







# An Unexpected Marriage with the Earl (Noble Gentlemen of the Ton #8)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Returning from a grand tour of Europe, Johanna Follett is full of hopes and expectations for the future. She has always lived life on her own terms, her heart set on botanical studies and exploring the world beyond Regency society's constraints. Yet, when an unintended encounter with the Earl of Beaumont thrusts her into a scandal she was not expecting, and with marriage being the only way to save her name, Johanna embarks on a match she neither courted nor desired.

Will she be able to reclaim her dreams amidst the suffocating scrutiny of the ton, or will she be forever trapped in her gilded cage?

Edmund Banfield, the Earl of Beaumont, never envisioned himself at the center of a scandal, but fate has a way of changing plans. Bound by duty and family expectations, he finds himself in a hastily arranged marriage with a woman who was brought into his life under the most unconventional circumstances. As he wrestles with his own insecurities and the demands of a new union, he struggles to balance the obligations of his title with the tumultuous emotions stirred by his new wife.

Can Edmund reconcile his deepest fears with the reality of his marriage, or will his personal battles jeopardize the love hesitantly blooming in his heart?

When a fresh scandal threatens to undo their efforts, Johanna and Edmund must confront their own doubts and learn to trust each other if they are to salvage their relationship and clear their names. Amidst the dazzling but fickle world of the ton, they must overcome the shadows cast by rumors, deceit, and external pressures and find a genuine connection. With the tongues of the ton wagging, the question of their true feelings for one another comes to the fore. Can their marriage survive, or will forces beyond their control put an end to the happiness they both so desire?

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# Page 1

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## Chapter 1

Hampshire, England

Summer 1812

“It’s as though I never went away. How long has it been? A year? It’s like nothing’s changed,” Johanna Follett said, peering out of the carriage window as it drove through the village of Wilton-Saint Mary, past the spire of the church in the early afternoon.

Her Aunt Marian smiled at her from across the compartment.

“A year to the day. But you’ve changed, Johanna. When we left, you were a shy, retiring butterfly, but now you’ve spread your wings. I’m very proud of you,” she said, and Johanna smiled.

She was returning from a year abroad with her aunt. It had been a remarkable experience—traveling through Europe, and experiencing other countries and cultures far removed from her own. Venice, Florence, Rome...Johanna had so many memories, and she could not wait to share her stories with her parents and brother.

“I hope they haven’t forgotten me. No...I’m being silly. They wouldn’t have forgotten me. But you’re right, Aunt Marian—I’m the one who’s changed,” Johanna said, struck by the sudden realization of just how profound that change had been.

When she had been traveling, the world had unfolded before her in a set of endless

possibilities. The people she had met, the places she had seen—all of it had served to bring her out of her shell, and she wondered what her parents and brother would think of this change that had come about. Returning home, she was faced with the prospect of what to do next, and what would be expected of her—of a new beginning.

“You’re being very philosophical, Johanna. Your parents are looking forward to seeing you. I’m certain of that. Look, we’re here now,” Johanna’s aunt said.

The carriage had turned into the gates of Wilton Grange, Johanna’s father’s modest estate on the edge of the village. He was the local squire—the Baron Hadley—whose family had held the manor of Wilton since medieval times. It was a handsome house—added to and extended to over the years, most recently during the reign of Queen Anne—and was surrounded by a lush, mature garden.

“Oh, I’m so pleased to see the gardens looking so lovely. I’ve missed them. The Italian peninsula was so dry. Beautiful, of course. But I missed the lushness of an English garden,” Johanna said, peering out of the window.

Botany was one of her chief interests, and since her youth, she had taken a practical and hands-on approach to the matter of gardening, much to the amusement of the gardener, Mr. Wilson, who was even now pruning the climbing rose above the door.

“Oh, look, there’s Mr. Wilson. Don’t the roses look beautiful? I have so many ideas after seeing the gardens at Villa d’Este,” Johanna said.

The sound of their arrival had brought her parents to the door, and they both waved excitedly as the carriage pulled up outside.

“Oh, Johanna...we weren’t expecting you until tomorrow. What a wonderful surprise,” Johanna’s mother said, hurrying to embrace Johanna as she and her aunt climbed down from the carriage.

“Mother, Father...I’m so pleased to be back,” Johanna exclaimed as her father, too, embraced her.

“We’ve missed you. It hasn’t been the same without you,” he said, and Johanna smiled.

“I’ve missed you, too. But what adventures we’ve had. Haven’t we, Aunt Marian?” Johanna said, turning to her aunt, who smiled.

“And I’m sure they’d be better told over a nice cup of tea, especially after such a long journey,” she said, and Johanna’s parents ushered them inside.

The gardener nodded as Johanna passed, handing her a rose from his prunings.

“I’ve taken good care of your garden, Miss Follett, but I’m sure you’ll be making a thorough inspection,” he said, and Johanna smiled.

“I’m sure you’ve done a wonderful job, Mr. Wilson. It looks beautiful. You’d have loved the gardens of the Italian peninsula—the scent on a warm day was like heaven itself,” she replied.

Inside, the house was pleasantly cool. It was a warm day, and Johanna was greeted by the familiar scent of wood polish and her mother’s perfume. There was a comforting familiarity about returning home, and Johanna was glad to see nothing had really changed, save for the minor rearrangement of certain ornaments. Her parents and aunt were already in the drawing room, but Johanna paused before entering, allowing herself a moment to remember the last time she had stood in the hallway.

I was a different person then. I’ve certainly grown up a lot—and I can speak French a lot better than I ever could before, she thought to herself.

But it was not just her French that had improved. Johanna had grown up. She had left Wilton Grange as a silly, immature youngster—by her own admittance. But she had returned with a new perspective on the world.

“Johanna, come into the drawing room, won’t you? We’re having tea,” her mother called out, and entering the drawing room, Johanna found her aunt and parents sitting by the open doors leading onto the terrace at the back of the house.

“Come and sit down, Johanna, and tell us all about your adventures,” Johanna’s father said.

“But where’s Roger? I thought he’d be here to greet me,” Johanna said, referring to her older brother.

“He’s out on business—for me. Besides, we weren’t expecting you until tomorrow, Johanna. Come along,” her father said.

“Oh, but I don’t know where to start—you can test me on my French and my Latin. I’ve learned so much. Reading all those inscriptions in the ancient ruins we visited. And the people we met—it’s extraordinary to think how other people live their lives. I don’t think I really knew anything about the world until now,” Johanna replied, brimming with excitement at the thought of all she had learned and experienced.

Her mother bid her to sit, and Johanna sat down with them and glanced at her aunt, who smiled.

“There’s so much to tell, isn’t there, Johanna? We’ve crossed Europe and made it as far as the Greek islands,” she said.

Johanna’s mother shook her head.

“I don’t know where you get your spirit of adventure from, Marian. We’re like chalk and cheese. I don’t remember the last time I left the district, though we’ll have to be brave and go up to London soon, won’t we?” she said, glancing at Johanna, who did not know why there was any need for them to go up to London.

“Will we?” she asked, and her mother nodded.

“Yes, for the Season. But we can talk about that later. We want to hear all about your adventures. From the beginning,” Johanna’s mother said.

Johanna was curious about her mother’s words—she did not want to go to London for the Season, and there had been no mention of their doing so in her mother’s letter. She knew what the London Season meant, and the thought of it—of marriage—filled her with foreboding. But with her parents waiting eagerly for tales of her adventures, Johanna put the thought aside, taking a sip of tea, and beginning at the beginning.

“Well, it all started in Paris, I suppose...” she began.

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“Oh, I feel as though I’ve traveled across Europe myself in the past few hours. What a wonderful time you’ve had, Johanna, and it was so good of you to take her, Marian. I’d have been no good—the heat, the language, the food...” Johanna’s mother said, shaking her head and laughing.

“She was no trouble at all. I’d gladly do it all again. Johanna was the best of traveling companions. I’ll miss her,” Johanna’s aunt said, smiling at Johanna, who smiled back at her and nodded.

She would miss her aunt, too. The two of them had got on well, and there had never been a cross word between them during their travels. Johanna would miss their shared



spirit of adventure, and she hoped the journey they had now returned from would not be their last. But Johanna and her mother had always got on well, too, and Johanna was pleased to be home, despite her thoughts as to what the future now held.

“Ah, here’s Roger now. You’ll have to repeat the story,” Johanna’s father said as the sound of horses’ hooves could be heard on the gravel outside.

Johanna had missed her brother terribly. They were as much friends as siblings, and she had written to him often during her travels, telling him of the wonderful places she was seeing, and how excited she was at the prospect of telling him all about her adventures. A moment later, the drawing room door opened, and Roger appeared, looking surprised to find Johanna and their aunt taking tea.

“Johanna, how wonderful—you’re back. We weren’t expecting you until tomorrow,” he exclaimed as Johanna flung herself into his arms.

He seemed older—he was older, but only by a year. But his appearance was that of a man, rather than a youth. His hair had grown, and he now had a beard, neatly clipped. There was no mistaking their relationship—both had inherited their father’s jet-black hair and their mother’s blue eyes.

“We got back earlier than we expected. But it’s wonderful to see you. We have so much to tell you about,” Johanna said, glancing at her aunt, who smiled.

“But I think I’ll let you do that, Johanna. I need a lie down after our journey,” she said, and Johanna’s mother now fussed around her sister, insisting she go upstairs and rest before dinner.

“And you’ll want to rest, too, Johanna,” she said, but Johanna shook her head.

“No...really, Mother. I’m quite all right. I want to talk to Roger,” Johanna said,

smiling at her brother, who smiled back at her.

“Let’s go and sit in the garden—under the oak tree. Where we always used to sit, before you went off gallivanting halfway across the world,” Roger said, and Johanna smiled and nodded as she took her brother’s arm and the two of them left the drawing room for the garden.

At the far end of the lawn, behind the house, was an oak tree—an ancient oak tree, far older than the house and its grounds. Johanna had always loved to sit beneath it on warm days, sheltered by the dappled shade of its branches, and now she and Roger did so once again. It felt like a true homecoming—almost as though she had never left.

