite tired." Isabelle placed her hand beside her plate and fidgeted with her spoon, avoiding looking them in the eyes.

Why do things have to be this way?

"I should imagine that would be the case after the scandal you caused last night," Aunt Alice snapped, causing Isabelle to look up.

Raising his hand, Richard motioned for his aunt to be silent. "I will handle this, Aunt Alice. Allow me to discuss the matter with my sister."

"As you wish," she answered haughtily and returned to her breakfast, picking listlessly at her slice of toast.

Meeting Isabelle's gaze, Richard stared at her from across the table. "This Henry Montague fellow ... How long have you known him for? Was the night you ran away the first time you have ever met him?"

What does he think I have been up to?

"Yes, I met Lord Ashford on the night of the final ball of the season. We have since become friends with shared interests. If you must know, he likes to read just as much as I do." Isabelle lifted her chin defiantly in the air, placing her hands on her lap beneath the table.

There was nothing sinister or clandestine about her friendship with Henry. They had done nothing wrong as far as she was concerned. She did not need to keep any of it hidden from her family.

“I see, and am I to take it that he is the reason for your frequent visits to the circulating library?” The corner of his mouth twitched slightly as he attempted to keep his cool.

“Yes and no. I will be honest with you as there is nothing for me to hide. I have always loved the Evergreen, but Henry and I have enjoyed seeing each other there. Our friendship goes beyond anything you will be able to understand ...”

“You deliberately disobey me ...” Aunt Alice banged her fist on the table, making the cups and saucers rattle. Her nostrils flared with anger as her eyes darkened.

“I haven’t done anything wrong!” Isabelle nearly jumped to her feet, enraged by how she was being treated. Did they not bear witness to the way that Lord James spoke to her at the ball? They were treating her like the aggressor when she had been the victim. Lord Henry had done nothing but save her from embarrassment.

Rage filled her aunt’s face as she narrowed her eyes. “Just what were the two of you discussing all those times you were together?!”

Her words seemed to enrage Richard as he whipped his head in her direction. “How many times were there? And why have you never mentioned anything to me!?” he asked, raising his voice in anger and turning his body towards their aunt.

“Don’t you dare raise your voice at me, young man. You may be the baron of this house, but I am still your aunt. I will be respected for the position I hold in this family. I didn’t see the point in telling you about the flirtation when Isabelle was constantly under my care.

They were never left alone in my presence!” She continued to bang her fists on the table while glaring at her nephew.

Richard’s jaw nearly hit the floor as he gawked at his aunt. “Flirtation? You knew about this all along and never thought to tell me, yet you defend your stance on the matter. Isabelle has all but made a fool of herself and this family. Do you think that Lord James will still want to marry her after last night? The man was humiliated, for heaven’s sake!”

Flirtation?

Isabelle’s heart suddenly skipped a beat as she recalled the way he’d touched her wrist, the gentle way he’d danced with her, and the way he’d looked into her eyes. Had they been flirting?

Her mind filled with confusion after all of her dreams. He’d held her like Atlas had held the world: gentle, sure, and strong.

The argument all but faded into the background of Isabelle’s mind until her brother confronted her again.

“Why are you so hell-bent on destroying this engagement? We need Lord James and the money he can provide!” It was Richard’s turn to slam his fists on the table, making Isabelle jump this time.

His words made her snap out of her daze as she glared at him. “Money, what money is it that Lord James can provide? He is not in line for inheritance. Everyone keeps mentioning these grand business gestures, yet I am still to learn what they are.” She frowned at her brother, wondering why he didn’t see how bad Lord James truly was.

“I have told you not to get involved in matters that do not concern you! You will

marry Lord James regardless of how he comes into his money!” The scarring on her cheeks turned white and bulged as his face filled with colour, hinting at just how angry he was.

Their aunt intervened this time by raising her hand. “Peace, I think we had all better take a deep breath before things get out of hand.” She cleared her throat and turned back to Isabelle. “What is it that you think you will gain by spending so much time with Lord Montague, Isabelle? He is far too old to entertain a young woman such as yourself.” She shook her head in disapproval but waited for a response.

“Old? You worry about his age when Lord Henry has been the only person to see me for who I truly am. He’s treated me with nothing but respect and dignity ever since we met. I will go as far as to say that he is the only person who truly cares about me.”

“Then perhaps you should go and marry him then! I am tired of trying my best for this family and being undermined at every turn! Is absolutely everyone in this family selfish besides me!?” Richard slumped back in his chair, shaking his head and gesturing to Isabelle and their aunt.

“He will certainly make a far better husband than Lord James!” Isabelle shot back, catching them all off guard as the room filled with stunned silence.

“Are you in love with him?” their aunt asked quietly as the colour drained from her face.

Stammering, Isabelle suddenly lost track of her thoughts. “I ... I ... I simply mean that he’s a better man than Lord James. He treats me with respect and kindness. Henry is my friend ...” She couldn’t explain why she suddenly felt shy.

“Henry ... are you on a first-name basis then?” Aunt Alice’s voice grew even quieter.

He is just my friend, isn't he?

Isabelle's throat suddenly felt dry as she gulped, turning her gaze back to her empty plate.

"Isabelle ... Lord Montague is an old man; even when he was younger, he was unable to provide his wife with a child. The man was injured in a war. A childless life is no easy matter for any lady, especially not for those of advanced age. These are hard truths, but you must hear them before it's too late. Lord Montague may have wealth, but he does not have the means to make you happy," Aunt Alice spoke more gently, clutching her throat as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing.

Her words shocked Isabelle, yet she couldn't sit by and listen to her family slandering his name. "And how do you know that it was Lord Henry at fault? What if the problem lay with his wife and not him?"

A stunned look of indignation came over her face as Aunt Alice sat back in her chair and gasped. "Blaming a woman for not providing an heir is ... it's just ..."

"Enough," Richard intervened, glancing at his aunt with concern.

Feeling a twinge of guilt, Isabelle stuttered. "I didn't mean to ..."

"Enough! I forbid you from seeing that man ever again. You will marry Lord James if it's the last thing I see on this earth. I have been charged with your well-being, and as such, I will do what is best for you!" Pushing his chair back with his legs, he stood, allowing the legs to scrape across the wooden floor.

"I am not a child, Richard. You cannot forbid me from living my life!" Hot tears of anger welled in Isabelle's eyes.

“You may not be a child anymore, but you certainly act like one! If you are so intent on disobeying my orders like a child, then you shall be treated like one!” He stepped away from the table and slammed his chair back in place before storming to her side and gripping Isabelle’s arm.

It was too late for her to escape as he pulled her towards the door. “Richard, stop, you can’t do this!” The tears fell freely down her cheeks as she stopped herself just in time from stumbling.

“I should have done this a long time ago. You have had far too much freedom to realize how the real world works for women like you.” He dragged her up the stairs, forcing her ahead of him on the gallery before pushing her into her room.

“How is wealth all that matters to you when Lord James doesn’t treat me with any kind of respect!” Angry tears stung her cheeks as she whipped around to face her brother. The moment grew tense as she balled her fists at her sides and stared him down.

Richard stood his ground, refusing to budge as he slammed the door in her face. The finality of the slam brought Isabelle to her senses as she sprang into action and hurried towards the door.

He’s being serious.

A cold sweat broke out on her skin as she slammed her hand against the door.

“Richard, please don’t do this! There is nothing more than friendship between me and Henry. You can’t forbid me from seeing him!” She pounded on the door with her fists just as the key turned in the lock.

“And now there will be even less than that!” Richard yelled at the top of his lungs.

She heard a large piece of furniture scraping across the floor before feeling the thud against the door.

“No ...” She sobbed softly with her forehead against the door as the final remnants of hope left her body.

Why am I so bothered by never seeing him again?

She turned her back to the door and slid to the ground, burying her face in her hands. All she could think of was his face and never seeing him look into her eyes ever again.

The ache in her chest grew stronger when she looked to the corner of the room where the large pile of books stood beside her desk. Each one was the same, yet their pages represented the friendship born from a game of revenge.

“Isabelle ...” Richard’s muffled voice carried through the door as she shut her eyes and leaned the back of her head against the wood.

Nothing mattered to her anymore as she stared into the dark abyss behind her eyelids.

“Isabelle, please try and see that I am doing this for you. No good will come from knowing a man like Lord Montague. He has nothing to offer a young lady. Lord James will take care of you.”

By controlling every second of my life.

She couldn’t help crying as she wished Henry were there with all her heart. Wherever he was at present, she hoped he knew that she cared for his friendship.

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Chapter 16

“Henry! Henry, let us in at once!”

The pounding in Henry’s head only grew worse as he ambled towards the front door.

Where is that blasted butler?

He grumbled a few curse words under his breath before opening the door. The sun had barely risen, yet he had to face the consequences of his actions from the night before.

“It’s about time you answered the door!” Lady Fitzgibbon and her husband pushed past him without waiting for an invitation.

“Good Lord, it is too early for this ...” he muttered to himself and shut the door while his unwanted guests made their way to the parlour.

How had one simple dance made such a raucous among the ton? People were carrying on as if he had committed a crime against the crown. It was bad enough that he’d felt like a fool in his fine suit with everyone staring at him.

The whispers that had followed his departure from the ball had let him know that a war was imminent, yet he hadn’t pictured it this early.

Stalking towards the parlour, he braced himself for the battle to come.

“And still you haven’t packed anything in this room! I demand to know what you have been getting up to behind our backs!” The countess rounded on him with angry eyes that could have pierced the thickest of hides as she placed her hands on her hips.

“Nothing has been going on behind your backs, Lady Fitzgibbon. I have merely been living my life.” Henry took a seat in an armchair before rubbing his temples with the tips of his fingers.

Angry tears filled her eyes as the countess sank onto the edge of a settee.

The earl seemed to be seething with rage, yet he remained silent as he stared at the wall past Henry’s head.

“All of these years of painful memories. How could you do this to us? Have we not offered up enough of our lives for your sake? How must poor Edith feel from where she is now?” Lady Fitzgibbon retrieved a handkerchief from the sleeve of her dress and dabbed her cheeks.

Her words struck a chord as Henry hung his hands between his knees and looked at them both. “What memories and sacrifices? Neither of you ever spent any time with me during my marriage. The only sacrifices that you have made since your daughter’s passing have been the ones where you have willingly wanted to control every aspect of my life.” His brow knit together in confusion.

What kind of memories were they referring to when his wife had always insisted on visiting them alone?

Lady Fitzgibbon’s crocodile tears instantly dried up as she sat up straighter. “How dare you accuse us of such things while bringing poor Edith’s death into the conversation?” Her voice was dark and cool as she raised her nose in the air.

“It was not our fault that you failed to provide her with a child. Had you done your duty as a husband, none of us would be in this situation at present. Edith would have been alive right now for all who know,” the earl spoke for the first time, spitting venomously in Henry’s direction.

Turning his gaze to the carpet at his feet, Henry muttered to himself. “There was no evidence to say that I was at fault ...”

“What did you say?” The earl took a step forward as his wife gasped in shock.

“How dare you give our sweet Edith the blame. She was a better wife to you than anyone ever could have been! Did she not remain by your side through all those years of marriage?” The countess raised her voice to match her husband’s tone.

“We ought to sue you for wrongful treatment in an unconsummated marriage! I will not have you wasting our daughter’s inheritance on some little piece of muslin that has caught your fancy!” The earl’s face began to turn red.

Is that what they think?

Henry could hardly believe his ears as he sat in stunned silence. He knew very well that his late wife’s parents had never thought very highly of him, but to accuse him of never consummating the marriage was something beyond cruelty. It had been Edith who had refused his advances. He’d doted on her whenever he could, bringing her flowers and arranging little surprises.

Thank you, Henry, but your gestures are entirely unnecessary.

He could still recall the cruel look in her dark eyes as she’d dismissed the bouquet of roses he’d got for her. At that moment, Henry realized that his wife had never loved him.

She'd married him for convenience and nothing more. Was he really to blame for never trying again in the months leading up to her death?

"You may think what you will, Lord Fitzgibbon, but your daughter is no longer with us. There is no use in placing blame when your statement cannot be upheld in a court of law." A quiet calmness filled his mind like the silence before a storm.

He had wanted to help Isabelle Sutton, to try to prevent her intended from snuffing out the passion in her eyes. Yet he now found himself in the crossfire of an ancient and angry war.

"What are you trying to say?" Lady Fitzgibbon came to her feet and demanded a response.

Placing his hands on his knees, Henry pushed himself up and faced them both. "I am saying that I never acted like a son-in-law because your daughter never acted like a wife. You may try and sue me, but you have no legal grounds to stand on. I have dealt with the constant pestering from you both for years, but I now realize I am not willing to put up with it any longer."

Lady Fitzgibbon exchanged an angry look with her husband before wrapping her arm around her waist and placing her free hand around her delicate neck. "I haven't heard you deny your feelings for this ... this girl you have been cavorting with." She changed the subject after presumably realizing that Henry was not playing into their hands.

"That is because I do not owe you any kind of explanation, Lady Fitzgibbon. My affairs, and whom I choose to spend my time with are mine alone. Now, I will ask both of you to please leave my home and allow me to choose my own path in life." He raised his eyebrows, waiting for them to defy his request.

The words had been brewing in his chest for years, yet something inside of him had suddenly snapped. It felt good to put the old codgers in their place.

Thrusting his finger in Henry's face, the earl stepped forward while glowering. "I am warning you, Henry, we may not have a legal reason to take back our money, but if you shame us by marrying and cavorting with this skinny little nobody, there will be consequences. I shall personally make sure that both of you are ruined in the eyes of the ton!" He whipped away from Henry and stormed from the room as his wife followed suit.

Isabelle ...

Henry shut his eyes and shook his head. How had things got this out of control? His life hadn't been easy before Miss Sutton had stumbled across his path, but at least he'd had peace.

His in-laws had kept a close eye on him from time to time, but at least they had never made threats.

What am I going to do?

He hung his head in defeat and shut his eyes. If he stayed and helped Isabelle, he would risk ruining her reputation as well as his own. Not that he had ever cared for the opinions of the ton, but he wasn't willing to throw his friend to the wolves.

My friend.

He lifted his head and looked out the window, seeing little to nothing happening on the street. How badly did he want the friendship with Isabelle if it meant ruining both of their lives? And even more important than that, why did he feel the need to protect her at all costs?

He made his way over to the chair and sat back down, resting his eyes for just a moment as he attempted to clear his mind.

“Henry, why have you come here?” Isabelle looked up from the book she was reading, frowning at him with a questioning look in his eyes.

“I’ve come to see you.” He chose a seat beside her, wondering where everyone else in the Evergreen had gone. He resisted the urge to reach for her hand and run his thumb over her wrist. The sweet scent of her perfume wafted up on a breeze that appeared from nowhere.

The small shop was empty with an eerie feeling of a storm lingering in the air as he waited for her to say something else.

“But why have you come?” Her eyes suddenly seemed hollow, as if all the passion and life had been drained from her soul.

“I wanted to see you.” He glanced down at the book in her hands as a cold chill ran down his spine.

A copy of etiquette and motherhood hung limply in her lap as she stared blankly into his eyes.

I can’t give her what she needs in life; even my friendship is a hindrance to her.

His chest suddenly clenched with pain as he recalled the disappointed look in his late wife’s eyes every time she had thought she was pregnant.

“What is the point of being married if I am never to be a mother?” Edith’s high-

pitched voice filled his ears as he looked up into Isabelle's face.

"What is the point, Henry? Why are we friends?" Isabelle's voice was suddenly her own again.

"I don't know ..."

His brow knit into a frown as he wondered why he had taken such a keen liking to her. He had thought of nothing else but her since that night in the street. His mind was constantly filled with memories of her voice. The sweet scent of her perfume and the defiant tilt of her chin.

Even the silent dance at the ball had been plaguing his dreams.

"I don't know," he repeated more firmly as he questioned his motives for being her friend.

"Well then. I think you had better figure that out before it's too late." She shut the book and handed it to him before standing and leaving the store.

The bell above the shop door tinkled as he looked down at the copy of *Sense and Sensibility* in his hands.

Why do I care so much about a girl I have hardly known for a few weeks?

Waking up with a start, Henry sat up in his chair, looking around the semi-dark room. How long had he been asleep? The sun was just about setting outside the window, casting ominous shadows across the floor.

He leaned forward and raked his hands through his hair. The dream had been confusing, but not as confusing as the pain in his chest.

"My Lord, will you be requiring tea?" the butler said from the doorway, making an

appearance for the very first time that day.

Henry looked at him with a frown. “No, thank you. I think I will be requiring something much stronger this evening. Have my supper brought up on a tray to the study. It’s been quite a long day.” He waited for the butler to turn before speaking again. “Oh, and you are more than welcome to report back to Lord and Lady Fitzgibbon. Tell them that their disappointment of a son-in-law has a glass of brandy once a year. Heaven forbid that I should ever attempt to enjoy my life.”