“And now I’ve told you of my adventures, what of your own? What business were you out on for father? I thought you’d always vowed never to get involved in all of that. You’ve certainly changed your tune,” Johanna said, when they had sat down beneath the shady boughs of the oak tree.

Roger sighed and shook his head.

“Father hasn’t been well. He keeps it to himself, of course. But he gets tired very easily, and he’s growing thinner with every passing day. I realized I was being selfish in holding back from the responsibility that was mine. Like it or not, I’ll inherit the title, and far better for me to learn under father’s guidance than to be thrust into it in the event of...” Roger said, his words trailing off as he spoke.

Johanna nodded. She had noticed her father had lost a lot of weight since the last time she had seen him. He had always had a healthy complexion—round-faced and jovial. But his features had become gaunt, and there was a pale look to him, as much as he appeared in good spirits.

“He probably doesn’t want to worry Mother,” Johanna said, and Roger nodded.

“Yes, I think you’re right. But whatever happens, I want to take my duties seriously. I’ve grown up in this past year. I think you have, too. And that’s why Mother is taking you to London for the Season...I mean...I’m sure she’s mentioned it,” Roger said, looking suddenly worried, as though he had said the wrong thing.

Johanna raised her eyebrows.

“She mentioned the London Season, but not the reason—though I’m sure I can guess. London Seasons mean marriage, don’t they? Or do you know differently? I hope so, because I don’t want to get married,” Johanna said, adopting a defiant tone.

Roger smiled.

“They want you to get married, Johanna. They’ve been talking about it for months. You and Mother are going up to London for the Season. You’ll go to balls and parties, dinners and picnics. And the hope is...” he began, but Johanna interrupted him.

“The hope is I’ll find a husband? I see.” Johanna said.

She had not expected to return home and find herself immediately thrust into society, but now she understood why her parents had not objected to her aunt’s suggestion of accompanying her on her journey across Europe. Her travels had given Johanna a maturity she had not possessed before, and with so many interesting tales to tell, she would not be short of matters to converse on. Her parents had clearly seen her tour of Europe as preparation for the task of finding a husband—a finishing school for the shy, retiring butterfly of her aunt’s description, and now they were to put their plans into action.

“They just want you to be happy, Johanna. As do I. It’s what you deserve. Neither of them is getting any younger, and I think they feel...Well, it’s their duty to see you married,” Roger said.

But if Johanna’s travels had taught her anything, it was the importance of an independent spirit. Her Aunt Marian was not married, and in her example, Johanna had seen a different possibility for what her life might be.

“But I’ve never really given much thought to getting married. Well, I suppose I have, but I don’t know if I want to, Johanna said, and her brother smiled.

“You don’t have to marry the first man who comes along. Just promise me you’ll think about it. You’ll please the Parker sisters at least,” he said, and Johanna groaned.

“Oh, I was hoping they might’ve disappeared off to London—didn’t they want a Season of their own? They’re not still causing trouble, are they?” Johanna asked.

Her brother smiled.

“Don’t give them a second thought, Johanna. When have they ever not sought to cause trouble? Besides, once you go to London for your Season, you won’t have them to contend with. They’re just jealous women—it’s no wonder they can’t find husbands for themselves, despite forever looking,” he replied.

“Yes...well, I just hope I don’t bump into them. That’s all. But right now, I’m eager to go out on a ride. Is Pegasus well?” she asked.

Pegasus was Johanna’s horse, and she was eager to see him again, for she had missed riding during her time in Europe and had asked her brother to keep him exercised. Roger smiled.

“He’s stubborn. He doesn’t like me riding him—not at all. But I’m sure he’ll be pleased to see you. Shall I come with you?” he said, but Johanna shook her head.

“No—thank you. I want to ride out on my own. It’s what I’ve missed the most—apart from you and Mother and Father, of course. And the garden,” Johanna said, and her brother laughed.

“I’ll see you later—and remember what I said, don’t give the Parker sisters a second thought,” he replied.

Johanna nodded, and then she made her way to the stable, finding Pegasus being brushed down by her father’s groom, Andrew.

“Ah, the wanderer returns,” he said, tipping his cap, as Johanna ran her hand along Pegasus’ silky-smooth back.

The horse whinnied, nuzzling his head into hers, and Johanna kissed his nose, fondling his ears as she did so.

“Oh, Andrew, how pleased I am to see him—and you, of course. I’ve missed being in the saddle,” she said, and the groom smiled.

“You’re the only one who can ride him properly, Miss Follett,” he said, and Johanna laughed.

“Then I’d better get him saddled,” she said, eager to feel the wind in her hair and know she was home.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:08 am*

### Chapter 2

“And you haven’t forgotten the arrival of the dowager countess, have you, Mrs. Parks?” Edmund Banfield, the Earl of Beaumont, said.

He was looking up from the breakfast table at his housekeeper, who now forced a smile to her lips and shook her head.

“No, my lord. How could I?” she replied.

Edmund smiled. It was just the way he felt, too. His mother was due to arrive from London that afternoon. She spent most of her time in the capital, preferring it to what she referred to as “the provincial scene.”

The dowager countess was a socialite who found the countryside boring, and had been only too glad to rid herself of the responsibilities marriage to Edmund’s father had brought.

“All those pointless charitable endeavors, the endless entertainment of dull people, and the fact one could never buy anything one really wanted,” she had said, before leaving for London following the death of Edmund’s father.

But Edmund himself had taken a different view. He had been away at school, and then at Oxford, before a period spent in military service to the crown. But all of these endeavors had been a waiting game—the wait to inherit, which he had done eight months previously upon the death of his father. But returning to Hampshire had not been the trial he might have expected, had he believed the many things his mother

said about her forced exile in the countryside—quite the opposite. Edmund liked the countryside. He liked to ride out or to walk across the estate, immersing himself in the natural world, with all its beauty and diversity.

“Prepare yourself, Mrs. Parks. I love my mother dearly, but you know better than me what she can be like,” Edmund said, shaking his head as he rose from the breakfast table.

“I served your grandmother, then your mother, my lord. I know just what’s expected,” Mrs. Parks said.

“You missed your true calling, Mrs. Parks—you should’ve been a diplomat. I’ll leave the preparations in your capable hands. She won’t be here until late this afternoon. I’m going to take one last opportunity for some peace and quiet,” Edmund replied.

It was a beautiful morning, and he intended to ride out to the far side of the estate, where a wood bordered the river and bluebells grew in abundance.

“May I ask, my lord, why Her Ladyship is visiting Beaumont Abbey at all? I thought she detested being here,” Mrs. Parks said, and Edmund raised his eyebrows.

“Yes...I’d wondered the same. But I fear her reasons are...practical. She wants me to marry, and since I won’t go up to London, she’s coming here instead,” he said, and the housekeeper nodded.

“I see, my lord. Well...I can only wish you luck,” she said, and with a curt nod, she left the dining room.

Edmund smiled to himself. His mother was not as bad as might be thought. But she was a forceful presence, and she had made the intentions of her visit clear.

“It’s high time you were married, Edmund. Think of the family line,” she had written in her letter inviting herself to stay with him at Beaumont Abbey.

There had been no suggestion as to how long the dowager would remain in Hampshire, and Edmund could only assume she would do so until her task was completed. He knew it was his duty to marry. The line was an ancient one, and the Beaumonts were a noble family. But Edmund was in no hurry to do his duty. He was not about to begin a courtship with someone simply out of necessity. If Edmund was to marry, he wanted to do so for love. His mother did not see it that way, of course. She and his father had married through an arrangement, and though it had been a happy marriage—despite Edmund’s mother’s dislike for the countryside—it could not have been called passionate. Theirs had not been a marriage based on love, but rather, a marriage based on duty. It was not what Edmund wanted.

But I’m sure she’s got other plans, he thought to himself, wondering how his mother would go about finding him a match.

The district of Beaumont Abbey was limited in terms of society. They had neighbors, of course, but there was little by way of a social scene. Edmund preferred the company of his friends to larger societal events, and since returning home to take up the title, he had made several close friends with whom he hunted or went for long walks with across the estate. But today, he wanted to be alone with his thoughts—before his mother arrived to fill those thoughts with her own agenda.

I suppose I should be grateful to her, Edmund thought to himself, as he left the house and walked the short distance across the gravel to the stables.

His mother had his best interests at heart. Edmund knew she wanted him to be happy, but her dominance and interfering attitude often resulted in conflict.

“I’ll take Lorna,” Edmund said, after the groom had asked him which of the horses he



would like to ride out on.

“It’s a fine morning, my lord,” the groom said as he saddled the chestnut mare.

Edmund took a keen interest in horses—both breeding and riding them. Lorna was his favorite—a gift for his eighteenth birthday from his parents. She was a fine horse, and as Edmund climbed into the saddle, he looked forward to the swiftness of the ride, and the freedom of the gallop.

“Thank you, Jones. I don’t know when I’ll be back—not before noon, at least,” Edmund said before riding out of the stable yard and urging Lorna into a gallop across the parkland.

The dew was sparkling on the grass as he rode, and a mist on the river was still clearing. The sun was already warm, and Edmund breathed in the fresh air, delighting in the freedom of the ride. He was glad to have this moment of peace before the arrival of his mother—a chance to think and reflect on the past eight months. He was twenty-two years old, and already burdened with the responsibility of one far beyond his years. But duty was a lesson his father had taught him from a young age, and despite the burdens of his title, Edmund knew he would not shrink from doing what was expected of him.

And I suppose that includes marriage, too, he told himself as he charged across the parkland, taking a path that would lead him by the river and toward the woods where the bluebells grew.

Edmund often rode that way. He liked to see the changing of the seasons in the changing of the trees—bluebells heralding the end of spring or falling leaves signaling the approach of winter. But today, the promise of summer reigned, and the air was fresh with the scent of new life. Lorna was in excellent form, galloping by the river as though she, too, wanted to feel that same freedom Edmund was experiencing.

“Woah there, Lorna,” he said, reining in the horse as they came to the edge of the trees.

The carpet of bluebells was spread out before them, a wave of color enveloping the woodland floor. Edmund smiled, taking in the scene and knowing he would far rather be there than in the middle of a city, surrounded by noise and other people. Here, in the cool stillness of the woodland, he felt at peace, and now he set Lorna into a gentle trot, following the path through the woodland and admiring the bluebells as he went.