The man’s body stiffened for a moment before leaving the room.

Good.

Henry shook his head in disgust before pushing himself up and going to his study. It was about time that he stood up for himself. He should have let the tiresome man go back to his wife’s parents when she died. He never wanted to be there anyway. Was there nobody in his life who never judged him or watched his every move?

Isabelle.

Her kind and passionate eyes swam in his vision as he recalled how she had never judged or pushed him in any direction.

Her kind and gentle manners, despite her defiant behaviour, made her a special breed of woman that he’d never encountered before. His late wife would certainly never have liked her.

He quickly shook his head again as he entered the study, pushing the unwanted thoughts aside as his gaze fell on the copy of *Sense and Sensibility*.

What am I going to do?

He suddenly found himself wishing he had never met Isabelle Sutton. Her presence created a conundrum in him that disturbed his peace.

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Chapter 17

Isabelle's shoulders slumped as she stared at the fat drops of rain beating against her window. True to his word, Richard had kept her locked in her room all night, never relenting as he'd had her food sent up on trays. The eerie sound of the wind shifting the gutters sent a shiver down her spine.

What if he never lets me out of this room ever again?

She couldn't help wondering if her current fate was better than marrying a man like Lord James.

"Isabelle?" Caroline's muffled voice carried through the door, startling Isabelle from her thoughts.

Holding her breath, Isabelle scrunched up her nose and pursed her lips, hoping in vain that her future sister-in-law would leave her alone. The very last thing that she needed was to see Caroline gloating in her triumph.

"Isabelle, I know you aren't asleep. I want to talk to you," her voice trailed off behind the sound of furniture legs scraping across the floor.

Why did Richard even feel the need to take extra precautions? Did he perhaps think that her unwillingness to marry Lord James had granted her superhuman abilities to pick locks? Or perhaps he viewed her as sinister in light of the recent events?

The thoughts had Isabelle shaking her head as the key turned in the lock.

“May I come in?” Caroline asked in an uncharacteristically meek voice as the door creaked open.

“Would you leave if I said no?” Isabelle pursed her lips and raised her eyebrow in a challenge.

Heaving a sigh, Caroline turned to the footman and dismissed him before shutting the door behind her.

“Aren’t you afraid I might overpower you and run away?” Isabelle turned her head back to the window as Caroline perched beside her on the bed.

“No, and I don’t agree with your brother locking you in a room either. I have told him that he needs to come and let you out once you and I have had a discussion.” She folded her hands in her lap and glanced at her slender fingers before facing Isabelle.

“I’m surprised that you would want me to leave this room. Is this not what you wanted all along? To have me out from under your feet no matter the cost?” Isabelle spoke her mind, no longer fearing the consequences of her words. She had already been treated like a prisoner. What else could they possibly do to her now?

Caroline’s face paled slightly as she turned her gaze back to her lap. “Is that truly what you think of me? Am I nothing but a monster in your eyes?” Her voice seemed softer and lower, lacking the usual bite.

“I do think that you want me out of this house. I won’t sit here and pretend to be ignorant on that score.” Isabelle turned her head to the side, examining her future sister-in-law’s face.

“I can see why you would think that. I haven’t exactly been gentle in my approach to matters. Believe it or not, I do want you to be taken care of. I know how uncountable

it can be for a lady when she passes a marriageable age. Being a lowly spinster may seem like a romantic idea, but it can prove to be far more uncomfortable than it appears in Romance novels.” She fidgeted with the fabric of her dress, picking at an invisible loose thread.

“And am I to sacrifice my freedom and tie myself to a hateful man in the name of comfort? Forgive me for questioning your views on the matter, but I do not see how such a sacrifice can benefit me in the long run.”

“Lord James will be able to provide you with money, comfort, and close proximity to nobility. Even as a second son of a marquess, Lord James will still be seen as more noble than an earl without an heir.” Caroline raised her head again, almost pleading with Isabelle to see her point of view on the matter.

Feeling exasperation flood her chest, Isabelle sighed heavily and shook her head. “Why does everyone look down on Lord Ashford because he never sired an heir? For all we know, it could have been his wife who was barren. And besides the point, I have never once expressed my willingness to marry Lord Ashford. We are friends, and that is all.” Her heart skipped a little as she spoke, bringing a strange kind of fluttering to the pit of her stomach.

He is just my friend, isn't he?

Caroline shot her a pitying look as she chewed the inside of her cheek. “Isabelle, I may only be a few years older than you but believe me when I say that these friendships can become quite inconvenient and uncomfortable down the line. It is better to end your friendship now than have your heart broken later.”

Coming to her feet, Isabelle whipped around and gestured in the air with her hands. “There you go again with comfort and convenience. Why is it that nobody can see just how inconvenient this situation is for me? Just because my brother wished to

sacrifice his happiness and freedom for a marriage, doesn't mean that I should as well!" She let the words fly from her mouth without thinking.

Caroline's face paled as her body stiffened, making Isabelle realize she'd overstepped.

"I didn't mean to ..." Isabelle began to stammer as she took a step back.

What was I thinking?

She suddenly felt flustered at the horrified look of shock on Caroline's face.

"If you would excuse me, there are things that I need to attend to." Caroline stood and excused herself quietly, attempting to hide the glistening tears in her eyes.

Richard appeared in the doorway just as Caroline reached the threshold. "There you are. I was just about to come looking for you," he said, addressing his future bride with a concerned frown.

Looking past his head, Caroline took a deep breath. "There is no need to concern yourself with my well-being, My Lord, far be it from me to inconvenience you any further." She lifted her head high and pushed past him, hurrying down the hall.

"Miss Sedgewick, what has happened?" Richard called after her in a flustered voice before rounding on his sister. "What the devil went on in here?" His eyes were bright with anger as he demanded a response.

"Nothing ... we were just ... we were ..." She fumbled over her words as she began to regret her loose tongue.

"I demand to know this instant what you said to her. She was fine when she came up

here to have a discussion with you.” His scars bulged as they always did when he was angry.

Swallowing hard, Isabelle placed her hand on her chest. “I simply mentioned that just because the two of you are sacrificing your happiness for a marriage of convenience does not mean that I have to as well.”

Richard’s jaw dropped open as he stared at her in horror. “After everything that we have all done for you, you have seen fit to ruin my marriage before it has even started. Has it never occurred to you that while I was marrying Caroline because of an arrangement, I still intended to make her happy?”

“Richard, I didn’t mean to. I wasn’t thinking ...” Tears filled her eyes as Isabelle realized how foolish she had been.

“No! You never think, and that is exactly the problem. I may not have fallen in love with Caroline from the start, but I always intended to make her feel loved in our marriage!” His fingers curled into fists at his sides as he glared at her angrily, fuming with rage.

“I will go and speak to her ...” The words had barely passed her lips when Richard blocked her path, barring her from leaving the room.

“No, you will stay in this room as I have instructed. I have allowed this situation to go on for far too long. I admit that I harboured the vain hope that giving you more time would allow you to accept the situation at hand, but I can see now that I have been foolish. You will marry Lord James, even if it is tomorrow. I do not care what the rest of the ton thinks.”

An icy shiver ran down her spine as Isabelle realized how serious her brother was being. “Richard, please ...”

“It is far too late for pleading with me. I will go to Lord James and grovel on my knees if I have to, but marry him you shall!”

“But what if I am not happy?” Her eyes filled with tears as a lump of fear formed in the back of her throat.

“I do not care if you are happy or not. Your future husband can send you to the country and lock you up for all I care! It is no concern of mine if you never see us ever again. You shall marry Lord James, and that is the end of it!” Richard hurried from the room and slammed the door behind his back, making Isabelle jump with fright.

Her heart raced uncontrollably as she lifted a hand to her chest.

What should I do?

Panic filled her mind as she realized nobody would save her from the marriage.

Henry might ...

The idea flashed through her mind, forcing her into action before she could think it through.

Hurrying to her desk, she pulled the chair out and took a seat before dipping the tip of her quill in the inkpot.

Dearest Lord Ashford,

I hope this letter finds you well. I am writing to inform you of a rather disturbing development in our heroine’s story. She is to marry as soon as possible without any say in the matter. Despite trying her best to convince her captors, the heroine cannot

make them see how vile and cruel the man actually is.

There is talk of money and wealth, yet no evidence can be produced to substantiate his claims. I am aware that you do not owe me anything, but if there is anyone in this world who is able to help me, it is you. Please, if you can find it in your heart to help me escape, I shall be eternally grateful to you.

Yours sincerely,

Isabelle Sutton.

PS. I shall be waiting pensively for your reply.

The tip of her quill had barely left the page when she began to blow on the ink. If she were to succeed in her endeavours, she needed to act as quickly as she could. Reaching into the top drawer of her desk, she pulled out the last few coins in her purse.

You truly are my only and final hope.

She took a moment to examine the three coins before closing her fist and carefully placing the letter in an envelope.

“My Lady, lunch is ready.” One of the footmen knocked on the door.

Perfect.

She jumped to her feet and hurried to let him in before shutting the door behind him.

The poor young man had barely placed the tray on her desk when Isabelle descended on him like a lightning bolt.

“I need your help. Will you take this letter to Lord Henry Montague, the Earl of Ashford? I will pay you for your help as well as your silence on the matter.” She thrust the letter along with the coins under the man’s nose.

Taking a step back from fright, the man blinked a few times before looking around the room. His light blue eyes widened with fear and uncertainty.

Taking a deep breath, Isabelle composed herself and lowered the letter as well as the money. “My apologies, Jimmy, that is your name, isn’t it? I have heard the other maids and footmen referring to you as Jimmy.”

“It is, My Lady.” Jimmy swallowed hard, using his sleeve to wipe a few beads of sweat that had formed on his ears.

Isabelle nodded with a reassuring smile despite the pounding of her heart. “I’m sorry if I frightened you, but I need your help. There is nobody in this house that I can trust. If you help me, I promise never to reveal it was you. I am not asking you to help me escape, just to deliver this letter for me.” Her hands trembled slightly as she raised the envelope and money again. “Please, I cannot tie myself down to a man like Lord James.”

Understanding filled the young man’s eyes as he reached up and accepted the offering along with the letter. “I will help you, My Lady.”

Relief flooded her body, making her feel as if she would collapse. “Thank you, Jimmy. You don’t understand what this means to me.”

The young man nodded as he placed the letter along with the coins in his breast pocket. “I understand, My Lady, and if it is not too bold of me to remark, none of the staff has ever taken a liking to Lord James.”

Tears of gratitude filled her eyes as Isabelle watched him leave the room, shutting the door behind him before locking it once again.

There is hope.

She sank back into her chair in front of the desk and sighed in relief. At least there was one person in the house that she knew would help her, even if it was out of pity.

Henry will help me, and not out of pity.

The thought startled her as the strange fluttering sensation returned to her stomach. Why was she so sure Henry would help her, and why did she want him to?

Images of knights fighting dragons to rescue the fair maiden filled her mind. Did she really believe that he would swoop in and carry her away to a better life, or was she hoping that he would just help her escape?

Why do I believe that he would save me?

She tried to reassure herself that she only thought of him as a saviour because of the night of the ball.

Henry always does what is right and chivalrous.

She pushed the unwanted thoughts aside and turned to her tray of food. She had been so distraught with her brother's behaviour that she'd hardly touched her breakfast.

Her stomach growled angrily as she reached for the knife and fork, cutting off a sliver of roast chicken. If she was going to escape with Henry, she needed her strength to do so.

At least there is hope.

She began to shovel the food into her mouth, hungrily tearing at the poultry as if her life depended on it.

Henry would reply to her soon, she just knew that he wouldn't leave her like this.

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Chapter 18

Henry stood at the window with his hands behind his back, watching the heavy rain beat against the glass.

I cannot save her.

Lady Fitzgibbon's words weighed heavily on his heart. He knew very well that she would follow through with ruining Isabelle's reputation if anything happened between them.

Did I want something more?

His brow creased into a frown as he cleared his throat uncomfortably. He had been telling himself that he never intended to have anything more with Isabelle Sutton, yet his mind constantly swam with thoughts of her. Where was she now, what was she doing, and was she going ahead with her impending marriage?

"My Lord, Lady Fitzgibbon to call on you," the butler announced, leaving the room again without waiting for Henry to reply.

Things had been tense in the house ever since Lord and Lady Fitzgibbon had paid him a visit. His little outburst and letting the man know he thought of him as a spy hadn't helped matters either.

Henry had barely turned around when Lady Fitzgibbon entered the room and faced him.

“My Lady.” Henry’s voice was stiff as he bowed politely.

“We can dispense with the formalities, Henry; I would like to get straight to the point. I didn’t think that you would be so foolish as to go against our wishes, but a letter from an old friend has made me realize that the matter is far greater than I realized.”

“Would that old friend perhaps be Lady Sinclair?” He raised an eyebrow in question, keeping his hands behind his back.

If Lady Fitzgibbon wanted to dispense with the formalities, then he wasn’t about to invite her to sit.

Anger made her nostrils flare as his mother-in-law took a deep breath. “Your reply confirms my suspicions.”

“Whether they do or not is no concern of mine, Lady Fitzgibbon.” Henry removed his hands from behind his back and strode over to the cart of drinks in the corner of the room before pouring himself a glass of whisky.

The countess’s eyes flashed with disapproval as she lifted her nose in the air and eyed his glass. “Lady Sinclair has written to tell me that Miss Sutton is refusing to go ahead with her marriage. Her brother has had to resort to desperate measures to keep her from making any foolish decisions.”

“And what exactly do you think is my involvement in this matter, Lady Fitzgibbon?” His heart pounded furiously with concern despite the coolness of his words.

Desperate measures?

He pushed down the urge to ask exactly what those measures were.

“Have you or have you not offered the girl a promise of marriage and protection if she refuses to marry Lord James? I demand an answer this instant!” she insisted, raising her voice slightly, refusing to back down.

“And what if I have?” Henry snapped back, feeling his chest clench with fear for Isabelle.

Lady Fitzgibbon’s face paled as she raised a hand to her chest. “How could you have done this to us. You cannot provide the girl with a child, and even if by some miracle you managed to produce an heir, what would people say of our daughter?”

The penny suddenly dropped for Henry as he realized why his in-laws were so set against him marrying again. It was never about the money, or even marrying someone beneath his station.

“Is this what it has always been about? You are so scared that I will marry again and prove that your daughter was barren?” He shook his head in disbelief.

“I ... It’s not fair ...” Lady Fitzgibbon seemed flustered for the very first time in her life as she stumbled over her words.

“You are so desperate to prove that your daughter was perfect and that I was in the wrong that you have dedicated the rest of your life to stopping me.” He couldn’t believe the words even as he said them.

Turning red in the face, Lady Fitzgibbon seemed to regain her composure. “I will not have you besmirching my daughter’s good name! It was you who was injured during battle. You are the problem, and I refuse to stand by and allow you to bring shame upon another young woman! Miss Sutton must and will marry Lord James! I will personally attend their wedding if it is the last thing that I do! You will not get away with this, Henry. I can promise you that!”

She almost seemed as if she would faint as she continued her tirade. “You made a mockery of our daughter while she was alive; I will not allow you to make a fool out of her in death!”

Pride.

Henry stood by and watched as his departed wife’s mother worked herself into a frenzy. It was clear to him now that her daughter’s reputation had been the driving force behind her behaviour for years. They were so scared of Henry proving that he could sire an heir that they had dedicated years of their lives to stopping him from doing it. Even he had known there was a small chance that his injury hadn’t been the cause.

“I ... I will ruin you both if you go ahead with this foolish plan. My daughter’s memory must be protected.” She broke down in tears as her words trailed off.

Taking pity on the woman whose pride and unhappiness were keeping her captive in a prison of her own making, Henry sighed. “You may rest assured, Lady Fitzgibbon, that I never asked Miss Sutton for her hand in marriage.”

A look of shock came over the woman’s face as she looked up. “Then why did you lead me to believe that you had?”

“Because I am a firm believer in allowing people to say what is on their minds. You have shown me what your true intentions are. I can now see that you are a broken woman with an even more broken pattern of thought. I pity you, Lady Fitzgibbon; truly I do.” He sipped the last few drops of his drink before placing the glass back on the cart.

“I have never in all of my life been so disrespected. I can only say that I hope that Miss Sutton has the good sense to go ahead with her marriage and that you, in turn,

will not interfere.” She raised her tear-stained face in the air again before marching from the room.

Running away from the truth just as she’s always done.

Henry shook his head in frustration before running his fingers through his hair. He wasn’t certain how he felt about his in-laws wanting to protect their daughter’s memory at all costs. He never wished ill on anyone, but he had to admit that a healthy dose of karma would certainly do them both some good.

Isabelle sauntered back into his mind as he strode over to a chair and took a seat. It worried him that she was being treated with ‘drastic’ measures, but what could he do regarding the matter? The question had barely popped into his mind when the butler appeared with a tray.

“There is a letter for you, My Lord.” The man cleared his throat.

“Does it say who it is from?” Henry licked his lips as his heart began to pound.

“It was delivered by a footman in blue livery, My Lord. He did not say who it was from,” the butler informed him before lowering the tray.

Taking the letter, Henry quickly ripped it open before retrieving the letter and reading it.

His heart stopped beating at her heartfelt plea.

How would I be able to help her?

He swallowed hard as fear gripped his chest. What was she expecting of him? He couldn’t provide the life for her that he knew she deserved. She was a high-spirited

young lady who could accomplish anything she set her mind to.

If anything, his conversation with the countess had reminded him of how difficult it was to keep a young woman happy. It took more than just a lowly widower to provide anyone with happiness.

I can't interfere, no matter how I feel about her ...

Chapter 19

Swinging her legs from her bed, Isabelle stood and waited anxiously for the door to open. She had been drifting off when a knock sounded at her door.

Henry.

Her heart raced frantically as she wrung her hands together. It had been a full day since she had sent the letter. She had been expecting Henry to come racing to her rescue, yet his lack of reply had only served to fuel her desire to see him again.

There is always a delay before the hero comes rushing in.

Images of Henry sweeping her up in his arms and carrying her off to his country estate filled her mind. She had spent the night questioning why she had suddenly begun to think of him as a hero, yet she reassured herself that there would be plenty of time to figure that out once he had come to her rescue.

“Come in,” she called to the closed door, expecting to see the footman who had helped her before.

Her heart sank when Richard opened the door, revealing a large box that made her even more anxious.

“I’m sorry to disturb you. I just thought you might want to wear this.” He placed the box on the bed before lifting the lid to reveal a neatly stored dress.

The fine neck of lace and pearls stared up at her like a ghost from the past as the lightly coloured champagne fabric shone in the early afternoon sun.

“Mama’s dress?” Isabelle’s throat suddenly felt all too dry. There was only one reason that Richard would have brought her a dress, which didn’t bode well for her at all.

“Yes, I did have a mind to offer it to Miss Sedgewick, but I thought you might like it instead.” He avoided looking at her as he rubbed the back of his neck.

Is he feeling guilty?

Isabelle’s mind raced frantically as she wondered if he was having second thoughts. She certainly hoped and prayed that he was.

“I know this isn’t easy for you, but I do hope you can see in time that what I am doing for you is for the best. None of this is easy for me, despite what you may think of the situation.” His voice was laced with sadness but no uncertainty at all.

Isabelle’s heart sank to the pit of her stomach as she realized he wasn’t changing his mind.

“I’m surprised that you would care what I think of you or anyone else for that matter.” Anger at her situation began to take hold again as she shook her head and averted her gaze from the dress. No matter how beautiful her mother’s dress was, it was little solace for a life that would be spent in misery.

Richard’s shoulders stiffened as he clenched his jaw. “I do not wish to discuss this matter with you any further. Lord James has agreed to marry you the day after tomorrow. I expect you to be ready when the time comes.” He dropped his hand from the back of his neck and left the room, once again slamming the door in his wake.

Pain clutched her chest as fear took hold.

The day after tomorrow. What is taking Henry so long?

She felt like crying out of frustration more than anything else as she stared at the shut door. She couldn't fathom why he had not answered her yet. Would the hero in all the novels she had read not have come to her rescue already? It didn't make any sense to her that she was having to wait. Something must have gone wrong with the delivery of the letter.

A gentle knock brought her back to reality as her heart skipped a beat.

Henry.

She rushed towards the door and tugged it open before staring into the wide-eyed expression of Jimmy.

"There has been a reply, My Lady. I was waiting for his lordship to go to his study before I brought it in," he whispered before handing her the note.

Nodding vigorously, she mouthed the words 'thank you' before hastily shutting the door and ripping the elegant wax seal.

Her heart thudded uncontrollably as she read the slanted words.

Dearest Miss Sutton,

I hope this letter finds you well. I hope you don't mind that I have taken my time to write you this reply. I have given your story a great deal of thought before coming to a conclusion.

It did trouble me greatly to hear of the heroine's fate, but you see I have been mistaken in trying to meddle in her affairs. It is not my place, nor should it ever have been, to offer advice on matters of her heart. I do hope that our heroine can make peace with her decision.

An arranged marriage, even to a tiresome prince, can be comfortable, even in the absence of love and fondness. I doubt that there is a man more capable of looking after her.

I have made my peace with being a lowly widower in the world, banished to his country estate to live in solitude. I hope that, in time, our heroine will be able to move on with her life as I am doing.

Our heroine will and must marry if she is to avoid a life devoid of disappointments.

Yours sincerely,

Lord Henry Montague, Earl of Ashford.

The letter fell from her hands as Isabelle sank to the floor, fluttering past her face as she stared at the closed window.

He's saying goodbye because he isn't coming.

The thought seemed almost as unreal to her as the situation she found herself in with Lord James. How was it possible that the hero wasn't coming to rescue her?

A jolt of shock ran down her spine as she pulled her legs closer to her body and rested her chin on her knees.

When did I start thinking of Lord Ashford as the hero in my story?

Realization dawned on her as her shoulders began to heave with dry sobs of panic. She cared for Lord Ashford far more than even she had cared to admit. She had placed so much stock in her feelings for him that she hadn't even doubted for a second that he would come to her rescue.

Leaning forward, she snatched up his letter and crumpled it into a ball before flinging it across the room.

How could things have gone this wrong?

She began to question her sanity and how she had convinced herself that things would work out in the end. Why had she believed that he would come to her rescue, and why couldn't her family see how much they were asking of her? She continued to cry out in silence as her tears refused to come.

At the end of the day, she was just as helpless and lost in her own story as all the other ladies in the ton ...

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Chapter 20

A few days had passed since Henry had sent Isabelle the letter. He wondered how she had taken his words since he had never heard back from her.

A small part of him wondered if he had done the right thing, but he also realized that he couldn't have provided for her in the same way that James Church could have done as her husband.

He may have had the means to treat her properly, but Lord James would offer her a higher position in society.

"Lord Ashford, I was wondering when I would see you in here again." Mr Charleston greeted him brightly with a warm smile, leaning slightly over the counter in his enthusiasm.

"I'm afraid that the packing has been keeping me quite busy. There isn't much time in a day when one has to pack up their entire life," he explained. It was common knowledge amongst the ton that he was planning on leaving, yet he hadn't confirmed it publicly until just then.

"I see." Mr Charleston's eyes suddenly grew sad as if he understood exactly what Henry was saying.

So, the rumours have spread.

Mr Charleston's lack of surprise all but confirmed Henry's suspicions. Lord and Lady

Fitzgibbon would have told more than half the ton that he was leaving by now. It would have only served their narrative to do just that.

“Has the book I ordered come in yet? I would like to finish reading it before I leave for the country.” His chest clenched after admitting out loud once again that he was indeed leaving his old life behind.

Pursing his lips in understanding, Mr Charleston gave a sad nod before disappearing behind the counter.

I’m going to miss this place.

Henry looked around the shop with its sparse decorations and rows of ledgers. The Evergreen had been such a source of joy for him that he could hardly believe it was more than likely the last time he was looking at it.

I will never bump into Miss Sutton in this place or anywhere else.

Something about the unwanted thought made the pit of his stomach churn with discomfort. Trying to distract himself, he focused on a pair of voices at the back of the shop. The speakers were hidden from view, yet he could clearly distinguish what they were saying.

“Can you believe that anyone would do such a thing?” a woman’s voice said loudly, defeating the purpose of her poor attempts at a whisper.

“Completely scandalous if you ask me. If I were a member of her family, I would insist that she be locked up in an asylum.” A second woman whose voice seemed to travel down the aisle answered the first.

Rolling his eyes at the snippets of conversation, Henry turned back towards the

counter. It wasn't often that women entering the shop stopped to gossip, but whenever they did, he always made sure to busy himself with his own affairs. If anything would reassure him that he was making the right choice by leaving, it was listening to the gossip mill spinning its ever-tiresome wheels.

"I agree with you. Any woman who chooses to climb from her bedroom window on the night before her wedding must not have been in her right mind," the first voice agreed with a heavy tone of judgement.

The night before her wedding. It can't be.

His ears pricked up as he did a small calculation in his mind. It had been roughly five days since Isabelle had written to tell him that her wedding was going ahead.

It can't be.

He shook off the thought and attempted to focus his mind back on the matter at hand. He needed the book he had ordered to finish packing in peace and leave London behind for good. Whatever Isabelle was or wasn't doing at present, wasn't any concern of his.

"I hear that Lord James Church is less than thrilled with the development. He's threatening to sue her and her family for breach of promise. Can you imagine throwing over the second son of a wealthy marquess? Miss Isabelle Sutton must have gone tarty if you ask me."

Isabelle!

Henry's heart began to race uncontrollably at the mention of her name. It was one thing to wonder what she was doing, but to know that she had climbed out of her bedroom window in desperation was another matter entirely. Where had she gone?

He sidled a little closer to the shelves in an attempt to gather more information.

The ladies came into view just as he peeked around a corner.

“Has anyone heard from her since she climbed from the window? Surely, she couldn’t have got that far on her own. Her family has no money, not to mention that there was no mention of any relatives she could have turned to,” the second voice, now proved to belong to a plump, blonde lady of roughly forty, answered her friend.

The first lady, whose hair matched the dull wooden planks of the worn brown floor, spoke up. “Not that I have heard; nobody has seen or heard from her in almost a week. If I were Lord James, I would simply leave her to her own fate and carry on with my life. She can’t be very well off wherever she is. Besides, I wouldn’t want to be her if Lord James does find her; he was practically fuming with rage the last time I saw him.”

She’s in danger.

A cold chill crept down Henry’s spine as the words echoed across his mind. What would James Church do to her if he found her first? The scene from the ball flashed across his mind as he recalled the way that James had gripped her wrist. Would he harm her? The thought made him spring into action as he bolted for the door.

“Lord Ashford, you forgot your book!” Mr Charleston called after him, but it was already too late.

Henry was making his way down the busy street, frantic to find Miss Isabelle Sutton before anyone else.

Where do I start?

His lungs began to burn as he picked up the pace on his way to every possible location he could think of. He swore to himself that he would overturn every stone and pebble in London, even if it meant he'd never sleep until she was found.

It's been almost two weeks.

Henry paced tirelessly in front of the parlour window, waiting for word from the Bow Street Runners. He had tried searching for her for days, wondering where she had got to. Out of desperation, he had gone to the only people known for tracking down criminals and thieves. Not that Isabelle was either; he only wanted to know she was safe.

He reassured himself over and over again that she would be found in due course and brought back to him before anyone else.

"My Lord, there is a visitor to see you," the butler announced from the doorway, causing Henry to look up.

Hope sprung in his chest as he stopped dead in his tracks. "Well, send them in at once," he demanded without any care for the man's feelings. Things had already got so bad between him and the butler that he didn't care what the man thought of him now.

Leaving the room, the butler returned after a few minutes with the guest in tow.

Henry's heart was torn between confusion and hope for news when he saw who it was.

"I hope I am not interrupting anything." Lady Alice Sinclair greeted him with a

sorrowful look.

“Has she been found?” Henry demanded immediately, no longer caring what anyone thought of him. There was no time for manners and propriety when so much was happening.

Lady Sinclair’s expression filled with concern rather than scorn. “I was hoping that you would be able to tell me where she has gone.”

Panic set in again when he realized Isabelle hadn’t returned home.

“I do not know where Isabelle is, Lady Sinclair. If I did know, I wouldn’t be utilizing half of London to try and find her.” His shoulders slumped in defeat as he approached a chair and sat, gesturing for his guest to do the same.

Eyeing him in suspicion, Isabelle’s aunt accepted his invitation and chose a chaise longue opposite his chair. “I came here to plead with you to tell us where she is. I know that you only want to protect her. I do not doubt that, but you can’t possibly think that you will be able to make her happy. Please write to our Isabelle at once and tell her to come home. It’s time that this whole ordeal comes to an end,” she demanded firmly.

Lifting his head in disbelief, Henry stared at her with his mouth slightly agape.

“I do not wish to fight with you, Lord Ashford. I simply want my niece to return to the life destined for her. You are not a suitable match for her, even if you have to concede to that. You were never able to make poor Edith happy, so how will you make someone like Isabelle happy? She is far younger and more stubborn than your late wife ever was.” Lady Sinclair looked him in the eyes without pulling any punches.

Jumping to his feet, Henry lost his temper. “It was not my fault that Edith was not happy. I tried to love her as best I could. It was she who rejected me and my affections. I cannot be held responsible for that failure of a marriage for the rest of my life! I deserve to live in happiness as much as she deserves to rest in peace!” He thrust his thumb into his chest.

Lady Sinclar seemed shocked as she raised her hand to her throat. “Don’t tell me that you intend on marrying Isabelle? What will everyone say if they hear that a renowned widower stole the bride of a wealthy young man?” Her eyes searched his face as if waiting for him to refute her claims.

Her words caught him off guard as he considered them. “I am willing to save her from a family who cannot see how desperately unhappy she is with their decisions. I do not care what you or the rest of the bloody ton thinks about that!” Heat rose on the back of his neck as he stared at her.

Doesn’t she care about anything other than that blasted marriage?

It dawned on him just how much Isabelle had needed him to be on her side. All her family and the rest of the ton ever cared about was the appearance of things. Nobody had ever stopped to ask themselves if she would be safe under Lord James’s care.

Lady Sinclair continued to stare at him in stunned silence with her hand raised to her throat.

“It strikes me as odd, Lady Sinclair, that you would prize the opinions of the ton above the well-being of your own family. I have never taken you for a fool, but have you truly never noticed what a wretched man Lord James Church can be? He has treated Isabelle with nothing but disrespect since the day I met her. Have you no shame in throwing her to the wolves for the sake of family honour? I do not know what he has promised your family, but sacrificing such a wonderful young woman

should never have been an option.” Henry felt more exasperated than he’d ever felt in his life.

Why can they not see what they are asking of her?

He felt even more disappointed in himself to know that he had left her to the mercy of her family that only seemed to care for their reputations. He should have dropped what he was doing and gone after her the moment he had received her letter.

Images of her flushed cheeks flashed through his mind, conjuring the memory of her face when he’d save her from burning herself with hot tea.

She was relying on me to save her again.

His chest clenched with disappointment when he realized just how badly he had let her down. There was something more than just trust behind her eyes on that day. Hope had coloured the streaks of brown in her eyes.

“Well, I can see that we won’t be getting anywhere here. I will return to my nephew and let him know that you have offered little to no help on the matter.” She placed her hand on the tip of her cane and pushed herself up before heading towards the door.

Henry stopped her just before she reached the threshold, standing in her way before she could pass. “On the contrary, Lady Sinclair, you may tell your nephew that I am doing everything in my power to locate his sister. If I knew where she was, I would not be so cruel as to keep the information to myself, yet you can rest assured that I will protect her if I find her first. Lord James Church is a dangerous man; the sooner you all realize that, the better it will be for Isabelle.”

He almost grew angry again when he recalled the amount of control Lord James had attempted to exercise over Isabelle on the night of the ball.

Isabelle's aunt swallowed hard, running her tongue over her lips before heading out the door.

I will find her, Henry reassured himself as he watched the baroness leave. He needed to find Isabelle before James reached her and ruined her reputation, or worse, beat her into submission before forcing her to marry him.

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Chapter 21

“Will you be wanting the servants to start packing up the parlour, My Lord?” the butler asked in his usual dismissive tone.

Looking around the room where Henry had practically lived after Isabelle’s disappearance, he allowed his shoulders to slump in defeat. He was by no means close to giving up on finding her, yet he knew that he couldn’t keep the servants at bay forever.

“I guess we will have to start in the parlour at some point,” Henry conceded with a tired shrug and began to gather the pieces of parchment scattered over the small table in the corner of the room.

It was inevitable that the people who worked for him would want to move on with their lives. He couldn’t expect them to hang around forever in limbo, not knowing if they were going to the country or staying to serve an empty house.

“Very well, My Lord, I shall instruct the maids to begin packing as soon as you are ready.” The butler bowed half-heartedly before making his exit.

At least he will be relieved to hear he’s not coming with me.

The servants had been whispering for days on end about his obsession with the missing spinster. He knew for certain that the news had already reached his in-laws, but he couldn’t have cared less about how things looked. All that mattered to him was finding Isabelle.