It’s so beautiful, he thought to himself, smiling at the thought of this all being his.

But Edmund sat lightly to his power. He did not boast of it or use his position to influence others to his own advantage—or so he hoped. But in this moment of peace, he allowed himself to feel a small sense of satisfaction at all he had achieved in the past few months since inheriting the title.

I wonder what my father would say? Edmund thought to himself.

His father had been a cold and distant figure during Edmund’s childhood and having been sent away at an early age the two of them had never had much chance to form a bond. But in the last few weeks of his father’s life, the two of them had come to an understanding of sorts.

“You’ll make a good earl, Edmund. A better one than I ever was,” he had said, and when he had died, Edmund had found himself feeling unexpectedly bereft.

And that’s why I suppose I have to do what my mother wants—it’s what he’d expect of me, too, Edmund thought to himself.

They had come to the very center of the woods, where the trees were the most ancient, and their canopies merged as one, creating an overarching roof like that of a

great cathedral with its gothic arches. The sunlight was cast in dappled rays, and the bluebells stretched out on every side, like an endless sea of purple. Edmund smiled—it was a secret place, hidden away, a place of peace and contemplation. He was about to slip down from the saddle, intending to climb up into one of the trees and sit there for a while, when a sudden movement to his left caused him to startle. A deer had just appeared from behind one of the trees. It darted across the path, startling Lorna, who now reared up on her hind legs.

“Woah there, Lorna,” Edmund cried, but the horse now bolted, and Edmund was thrown from the saddle to the ground.

He landed awkwardly, hitting the back of his head on the gnarled root of a tree protruding from the ground. As he did so, he heard a loud crack, followed by a searing pain in his right arm. Rolling amid the bluebells, he gazed up at the canopy above, dazed and confused.

“I think I’ve broken my arm,” he said to himself, unable to sit up, and now lying helplessly in the middle of the wood, the horse gone and help far away...

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“I’d forgotten how beautiful England can be on a summer’s day,” Johanna said to herself.

She had ridden as far as the woodland bordering the east side of the village before proceeding on foot through the trees. Bluebells were growing in abundance, and Johanna had brought her sketchbook with her, intending to draw a scene by the brook—where she had often come to sit and contemplate. It was a beautiful day, and Johanna had been glad of her wide-brimmed sun hat as now she sat sketching beneath the trees.

I've certainly improved my sketching since going abroad, she thought to herself, for on the continent, she had made numerous sketches of the buildings and landscapes they had seen.

In time, Johanna intended to paint some of them as pictures to hang at Wilton Grange. But that was a task for the winter, and on a day such as this, she was content to sit with her sketchbook and try to forget her mother's plans for the London Season. But despite her best attempts, Johanna could not forget her mother's plans. Life was about to change. It already had in many ways, but as for what would happen when she and her mother went to London...

"I don't want to think about it," Johanna said to herself, trying to concentrate on her sketch.

But her thoughts kept returning to her brother's words, and to what was intended now she and her aunt had returned from Europe. What would London be like? Would she be expected to attend all manner of balls and soirees? Did she really have to make a match by the end of the Season? It was all very confusing, and Johanna sighed, wishing she was about to set off on another adventure with her aunt. She had just finished making her preliminary sketch, when the sound of voices echoed through the trees. Johanna's heart sank.

"I just don't understand it, Hortensia—one minute he was paying calls and arranging picnics and visits to the theater, and the next...well, I've heard nothing from him," a high-pitched voice was saying, as along the path came the Parker sisters—Hortensia and Mildred—arm in arm.

They were dressed in the most ridiculously impractical and over the top clothes—dresses like ballgowns, and heavily decorated bonnets covering their hair—as though they had set out in the hopeful expectation of encountering a match on their walk through the woods. There was no time for Johanna to hide, and now she

scrambled to her feet, dusting herself down as she came face to face with the two people she had hoped not to meet.

“Johanna—we were just talking about you the other day. We thought you’d got lost on the continent,” Mildred said, smirking at Johanna, who forced a smile to her face.

“Mildred, Hortensia—what a pleasant surprise. I arrived back today, in fact. I thought the two of you might be...in London for the Season,” she said, and the expression on the sisters’ faces changed.

“No...we decided to remain here. Mother isn’t well, and...well, one doesn’t need to be in London to enjoy the Season, does one?” Hortensia replied.

There was a defensiveness to her tone, and Johanna thought better than to prolong the conversation with further questions. She had never cared for the Parker sisters, and she knew the feeling was mutual.

“I’m sorry to hear about your mother,” Johanna said, and the two sisters nodded.

“Yes, well, Doctor Arnold’s been very good with her,” Mildred replied.

“I’m glad to hear it. I should be on my way,” Johanna said.

“Oh, were you meeting someone? I didn’t realize,” Hortensia said.

The Parker sisters had not changed—they delighted in scandal and were not above creating it to satisfy their own ends. In something as innocent as a walk in the woods, they were likely to read more into the matter than was the case. Johanna shook her head.

“No, I’m not meeting anyone—I’ve only been back a few hours. I came to ride out.

I've missed doing so abroad," she replied.

"Well, don't let us keep you, Johanna. I'm sure we'll bump into one another again soon—it's inevitable in a small place," Mildred said, and nodding to Johanna, the two sisters walked on, arm in arm, whispering to one another.

Johanna sighed. She had tried to be friendly toward Hortensia and Mildred, but the two sisters kept their own counsel. In the past, Johanna had often felt a sense of rivalry and jealousy on their part toward her.

Better kept at arm's length. Roger's right—at least I won't have to contend with them in London, Johanna thought to herself, as now she returned to her sketching.

But she had barely drawn the outline of another tree when the sound of horse's hooves caused her to look up. There, to her immense surprise, was a saddled horse charging through the trees at a gallop.

Where's the rider? Johanna thought to herself, rising to her feet and wondering if she should try to catch the creature before it disappeared.

But the horse was too fast, and Johanna knew better than to try to get in the way of a charging mount. She was about to follow at a distance, hoping to catch the reins, when the horse eventually came to a stop, when a shout through the trees caused her to startle.

"Help me...is anyone there? Help me, please," a voice called out.

It was a man's voice, and Johanna now hurried through the trees, looking for its source. She found him in a clearing of trees, lying on the carpet of bluebells. He was well-dressed, a gentleman in a green frock coat, riding breeches, and black boots. He was a few years older than Johanna—perhaps her brother's age—and handsome, too,

with tousled blonde hair and a fair complexion. Johanna hurried over to him.

“It’s all right—I heard you. The horse threw you. I’ll help you,” Johanna said, kneeling down next to the man, who looked up at her with a thankful expression on his face.

“It’s my arm. I think it’s broken. I can’t move it without it...ah, it hurts!” he exclaimed, and Johanna took off her shawl, helping him to sit up before fashioning a sling with it.

“It’s all right. I know it hurts. Let me put this under your arm,” she said, and the man grimaced as she gently moved the sling into position.

“Thank you...it was a deer. It bolted from the trees, and Lorna—the horse—bolted. I feel so foolish,” he said, catching his breath and giving Johanna a faint smile.

“It’s not foolish to be thrown from one’s horse, is it? It was an accident,” Johanna said.

“I know, but...well, it shouldn’t have happened. Look at me, sitting here amid the bluebells. Thank goodness you heard me call out. I’ve never met anyone in these woods before. I thought I might be here all day,” the man said, shaking his head, as Johanna now tried to help him to stand.

“It’s quite all right...I’m just glad I heard you call for help. Here, put your arm around me,” Johanna said.

The man was unsteady on his feet, and Johanna feared he was about to faint. She put both her arms around him, trying to steady him and prevent him from falling.

“I’m sorry,” he kept repeating.

“It’s all right—just hold on to me,” Johanna said.

Her arms were around him, and he was clinging to her as she tried to hold him up. But as she was doing so, the sound of voices now came from along the path.

“One wonders what she got up to—all those months abroad, and with only her aunt to act as chaperone, and...oh,” Hortensia said as the two sisters appeared along the path.

Johanna stared at them as they stared back at her, before exchanging glances and giggling.

“We need to help him—can you fetch the doctor?” Johanna said, but Hortensia only laughed.

“Oh, really, Johanna, do you really expect us to fall for that?” Mildred said.

For a moment, Johanna did not understand—was it not obvious what had happened? She was trying to help the man. He had been injured, even as the Parker sisters now turned away.

“Don’t worry, Johanna. Your secret’s safe with us,” Hortensia called out, and Johanna watched in desperation as they walked away, arm in arm, whispering to one another as they went.

“What...what happened?” the stranger asked, his head lolling to one side.

He was about to faint, and now she could no longer hold him, and together, they tumbled to the ground. He was unconscious, and now Johanna was the one calling for help, even as the Parker sisters disappeared through the trees.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:08 am*

### Chapter 3

“Please wake up? Oh...can you hear me? Whatever am I to do?” Johanna exclaimed, as now she looked around her, desperate for help.

The man was now lying back amid the bluebells, his eyes closed in a faint. He was still breathing, but Johanna was unable to revive him, despite batting his cheek with her palm and calling out to him in a loud voice.

“Oh, it’s no use. I’ll have to go for help,” she said to herself, though she was too far from Wilton Grange to return home and summon assistance.

But a sudden thought now occurred to her. Mr. Wilson, the gardener at Wilton Grange, lived on the edge of the wood in a small cottage belonging to her father’s estate. He had a horse and trap, used for taking garden cuttings away to be burned, and if he was now at home, perhaps he could help her get the stranger home.

“I’ll be as quick as I can,” Johanna said, though the stranger made no reply, and now she hurried off through the trees in the direction of the gardener’s cottage.

Pegasus was tethered at the entrance to the trees, and he looked at Johanna with bemusement as she hurried past.

“I’ll be back soon, I promise,” she called out, and now she followed the path across a meadow by the river, where the whitewashed cottage belonging to Mr. Wilson stood by a gate leading onto her father’s land.

It was a pretty dwelling, with roses growing around the door and smoke coming from the chimney. The trap was pulled up outside, and the gardener's horse was tethered with a nose bag by the gate—an indicator Mr. Wilson was at home.