Henry shook his head and turned back to the map of clues he'd scribbled on a piece of paper. It had been two weeks since Isabelle had run away, and he wasn't any closer to tracking her down.

"There has to be something here that I'm not seeing," he spoke to an empty room while curving his brow into a frown and chewing the inside of his cheek.

An idea popped into his head as he surveyed his scribbled notes. He'd checked just about everywhere for signs of Isabelle. Everywhere except for one place in particular. It wouldn't be easy to get in, but even that was a small price to pay if it would lead him in the right direction.

Making up his mind, he lifted himself from the chair and headed straight for the front door before bumping into the butler on his way out.

"My Lord, may the maids ..."

"Yes, yes, pack up whatever you want." Henry cut him short with a wave of his hand before reaching for his coat and shrugging it over his shoulders.

The butler simply nodded and opened the front door, stepping aside as if he were relieved that Henry was finally leaving.

Out on the busy street, Henry looked around in the vain hope of catching a glimpse of Isabelle before heading straight towards the Bow Street Runners main office.

It took him a good few minutes to reach them, but when he did, he was greeted by an exasperated old man with a handlebar moustache and grumpy countenance.

"Good morning. My Lord. Like I told you yesterday and the day before that, we have not yet heard from or seen your Miss Sutton. I shall personally deliver the news to

your door if we find anything at all.” He grumpily continued to riffle through a stack of parchment on his desk that sat facing the front door.

The old shop that a merchant had once used now consisted of shelves of ledgers that harboured the detailed notes of wanted or apprehended criminals in London. The smell of flour and salt still lingered in the air if one was inclined to give the room a good sniff.

Henry bit back his frustration with the older man and forced a smile. “I understand, Mr Hayworth. I am here to ask if one of your men, preferably a more experienced man, would be able to join me on a little excursion. I think I may know where we should be looking. I didn’t think it wise for me to be tackling this endeavour on my own.”

Mr Hayworth looked up at Henry with a tired shake of his head. The weariness in his light brown eyes and the unkempt appearance of his wild, bushy hair, spoke of the hours he’d spent behind his desk. “All of the men are busy at present, but if you must take someone with you, our newest recruit is in need of some training. He hasn’t had any experience, but he’s a fair hand at finding out information.”

“Is there really nobody else? This matter is quite important ...”

“Taking George is my final offer; take it or leave it,” Mr Hayworth snapped before turning his attention back to the stack of papers on his desk.

Realizing that he had made quite a nuisance of himself over the past two weeks, he conceded to the offer. “Oh, very well,” Henry replied irritably, tapping his foot repeatedly on the floor.

I’ll take what I can get at this point.

“George, I have a case for you!” Mr Hayworth called to the back of the shop without lifting his head.

A few moments passed before a young, dishevelled-looking young man with tatty clothes appeared from behind a door. “You called for me, Mr Hayworth?” He seemed quite well-spoken and enthusiastic despite his appearance.

“Yes, Lord Ashford here requires your assistance. You may go with him,” Mr Hayworth answered in a tired voice and waved them both away with a flick of his wrist.

The man named George turned to Henry with a respectful bow. “I am at your assistance, My Lord. This will be about Miss Sutton, who climbed from her bedroom window, not two weeks ago?” His dark brown eyes examined Henry’s face as if the words were written in his expressions.

“You are familiar with the case then?” Henry felt a little impressed regardless of the man’s appearance.

“I am in training, My Lord. It is my job to keep my eyes and ears open at all times. I am familiar with all the current cases we have.” His monosyllabic replies made Henry feel as if he were talking to some kind of news outlet rather than an actual person.

“Very well, I think we are stuck with each other then. I am on my way to visit someone. I would like you to join me and go along with my lead,” Henry informed the man.

George simply nodded with a pained expression as if he were doing some rather difficult arithmetic.

God help us all.

Henry began to wonder if he had done the right thing in coming to ask for help. By the looks of things, he may have been better off tackling the task on his own, but then again, he didn't know what kind of welcome he would receive when he reached the house. It was better to have George at his side rather than nobody at all.

"Is the Baron Sutton home at present?" Henry asked the friendly-faced footman who answered the door.

"He is, My Lord. Would you like to wait in the parlour while I let him know that you are here, Lord Ashford?" The man's light blue eyes scanned the man behind Henry's back.

He knows who I am.

Henry wasn't certain at all if the knowledge spelled something good for him or not. "Yes, thank you, my 'friend,' and I shall wait in the parlour." He pushed past the young man and gestured for George to follow before the footman could protest.

Inside the house, Henry looked around for any kind of clue that could lead him to Isabelle. He had never been in the house before, yet nothing seemed out of place or strange. Everything seemed just as bland and plain as he'd imagined.

The main entrance hall was sparsely decorated with minimal furnishings besides a small side table with a lamp and a few old vases.

"This way, My Lord." The footman gestured for them to follow him into a small room off the hall.

The room in question was almost as sparsely decorated as the hall outside. The chairs

and chaise longue were covered with fine green felt while a small pianoforte stood in the corner of the room. Henry's mind wandered to Isabelle and how he could picture her playing the pianoforte on a lazy afternoon.

"I shall just let his lordship know that you are here." The footman excused himself before inviting the men to take a seat.

It was odd to Henry that the footman seemed eager to help, yet he couldn't linger on the thought for too long.

George looked rather uncomfortable and out of place before Henry turned to him with an air of urgency.

"I would like you to go upstairs and look for Miss Sutton's room. I have never been to this house until now, so I cannot tell you which room it will be, but if I know Miss Sutton, you are looking for a room with enough books to resemble a small library. We are looking for any clue that will tell us where she would have gone," he spoke in an urgent whisper.

Nodding in understanding, George glanced at the room before heading back out the door.

I hope he doesn't get caught.

Henry's palms began to sweat as he rubbed them against the side of his breeches. He knew what he was doing wasn't right, but he also knew that nobody in the family would have permitted him to search Isabelle's chambers. He was doing what needed to be done for Isabelle's sake.

A few moments passed before the door to the parlour swung open again.

“Lord Ashford, I was wondering when I would be seeing you again. Have you come to lead more members of my family astray? I know my fiancée has been quite disgruntled with me of late, will you convince her to run away as well?” Richard lifted his arms in the air as if he were about to embrace his guest.

The strong smell of whisky that permeated the air let Henry know that Richard was a few glasses away from making terrible decisions.

His dishevelled hair and robe that had been thrown over his clothes spoke of the sleepless nights he’d been enduring. Although he wasn’t drunk, Henry realized he needed to proceed with caution in Richard’s presence.

“Good morning, My Lord. I am sorry for the circumstances of my visit, but I am here to discuss Isabelle and how we can find her.” Henry pushed the man’s insults aside and kept him busy for as long as he could.

Richard gave him a strange look before heading over to the chaise longue and taking a seat. “I’m afraid that I do not know where my sister is, Lord Ashford, and if you do not know where she is, I am afraid that she has disappeared off the face of the Earth.” His eyes were sad and tired as he attempted to focus on Henry.

Feeling a pang of pity towards the man, Henry decided to address the matter directly while he waited. Nothing had been set in stone when he’d set out that morning, but he now realized he needed more of a plan. “Richard, if you don’t mind me addressing you by your given name?”

Richard simply nodded tiredly before raking his fingers through his hair. “Who cares about propriety and familiarity when the world is upside down?”

“I think there is a way for you to let your sister know that it is safe for her to return home. You must put an ad in the papers saying that the wedding has been called off.

If Isabelle reads that notice, I am more than certain that she would return home at once,” Henry said decisively, hoping that Richard was in the right frame of mind to help him.

Slapping his knees, Richard scoffed. “I couldn’t do that now even if I wanted to. If Isabelle does not go through with the wedding, Lord James will ruin us all.” His response brought a frown to Henry’s brow.

“But surely there are other ways to help your family? Can Isabelle not marry a wealthy man of her own choosing?” His own words caused an uncomfortable sensation in the pit of his stomach.

What if she does choose to marry somebody other than James?

The thought had barely taken root when Richard scoffed once again. “You really don’t understand any of it. If anything happens before James and Isabelle are married, my life will be in danger as well. Lord James will have to get rid of me along with ...” His words trailed off when a loud commotion floated down the stairs.

The sounds of a scuffle made Henry realize that his time in the house was quickly coming to an end; whether Richard wanted to help him or not, he needed to leave. Jumping to his feet, Henry was about to leave the room when Richard blocked his path.

“Thief! There is a thief in the house!” a frantic maid began to scream as she ran down the stairs.

“What have you done? Have you brought a spy into my house?!” Richard clumsily gripped Henry’s lapels in an attempt to drag him to the floor.

Acting quickly with the advantage of a sober mind, Henry countered the attack and

pushed Richard aside just as they both tumbled to the ground in opposite directions.

Richard cursed under his breath as a large vase fell from a table and shattered on his hand. “I’ll show you what will happen if you think you can bring a strange man into this house!” He jumped to his feet and readied himself to lunge at Henry with a shard of the broken glass.

Everything happened within the space of a few moments as Henry jumped to his feet, avoiding the shard just as he caught a glimpse of George exiting through the front door. A sharp pain shot through his thigh, making him wince as he attempted to escape. Pausing for a moment to look back, Henry noted that Richard had slumped into a chair after nearly colliding with the wall.

“What have I done? I only wanted my sister back. How could I have allowed things to get this far out of hand?” Richard buried his face in his hands and sobbed, shaking his head repeatedly with pitiful moans.

It took Henry a moment to realize he was free to leave before he hobbled towards the front door with his hand on his thigh.

None of the shocked servants seemed to try and stop him, yet the kind footman eyed him with suspicion as he let Henry pass through the front door.

Out on the street, George signalled to him from an alley a few buildings down.

Henry wasted no time in hobbling towards the man after checking that they weren’t being followed. “Did you find anything at all?” he asked George almost as soon as he entered the alley.

Nodding, George pulled a scrap of paper from his breast pocket. “I found a room that matched your description. It struck me as odd that there weren’t as many books as

you said there would have been. I poked around for a few moments before realizing that a very heavy trunk that had been standing in the corner of the room was no longer there. Beside the impression on the carpet was this scrap of paper. It seems as if Miss Sutton had been making a detailed note of booksellers and how much each would pay her for a specific book.”

Henry accepted the scrap of paper and glanced at the neat, detailed writing.

“I also found it very strange that all the books she is attempting to sell have the exact same title. It seems to be a war novel of sorts,” George added with a frown.

What is she planning?

The pit of his stomach churned uneasily with fear as he wondered what had happened to her. Had she planned on running away with her belongings? Perhaps she had taken the stack of revenge books as a memento of their time together. His heart clenched with guilt as he thought of her climbing from her window.

“It doesn’t strike me as strange at all. Thank you for your help; you have been more helpful than you will ever know. You may return to Mr Hayworth now and tell him that our little mystery is all but solved.” He folded the scrap of paper and placed it in his breast pocket.

“If you are sure, My Lord?” George asked him with a confused frown.

“I am. I know all the booksellers and I also know that there is one in particular that would be able to tell me if Isabelle mentioned where she was going.” Henry was about to turn and leave when he stopped and looked back at the man, whom he had judged unworthy because of his appearance. “You know, George, I think you will make a fine constable someday. If I am ever in need again, I shall personally request your assistance in particular. The Bow Street Runners, as well the people of London,

are lucky to count you among their ranks.”

Geroge’s face cracked into a bright smile that changed his appearance entirely.
“Thank you, My Lord.”

Returning the man’s smile, Henry set out with his limp, clutching the scrap of paper to his chest. He was more than certain that he would find Isabelle before the sunset.

Wait for me. I’m almost there.

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Chapter 22

“Nothing again.” Isabelle heaved a tired sigh as she ran her fingers through her uncombed hair.

One of the benefits of running away from home was that nobody forced her to comb her hair or place it in one of those godawful buns. Yet her newfound freedom seemed more frustrating than anything else as she tossed the newspaper aside.

She had been spending every waking hour since her disappearance looking for a governess position abroad. Even a school marm would have suited her, yet nobody seemed to require a runaway sister of a baron.

These things seem far easier in novels.

Shaking her head in an attempt to relieve herself of the tired ache behind her eyes, she surveyed her cosy little room with minimal furnishings. She didn't need much more than a bed and a writing table, but she did wish that she hadn't sold most of her books along with the ones she had purchased to get revenge on Henry.

Henry.

Her heart ached terribly again at the memory of his rejection. She hadn't been hoping for a proposal, yet she had thought he'd grown fond of her over the past month. Yet her current position was still preferable to marrying that slimy weasel of a man.

A knock on the door made her jump as her body suddenly stiffened.

It's impossible.

She tried to calm herself as she reminded herself that nobody knew where she had gone. It was more than likely just one of the maids looking to tidy her room.

Working up the courage, she swung her legs from the bed and headed towards the door, taking a deep breath before pulling it open.

"Henry!" She gasped in shock to see him standing there with a stack of books in his arms. Out of all the people she had been expecting to come after her, it hadn't been him.

"I hope that isn't a gasp of disgust?" He looked rather sheepish as he pulled his mouth into an awkward smile.

"How did you find me?" Her heart raced with confusion and hurt. Why had he come for her when he'd been so clear in his letter that he wasn't her saviour?

Glancing down at the books in his arms, he took a deep breath. "The how is not important. What matters the most now is that I am here. I have these books of yours if you would like them back. They were a little scuffed and dirty. Did you throw them out of the window before you climbed down?" His voice was hopeful as he lifted his eyes and met her gaze.

"I did." Was all she could say as she stood there, staring into his dark eyes flecked with gold. She had dreamed of seeing those eyes again before making her peace with his rejection, but now he was standing in front of her, she didn't know what to say.

Nodding in understanding, he glanced past her shoulder at the small table in the far corner of the room. "May I put these down? They are all much heavier than they look."

Isabelle nodded, unable to speak or think of a reply.

Walking into the room, Henry placed the stack on the table with a loud thud before turning back to her. “I was a bit shocked to learn that you sold some of your own books along with the ones that you purchased for revenge. I thought it a good idea to purchase them back.” He patted the top of the pile protectively.

“I still don’t understand why you are here, Lord Ashford?” The overwhelming feelings of betrayal and confusion became too much for her as she stared at him with a broken heart.

Just what does he think he is doing?

She fought against the urge to cry out of confusion. He had no right to say goodbye in a letter and then suddenly show up at her door as if nothing had happened. She had sold those books to make enough money to live before leaving the country in search of a job.

Limping slightly forward, he winced before running his tongue over his lips. “You are in danger, Isabelle. I need to get you as far away from Lord James Church as possible. I have come to rescue you as I should have done the moment I got your note.”

“Is that the only reason you came?” Her heart beat furiously as she asked the question.

He seemed uncertain at first but quickly swallowed before answering again. “I came because James Church is a dangerous man. He is up to no good, and I think he is willing to hurt people if anyone gets in his way.”

Isabella snapped at his response and almost slammed the door but caught herself just

in time and held it steady. “I don’t care about James Church, or anyone else for that matter. Why have you come here? I asked you a question that you have yet to answer!”

“Because you should care if your life is in danger! I care about your well-being and what happens to you! I cannot go on in this world if you are not in it; can you not see that?!” Henry’s eyes filled with tears as he raised his voice. “You are the last remnant of hope in a dreary and otherwise bland existence ...” His voice trailed off on a soft note of desperation that touched her heart, breaking through a wall he’d built.

The world seemed to spin as Isabelle took in his words.

What is happening?

She shut the door behind her and ambled towards a chair when it felt as if she would faint. There was no reason to stand on propriety anymore when nothing seemed to make sense at all.

Coming forward, Henry fell to his knees in front of her and took her hand, looking her in the eyes.

The contact made her suck in a sharp breath as she looked into his eyes.

“I must apologize to you, Isabelle. I should have asked you to marry me in the Evergreen the moment you told me about James Church. I have been a fool in my actions. Will you ever forgive me?”

The heartfelt look in his eyes created more confusion as she shook her head, and hot tears streamed down her cheeks. “I would have said no if you asked me back then. I won’t marry a man just because he feels the need to save me. Any woman is worthy of saving; it’s a chivalrous and noble act. You should marry a woman because you

love her; you deserve that.” She continued to shake her head as her heart broke all over again.

He doesn’t love me. He’s here to save me, but he doesn’t love me.

She reminded herself that he only wanted to marry her because of his misplaced notion of chivalry. She was far better off on her own rather than tying herself to a man out of obligation.

“No.” Henry shook his head before continuing. “You are wrong; I deserve someone who loves me back as much as I love them. I was married to a woman I loved; she never loved me back or even allowed me to show her affection. In fact, I think she was rather glad when I came back from war with a wound. I think the news that there was a chance we couldn’t have children gave her a reason to keep away from me. She spent the remainder of our marriage waiting for me to die so that she could move on with her life. I am certain of that.”