“Miss Follett? I wasn't expecting to see you until tomorrow,” Mr. Wilson said, answering the door a moment later.

“Oh, thank goodness you're in. You've got to help me,” Johanna exclaimed, and now she explained about the stranger in the woods and how they had to take him to Wilton Grange immediately.

“Oh...but I was just getting the fire going to boil a kettle for some tea,” the gardener replied, furrowing his brow.

“Please, Mr. Wilson—he's unconscious. I didn't know what else to do,” Johanna begged, and the gardener sighed.

Mr. Wilson had a reputation locally as a gruff and insensitive man who preferred the company of flowers to people. But he and Johanna had always got on well, and now he agreed to help her, following her back into the woods to the place where the stranger was still lying on the carpet of bluebells.

“Strange...I recognize him from somewhere. But I couldn't tell you—he's someone important by the looks of him,” the gardener said as Johanna stooped down and attempted to rouse the stranger once again.

“Please...won't you wake up?” she said loudly, but the man remained in a state of unconsciousness, and it took both her and Mr. Wilson to lift him.

The gardener took most of the strain, and with some difficulty, the man was carried along the path.

“And what about his horse?” Mr. Wilson asked.

“I didn’t see where it went—he said it bolted because of a deer. His horse ran past me...they usually find their own way home, though, don’t they?” Johanna replied.

Pegasus was still waiting patiently at the entrance to the trees, and he watched curiously as Johanna and Mr. Wilson hauled the stranger along. Johanna was relieved when they reached the cottage and could lie him down on the grass. The gardener went to ready the horse and trap, and Johanna took the opportunity to examine the stranger further. She did not recognize him, but having been away from the district for so long, it was hardly surprising. Now, she noticed further details about him—his gold cufflinks, the pearl buttons on his shirt, and his belt with its metal clasp displaying what appeared to be a regimental insignia.

Perhaps he’s an officer in the king’s militia, Johanna thought to herself, though there was no other sign of a military connection.

But his clothes were of the highest quality, and he was well-groomed and presentable. He reminded Johanna of those men she had met on her travels around Europe—English aristocrats on their grand tour of the continent. Perhaps this man, too, had aristocratic connections.

But I’d know him if he did. Wouldn’t I? Johanna thought to herself, for she knew everyone in the district of a certain rank and class—even after a year of being away.

Her thoughts now returned to the Parker sisters—what were they thinking? What had they assumed? There had been nothing compromising about the situation, and to any other observer, the facts would have been plain. But Johanna could not help but wonder what the two sisters would make of what they had seen, and who they would tell...

“Right, let’s get him into the trap. It’s a good thing he’s not heavy,” Mr. Wilson said, appearing around the side of the cottage and shaking his head as he looked down at the still-unconscious stranger.

Somehow, they managed to get the man up, and with his head lolling to the side, they laid him down on the trap.

“I’ll fetch Pegasus,” Johanna said, and she hurried back across the meadow to untether the horse, who gave her a disapproving look as she approached—suggesting, it seemed, she had forgotten about him.

“You ride on the board, Miss Follett. I’ll lead,” Mr. Wilson said. He tied her horse’s reins to the back of the cart, and Johanna did as he said, riding on the board, and keeping an eye on the unconscious stranger lying on the trap.

It was not long before they came to the gates of Wilton Grange, and Johanna now wondered what to do next. Her mother was expecting her back for dinner—not in the company of an unconscious invalid with a broken arm.

“Thank you, Mr. Wilson. You’ve been very kind. I’ll be sure to tell...well, whoever he is, just what you did. When he wakes up, at least,” Johanna said.

“Let’s hope he does,” the gardener said, shaking his head.

“Oh, but if I can press on your kindness a second time, Mr. Wilson—would you call on Doctor Arnold on your way home. Tell him to come as a matter of urgency,” Johanna said.

Mr. Wilson smiled

“I’ll have to pass that way to get back to the cottage,” Mr. Wilson said, and Johanna

gave him a few pennies for his trouble, and promised to tell him all about the garden at the Villa d'Este the following day.

“Thank you so much, Mr. Wilson. Oh...look, here’s Andrew. Andrew...will you ask one of the footmen to come and help,” Johanna said as the groom appeared from the stables to help with Pegasus.

He looked surprised at the sight of the unconscious man lying in the back of the trap but did not question Johanna, and with a nod, he hurried off to fetch help, returning a few moments later with one of the footmen. The stranger was lifted off the trap and carried into the house. Johanna followed, and as they were just about to take the man upstairs, Johanna’s mother appeared from the drawing room. At the sight before her, she screamed, throwing her hands up in the air in astonishment.

“Johanna, what’s all this?” she exclaimed, staring at the unconscious man in horror.

Johanna gave a brief account of the events as they had occurred, and her mother—who was not the sort of woman who enjoyed excitement or things out of the ordinary—shook her head in disbelief.

“Oh...the poor man. Put him in the red room—your aunt’s in the green room,” she said.

Johanna now directed the groom and footman upstairs to the landing. There, they made their way along a corridor into the oldest part of the house, where the ceilings were low and the walls paneled. The door of the red room was unlocked, and once inside, they were able to lay the stranger on the bed.

“Will you...take his boots off, and cover him over,” Johanna said, turning away as the footman removed the man’s clothes and covered him over with a blanket.

“He’s decent now, Miss Follett,” the groom said, and Johanna turned to find the stranger covered over, his head propped up on a cushion.

“Thank you, both,” she said, and the groom and footman both mopped their brows and nodded.

“I’ll go and see to Pegasus, Miss Follett,” Andrew said, and the two men now left the room, leaving Johanna and the unconscious man alone.

I suppose there’s nothing improper about it—he’s hardly able to act improperly, Johanna thought to herself.

But at that moment, the bedroom door opened, and Johanna’s mother appeared

“Oh...what are we to do with him? I don’t...I’m sure I’ve seen him before, but with his head lolled to the side like that, it’s hard to tell. And you say you found him in the woods where the bluebells grow?” she asked, and Johanna nodded.

“That’s right—all on his own, lying on his back. He’s broken his arm,” Johanna said.

Her mother tutted.

“The poor thing. Did you send for the doctor?” she asked, and Johanna nodded.

“Mr. Wilson’s going to call on him on his way back to the cottage. He’ll be here soon,” she said, and her mother nodded.

“Then come downstairs and wait. I don’t like you being here alone with him. You can come up with Mary when the doctor arrives,” Johanna’s mother said.

Mary was one of the maids. Johanna would have liked to have stayed, but her mother

was adamant as to the impropriety of her being alone with the stranger—despite the man being unconscious,

They went downstairs to wait for the arrival of the physician, but before leaving the man's side, Johanna tucked the sheet around him, her hand brushing against his face as she did so. For a moment, she thought he was stirring, but his eyes remained closed, and once again, Johanna could not help but notice just how handsome he was.

“He can stay here until he's better—can't he, Mother?” she asked, and her mother nodded.

“I'm sure your father wouldn't send an injured man out onto the street. But I'm sure he has a place to call home. As I say, I'm sure I recognize him. I just can't think from where,” she said, and now Johanna followed her mother out of the room, curious to know more about the stranger—who he was and where he had come from.

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Edmund blinked, opening his eyes, then closing them again. It was bright—as though a lantern was being shone in his face—and his head was aching. There was a pain in his arm—a sharp, blinding pain, and as he tried to move, he realized his whole body ached, too. He let out a groan, opening his eyes again and squinting. The bright light was really just the sunlight coming through the window, and now he realized he was lying on a bed in an unfamiliar room. It was comfortably furnished, the walls painted red, matching the curtains at the window.

Where am I? Edmund wondered to himself, trying to think of the last thing that had happened to him.

He remembered falling from the horse, and there had been a woman, too—a pretty young woman who had come in answer to his calls for help. She had put a sling on

his arm, and then...

I must've fainted, Edmund thought to himself, though still, he could not imagine where he was or what had happened next—it must have been something to do with the young woman who had come to his rescue.

But surely, she could not have carried him herself, he reasoned...

He was about to call out, hoping someone would hear him, when footsteps outside the door announced the arrival of what Edmund hoped would be a solving of the mystery. The door now opened, and two people entered the room—there was the woman who had come to his aid in the woods and a maid, both of whom looked relieved to see him awake.

“Shall I tell Her Ladyship he's awake?” the maid said, but the woman shook her head.

“No, Mary—not yet. We're not supposed to be up here until the doctor arrives. You heard what mother said. Oh, but you're awake. How pleased I am,” the woman said, hurrying to the bedside with a smile on her face.

She was very pretty, with long black hair and bright blue eyes. Her smile lit up her face, and Edmund wondered why he had never met her before. It was obvious he was in one of the grand houses of the district—comfortably furnished and with maids.

“I...I'm sorry. I've put you through a lot of trouble,” Edmund said, but the woman shook her head.

“Nonsense. I was glad to help. You fainted when I tried to help you up. I had to get Mr. Wilson, our gardener, to bring you back in his trap,” the woman said.



Edmund stared at her in disbelief. “You mean I’ve been unconscious for several hours?”

She nodded.

“It’s nearly eight o’clock, and it was four o’clock when we brought you back in the trap. I’d gone out riding, you see. But it was just by chance I was walking in the woods. They’re so beautiful at this time of year. I’ve been away, and...oh, but I’m talking out of turn. Is your arm sore? What about your head?” she asked, and Edmund tried once again to move, even as his body resisted.

“Everything’s sore,” he admitted, and the woman patted his hand.

“The doctor won’t be long,” she said, smiling down at him.

Edmund was impressed. Not only was she very pretty, but she exuded an air of calm confidence. It had been the same in the woods. The woman had taken charge—fashioning a sling and ensuring Edmund was comfortable. The fact of his having fainted had clearly not alarmed her, and she had taken care of him to the point of bringing him home and summoning the doctor. A sudden feeling of guilt came over him, and he blushed, realizing the risk the woman had taken in doing all this for a stranger.

“I’m sorry if you felt I...compromised you,” he said, and the woman shook her head.

“Not at all. It’s not your fault your horse bolted, is it?” she replied, and Edmund smiled.

“No...but for the two of us to be alone in the woods together...if someone were to discover...well, scandals can so easily emerge,” he said.

The woman looked suddenly uncomfortable.

“Well...there was someone, two people, in fact. Mr. Wilson, the gardener, couldn’t possibly think improperly of what occurred. And nothing did occur, but we were observed together by...the Parker sisters,” she replied.

Edmund groaned. He was acquainted with the Parker sisters—Hortensia and Mildred—at least from afar. They were gossips, local busybodies who made it their business to know other people’s business.

“But they can’t possibly have thought anything improper was occurring. You were helping me. I had a broken arm, for goodness’ sake,” he replied.

Again, the woman looked uncomfortable.

“Yes, but when you were about to faint, I had my arms around you. I was just holding you up, and you were clinging to me, and...” she said, her words now trailing off as Edmund shook his head.

“Oh dear,” he replied, fearing the damage had already been done.

It was a fact of his rank and class—the merest hint of impropriety could be seized on by those with their own agendas. How easy it was for a reputation to be ruined, and how difficult for it to be regained. Should it be spread that the two of them had been alone in the woods together, and if the Parker sisters made it their business to attach scandal to the facts.

“I’m sure it’ll be all right,” the woman said, but Edmund now felt honor bound to make amends.

“No...really...I must insist. I wonder...we can’t allow rumors to spread,” he said, but

the woman only smiled and shook her head.

“Wouldn’t it be pertinent to introduce ourselves to one another before we try to solve our dilemma? There’s surely more scandal in a nameless encounter than a familial one,” the woman said, and Edmund nodded—she was right, they still did not even know one another’s names...

“Forgive me. You’re right. I don’t even know how to address you properly. For all I know, I could be in the company of a royal princess,” he said, and the woman blushed.

“Not quite a royal princess, sir. My name’s Johanna—the Honorable Johanna Follett, and I’m very pleased to meet you,” the woman said, holding out her hand to Edmund, who took it with the sudden realization of who he was talking to.

“Johanna? And is this Wilton Grange?” he asked, and Johanna looked surprised.

“It is, yes. Do you know it?” she asked, sounding puzzled, and Edmund laughed and shook his head.

He should have realized sooner—the likeness was now plain to see. This was Johanna Follett, the sister of Edmund’s friend, Roger. She had been away traveling on the continent when Edmund had inherited his father’s title, but he knew all about her from the tales her brother had told him of his sister’s adventures.

“Forgive me. I know your brother well. I’m Edmund—Edmund Banfield, the Earl of Beaumont,” he said, and a puzzled look came over Johanna’s face.

“But I thought the Earl...oh, you mean you’re...” she began, and Edmund nodded.

“My father died eight months ago. I inherited the title and estate, but I’ve been away

for many years—first at school, then at Oxford, and most recently serving with the king’s militia,” he said.

As children, neither of them would have been aware of one another, and it was only recently Edmund had struck up a friendship with Johanna’s brother, Roger. It was a remarkable coincidence, but a happy one, and now Edmund knew he had to do something to make amends for her kindness—and for the compromise she had made to herself in helping him, knowing the Parker sisters were bound to spread the rumor of their being compromised. Johanna smiled at him.

“Roger mentioned you in several of his letters—but I didn’t know what you looked like, of course,” she said, and Edmund smiled back at her.

“You do now,” he said, and Johanna blushed.

“I’ll have to tell Roger—he’ll be surprised,” Johanna said, and now it was Edmund’s turn to blush.

He did not want his friend to think he had been foolish enough to have an accident, and he certainly did not want Roger to think anything improper had occurred between him and Johanna. It had not, but Edmund knew how easily the truth could be turned into gossip.

“Wait a moment...I really think...” he began, but at that moment, the bedroom door opened, and an older woman—who Edmund recognized as Roger’s mother—entered the room, followed by Doctor Arnold.

Johanna rose to her feet, looking embarrassed, even as her mother passed no comment on the scene. Doctor Arnold looked at Edmund with surprise.

“My lord, I didn’t realize it was you lying here at Wilton Grange,” he said.

Johanna's mother gave a cry of exclamation and threw her hands up in the air.

"Oh, forgive me, my lord—I should've recognized you. But we were all in a fluster earlier, and I didn't look at you properly. A thousand apologies," she said, moving Johanna to one side to allow Doctor Arnold to make a proper inspection of his patient.

"Are you in a lot of pain, my lord?" the doctor asked as he began his examination.

"I'd be in a lot more if it wasn't for Miss Follett here," he said, glancing at Johanna, who blushed.

Doctor Arnold nodded, examining the sling fashioned from Johanna's shawl. Edmund wondered what he was thinking. Was he drawing the same conclusions others might jump to—a "chance" encounter in the woods, a shawl removed, the couple alone as they awaited help...It would only take a word from the Parker sisters to give rise to further rumors.

"You've done a fine job here, Miss Follett. You've saved His Lordship from considerable discomfort," the doctor said, and Johanna smiled.

"I just happened to be in the right place at the right time, I suppose," she said.

The doctor made no reply, and now he examined the bruises on Edmund's arm, nodding as he did so. The doctor set the bone and wrapped it up, eliciting a groan from Edmund.

"Plenty of rest, I suppose," Johanna's mother said, and the doctor nodded.

"Yes, that's right—bed rest, and keep the arm in the sling to allow it to heal," he said.

“But I can’t impose on these good people any longer. They’ve already done so much for me,” Edmund said.

A sudden thought now occurred to him—his mother would have arrived at Beaumont Abbey. She would be wondering where he was, as would the servants. What if a search party had been sent out?

“You can’t leave like this. It’s not just your arm—you had a very nasty bump to the head. You were unconscious,” Johanna said, even as Edmund was struggling to get up.

“But I...my mother was arriving this afternoon from London,” he said, but Johanna shook her head.

“We’ll send word to Beaumont Abbey. She can visit you here if she wishes,” she said, and Edmund lay back with a sigh and nodded.

Perhaps she was right, But another thought now crossed his mind—a remarkable thought, but one that might just be the saving grace he required. Should the Parker sisters see to it the rumor of what they believed they had seen be spread, Johanna would be compromised. Any chance of her marrying respectably would be gone, and her family’s reputation, too, would be ruined. There was only one thing for it. He would have to ask for Johanna’s hand in marriage. Any question as to the two of them having been compromised by their unexpected encounter would be quashed if news of a betrothal was spread. Perhaps there would be some question as to why the two of them had been alone in the woods together, but at least there would be a happy ending. Of all the women Edmund had encountered since his arrival in the district, Johanna was by far the prettiest, and the nicest, and to marry her would also appease his mother, who was coming to the countryside to make arrangements on his behalf.

“It’s very kind of you,” Edmund said, and Johanna placed her hand on his and smiled.

“I’ll go and find Roger—he’ll be so pleased to see you,” she said, and before Edmund could protest—or make any suggestion as to how their dilemma might be solve—she had left the room, followed by the maid.

Doctor Arnold now finished packing up his medical bag, promising to look in on his patient in the coming days.

“Stay in bed, my lord—I’m sure it’s no hardship to enjoy the hospitality of Wilton Grange for a few days,” he said, and Edmund nodded.

“You’ll be our honored guest, my lord,” Johanna’s mother said, and ushering the doctor from the room, she closed the door behind her, leaving Edmund alone.

Sighing, Edmund closed his eyes, thinking again about the strange thought that had occurred to him—to make a proposal to Johanna in light of what had happened that day in the woods. Edmund had known just what Doctor Arnold was thinking, and he knew what others would think, too, once the Parker sisters began to spread their rumors—far better to put pay to a scandal than to allow them to smolder and gain heat. It made Edmund smile to think what his mother would say—she would certainly be surprised.

And yet, I wouldn’t really mean it, would I? We barely know one another. And she might simply refuse me, Edmund thought to himself, mulling the thought over in his mind and wondering if it was not simply the result of the concussion.

He was still trying to convince himself one way or another when the bedroom door opened, and Roger—his friend, and Johanna’s brother—appeared, followed by Johanna, shaking his head and laughing as he bounded over to the bed.

“Well, well, well. What a surprise this is. What on earth were you doing?” he exclaimed, rolling his eyes as he sat down on the side of the bed.

“I fell off my horse. That’s all. Don’t make fun of me, Roger. It could happen to any of us,” Edmund said, and his friend smiled.

“All right, I’m sorry. But you’ve got to admit it’s rather amusing—and rescued by my sister,” he said, glancing at Johanna, who had followed him into the bedroom.

Edmund blushed, glancing at Johanna, who smiled back at him.

“And why shouldn’t your sister have rescued me? I can only thank her for what she did,” Edmund said.

Roger glanced up at his sister and shook his head.

“But how fortuitous you should both find yourselves in the woods at the same time,” he said.

Edmund could hear the speculation in his voice—the tacit assumption of something untoward. It had been the same with Doctor Arnold, and it would be the same with so many others, too. It would take only one word from the Parker sisters, and Roger would jump to conclusions—perhaps even assuming a secret correspondence between Edmund and his sister, or a previous rendezvous.

“And what do you mean by that, Roger?” Johanna interrupted.

Her brother shook his head.

“I don’t mean anything by it, Sister. I’m just pointing out the coincidence, that’s all. I should’ve insisted on accompanying you,” Roger said.

Edmund felt he should say something. He did not want any sense of impropriety to damage his friendship with Roger—or the relationship between brother and sister.



“There was really nothing to it. But I’m so very grateful to Johanna for what she did,” Edmund said, and Roger nodded.

“Well...we’re glad to see you in one piece, my friend. And you must stay for as long as you need to. Do you understand?” he said, and Edmund nodded.

“It’s very kind of you,” he replied as the door opened and the maid entered the room, curtsying as she did so.

“Forgive me, sir, but your mother’s asking for you,” she said, and Roger rolled his eyes.

“Very well. I’ll leave the two of you alone. Well...not quite alone,” he said, nodding to the maid who now sat down in the corner of the room as Johanna pulled a chair up to the bedside.

When Roger had gone, Edmund sighed and shook his head. He wanted to apologize to Johanna and make amends for his actions—for the difficulties he had undoubtedly caused her.