Waves of pity washed over her being. She had wondered about his wife, but she hadn’t realized just how much pain his marriage had caused him. She could see now that he was a broken man, discarded in love just as much as she had been discarded by her family.

“Are you certain? That is to say, absolutely certain of what the doctor said?” She felt guilty about questioning him, but the need to know his heart pushed her forward.

He shook his head slowly this time. “No, I have never admitted it out loud until now, but there is no possible way to tell if I was the problem. We assumed it was me because of my wound, but I will only know for certain if I marry again.” He gulped back his words after taking a deep breath.

A moment of understanding passed between them as their eyes locked.

If I accept him, there is a chance that I will never have children of my own.

The moment seemed to linger on for a while as Isabelle attempted to sort through her own misgivings.

“Edith hated me, Isabelle. She resented me from the day we married. I want someone who loves me back in equal amounts, if not more.” A single tear ran down his cheek as he reached for her other hand and pressed his lips against her palm in a tender kiss.

Gasping audibly now, she felt a shiver of uncertainty run down her spine at the gesture. “Henry, what if someone comes in and sees us like this?” She almost pulled away but felt her hands being held firmly in place.

“I don’t give a damn what the rest of the world thinks, nor do I care about your family’s opinions or those of my in-laws. I love you, Isabelle Sutton. I want to marry you because I love you.” His eyes shone brilliantly with flecks of gold as he held her gaze.

Feeling a lump in her throat, Isabelle sought the right words.

Is this real? Does Lord Henry Montague truly love me?

Her hands began to tremble as he ran his fingers over her wrist. “Do you love me, Isabelle?” His voice was low and vulnerable as he waited for her reply. “All I need to know from you is if you love me?”

“Yes, Henry, I think I may have loved you from the start, but I’m scared. The world seems to be against us ... How will we make this work?” It was her turn to swallow the lump in her throat as the reality of their situation seemed far too difficult.

“The world be damned! All that matters is you and me. The rest of them can sort out

their own affairs on their own time, this is our Romance novel!” He dipped his head and kissed the top of her hands in turn, lingering a little longer each time before coming up for breath.

“Oh, Henry!” Isabelle came to her feet in utter disbelief as shock took over her body, causing her to tremble with happiness.

He loves me. I can hardly believe that he loves me.

“Is that a yes?” Henry looked at her from his position on the floor, his eyes shining brilliantly with hope.

“Yes, of course, I will marry you, Lord Ashford.” She sobbed openly now, no longer fighting the feelings that had overwhelmed her chest.

Rising to his feet, Henry stood with a great deal of difficulty before placing his hands on her arms and holding her steady. “Thank God that you love me back, I have never been an overly religious man, but I do not know what I would have done if you didn’t.” He almost began to laugh as he shook his head in disbelief.

Glancing down at his lips, Isabelle averted her gaze as her cheeks filled with colour. They were, after all, still an unmarried couple in the privacy of a rented room. “But what will we do about Lord James? He won’t just allow us to run off into the sunset, I am sure of that.”

Henry’s eyes darkened for a moment as he sucked in a breath. “I think he is up to something; we will need to stop him. Will you be patient while I try and sort everything out?” He lifted her hand in his and gently pressed a kiss to the top.

“Of course, I will wait for you.” Her voice was low and breathy as she watched his eyes lighten with joy. “I would wait for you even if it meant waiting for the rest of

my life.”

“I can assure you that will not be necessary; you and I will overcome this little bump in the road. No matter what he is planning, Lord James Church will not be able to keep us apart.”

“Good, because I have a plan.” Isabelle could feel the flame of revenge ignited in her chest once again. Her plan wouldn’t be as simple as buying books this time, but she knew for certain that it would be able to stop James Church.

Chapter 23

“Are you both sure of this plan?” George asked Henry and Isabelle as he glanced from one to the other with a raised eyebrow.

Stealing a glance at Isabelle, Henry quickly nodded. “Yes, we have gone over it a million times. There is no other way to stop the culprit.”

George simply nodded his agreement as the carriage rattled down the bumpy country lane.

Henry hadn’t liked Isabelle’s plan at all, but he knew deep down that the fire she’d had in her eyes matched the determination on the day they had met. If he were certain of anything, it was the fact that Isabelle Sutton could not be stopped once an idea had popped into her head.

Exchanging a glance with Isabelle, Henry could feel the pit of his stomach fluttering with nerves.

She loves me.

Her smile warmed his soul, making him feel happier than he had ever thought he had a right to be. He almost leaned in and kissed her when the moment lingered on for a little too long.

“I think we are here.” George interrupted the moment as the carriage came to a stop.

Isabelle cleared her throat and blinked a few times as if she had been in a daze. “Shall we go over things one last time?” She averted her gaze from Henry and looked at George.

“Aye, I am to wait for the signal and head to the stables as soon as the coast is clear. If everything you have told me is correct, then I believe that our best chance of finding evidence will be in there.” He nodded in agreement just as a footman came forward to open the carriage door.

Placing his hand on her arm, Henry held her back for a moment as George left. “Everything will be fine in the end.” He winked at her, causing a light sheen of colour to appear on her cheeks.

Taking a deep breath, she gently squeezed his hand before stepping from the carriage.

Henry could hardly believe his eyes as he stared at the monstrosity of a house before him. If this was truly how wealthy the Church family was, then he wasn’t surprised that James was attempting to come by the title in dishonest ways. The estate alone was worth enough money to set anyone up for life.

“I didn’t think it was this big,” Isabelle whispered to Henry as he stopped at her side.

The large house, with at least four floors and hundreds of windows, boasted some of the finest masonry and architecture that Henry had ever seen. The white marble pillars and stone lions at the entryway were only some of the wonders to behold.

“Are you regretting your decision not to marry Lord James?” Henry leaned over and whispered in her ear, hoping to break some of the tension with a joke.

Turning her head to meet his gaze, Isabelle gave him a serious look. “Never,” she whispered back and gave his hand a gentle squeeze before quickly letting go and

facing the butler who came to meet them.

His heart sang with unbridled joy as Henry lifted his chin to face the upcoming war.

The butler came striding towards them with lengthy steps. “My Lord and Lady, I was unaware we were expecting any guests this evening.” The tall man with a light moustache and brilliant green eyes greeted them with a bow. His long and pointed nose nearly reached his chest as he bowed.

It was Henry who spoke first when he realized that George had positioned himself behind the carriage out of sight. “I am afraid that the marquess is not expecting us, but he will want to hear what we have to say,” he said in a steady voice that conveyed the importance of the matter.

The butler’s bushy brows knitted together in a frown before he glanced at Isabelle. “I see; you may come with me while I send one of the servants to fetch his lordship.” He cleared his throat uncertainly before turning and gesturing for them to follow.

Taking his chance, Henry turned back to the carriage and motioned with his head for George to head to the stables in the distance. Facing forward again, he fell back into step with Isabelle and the butler before entering the house.

If they had thought that the outside of the house was grand, it was nothing compared to the splendour and grandeur of the inside. White marble floors shone with polish to the point where Isabelle and Henry could see their reflections as they walked. Every available inch of wall was covered in portraits of the family or enormous paintings of horses.

Henry couldn’t help feeling out of place as he and Isabelle were led into a drawing room twice the size of any he’d ever seen.

“I am sure his lordship will be down in a moment.” The butler bowed respectfully to them both and left the room.

“Is it any wonder that Lord James has a chip on his shoulder?” Isabelle looked around the room in astonishment.

“I think his lordship may take more than just a moment if he’s on the other side of the house. I’ve never been in a house as grand as this one. Do you think they have one of those chairs to carry the marquess from room to room?” he said rather seriously.

Isabelle looked at him with a frown before bursting into a fit of giggles that broke the tension.

A moment passed between them where Henry wished he could take her in his arms and show her just how much he longed to make her his wife. He could hardly picture his life without her as her smile lit up his world.

Leaning in slightly, Isabelle shut her eyes, allowing her naturally long lashes to caress the tops of her cheeks.

His heart raced at a million beats per second as he took a brief breath to prepare himself for their very first kiss.

“Lord Benedict Church, the Marquess of Everly,” The butler reappeared in the doorway and broke the moment with his announcement.

Jumping apart, the pair quickly sat up straight and looked ahead.

An older man with salt-and-pepper grey hair entered the room in a huff. His face resembled Lord James’ with the addition of wrinkles and a square chin that spoke of a strong lineage.

“Just who do you think you are barging in like this?” he barked at Henry before turning his focus on Isabelle. “And you, how dare you show up here after all the commotion you have caused? I should send for the solicitors at once and sue you for breach of promise.”

Isabelle came to her feet and faced the man head-on without so much as a flinch. “Forgive me, My Lord, but I do not think you will want to do that once you hear what we have to say.”

“And why exactly would I do that instead of having you thrown out?” He lifted his nose in the air and glared down at Isabelle with an intimidating stance.

“Because, My Lord, I think you will find it very interesting to know that your son, Lord James, has been going around the ton and making remarks of coming into an inheritance and a title. I thought it strange at first, but I can now see that he harboured a sinister purpose all along,” Isabelle answered him again without backing down.

The marquess seemed taken aback at first as he looked from one to the other, but he quickly waved the idea away with a scoff. “Stuff and nonsense, James has always been an ambitious young man. Surely, he misspoke about the title. My eldest son is on the mend and will make a full recovery in no time at all.”

It was Henry’s turn to add to the conversation as he stepped forward. “Quite strange that your eldest son would meet with a riding accident after years of having ridden his horse with no incidents. If I remember correctly, he has always placed first in any competition he chose to enter?” He raised an eyebrow conspiratorially to make his point.

The marquess’s frown deepened now as a strange look flashed across his face. “What exactly are you trying to say?”

“What we are trying to say, My Lord, is that we don’t think the accident was, in fact, an accident. We believe that Lord James is trying to get rid of his brother in an attempt to gain the title along with the inheritance,” Henry stated, voicing the suspicions that he’d discussed with Isabelle the day before.

“What ridiculous accusations are these?” James stepped into the room and glared at Henry before spotting Isabelle. “You!” His face suddenly grew irate with anger as he attempted to lunge at her.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” Henry stepped in front of her and stopped him just in time.

Pausing mid-lunge, James smirked before glaring at Henry. “And just what do you think you are going to do, you old cripple?” He laughed haughtily before receiving a hefty blow to the chin and falling on his bottom with a loud thud.

“I am going to protect the woman that I love; that is what I am going to do.” Henry narrowed his eyes and towered above Lord James.

The marquess saw fit to intervene as he stared down at his son. “That is more than enough from both of you. Get up before you make an even bigger fool of yourself. I always told you that your arrogance would someday lead to your downfall.” He shook his head in disgust as James attempted to stand, drops of blood dripping from his nose.

“I beg your pardon for interrupting, My Lord.” George, the runner, suddenly appeared in the doorway with a half-broken saddle in his hands.

“And who the devil are you supposed to be?” the marquess snapped as he whipped around.

Lifting his head with pride, George introduced himself as a member of the Bow Street Runners. “I know this may shock you, My Lord, but I have been helping Lord Ashford find Miss Sutton. In light of the recent events, I think there is something that you want to see.” He turned the saddle upside down in his hands and held it out for the marquess to see.

“What am I looking at?” The marquess’s frown deepened when he spotted the bottom of the saddle.

Coming forward, George pointed to some very visible saw marks where a support bar had clearly been removed. “I am guessing that the saddle has never been examined, owing to the fact that the incident was thought to be an accident,” he spoke respectfully.

“No, it was not examined.” The marquess clenched his jaw before turning back to his youngest son. “Is there anything you would care to explain, James?”

Seeing the colour drain from the man’s face, Henry watched as James began to panic.

“It’s all a lie! I never sawed that bar off; the saddle snapped because Thomas was not being careful! These are all lies. Why are you believing these beastly lies about your heir?” James gesticulated frantically and sprayed the world with drops of blood from his nose.

Anger filled the marquess’s face as he stared at his son. “Except you are not my heir; you have an older brother who is fully recovering from his ‘accident’. And what I find even more disturbing is the fact that you knew the bar had snapped without anyone ever mentioning it. Nobody, not even the doctor, ever mentioned anything about a bar snapping.”

Falling to his knees, James began to grovel at his father’s feet as he crawled forward.

“Please, Father, forgive me, do not let them throw me in prison. It was temporary insanity that made me act the way that I did. Please, I can’t go to prison. Thomas is making a full recovery; no harm was done!” Tiny beads of sweat began to form on his temples and run down his face.

The marquess kept his cool despite the anger in his eyes. “Prison, who said anything about prison?”

A moment of relief flickered across James’s face before his father spoke again.

“No, no, no. No son of mine will be going to prison; that is far too great a mercy for you. The only punishment you shall receive is to be cut off from your family. If you cannot appreciate what you have, then you shall be thrown out without so much as a penny to your name.”

“Oh, Lord, no.” James’s face grew even paler as he crumbled into a pile of arms and legs, wailing as if he were a newly-born child.

“And if I am forced to help you, the only thing you can count on me for is a scathing recommendation for the military. You will have the lowest of low positions if I have anything to do with it.” The marquess finished speaking to his son and turned to George. “Young man, you have done far greater work than any constable I have ever seen. I will be wanting a word with you when this is all done. It would seem as if I need an expert to handle the security of my family.”

George beamed from ear to ear with pride as he stood to attention.

Turning back to Henry and Isabelle, the marquess addressed them both. “I must thank you both for saving the life of my eldest son. I can see now that if James hadn’t succeeded now, he would have only tried again.”

Twitching on the floor, James continued to whimper like a dog that had been kicked.

“And now that I have thanked you for your service, I will thank you for leaving my house and never returning. I wish you both the best with your plans, but I would like to put all of this behind me as soon as possible.”

“I think we can agree to those terms, My Lord.” Henry came forward and shook the man’s hand before reaching for Isabelle’s hand and pulling her out of the room and down the hall.

They had barely reached the bottom of the steps when Isabelle laughed.

“Henry, where are we going? You are going to make me fall if you don’t slow down!”

Stopping in his tracks, Henry caught her just before she collided with his chest. “We are going straight to your home and asking your brother for his blessing on our marriage. I do not care what anyone says. They can say that I am too old for you and you are too wild for me to tame! All I know is that we will be married before anyone else can interfere!” He laughed freely at the joy in her eyes as he turned back around and began to pull her towards the carriage.

“I can’t say I can argue with you on that score!” Isabelle’s voice was light and bubbly as if a giant weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

Moving forward with all the strength he could muster, Henry looked to the future and everything that now lay ahead for him and his new bride.

Who would ever have thought? Henry Montague is going to be married again.

The thought made him happier than he ever thought he had a right to be. Nothing

mattered now except for his bride.

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The carriage stopped in front of her childhood home as Isabelle descended the steps. It seemed unreal to her that she had left as a captive but was now standing on the brink of marital bliss.

I am getting married to someone I love.

She would have pinched herself to check if it were all real, yet she stopped herself just as Richard came bounding down the stairs towards her.

“Isabelle, is that really you?!” Tears streamed down his tired face as Richard embraced his sister, swinging her around in his arms before putting her back down.

“Richard, I can’t breathe,” Isabelle said gently before pushing him off.

Looking her over, his eyes filled with sadness. “I have just got word as to what happened with Lord James. Will you ever forgive me for wanting to marry you off to such a beastly man?”

“How on earth did you hear about it before we reached London?” Isabelle frowned and cocked her head to the side.

Taking a step forward, Henry placed a hand on her shoulder. “You know how the gossip mill turns quicker than the beating of a horse’s hooves, my darling.”

The term of endearment made her cheeks fill with colour.

Richard’s expression suddenly changed to one of surprise as he looked from one to

the other. “My darling?” His tone lacked the anger that had been present when they’d last spoken.

It was strange to Isabelle that she no longer hated her brother for her choices. She hadn’t forgiven him, yet she no longer felt the need to fight with him.

Clearing his throat, Henry smiled. “I hope you don’t mind me jumping the gun, My Lord, but I was hoping to ask for your blessing...”

Richard raised his hand and stopped Henry before he could continue. “Please, there is no need to explain, Lord Ashford. If anyone deserves my sister’s hand in marriage, it is you. I only hope that the two of you can forgive me for my actions. I saw how you felt about each other during that dance, but I placed our family name above your happiness.” He turned back to Isabelle with a heavy sigh of regret.

Isabelle was about to respond when Caroline spoke up from behind.

“Isabelle, are you hurt?” Her voice was timid and low, softer than Isabelle thought was possible.