“Johanna...Miss Follett...I fear I’ve caused a terrible inconvenience for you,” he said, but Johanna shook her head.

“Not at all, no. But it’s getting late now. You need to rest. Why don’t you try to sleep? We can talk more in the morning,” she said, but Edmund shook his head.

He wanted to talk now. He wanted her to know how sorry he was if he had done anything to compromise her, and now his mind was made up. He would ask her to marry him. It sounded ridiculous when put so bluntly, but in doing so, he would surely be helping her, too. If the inevitable twisting of the facts occurred and were widely reported, conclusions would be jumped to, and it would be Johanna’s

reputation on the line—not his. A man could get away with far more than a woman. But even the slightest hint of compromise would damage Johanna’s reputation beyond repair, and Edmund was determined for that not to happen.

As for himself, the advantage was clear—his mother would have no grounds for pursuing her own matchmaking agenda, before it had even begun. But more so than that, Edmund had felt an immediate attraction toward Johanna—she was pretty and possessed of a strong will and determination, one Edmund could not help but admire. In asking to marry her, he would be pursuing a match he might well have pursued in a more conventional sense, had circumstances been allowed. But that spark of attraction was enough for a moment, and now he insisted on saying his piece.

“Please...can’t we talk now? Must you leave?” he asked, and Johanna shook her head.

“No...it’s been a long day. I only arrived home from my travels this morning. I’ve been in Europe with my aunt. I rode out to remind myself of home, but...well, this happened. It feels as though I’ve already been back an age, but it’s less than a day. But I can stay a while, I suppose,” she said.

“Then, please—tell me some of your stories. You must’ve seen so much on your travels,” Edmund said, for he was genuinely fascinated by the idea of travel and adventure as she described and wanted to know more about her before asking the question now foremost on his mind.

Johanna smiled, and it seemed she was only too pleased to tell Edmund of the places she had been and things she had seen. For the next hour or so, she told of him of vast piazzas, sprawling palaces, magnificent churches, lush gardens, ancient ruins, and the warmth of the European sun. Her descriptions were vivid, and Edmund could imagine himself a part of it, caught up in the romantic dream of those far-off destinations.

“I’d happily leave tomorrow if I could. My aunt would say the same, but I doubt my

mother would allow it. She wants me to go to London for the Season, and then...well, I suppose she wants me to find a husband,” Johanna said, shaking her head sadly.

“You don’t...want to get married?” Edmund ventured, suddenly fearing his plan to ask for her hand was a foolish one.

But to his relief, Johanna shook her head.

“I’m not certain. But whatever happens, I want it to be on my own terms, and not just to some man my mother deigns to introduce me to. She means well, of course. But I simply don’t want the same as she believes is best for me,” Johanna said.

Edmund nodded. It must be hard for Johanna—returning from such freedom to the constraints of English society. He wanted to help her—just as she had helped him.

“I wonder...I might be able to help,” he said, and Johanna looked at him in surprise.

“Help? But what do you mean?” she asked.

“Well...when Doctor Arnold was here earlier, I got the distinct impression he was judging the situation we found ourselves in unfavorably. It was the same with your brother. He didn’t say as much, but I could tell what he was thinking. And if those Parker sisters start spreading rumors, your reputation will lie in tatters,” Edmund said.

Johanna looked at him curiously.

“I don’t quite understand,” she said, and Edmund blushed.

“Well...I mean...the fact of our having been alone together, how it might be construed. I know nothing improper happened. You know it, too. But you said yourself what you thought it looked like,” he said.

Johanna raised her eyebrows, but it seemed she understood what he was saying.

“Yes...but surely no one can think that about us, can they? I was helping you. You’d hardly break your arm just to allow for an excuse for the two of us to have a secret meeting in the woods,” she said, laughing as though the thought amused her.

“I know, but that’s how it’ll be seen—that’s how the doctor and your brother viewed it, and that’s what the Parker sisters are going to say, too. But I have an idea,” he said, and Johanna nodded.

“Yes...what is it?” she asked, and Edmund now took a deep breath.

“We get married,” he replied, and Johanna’s eyes grew wide with astonishment.

### Chapter 4

For a moment, Johanna thought she had misheard him. The very idea of what he was proposing was extraordinary. They had only met that day, and half of the time they had spent together had seen Edmund lying unconscious before her. The idea of a scandal seemed totally far-fetched, and yet now she could not help but feel there was some truth in what he was saying. English society was fickle. The merest hint of a scandal was enough for a reputation to be ruined, and if her reputation was tarnished, so would that of her family be, too. And now, another thought crossed her mind—to accept the offer would buy her time. Her mother planned to take her to London, and who knew what sort of man she would find there? To be forced into a match was not what she wanted, but this...

“Well...are you sure you’ve thought this through? It’s not the...” she began, but the earl interrupted her.

“No, it’s not the concussion, I assure you. I want to make absolutely certain your reputation isn’t damaged by my foolishness. You’ve been so very kind to me, and...well, it seems the right thing to do. You don’t seem very happy at the thought of your London Season—this is the perfect solution,” he said.

Johanna wondered what the earl himself would gain from such a match—from the potential of such a match. It seemed extraordinary, and yet the truth of what he was saying now struck her. How easily she could be ruined—and her family, too. Johanna had no intention of hurting her mother and father. They had allowed her such freedom in traveling abroad, and if she was to repay them with scandal...

“But aren’t you destined to marry someone else? Isn’t there an arrangement already made for you? We both know how these things work,” Johanna said, even as the thought had a certain appeal to it, but the earl shook his head.

“No...there’s nothing. As you perhaps know, it’s only been eight months since my father died. I wasn’t expecting to inherit so soon. I’m still young, and the thought of marriage hadn’t really occurred to me. Until now, at least. My mother’s visit marks the beginning of a search. But I’d far rather have already found what she’s looking for,” he said, and Johanna felt confused.

There was a sincerity in his voice, and yet the whole thing seemed utterly ridiculous—madness, even.

“Well...I’d have to think about it. And so would you. I’m rather tired now, and I think we should both get some sleep,” she said.

Johanna had not imagined any proposal she might receive being delivered in this way. Her time on the continent had given rise to romantic notions of heady nights, the scent of eucalyptus, the pulsing of her heart, the distant sound of music as the man she was to marry sank to one knee, gazing up at her with a look of love. A proposal from a sick bed was not what she had had in mind.

“Yes, of course...please, we should sleep on it. But you must think about it seriously. Both our reputations are at stake. I can only imagine what the Parker sisters are saying to their mother or aunt or whoever. And they’d be bound to mention it to the cook or the maid. And they’d mention it...well, you see my point,” the earl said, and Johanna nodded.

“I understand,” she replied, and now she rose from the bedside and said goodnight to him, leaving the room with Mary and sighing as she closed the door.

“What will you do, Miss Follett?” the maid asked, and Johanna shook her head.

“I don’t know...it’s the strangest of proposals,” she said, and as she later readied herself for bed, she wondered if things would be clearer in the morning.

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As it happened, things were not clearer in the morning, and when Johanna came down for breakfast, her head was spinning with possibilities. Her mother and her aunt were still at the table, but her father and brother had already gone out on business, and as Johanna sat down, her mother cleared her throat, glancing at Johanna’s aunt, who nodded. Johanna took a sip of the coffee a footman had just poured for her, waiting for them to speak.

“Johanna, your aunt and I have been talking. Your father and I want you to go up to London for the Season. And your Aunt Marian agrees,” Johanna’s mother said,

The words felt like a betrayal—did her aunt really agree with such a nod to conformity? Johanna had been expecting as much from her mother. It was hardly news. But to know her aunt was in agreement...

“You don’t mean that, Aunt Marian—surely, you don’t. You’re not married, you don’t have children. Only yesterday, you were talking about your next adventure!” Johanna exclaimed.

There had never been any question of Johanna’s aunt getting married, but now it seemed she had joined ranks with her sister on insisting Johanna do so.

“It’s not as simple as that,” Johanna’s aunt replied.

“I know what you want—you want me to be married. But I don’t know if I’m ready,”

Johanna replied.

This was the truth—the earl’s proposal had come as a surprise, but it begged the wider question of what marriage would mean for Johanna’s future. Whoever it was to.

“You’ve had your adventure, Johanna. And now your parents want you to settle down,” Johanna’s aunt said, and Johanna glared at her.

“I thought you’d be on my side, Aunt Marian,” Johanna said, and her mother tutted.

“No one’s on anyone’s side, Johanna. We all want what’s best for you. Your aunt...well, not everyone can be so fortunate as her. You need to marry. Your aunt’s right. You’ve had your adventure, and now it’s time to settle down,” Johanna’s mother said.

But Johanna did not want to settle down—not in a conventional way. The thought of being presented in London—of being forced to conform in the way so many other young women did—filled her with dread. But now, another thought entered her mind. The earl’s proposal would buy her time. She would not have to go to London and endure the Season, and with time, perhaps her parents might be persuaded to an alternative arrangement. It would do for now, even as she had not considered any of the consequences.

“Well, I don’t need to go to London for such a thing—or to navigate a Season,” Johanna said.

Her mother looked at her with a puzzled expression.

“What do you mean? We won’t find a husband for you here. There’s no one in the district, and...” she began, but Johanna interrupted her with an impassioned resolve.



“Oh, but there is—I’ve found him already. The Earl of Beaumont,” Johanna said, and both her mother and aunt stared at her in disbelief.

For a moment, they were silent. Johanna looked from one to the other, quietly defiant, even as she now wondered what she had done. It was a momentous decision—even if it was made entirely for practical reasons—and she knew it would have consequences, whether she went ahead with it or not. Had the earl been sincere? He had spoken of defending her honor, and she could well imagine what the likes of Doctor Arnold and others in the district might be saying about the unusual circumstances in which they had encountered one another. Not to mention the Parker sisters, who had seen what they had wanted to see and were surely even now using to their advantage. But a proposal to avoid a scandal was still a remarkable solution, and now Johanna’s mother shook her head, furrowing her brow as though trying to understand what her daughter was saying.

“But...what do you mean? How can you just decide to marry the earl?” she asked, and Johanna now explained how the earl had proposed to her the evening before.