Turning around, Isabelle faced the tear-stained cheeks of her future sister-in-law. “I am quite well; how have you been?” The interaction still felt awkward to her until Caroline threw her arms around Isabelle’s neck.

The moment caught Isabelle off-guard as Caroline began to sob. “I am so sorry for trying to force you to marry that horrid man. It wasn’t until you went missing that I realized just how wrong I had been. Will you ever forgive me for placing your life in danger?” Her words were almost inaudible as she continued to sob.

“There, there, I think a lot has happened that everyone would like to take back. I will forgive you if you promise to forgive me for my heartless and thoughtless words. Do

we have an agreement?” Isabelle gently patted her back before pushing her away at arm’s length.

Sniffing back the rest of her tears, Caroline attempted a smile, making her seem far less formidable than she ever had. “I think I can live with those terms.” She nodded gratefully before cautiously glancing at Richard over Isabelle’s shoulder.

“Miss Sedgewick, I ...” Richard began but found himself being cut short by Caroline.

“Let’s have tea next week. I heard the happy news, and I hope you will allow me to help,” she said, addressing Isabelle without looking at Richard.

“Of course, I would love nothing more than to have your help.” Isabelle felt utterly confused by Caroline’s interaction with her brother.

Has she still not forgiven him after what I said?

“Wonderful. I will be in touch to confirm a time and place.” Carolien curtsied to them all before practically running away.

Turning back to her brother, Isabelle looked to him for an answer.

“I am afraid that it isn’t just you whom I have neglected in favour of the family name. I would like to say that it was because of your words to Miss Sedgewick, but the fault lies with me and me alone. I have not done my duty by Miss Sedgewick as her fiancé. I cannot tell you her favourite colour or anything about her past. Somewhere along the line, I have lost sight of what it means to appreciate a person without being bound by honour.”

Sadness filled her chest as Isabelle realized that the engagement between her brother and Caroline may very well have ended. She had never been fond of the young

woman, but she could see how Caroline was a good match for someone like her brother.

“I’m sure that things can be mended in time. You will just have to try a little harder in the future.” Isabelle embraced her brother and put to rest the decades of family disagreements that had kept them apart.

Clearing his throat, Henry drew the attention back to himself. “I hate to interrupt such a touching family reunion, but if we are all in agreement, then I shall go ahead and arrange a date with the vicar. Does a week from tomorrow sound good for everyone?” He looked from Richard to Isabelle.

“I think that sounds wonderful,” Isabelle managed to speak despite the overwhelming emotions in her chest.

“A week from tomorrow, it is then.” Richard took both their hands and placed them on top of one another. “And may this union signal the start of something quite marvellous for us all.”

One week later ...

The dress fit her figure like a glove, and Isabelle couldn’t help wondering if her mother and father were smiling down at her from heaven. She hadn’t seen much of Henry in the week leading up to the big day, but she knew in her heart that it was only going to work out after the wedding.

She took a deep breath and checked her reflection once more in the carriage mirror. Her cheeks were filled with bright colour while her hair had been pinned to the back of her head in an elaborate style.

“Are you ready?” Richard offered her his arm for support.

Taking a deep breath, she took his arm and faced the chapel, feeling the cool afternoon breeze through the thick fabric of her tulle dress. “Ready as I ever will be, but before we start, have you had a chance to discuss matters with Caroline? I haven’t seen the two of you together in a while.”

Richard’s eyes filled with sadness as he glanced at her. “Never mind all of that now; you have a wedding to focus on, and I don’t think that Lord Ashford will thank me if we keep him waiting.”

“No, I don’t think he will.” Her heart suddenly began to race again as she focused her mind back on her wedding. Whatever happened with her brother and his bride would have to wait until after she said I do.

The large chapel doors swung open as they climbed the steps, revealing a handsomely attired Henry in his navy suit.

Her heart raced with anticipation as she hurried down the aisle, practically pulling her brother beside her. So much had happened since she and Henry had met on that fateful night that she felt the need to speed things up before anything else could happen. The stems of her pure white roses began to wilt the tighter she held them to her chest.

Henry looked up and met her gaze for a moment that would stay with her for the rest of her life.

I am waiting, his eyes seemed to say to her as she reached the altar.

Turning towards her, Richard gave her his blessing before stepping aside and allowing Henry to take her hand.

“I hope I didn’t keep you waiting for too long?” she asked him almost breathlessly as they faced each other in front of the altar.

“You were worth the wait.” Henry winked at her, filling the pit of her stomach with an intense fluttering sensation. It was strange to have a man wink at her and enjoy it. It was nothing like what she felt when James had winked at her. She felt happy and even a little flirtatious when it was Henry who was doing the winking.

The vicar came forward and addressed the two witnesses along with the bride and groom. Henry and Isabelle had opted for a small wedding with just Richard and Caroline to witness. Aunt Alice had declined the invitation, which had saddened Isabelle, but she knew in her heart that her aunt was not willing to face the fact that she had been wrong about Henry.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to join this man and this woman in holy matrimony. If anyone should object to this union, let them speak now or forever hold their peace.”

Isabelle’s hands began to tremble slightly as Henry gave them a gentle squeeze.

The moment seemed to linger on for a little too long before the vicar spoke again. His white robes with the purple sash fluttered slightly in the light breeze that floated down the aisle.

“Do you, Henry Alfred Montague, take this woman, Isabelle Sutton, to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, in good times and woe, for richer or poorer, keeping yourself solely unto her for as long as you both shall live?” the vicar finally asked Henry as Isabelle held her breath.

“I do,” he answered without hesitation while keeping his eyes locked on Isabelle’s.

“And do you, Miss Isabelle Sutton, take this man, Henry Alfred Montague, to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, in good times and woe, for richer or poorer, keeping yourself solely unto him for as long as you both shall live?”

“I most certainly do.” It felt like a weight had lifted off her chest when she was finally presented with the opportunity to profess her willingness to marry the man of her dreams.

“By the power vested in me by God and the holy church, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride.” The vicar took a step back, allowing them a moment of privacy to seal their union with a kiss.

Isabelle’s heart raced uncontrollably as she closed her eyes, feeling the gentle fluttering of her lashes against her cheeks as Henry lifted her veil. It seemed as if an eternity had passed until she felt his lips pressing against hers, strong and firm at first before softening into a gentle caress.

Everything seemed to fall into place as her soul felt united in his warm embrace.

“I think that is more than enough to seal the union,” Richard teased them gently, breaking the spell that had formed between them.

Opening her eyes, Isabelle blinked back the strange sensations of longing that flooded her body when Henry pulled back.

Caroline came forward and embraced her, offering her congratulations with a tear-filled hug. “I couldn’t have been happier for you, dearest Isabelle; may you both be blessed with many more years of happiness.”

Isabelle accepted her embrace, thankful for the friendship that had developed between

them. It was hard to find a friend that could be trusted among the ton, yet Isabelle was grateful that she and Caroline could finally find that in each other.

Pulling away, Caroline gave her a sad smile before glancing at Richard. “True happiness and love are hard to find even when both parties are willing. Make sure that both of you cherish one another for the rest of your lives.”

Looking away, Richard seemed to be filled with regrets as he looked out over the empty chapel.

“Well, I think I shall leave you two to it then.” Caroline offered Henry her heartfelt congratulations before glancing at Richard and going down the aisle. She seemed more secure in herself than before, but Isabelle couldn’t help wondering if she wasn’t secretly in love with Richard. It was even possible that she had been from the start.

“That’s my cue to leave as well, but before I go, I would like to thank you for helping our family, Lord Ashford. Your being willing to help us out of our financial difficulties speaks volumes of your character.” Richard faced them both with a warm smile before heading down the aisle.

Henry turned to Isabelle with a frown. “You know it’s funny. I thought he would have had more to say to us.”

Looking down the aisle at her brother’s retreating figure, Isabelle smiled. “No, I don’t think there is more to say. He’s said all he’s needed to say in his blessing. Richard has always been a man of few words, and I know he will make better decisions in the future. We all appreciate your kindness; that is all that needs to be understood.”

“Very well, I guess I will have to get used to it since I have married into the family. The time to express my doubts has passed.” Henry chuckled heartily before offering his arm to usher her down the aisle.

“Henry Montague, don’t you dare tease me like that, not after everything we have been through together.” She slapped his arm with her bouquet, sending a small waterfall of petals tumbling to the ground.

Pulling her closer to his side, Henry began to lead her away from the altar. “You know, I was thinking that roses make you look lovely, but a bundle of books would have been better. Now, I’m just glad that I didn’t follow through with the notion. Books would have caused far greater damage than the roses.”

Throwing her head back, Isabelle laughed from the pit of her stomach. Marriage no longer seemed like a burden to her, not now that she was marrying her best friend in the whole world.

“Do you think we should head somewhere exotic for our honeymoon? Like Paris or Scotland, or even Italy. Everything happened so fast that it never occurred to me to ask what your preference would be?” He glanced to the side, examining her face.

“I think your country estate would do quite nicely. That is if you promise to take me to the Evergreen at least once a week.” She nuzzled a little closer to his side and placed her cheeks against his shoulder, stealing a moment of happiness in the abandoned chapel.

“And that answer, Mrs Isabelle Montague, is why I can rest assured that you will make a perfect wife for me.”

The pit of her stomach fluttered uncontrollably as she looked up at the man she loved. The future had never seemed brighter than when Henry was by her side. All she could have ever asked or hoped for was present in the man she had married.

THE END

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:03 am

Two years later...

“Who is the most beautiful girl in all of the world? Daddy’s little girl, that is who.” Henry touched the tip of his daughter’s nose, cradling her tightly against his chest as he looked down at her with pride.

The pregnancy had come as quite a welcome surprise to Henry and Isabelle shortly after their wedding. They had been preparing themselves for a contented life by themselves when Henrieta had come along.

“I found that book that I wanted to read to Henrieta,” Isabelle announced as she joined her husband beneath the giant oak in their garden.

The couple had taken to reading to their daughter on lazy afternoons in the summer. It hadn’t taken long for the little girl to take a liking to the dramatic renditions of the stories her parents read her.

Henrieta’s bright brown eyes, flecked with gold, lit up considerably when she spotted her mother carrying a new book. Her chubby little hands reached out almost immediately and began to make grabbing motions towards Isabelle. At only a year and eighteen months old, she remarkably resembled her mother while boasting her father’s eyes.

Isabelle laughed contentedly before reaching for her daughter and settling on the grass with her legs crossed. “This one has plenty of pictures for you to look at, darling.” She smoothed back her daughter’s bright brown hair streaked with blonde.

Gurgling happily, Henrieta proceeded to page through the book while her parents exchanged a loving glance.

“You know I heard from Richard and Caroline this morning. The letter came after breakfast while you were out. They are thoroughly enjoying their honeymoon in France.” Isabelle smiled at him, making him fall deeper in love with her personality with every passing day.

“I am glad they could finally find their way to one another. It’s never easy, but I think they can make it work.” Henry smiled at her, cursing himself for not asking her to marry him the moment he had seen her on the street. He had cherished their love story and how they had eventually got together, yet he couldn’t help feeling as if too much time had been wasted.

“Speaking of news, I heard that James Church was spotted in Spain. He was thrown out of an inn for drunk and disorderly behaviour,” Isabelle added with a sigh. “It’s such a pity he could never pull himself together in the military.”

Henry nodded in agreement. “Two years is more than enough time for him to have advanced in the ranks, even with his lack of standing among the ton. If he cannot get it together after all of this time, I’m afraid that the life of a beggar will be in store.”

“Well, I can’t say that I am glad that he’s suffering, but he did cause us all a great deal of pain, not to mention his poor brother who almost died.”

Henry pursed his lips in agreement and nodded. He never did ask Richard how exactly he knew about James Church’s plans, yet so much time had passed that it didn’t feel right to bring up the past. Things were better left unsaid for everyone to carry on with their lives.

Lord and Lady Fitzgibbon had also given the couple a wide berth every time they had

seen each other on the street. It was sad to Henry that they couldn't allow bygones to be bygones, but in the end, he was happy if everyone were healthy and living their own lives. It would have been great for them both to have their parental figures remain in their lives, but all that mattered in the end was the little family they had created on their own.

"Oh, dear, I think someone is getting a little sleepy." Isabelle brushed back a few strands of her daughter's hair as the little one stifled a yawn.

"I think it was the anticipation of waiting for her mommy to come back with the new book. She got all tuckered out while talking to her daddy." Henry leaned over and pinched his daughter's chubby cheek, eliciting a smile from Henrieta.

"Well, I would have found the book sooner if Daddy hadn't rearranged our library according to the author's names." Isabelle shot him an accusatory look before cradling her daughter's head on her shoulder.

"That's because it's madness to arrange books according to size and colour! Who on earth thinks that is an acceptable way of arranging their books!" Henry felt flustered as he shook his head in disbelief. The argument about their personal library had been one that started at the beginning of their marriage.

"The woman that you married, that is who." Isabelle narrowed her eyes, challenging him with a single look.

Relenting to the fact that he would never again have his way, Henry conceded. "Oh, very well, we can arrange the books in order of size and colour, but God save us all if anyone thinks I belong in an asylum for doing it!" Leaning over, he kissed Isabelle's cheek before laughing to himself.

All seemed bright and merry on the little estate just a stone's throw away from

London and their cherished Evergreen circulating library.

Three years after the wedding ...

“I can’t believe that you would say such a thing. And to think that I married a man with such appalling views.” Isabelle practically flung the copy of Frankenstein above Henry’s head, making him dodge the blow with a laugh.

“Careful how you handle that book, Mrs Montague. I don’t think that Mr Charleston will thank you for returning a damaged copy.” Henry laughed at her as they sat side by side in the small alcove of the Evergreen.

The shop had become a bustling hive of activity over the years, drawing more and more customers as the story of Henry and Isabelle’s love had spread. The fiery spinster had been swept off her feet by the handsome and chivalrous widower. Neither of them could believe how the story had evolved into a famous tale by the time they married.

“I think Mr Charleston would thank me for knocking some sense into you. How could you not enjoy such a fresh and inspiring novel? The monster and even Doctor Frankenstein’s thirst for success speaks volumes on the nature of men and how badly they feel the need to succeed no matter the cost to others,” Isabelle continued, unperturbed by her husband’s remarks.

“I think it is salacious, sensational, and rather gory. Quite frankly, I am surprised that you would enjoy such vivid imagery. Is there something in your character I haven’t seen after all these years?” He narrowed his eyes at her playfully.

“Quite frankly, Doctor Frankenstein?” She returned his flirtatious remark with a

sweet smirk that never failed to set his heart racing.

“Am I to take it that I am the doctor in this story? I would have thought that you would liken me to the monster since you were the one who brought me back to life.” His eyes sparkled mischievously as he looked at her.

Feeling as if she were falling in love with him all over again, Isabelle batted her eyelids. “Don’t be so dramatic, my dearest; it was you who brought me back to life. And as for the rest of the comparisons in the book, I think both of us were abandoned by family members who should have stayed by our sides in support.”

Henry smiled at her, cocking his head to the side. “Have you heard from your aunt at all?”

“No.” Isabelle shook her head sadly. “Not since before our wedding. I don’t think it sits well with her that we had a child. She was more than certain that you were to blame, but I think it had to do with her own experiences. She was locked in a loveless marriage where she couldn’t provide her husband with an heir. I do not blame her for wanting to save me from the same fate. It is only sad that she couldn’t see past how wrong she had been about you.”

Henry placed his arm around her shoulder and pulled her a little closer to the small couch. “You know, I think it’s the same for Lord and Lady Fitzgibbon; they were so consumed by proving their daughter wasn’t barren that they lost sight of what truly matters in life. Living for the dead is a lonely and cruel fate that wasn’t meant for those who survived.”

“Truer words have never been said.” Isabelle nestled her head on his shoulder when she was certain that nobody was watching them.

“I am glad that we can agree on that, my love.” He kissed the side of her head and

sighed contentedly. “Shall we go home now and place that awful book in our collection? I know you aren’t going to return it any time soon.” He smiled at her, already knowing the answer.

“Not until you admit, Lord Ashford, that I am right in saying this book is a creative genius!” Isabelle jumped to her feet and pulled Henry up behind her.

Laughing heartily, Henry followed her from the shop and into the waiting carriage. “Am I to hear this argument all the way home?”

“Not if you agree that I am right. The matter can be easily settled if you would only concede that I am right,” Isabelle said firmly, cocking her head to the side in a challenge after being helped into the carriage.

Taking the seat opposite hers, Henry shook his head. “And what if I can make a fairly good point that will allow me to win this argument; will you then concede that I am right and allow the matters to rest forever?”

Isabelle folded her arms over her chest and glared at him despite the smile curving her lips. “And what argument could you possibly make?” Her body jolted slightly as the carriage moved off.

“Just this one.” Henry looked out the window to ensure that nobody was watching before pulling her onto his lap and kissing her deeply.

The rest of the world faded into the background as Isabelle came up for breath. Every fibre of her being knew that she would let him win if he kissed her like that again.

“So, do I win?” he asked her with a cheeky grin.

“Yes,” she answered breathlessly. “You win this fight and any argument that will

ever arise. I will promise to let you win every one as long as you promise to keep loving me as you have.”

Pulling her back into his arms, Henry kissed her deeper this time, savouring the moment for as long as he could.

It seemed like an eternity had passed before Isabelle pulled away and sat back in her seat. “Now that the argument has been settled, Lord Ashford, there is something I have been meaning to tell you.”

Henry met her gaze with eager expectation as the carriage rattled over the bumpy country lane, leaving the city far behind them. “And what is that, Lady Ashford?”

Smiling cheekily with a glint in her eyes, Isabelle reached under her seat and retrieved a copy of a book that he would have recognized in any store.

“You stole my copy of *Sense and Sensibility*?” Henry raised an eyebrow as he studied her face.

“Correction, My Lord. I think you meant to say ‘our’ copy of *Sense and Sensibility*. It was after you ruined the ending for me, but it was mine to begin with,” Isabelle shot back.

“Very well, our copy,” he corrected himself, rolling his eyes.

“And to prove how much attention you pay to the details, I would like to direct your attention to the title. It is a copy of *Great Expectations* with a cover similar to *Sense and Sensibility*.”

“By Mr Charles Dickens?” Henry took the book from her hands and opened the cover, examining the front page where a carefully crafted message had been written

in the margins.

My dearest Henry, I hope this book will mean the world to you while we look to the future and all of its great expectations.

Yours forever, your faithful and dutiful wife,

Lady Isabelle Montague.

Ps. Pip revisits Stasis' house and reconnects with the widow Estella. Now that I have ruined the ending of this new book for you, we are finally even.

Looking up after blinking a few times, Henry couldn't help throwing his head back and laughing from the pit of his stomach. It had taken three years, but Isabelle had finally acted upon her desire for revenge.

"You know, my love, I could not have thought of a better ending to our story. I do not even feel the need to get my revenge on you. You have won the battle along with my heart. May we never ruin another book for each other ever again." Henry shut the book with one hand, causing a loud snap to fill the carriage above the rattling sound of the wheels.

"I think that sounds like a fair deal to me." Isabelle smiled at him, changing seats as she snuggled up to his side with her head on his shoulder.

"Are you content, my love?" He smoothed back her hair and kissed the top of her head. "Have I been as good a husband to you as I hoped I have over the years?"

She sighed softly before answering him. "You have, but I must tell you that I cannot agree to be content, at least not until the end of next summer."

Leaning slightly back in an attempt to see her face, Henry frowned. “Whatever do you mean by that, what will be happening at the end of next summer? That is practically seven months away.”

Realization dawned on him almost as soon as he said the words.

Drawing her lips into a smile, Isabelle sighed contentedly. “You are not mistaken, My Lord, the end of summer is exactly in seven months.”

Happiness filled his chest, filling his eyes with grateful tears as he pulled Isabelle to his side. “I hope it is a boy this time, but I will be happy with another daughter as long as they are healthy and love to read.”

“And what if they do not love to read?” Isabelle asked with a note of concern in her voice.

“Well then, we had better start looking for a good orphanage or some distant relative willing to take them in,” he said seriously, paying close attention to her reaction.

Slapping his arm, Isabelle came up straight with a shocked look on her face. “Henry Montague, you take that back this instant!”

Laughing heartily, he pulled her back to his side. “Of course, I will love them no matter what. How could I not love anyone born out of our union?”

THE END

Chapter 1

“Wouldn’t Christmas be the best time of year to fall in love?” Lady Aurelia Bartlett asked, as she swept around her family parlor, her arms raised as if she were dancing a waltz. The music from that night’s ball was still filling her head, and her feet moved lightly over the carpet as she pretended she was back in the ballroom, dancing with a handsome gentleman.

Her mother and father, the Marquess and Marchioness of Thurston, who both sat reading in the corner, looked up at her, their expressions surprised.

“At Christmastime?” Her father said, his brow furrowing in confusion. “But Christmas is a time for prayer and contemplation, not for falling in love, my dear.”

“Yes, and there are so many things one must do around the house,” her mother sighed. “Once you run your own estate, you’ll be too busy throwing balls and parties to find it romantic.”

“I will always think of Christmas as a romantic time,” Aurelia declared. “Although, I don’t know how many balls and parties, I’ll be throwing. I’d much rather turn my future home into a place of charity around Christmas. Perhaps my future husband and I can host dinners for the poor in our entrance hall. Or collect presents for the orphanages.”

Her father smiled at her over the top of his book. “It’s good to see that even in the hunt for a husband, you are still the same Aurelia you have always been,” he said fondly. “Always thinking of others first.

Aurelia smiled at her father, then she stopped dancing and collapsed onto a sofa across from her parents. It was late, she supposed, and she ought to go to bed. After all, she'd had two glasses of champagne at the Winterson's' annual November ball, which was one more than a lady was expected to have.

But she hadn't been able to help herself. The Winterson's' ball had been a marvelous success, and she'd been having so much fun dancing. It should have exhausted her, but truthfully, Aurelia felt more awake than ever.

She sat up and looked at her mother, who was still watching her thoughtfully. "Did you have a good time at the ball, Mama?" she asked.

"It was a pleasant enough evening," the Marchioness said with a shrug. "But dearest, you know I would rather be here at home with your father, reading or playing chess, then dancing until all hours of the night."

Yes, Aurelia did know that. And it took everything in her not to sigh as her mother returned to her book.

She was lucky; she knew. She had two kind, wealthy, and titled parents who loved her. They also loved one another, in their own way, which was rare among members of the ton. But while her parents might support her, they certainly did not understand her. The Marquess and Marchioness could not comprehend why she would rather be out dancing than reading; why she wanted to meet lots of gentlemen instead of simply entertaining the ones they chose; why she wanted to stay up all night talking with the best and brightest of London, instead of coming home and going to bed?

It was Aurelia's first Season, and so far, it had been a dream come true. She loved attending balls, musicales, and the opera, and every other event to which she was able to secure an invitation. And she had secured invitations to them all, much to her surprise and the envy of other debutantes . She had even been issued a coveted

voucher for Almack's.

"It's because of your pretty face," one debutante had put it sourly.

"And your personality!" another, kinder young lady had insisted. "You're very charming, Lady Aurelia."

Aurelia appreciated these comments and was honored to receive so many invitations. But sometimes she wished they didn't come at the cost of the other young lady's envy. It had been hard, this Season, for her to make friends, no matter how hard she tried.

The only other downside of the Season so far had been the gentlemen. No, that wasn't fair. There was nothing wrong with the men who had asked her to dance, sent her flowers, called upon her, and even asked for her hand in marriage. But most of them had displayed a shocking lack of depth and care for the outside world.

"You are interested in charity work for the poor?" One gentleman had asked her, in shock, when he had called upon her. "But you are so young and beautiful! All the reformists I know are dreadful bores..."

It had offended Aurelia deeply that gentlemen thought she could only be one thing or the other: beautiful and charming, or smart and interested in the world around her.

Her mother seemed to notice what she was thinking, because she said, "Did any of the gentlemen comment again upon the oddness of your interests?"

"No, not tonight," Aurelia said. "They seem to have all gotten used to the idea that I am not just a pretty face."

"I should think not!" her father said passionately. "We raised you to be an

intellectual, not just a debutante!”

And that was true: Lord and Lady Thurston were true intellectuals. Her father was a renowned botanist, and her mother, who served as his secretary, had accompanied him on many of his missions to the far east to study plants, even after Aurelia was born. Many times, she had been left behind in the care of her aunt and uncle while her parents headed off for India, China, and other exotic places.

Aurelia loved her parents dearly. From an early age, they had instilled in her the love of learning and the world outside the ton, and they had encouraged her interest in charity work. Thanks to them, she was a patron of one of the orphanages in London and sponsored young girls from poor families to get apprenticeships in respectable businesses.

But her parents’ scholarly personalities could also be a hindrance. Her mother, who acted as her chaperone, never wanted to stay as late as Aurelia did, disapproved when she danced every dance, and was always turning down invitations because she was over-exerted.

Aurelia needed a better chaperone. But with her aunt living in the countryside, and too far away to travel into London on a regular basis, there was little chance of that.

As if reading her mind, her father suddenly looked up at her. “Oh Aurelia, I forgot to tell you this morning. A letter came from you. From your aunt.”

“From Aunt Mary?!” Aurelia leapt to her feet at once. “Oh Papa, where is it?”

“Here, here,” he said, reaching for the end table where he’d placed his spectacles. “Ah yes.” He handed her the letter, and Aurelia ripped it open. Immediately, the words inside it seemed to jump out at her.

Dearest Aurelia,

Seeing as how the Season will soon be on break until the New Year, I thought it best to get you out of London for the holidays. All of the ton will be in the countryside to celebrate Christmas, as you know, and since rumor has reached me that you are the ton's most eligible debutante, I know you will benefit greatly from the lively dinner parties, Christmas fetes, and other spectacles that will await you here—not to mention the many rich, titled gentlemen who keep to their country estates in the winter and will not return to London until the spring.

Do you think your dear mama and papa will allow you to slip away for a few weeks to visit your uncle and me here in Kent? I know it's hard for them to part with you, but we would love to have your company during the Christmas season. Of course, you will attend all the best balls, soirees, musicales, and festivals that Kent can provide.

I look forward to your response.

Your loving aunt,

Mary

Aurelia squealed with excitement. "Oh Papa, Mama! She invites me to Kent for the Christmas holidays!" Aurelia was once more dancing around the parlor, all thought of retiring to bed gone. "Oh, please say I can go! It will be the most wonderful Christmas, snowy and beautiful, and there will be balls and parties every night!"

"Go to Kent for the holidays?" Her father looked so alarmed that he actually set his book down on the end table. "But dear... we always celebrate Christmas together...in Yorkshire."

“I know,” Aurelia said, “but I am no longer a young girl, Papa. I am a woman now, on the hunt for a husband, and there is no better place to search for one than in Kent during the holidays. Aunt Mary is right. It is where all of society retreats to for Christmas, and there will be events throughout the season. London will be empty until January, maybe February. Everyone will be in Kent!”

Aurelia did not say what she was also thinking, which was that while she loved her parents, no one’s Christmas celebrations were more festive than Aunt Mary’s. Aurelia had spent many Christmases with her aunt in Kent while her parents were traveling until her father had inherited his country estate and moved them out to Yorkshire. She hadn’t been to Kent now in many years, and she missed her aunt’s holiday traditions dreadfully.

“And I suppose you want to fall in love while you’re there, seeing as how you find Christmas so romantic,” the Marchioness said with a raised eyebrow. She turned to her husband. “We must face facts, my dear: our daughter is a twenty-year-old, and she hopes to make a love match, like my dear sister.”

“A love match?” The Marquess looked even more confused than ever. “Whatever for?”

The Marchioness shrugged. “Love... it’s very fashionable these days.”

Aurelia rolled her eyes, although she made sure her back was turned away from her parents before she did it. The Marquess and marchioness were very old-fashioned in certain ways. They had married because they had mutual interests, values, and families. While Aurelia knew they loved each other now. While many couples of the ton still married for similarly practical reasons, her mother was right; love was fashionable. At least, it was often the topic of the gossip sheets that Aurelia read in earnest every night before bed.

Her mother's sister, Mary, was the woman who had first set the gossip sheets ablaze when she had shocked her family by marrying for love. Lord Demlin was not below her station, but he was a bit eccentric and not the man her family had picked out for her. More than a few raised eyebrows had accompanied the match.

Truthfully, Aunt Mary was Aurelia's role model. She had made her own decisions when very few women did, and Aurelia hoped to be exactly like her. Aunt Mary was also her closest friend and confidant, although she hadn't seen her in several months. Aunt Mary rarely spent time in town, preferring the peace and quiet of the countryside. She kept up a regular correspondence with Aurelia, though, and not a week went by when Aurelia didn't receive a letter from her.

"Let me see that letter," her mother said, and Aurelia handed it to her. As she read, the Marchioness's eyebrows went up. Finally, her mother looked back up at her. "She calls you the most eligible debutante of the Season! Upon my word, is that true?"

"Of course not!" Aurelia said at once, blushing scarlet. Although she also couldn't deny that she received a large number of gentlemen callers. But those gentlemen called on all the young ladies, surely...?

"But what of your peculiarities?" her mother asked.

"Gentlemen seem more amused by my ambitions to help others than offended by it," Aurelia said, shaking her head. "Although one did say that he hoped my interest in charity would not distract from my duty of running his household."

Her mother tutted, and her father looked scandalized.

Aurelia didn't mention that her large dowry was probably also to thank for gentlemen's willingness to overlook her peculiarities, but she didn't need to. Her parents had been the ones to ensure that she would be well taken care of when she

married.

“Then why can you not pick from among the men who have already shown an interest in you?” Her father demanded. “Surely one of your many suitors would make a suitable husband?”

“Oh, they are all boys!” Aurelia sighed, once more flopping down on the sofa. “I want to marry someone who shares my interests, Papa, and my passion for helping others—not just someone interested in my dowry and title.”

Her mother sighed as she set the letter down in her lap. “I think we ought to let her go, Albert,” she said, and she and her husband exchanged a long glance. “Otherwise, we shall not hear the end of it all winter.”

The Marquess did not look pleased, but at last, he relented. “Alright then. You have our blessing, Aurelia. You may write to your aunt and tell her to expect you next week at her home in Kent.”

“Oh, thank you, Papa! Thank you, thank you!” Aurelia squealed, and she stood and hastened over to him, throwing her arms around him. “And don’t worry, I will be on my best behavior. You won’t regret this, I promise you!”

“Famous last words,” her father muttered, picking back up his book and once more burying his nose in it. Aurelia, however, didn’t hear him. She had already gone to the writing desk, where she sat down to pen a quick reply to Aunt Mary. After dashing it off, she rushed upstairs to begin packing. Sleep could wait. For now, she had to think through every item of clothing she would need for Christmas in Kent. There would be holiday feasts, New Year's Eve parties, and celebrations awaiting her in the winter wonderland she remembered from her childhood. And perhaps even a white knight to sweep her off her feet and make all her romantic dreams come true.

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It was a cool, crisp day in late November when Aurelia arrived at her aunt and uncle's country estate in Kent. Just a week had passed since she had received the invitation, but already the weather had gone from autumnal to hibernal. Winter was all around her. The leaves had changed entirely and almost all of them had fallen to the ground. Best of all, when Aurelia leaned her head out the carriage and took in the magnificent house nestled by a small pond, she could smell the scent of snow in the air. It would begin to snow soon, and with it would come all the magic of Christmas.

When Aurelia dismounted from the carriage and was led into the hall by the butler. It was to be greeted by the hustle and bustle of a house preparing for a ball. Maids were cleaning, polishing, hanging decorations, and generally making the house festive, while footmen ran to and fro holding crates of champagne, baskets of food, candlesticks, and so many other things that Aurelia felt her head spinning.

She had just removed her traveling cloak and handed it to the butler when she heard a shriek from the top of the stairs.

"Aurelia! You're here!" She looked up to see her aunt at the top of the marble staircase, beaming. Aunt Mary looked exactly how Aurelia remembered: her long, silky black hair was swept up into a loose coiffure, her skin was pale and glowing, and her green eyes sparkled radiantly. She had high cheekbones, a proud nose and chin, and was slender and elegant. Aurelia thought her aunt the most beautiful woman in the world, which was lucky, because they looked very much alike. They both had silky black hair and green eyes, and many people had told them they had the same graceful elegance about them. Aurelia hoped that she would look exactly like Aunt Mary when she was her age.

Aunt Mary hurried down the stairs and took Aurelia in her arms. “My dearest,” she gushed, kissing both her cheeks. “It has been too long!”

“Aunt Mary,” Aurelia said, hugging her tightly. “I have missed you so much.”

“Leave that there,” Aunt Mary said, gesturing at her portmanteaus. “The servants will bring them up to your room. For now, let’s go to my parlor. We can catch up over tea and cinnamon biscuits. I’ve had the cook prepare them specially for you.”

Aurelia’s heart seemed to swell in her chest. Tea and cinnamon biscuits had been her favorite as a girl, and she was touched that her aunt remembered.

Once they were settled in the parlor, Aunt Mary leaned forward and said, “So, my dear, I must know the gossip: how has it been your first Season?”

Aurelia laughed. “You seem to know a little bit already. You said you’ve heard rumors that I am the most eligible debutante of the Season!”