“The two of us have found common ground. He’s a good man—a decent man. I like him. And I’d much rather him than some...London aristocrat,” Johanna said.

She spoke in terms of his gratitude, rather than the need to avoid a scandal—no one need know about that—and her mother and aunt listened, shaking their heads as though they could still not believe what Johanna was saying was real.

“But Johanna...you barely know this man. He barely knows himself—he only inherited the title a few months ago. Why would you think it a good idea to marry him?” her aunt asked.

“Can’t two people fall in love in a moment?” Johanna asked.

Her mother sighed.

“We need to think about this...your father and brother need to be informed. I’m not sure it’s a good idea,” Johanna’s mother said, but Johanna was adamant she would not be taken to London for the Season and forced to marry a man against her will—this was her choice, and it was better to have made it for herself than to have it made for her.

“I don’t need to think about it, Mother. He made a proposal and that’s that. I’m glad of it,” Johanna said, and her mother sighed.

“Well...I suppose he is the Earl of Beaumont. You’d be the Countess of Beaumont. And he certainly seems a good and honest man. Roger thinks very highly of him. But we’ll have to see what your father says about the matter. He might object,” Johanna’s mother said.

It was decided they would wait for the baron’s return, and Johanna—accompanied by Mary—now went to visit their guest in the red room, taking him a cup of tea on a tray. She found the earl awake and sitting up in bed. The color had returned to his cheeks, and he looked much better than he had done the previous day. As Johanna set the tray down on the bedside table, he smiled at her.

“Thank you,” he said, and Johanna smiled back at him.

“Did you sleep well? It must’ve been uncomfortable, was it?” she asked.

“The pain comes and goes. I still ache all over. But I think I might be able to get up,” he said, but Johanna stopped him.

“You heard what the doctor said. You need to rest,” she said, placing her hand on his shoulder.

He looked up at her and smiled.

“Very well. I’ll do as I’m told. I’m not always very good at doing what I’m told, though,” he said, and Johanna raised her eyebrows.

“But you’ve got to if you want to recover quickly. Is there anything else I can bring you?” she asked, but the earl shook his head.

“No...but I was wondering...have you thought more about my proposal?” he asked.

Johanna nodded. She had thought more about his proposal. She had thought a great deal more about it, and her decision was made. Now she smiled at him, grateful to him for what he had done in making the suggestion and saving her from an unintended catastrophe.

“I’ve agreed to it. I told my mother and aunt over breakfast. If it’s really what you want,” she said, and the earl smiled.

“I think it’s advantageous for us both. Don’t you? I mean...well, if my mother is going to arrive with ideas in her head, and if your mother intends to spirit you away, then our making a match would ensure we both bought ourselves time. And as for any scandal attached to what might’ve been construed—well, it’s null and void,” he said, and Johanna nodded.

There was no doubting the spark of attraction between them—at least on Johanna’s part. On responding to his calls for help, Johanna had expected to find an elderly man in the woods, an injured gamekeeper or an old laborer collecting wood. But the sight of the earl—even in his injured state—had brought with it an immediate attraction. He was handsome, and in his words, his mannerisms, and his demeanor, Johanna had sensed a gentle kindness, a sincere respect, and a desire to do the right thing. She liked him, and she was willing to believe that liking might grow into something more.

The arrangement was beneficial to them both, but there was no reason it should not result in something more. Likewise, if it did not, Johanna would have given herself time to make alternative arrangements. Time was what mattered, and the earl's offer would buy her the time she needed.

"I think so, too. They're discussing it as we speak. My mother wanted to wait for my father and brother to return. But I'm certain there'll be no objection," Johanna said.

The bedroom window was open, and now the sound of horse's hooves could be heard from outside. Johanna assumed it was the return of her father and brother, and now she crossed to the window to look out. But to her surprise, it was not her father and brother but a carriage from which now emerged a grand-looking woman dressed in black.

"Who is it?" the earl asked, and Johanna turned to him with a puzzled look on her face.

"I don't know...well, a woman—a very grand-looking woman," she said, and the earl smiled.

"It'll be my mother—she was arriving yesterday. I was expecting her to come," the earl said, rolling his eyes as Johanna turned to him and smiled.

Now, she glanced out of the window again. The grand-looking woman was being greeted by Johanna's mother and aunt. What would they be saying to her? Would she agree to the proposal?

"I should go downstairs. I wonder...well, perhaps you could get up. If I helped you," Johanna said, for it would surely be better to present a united front, rather than for the case for the proposal to be made by Johanna alone.

The earl nodded.

“Yes, if you wouldn’t mind helping me. I’m sure my mother will agree. She’s come down here specifically to make the case for my marrying. She hates the countryside—though she lived at Beaumont Abbey for long enough,” he said, smiling and shaking his head.

With Mary’s help, Johanna was able to assist the earl in getting out of bed. He was a little unsteady on his feet, and complained of aching all over, but between them, they managed to get him upright, and now Johanna took his arm, helping him out of the door and along the corridor to the landing. Voices could be heard coming from downstairs, and Johanna realized her father and brother had returned to the news of the earl’s proposal.

“It certainly strikes me as rather sudden,” Johanna’s father was saying.

“But an excellent match, don’t you think, Baron Hadley? We’ve been neighbors for many years, and to think of our families being united...well, I came down from London to help Edmund make a match. I didn’t think he’d manage it for himself, but he’s proved me wrong, and I’m glad of it,” another voice replied, and Johanna could only assume this was the dowager countess.

As they appeared arm in arm at the top of the stairs, the others looked up from the hallway—Johanna’s mother and aunt, her father and brother, and the earl’s mother, too. All of them looked surprised, and now the dowager countess hurried up the stairs to where Johanna and the earl were standing together.

“Mother...” the earl began, but the dowager now flung her arms around him, sobbing as she did so.

“Oh, my poor Edmund...when they told me you’d had an accident, I was so worried.

But look at you—how fortunate you’ve been. And dear Johanna—how can we thank you enough?” she exclaimed as she and Johanna now helped the earl down the stairs.

“It was all quite by chance,” Johanna said, and the dowager tutted.

“I don’t believe in chance—fate drew you together. It was meant to be. And now a proposal. I think it’s wonderful,” she said.

They had reached the bottom of the stairs, and Johanna now caught her brother’s eye. He did not look convinced by the proposal, but he said nothing, allowing the dowager to continue her outburst of gratitude toward Johanna, who blushed at the praise she was receiving.

“Well...I was only too glad to help,” Johanna said, glancing at the earl, who smiled.

“Let’s talk about it further in the drawing room,” Johanna’s father said, and he ushered the party from the hallway as the dowager continued to extol Johanna’s virtues in the strongest of terms.

“What are you doing?” Roger whispered as the drawing room door was closed behind them.

“Accepting a proposal. And what business is it of yours? I thought you wanted me to get married,” Johanna said, for she did not think her brother had any right to judge her on the matter, even as her father now cleared his throat.

“My lord, am I to understand correctly you’ve proposed to my daughter?” the baron asked.

The earl and his mother were sitting next to one another by the hearth, and the earl nodded, glancing at his mother, who clapped her hands together in delight.

“I think it’s wonderful, don’t you?” she exclaimed.

“I realize it might seem sudden—unexpected, even. We barely know one another, you might say. These things are true. But I pride myself on being an excellent judge of character. I know a good person when I see one, and your daughter’s actions yesterday went above and beyond anything one could have expected of her. A proposal needn’t mean wedding bells immediately. But for those of our rank and class, the fact of an engagement sets a certain tone for relations in the future. As the Earl of Beaumont, I have a duty to continue the family line, and I know you and your wife are eager to see Johanna...Miss Follett, married. What I offer is the possibility of just that, and without the bother and expense of the London Season. We have ample opportunity to deepen our friendship, and there can be no hint of scandal surrounding the match, given the formal declaration we’d make of a commitment,” the earl said.

It was an impressive speech, though bordering on the practical rather than romantic. He mentioned nothing about the Parker sisters, and Johanna could be only glad of the fact, for there was no reason to raise the question of a scandal when such happy news was being conveyed. But Johanna was impressed by him. He had a kind heart and had not treated her as so many other men might have done—dismissing the possibility of scandal as idle fancy. He took his responsibility seriously, and it seemed Johanna’s father now thought the same.

“Well, my lord...you honor us by your proposal. And if Johanna is willing...” he said, glancing at Johanna, who now realized she was being given a choice.

But was it really a choice? Her parents expected her to marry, and if she did not marry the earl, they would expect her to marry someone else instead. She was not to be allowed the freedoms her aunt had enjoyed. Marriage was certain, but the choice of who to marry was, at least, an open one. Johanna knew what was at stake, and in agreeing, she felt a certain sense of finality. What other choice was there?

“I...well, yes,” she said, realizing she could do nothing else but agree.

The dowager clapped her hands together in delight.

“Oh, how wonderful. I’m so pleased for you both,” she exclaimed, and Johanna now glanced at the earl, who smiled.

“Thank you, sir—I’d shake your hand, but...” he said, but Johanna’s father shook his head.

“There’s no need to explain, my lord,” he said, smiling as he did so.

“We should have a toast,” the dowager said, and refreshments were called for—champagne to celebrate their happy union.

But as Johanna raised her glass in a toast, she wondered what she was letting herself in for and whether accepting the earl’s proposal in such haste had really been the right thing to do.



## Page 5

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### Chapter 5

“You will come for the wedding, won’t you, Marian?” Johanna’s mother said, and her aunt nodded.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world. It’ll be a wonderful day. I’m so happy for you, Johanna. Thank you again for accompanying me on my adventure. I’ll have to find a new traveling companion now, though, won’t I? I doubt the earl would allow his new wife to go gallivanting across Europe on her own,” Johanna’s aunt said, smiling, and now she kissed Johanna on the cheek and patted her arm.