“Whispers of your success in London have made it all the way to Kent,” Aunt Mary said, her eyes sparkling. “But I want to hear the details from you! And spare nothing. I am an old lady who has been married for many years, and I need fresh tails of courtship and illicit love to keep me feeling young!”

“Well, there has been nothing illicit,” Aurelia giggled. “But there have been many suitors.”

“Oh?!” Aunt Mary beamed. “And do you have any favorites so far?”

Aurelia thought about this as she took a bite of her biscuit. “Not really... There have been several young men I admire, even a few I like, but no one serious. They are all preoccupied with titles and wealth, and not with the further education of their minds.”

“I think it fortunate your parents waited until you were twenty for you to debut on society,” Aunt Mary said, “as it gave you the maturity to see through the more vacuous men of the ton.”

“I suppose so,” Aurelia said. “I don’t want to be harsh, but not one has asked me about my work at the orphanage except to tell me that he disapproves and hopes a wife of his won’t be so preoccupied by matters that do not concern her.”

Aunt Mary made a disapproving noise. “They are boys, then,” she said empathetically. “Strong, secure men understand the importance of one’s own interests and academic pursuits. Look at your dear father... he loves and admires that your mother is not just his secretary, but his equal in botany.”

“Yes, well, I do hope my future husband is not a botanist. I’d like someone who is engaged with the outside world and it’s bettering, not caught up with his own singular academic interests.”

“I’m sure he will be,” her aunt said kindly. “Is that what you seek, then? A marriage to a man who shares your interests and worldview?”

“Yes, but I also want to feel passion. And so far, I have met no one who has made me feel, well, whatever it is you’re supposed to feel when you’re in love.” Aurelia bit her lip. She wasn’t actually sure what being in love felt like, although she longed for it with every fiber of her being.

“Ahh...” Aunt Mary sat back on the settee and smiled a secret, knowing smile. “So, you are looking for a love match?”

“Of course,” Aurelia said at once. “I want what you and Uncle Frederick have! I want to be in love. To feel what poet’s talk about, what writers describe in novels. I have never felt that. I don’t think...” Aurelia bit her lip. Was it possible she had felt love and just hadn’t realized it? She’d certainly been flattered by the attention of several

suitors, and one or two had even made her heart hammer. They hadn't been as civically minded as herself, but they had been handsome and charming.

However, when they weren't present, she quickly forgot about them, and none had delighted her enough that she could imagine spending her whole life as their wife.

"Believe me, you would know," Aunt Mary said, a twinkle in her eye.

"What does it feel like?" Aurelia asked, leaning forward. She knew her aunt wouldn't judge her for asking. "What does it feel like to fall in love?"

Aunt Mary considered this. She took a long sip of her tea before responding. "Love is hard to describe, and there are many different phases of it. It's nothing like you've ever experienced. At first, it's like a lightning bolt. Like an illness. You cannot eat, you cannot sleep, you can think of nothing but him. And the pain of not knowing how he feels is agony. But if he loves you back, well..." Aunt Mary's eyes had a far-away look in them that made Aurelia wild with envy. "That is the most exquisite feeling in the whole world."

"It sounds so glorious," Aurelia said with a sigh.

"It is," Aunt Mary agreed, "but it can also be torture. No one can make you as happy as the person you love, but no one can make you quite as miserable, either. A fight with your love feels like the end of the world. But when things are well..." She smiled again. "And then there is the love that your uncle and I share now. It isn't like it was when we were young and newly married. It is calmer, steadier. I do not feel the high highs and low lows I once did. But it's also better. The feeling of security, of safety, and of companionship is second to none."

"That's very beautiful," Aurelia said. "I want that more than anything." And she meant it. As much as she wanted the lightning bolt her aunt spoke of, even more than that, she wanted the calm, steady love of long-term love. Because even after all these

years, Aunt Mary's cheeks had flushed as she spoke of her husband, and the look of pure adoration on her face made Aurelia's heart ache.

Aurelia sighed. "My parents don't understand. They think I should find a practical match, like they did."

"Your parents are very much in love," Aunt Mary said, laughing lightly. "They just experience love very differently from you and me. They aren't romantics, nor are they emotional creatures. They're both steady and reserved. You and I, on the other hand... Well, let's just say that the kind of love we feel is passionate. But we must be wary of it as well. Passionate love can burn hot and quickly. You want to make sure that the love you find doesn't just flame out. You must sustain it through careful work, like tending a fire. Let it be a smoldering hearth, not a raging forest fire that dies as quickly as it began."

Aurelia nodded. She would keep that in mind. "Do you think it unlucky that I didn't find love in my first Season?" she asked.

"Not at all!" Aunt Mary exclaimed. "The nerves of the first Season can get in the way of opening oneself up to love. And it's good to be picky. You are still young, my dear, and beautiful and wealthy to boot. You have plenty of time. I predict that you will have great luck when you return to London in the spring. The Season will be in full swing then, and you'll have a better idea of what you are looking for in a husband. Especially after being courted by several gentlemen and knowing what it is you aren't looking for."

Aunt Mary took a sip of tea, then smiled wickedly. "Of course, that is, if we don't find you a husband here in Kent!"

Aurelia laughed and blushed. "Catch me up on the gossip, then. Are there any eligible gentlemen who have arrived in the countryside already?"

“Hmmm.” Aunt Mary considered this as she stirred her tea. “There are a few. The most promising, of course, is the Duke of Lindon. He is said to be back at his ancestral home, which is just three miles from here.”

“The Duke of Lindon...” Aurelia frowned. “The one whose engagement just--”

“Ended?” Aunt Mary finished the sentence for her. “The one and the same.”

This was intriguing news, and Aurelia’s heart began to pound at the thought of finally meeting the mysterious Duke of Lindon.

“There were so many rumors about him back in London,” she said, sitting forward in her chair and lowering her voice to a conspiratorial murmur. “The gossip sheets were printing theory after theory about why his engagement came to such an abrupt and mysterious end. But no one knows the truth, of course.”

“No one except the Duke and his former fiancé,” Aunt Mary said. “I’ve heard rumors as well, but I try not to listen to them.”

Aurelia raised an eyebrow. She very much doubted this was true. Aunt Mary loved gossip. “Do you think he’ll be at any of the upcoming events? What about your ball? Do you think he’ll attend?”

“Perhaps. I sent him an invitation, of course, but while we are neighbors, the duke has always kept to himself. I don’t expect him to show. Even before the engagement ended, he was a touch reclusive. And now... well, he hasn’t made any appearances since the engagement was called off.”

“Yes,” Aurelia said pensively. “It does sound like a long shot. But I would like to speak with him, after hearing so much about him.”

“Well then,” Aunt Mary said, her eyes once more sparkling. “We will just have to

contrive a way!”

The night of Aunt Mary and Uncle Frederick’s opening of the Christmas Season ball arrived with all the fanfare and opulence that Aurelia had come to expect from her aunt and uncle. Despite not living in town, they were natural hosts and loved to throw the most lavish parties imaginable.

This one was no less spectacular, and as Aurelia swept down the marble staircase in a gown of emerald green, she couldn’t help but feel as if she had walked into a winter wonderland.

The hall was stunning. It had been bedecked in garlands of holly, tinsel, paper snowflakes, and more candles than she could count, and was as beautiful as she remembered it being as a child. Of course, back then, Aurelia had been forced to go to bed long before the festivities began, but she would always stay up and, once the dancing started, sneak down the stairs to admire the decorations and, more importantly, the elegant guests. Now that she was finally old enough to attend the ball, Aurelia planned to dance the entire night away.

The hall was already crowded with partygoers, and as Aurelia descended the stairs, she saw heads swiveling in her direction. Eyes seemed to be following her, and more than a few gentlemen gazed in awe at her for longer than was strictly appropriate.

None of them, however, held Aurelia’s attention, as she found herself scanning the room for the duke. Although she had never met him, she had seen his likeness reproduced in several of the gossip sheets. And, of course, she had memorized a miniature of him when she first made her debut. Her mother might not be the most inclined to the marriage mart, but she’d still had the foresight to ensure her daughter knew the names, ranks, and fortunes of all the ton’s most important lords.

However, the Duke was nowhere to be seen.

It didn't take Aurelia long to realize that even in the countryside, she was the most eligible bachelorette. No sooner had she been announced, then young gentlemen were crowding around her, complimenting her dress, asking her for a dance, and offering to fetch her lemonade. Soon, her dance card was full, and as she swept around the ballroom in dance after dance, she barely even had time to talk to the other young ladies and their mothers.

"Is anyone in particular courting you, Lady Aurelia?" One of these mamas asked her between dances, as Aurelia stood near the lemonade table, fanning herself and trying to catch her breath. It had been a particularly exerting country dance, and she had to recover her strength in time for her next dance, a quadrille with the particularly handsome Lord Anthony Rutledge, who was the eldest son and heiress to the Marquess of Thurle.

"No one in particular at the moment," Aurelia admitted. "I'm keeping my options open."

"Just don't wait too long," the mama said, grimacing slightly. "My Katherine was popular during her first Season, too, and rejected several offers because she was sure someone better would come along. Now she's three years on the shelf with no prospects."

Aurelia's stomach clenched, and she forced herself to smile politely. It was horror stories like this that sometimes made her wake up in the middle of the night, drenched in sweat. For all Aurelia's hopes of making a love match, she wasn't so foolish as to think she could hold off on marrying forever. She knew what happened to young ladies who never married. But she didn't like to be reminded of it.

Fortunately, Lord Anthony Rutledge chose that exact moment to appear by her side.

“Are you ready to dance, my lady?” he asked, bowing low over her hand.

“Indeed,” she said, setting her lemonade down rather hard on the table and taking his hand quickly. “Let us dance.”

Lord Rutledge was a good dancer, and, perhaps more importantly, very handsome. Far more handsome than any of the other men she had danced with that evening. And when his hands met hers on the dancefloor, she felt her heart flutter.

“The ball is well-attended tonight, my lord, don’t you agree?” she asked, to make polite conversation. “I was surprised to see so many familiar faces outside of London.”

“Yes, I suppose,” Lord Rutledge said in a bored voice, sniffing slightly as he glanced around. “Although very few people of the finest pedigree are here. But it is only natural for a country dance. These things do not attract the most illustrious peers of the realm. Present company excluded, of course.”

Aurelia smiled tightly. While she supposed he had paid her a compliment by excluding her from his criticisms, she had to bite her tongue to keep from pointing out that he’d just insulted her aunt’s ball. And while he was right, that country dances were not as populated by those peers with the more noble titles, what did it matter? Aurelia considered good company to be people who were kind, compassionate, intelligent, and thoughtful. She didn’t care about whether or not someone had a title or was of the finest pedigree. Unfortunately, most of the men she met were like Lord Rutledge, and only concerned with titles, fortunes, and rank.

At last, the dance ended, and although Lord Rutledge offered to bring her another lemonade, Aurelia declined. She needed a moment or two by herself, free from the company of snobbish men who only paid attention to her because she was the daughter of a Marquess.

The musicians decided then to take a break as well, and Aurelia seized on the lull in the dancing to make her way over to the centerpiece that her aunt had had specially crafted and delivered for tonight's ball: a giant, ornate ice sculpture in the midst of the refreshment tables.

After making sure that Lord Rutledge wasn't around, Aurelia poured herself a glass of lemonade. She then stood back and looked up at the ice sculpture. It depicted an angel lifting a trumpet to its lips, as if heralding the birth of baby Jesus, and as she looked at it, Aurelia felt a calm go over her. It was nice to feel this peace and quiet amidst all the chaos.

And then, so suddenly that it completely knocked her off balance, someone ran right into her. Aurelia's glass went flying, and, to her horror, her lemonade spilled all over her dress, leaving a large wet stain right down her front. A split second later, she heard the glass fall to the ground and shatter. But she barely had time to think about this, because at the same moment, she lurched and fell forward, hurtling towards the ice sculpture. Her stomach fell out of her.

I'm going to slam right into it! In front of all these people!

Aurelia closed her eyes, threw her hands out, and waited to hit the ice. Except she never did. Instead, she felt a pair of large, strong arms wrap around her and stop her fall. She opened her eyes cautiously. Her face was inches from the sculpture, so close that she could feel the cold of the ice radiating out of it.

But she was safe. The arms were so strong and sure that she knew, without a shadow of the doubt, that they wouldn't let her fall.

Slowly, whoever was holding her pulled her back, righting her, until she was once steady on her feet. Only then did the arms loosen a little, and then large, sure hands were turning her around to face her rescuer.

Aurelia looked up and found herself face-to-face with the most handsome men she had ever seen in her life.

The man was tall, with long dark hair that fell somewhat rakishly in front of his eyes. His face was hard and masculine, with a chiseled jawline, and his complexion was dark and weathered, something that was unusual for a gentleman. He looked as if he had ridden outside in the sun more often than was considered genteel. But the look suited him. It made him appear wild and mysterious. Aurelia had never seen someone who looked like that.

At the same time, the man was dressed impeccably in a black velvet suit jacket and a precisely starched lily-white cravat. So, she also knew that while he might look like the ruffian romantic hero out of a harlequin novel, he was, in fact, of the highest breeding.

But even if Aurelia hadn't noticed any of these other things about him, she would have noticed his eyes. They were dark brown, but with flecks of red and gold in the irises, and they seemed to burn with a fiery intensity she had never seen before. They were eyes that seemed to hold great pain and great passion, and they were now looking at her with a mixture of curiosity and wariness.

His hands were still around her, she realized. One was holding her elbow, while the other had stayed firmly on her waist. She was uncomfortably aware of them, of how tightly they held her. At the same time, she didn't want him to ever let go.

He rescued me, she thought weakly. Like a white knight, come to my rescue.

Aurelia breathed in, and the scent of him—clove and tobacco, masculine and warm—washed over her, setting all her senses aflame. He was still staring at her, unsmiling, but a heat seemed to spread from him, and his eyes smoldered. She knew then that she wasn't imagining it: the man felt the chemistry that sizzled between them.

“My lord,” she murmured, and she wasn’t surprised to hear how breathless she sounded. “Thank you.”

“Not at all,” the man said. His voice was deep and warm, like dark chocolate. “It was my fault.”

At last, he released her, and Aurelia felt the absence of his hands acutely. His eyes, she realized, were no longer smoldering. If anything, they now seemed remote and distant.

“Please, accept my apologies,” he said, bowing his head slightly. “I wasn’t looking where I was going, and I nearly caused you disaster.”

“There is no need to apologize,” she said at once. “I would consider it apology enough if you would enlighten me--” but before she finished the sentence, the man nodded again, turned, and walked away.

“--as to the identity of my rescuer,” she finished, somewhat lamely. She stood there, with her mouth slightly open, watching as the man disappeared into the crowd. Never before had a man walked away from her mid-sentence! And without even introducing himself! It was unconscionable.

Anger, embarrassment, and intrigue immediately surged through her. Part of her wanted to run after the man and demand he apologize for his rudeness. Another part of her wanted to disappear on the spot and never be seen again.

“Aurelia!” She turned at the sound of her name to see her aunt rushing towards her, looking distraught. “My dear, are you alright? I saw you almost run headlong into the ice sculpture!”

“I’m alright,” Aurelia said. “My dress, however, is ruined.” She looked down at the wet spot on the front and felt another flush of embarrassment.

“That is easily amended,” Aunt Mary said quickly. She took Aurelia by the shoulders and peered into her eyes. “You do know who that was, don’t you? The man who bumped into you?”

“Er--”

“It was Thomas Fitzroy, Duke of Lindon!”

Aurelia gaped at her aunt, then quickly remembered to shut her mouth. Ladies did not stand around looking dumbfounded. But she was truly shocked. Despite having seen likenesses of him, she hadn’t recognized the duke. In pictures, he was handsome but cold. In real life, he burned with so much heat that it seemed to make him a different person.

I finally met the duke, she thought dully. And looked like a clumsy fool in the process. Nor was he the gentleman I expected him to be.

“Well, he was very rude,” she said, trying to sound more annoyed than flustered. She felt so strange: rejected and angry, excited and baffled, and the emotions made her feel unsettled. “He didn’t even introduce himself and left while I was in the middle of thanking him.”

To her surprise, her aunt laughed. “Well, the Duke of Lindon isn’t exactly known for being warm and fuzzy. He’s brooding, stand-offish, and unwelcoming. The fact he caught you at all and didn’t let you tumble into the ice sculpture is miracle enough.”

Aurelia scowled. She had expected much better from the duke about which she’d heard so much.

“Come dear, let’s get you changed into a new dress,” Aunt Mary said, ushering her away from the ice sculpture. “And don’t worry about the Duke of Lindon. He’s a curmudgeon, and nothing will change that.”

“I don’t care about him,” Aurelia declared, making a decision then and there. “I don’t care about him one jot!”