Johanna stood to wave her aunt off, sighing as she and her mother returned inside. Her aunt’s departure marked the end of their adventure, and seeing her leave made Johanna realize this was the beginning of a new chapter in her life—whether she liked it or not. The earl had returned to Beaumont Abbey two days previously, and news of their engagement had now spread far and wide. The question of a scandal had been averted, and they had heard nothing from the Parker sisters, not even a whisper. Johanna’s mother no longer spoke of their going up to London for the Season. But there was a sense in which Johanna felt her future was now mapped out for her. She liked the earl—he was handsome, intelligent, quick-witted, and a delight to converse with. But as for marrying him...

“Now then, there’s no time to lose, Johanna. We’ve got a lot to organize if you’re to be married before the end of the Season,” Johanna’s mother said.

The exact date of the wedding had not yet been decided, but it seemed Johanna would have little say in the matter, given the pleasure her mother took in organizing such

things. It was, after all, a mother's prerogative to do so, and Johanna knew she had little choice but to go along with whatever her mother said. The alternative was worse, and Johanna had come to realize it was better the devil she knew—or, at least, vaguely knew.

“But does it have to be so soon, Mother?” Johanna asked, and her mother tutted.

“Why wouldn't you want it to be? The sooner the better, I'd have thought. I'm sure the earl thinks the same. And besides, summer weddings are always so much nicer. Don't you think?” she asked.

Johanna nodded. She had not thought the matter would be so quickly settled on, though it made perfect sense to do so. The proposal had come so suddenly—it was all a blur—given out of necessity, rather than mutual attraction. Had there been a conventional courtship, perhaps those feelings would have grown naturally, but now Johanna was to be married without feeling anything except a vague sense of gratitude. The more she thought about it, the more she wondered if she had moved too hastily to accept. She and the earl had barely spent any time together, and yet now they were to be married, and Johanna was to be the Countess of Beaumont. It all seemed...

“It's very quick,” Johanna said, and her mother raised her eyebrows.

“You do want this, don't you, Johanna?” she asked, and Johanna nodded.

There was nothing else she could say but yes, and yet the more she thought about it, the more she feared what life would be like if she went through with the marriage and became the earl's wife. The alternative—to be dogged by scandal and rumor for the rest of her life—did not present an attractive thought. But either solution entailed a commitment to a certain way of life, one Johanna remained uncertain about.

“I do, Mother, yes,” Johanna said, and her mother patted her on the arm.

“I’m so glad to hear it, Johanna. You deserve to be happy, and I’m going to make sure you have the most perfect of wedding days,” she said.

Johanna forced a smile to her lips, thanking her mother, before making her way outside to the garden. She was usually at her happiest there—among the roses and lavender. But today, even the beauty of the garden could not lift her mood. She felt miserable, and as she crossed the lawn, she thought about running away and never coming back.

“Is everything all right, Miss Follett? You don’t look very happy,” the gardener, Mr. Wilson, said.

He was clipping the box hedge—a topiary sculpture of a peacock—and Johanna turned, surprised to find him there, for she had not noticed him as she had left the house.

“Oh...Mr. Wilson...I’m quite all right, thank you. I’ve just got a lot on my mind,” Johanna said.

“I heard you’re going to marry the Earl of Beaumont. This wouldn’t have anything to do with finding him in the woods, would it?” he asked, and Johanna blushed.

“Well...I’m not sure. Not everyone knows the full story. We were seen—by the Parker sisters. Perhaps you don’t know, but they’re terrible gossips, and they thought they saw something they didn’t. It’s embarrassing to talk about. Anyway, the earl proposed out of a sense of honor, I suppose. But I just don’t know whether to go through with it. What do you think I should do? He wanted to safeguard my reputation, you see. But I don’t think it was damaged. Well...perhaps some people might’ve thought ill of us. But you were there. You know there was nothing untoward

about our encounter,” Johanna said, and the gardener nodded.

“I’d swear to it,” he said.

Johanna was grateful to him. But she knew others would not be so forgiving. It would take only the merest hint of a rumor for a scandal to erupt, and now she felt trapped by the circumstances she and the earl had found themselves in. Mr. Wilson’s word would not stand up against that of the Parker sisters, and Johanna knew it was futile to imagine it might.

“But I don’t think I have any choice, you see. He’s perfectly nice, of course. More than that, he’s handsome, kind, and charming. But is that really enough?” Johanna asked.

It was a question as much to herself as to the gardener, who now scratched his head and shrugged.

“I don’t know much about these things, Miss Follett, but I’d say it can take a lifetime to understand how we feel. But it’s what’s in here that matters most,” he said, tapping his chest.

Johanna nodded. He was right, but as for what her heart was telling her, Johanna remained confused. Heart and mind were not as one, and while the idea of marrying the earl was not repulsive—far from it—the possibility of falling in love with him seemed remote.

“But should a person always marry for love, Mr. Wilson?” Johanna persisted, and the old gardener smiled.

“I think you’ve answered your own question there, Miss Follett,” he replied.

Johanna was about to reply when a voice came from across the garden, and turning, she found Roger coming toward them.

“Johanna—I’m going to Beaumont Abbey to see Edmund. Why don’t you come? You haven’t seen him since the proposal, have you?” he said, and Johanna shook her head.

She had not known whether it was proper to call on the earl or not. He had written to her—thanking her again for what she had done—but as for a more formal arrangement, or the suggestion of the two of them spending time together...

“Well...no, I haven’t. But I could come, I suppose. Yes...why not?” Johanna said, glancing at Mr. Wilson, who smiled.

“Good luck, Miss Follett—and don’t forget, you’ll always have your garden,” he said.

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“I thought we were going to have so much trouble over the matter,” Edmund’s mother said, taking a sip from her cup and smiling at Edmund as she set it down on the table between them.

They were taking tea in the drawing room at Beaumont Abbey, and the dowager countess had been repeating her delight at the fact of the proposal Edmund had made.

“I’m not entirely helpless in these matters, Mother,” he said, and his mother laughed.

“No...but you were hardly making progress, either. Were you? I thought you simply didn’t care about marrying—or the continuation of the line,” she said.

“I care about it a great deal, Mother. But I wasn’t about to marry just anyone, was I?” Edmund said.

“Then how fortuitous you should’ve met Miss Follett. She’s such a delightful creature—I’d have chosen her myself,” the dowager said, and Edmund smiled.

His mother was right. Johanna was a delightful creature, and the fact of her agreeing to the proposal had come as something of a pleasant surprise. Edmund had expected to be dismissed, but now he found himself on the brink of marriage—a marriage that would surely satisfy both parties, even as its protagonists knew better. Edmund was under no illusion as to Johanna’s feelings toward him. He was not in love with her, and she was not in love with him—how could either of them be? And yet they had discovered in one another a mutual benefit in what they were about to embark on—as well as a saving grace. For Johanna, marriage would mean an end to her mother’s plans for a London Season, and for Edmund, it would mean an end to his mother’s plans to marry him off. Both of them would be given time to make alternative arrangements, and if a quiet breaking of the betrothal was necessary, so be it. More importantly, the prospect of a scandal had been averted, and Johanna’s reputation had been saved. In truth, Edmund had not given much thought to the details—nor the implications. But it was enough to be grateful for the here and now, the prospect of their impending marriage looming large.

“I’m glad you approve of her, Mother, and without the need for your own intervention,” Edmund said.

His mother raised her eyebrows.

“You know I only have your best interests at heart. I want you to be happy, Edmund. I wasn’t always happy myself here—you know that. Your father was a good man, but it wasn’t always easy,” the dowager said.

There was a wistful look in her eyes, and Edmund feared she was about to upset herself.

“But it wasn’t all bad, was it?” he said, hoping to gently encourage her into happier thoughts.

The dowager nodded.

“Not at all, no. And if only Beaumont Abbey hadn’t been so...remote. I was worried we’d never find anyone for you in the district. I had it in mind to take you back to London with me. It’s so much easier there. Anyway, none of that matters now. You’re to be married to Miss Follett, and I couldn’t be happier,” she said, taking another sip of tea and smiling.

Edmund was glad to think his mother had been appeased. He had feared she would object to the match, but it seemed Johanna had made as good an impression on her as she had on Edmund himself. He had no doubts as to her suitability for the role of countess, and he was looking forward to their shared companionship, even as the question of what marriage would really be like remained.

“I’m glad to hear it, Mother,” Edmund said, just as the housekeeper, Mrs. Parks, entered the room.

“Excuse me, my lord, my lady, but there’re visitors here to see you—Mr. Follet and Miss Follett. I’ve shown them into the morning room,” she said.

Edmund was surprised—though pleasantly so. He had not expected Johanna to visit him, and now he rose from the tea table and followed Mrs. Parks out into the hallway. His arm was still in a sling, and Doctor Arnold had told him it would be some weeks before the first signs of healing were evident. But the bruising was almost gone, and Edmund’s body no longer ached as it had done in the previous days. He was eager to

get back to his duties—and his riding—though the doctor had urged him to rest a little longer.

“How nice of her to call on us, Edmund. I’m very impressed,” Edmund’s mother said, and now the two of them entered the morning room, where they found Johanna and her brother waiting for them.

“Ah, the patient lives,” Roger said, grinning at Edmund, who laughed.

“Yes, I wasn’t to be gotten rid of so easily. But this is an unexpected pleasure. I’m very glad to see you both,” Edmund said, glancing at Johanna and smiling.

Her expression was difficult to read, and now Edmund wondered if she was perhaps having second thoughts. There was a thoughtfulness in her look, as though she was pondering the situation, rather than delighting in it. Edmund knew he could not expect Johanna to feel as she might have had they had more time, and yet he hoped the prospect of their marriage was not a bleak one. Given time, the two of them might come to form a stronger bond than that of a mere arrangement. He found her attractive, not only in looks, but in demeanor, too. She was an interesting character, with all manner of stories to tell, and despite reminding himself of the practicalities of the match, there seemed no harm in imagining its benefits, too.

“Well, I thought I should bring Johanna with me—the two of you should spend some time together. You’re going to have the rest of your lives together, after all,” Roger said.

Edmund smiled and nodded. He did not know how Roger felt about the situation. Was he in favor of the match, or was he questioning it?

“Perhaps we could walk in the garden?” Edmund suggested—for whatever Roger thought about the situation, he was right about their spending time together before



making such a life-changing commitment.

“An excellent idea—you two go ahead. We’ll act as chaperone, won’t we, Roger?” Edmund’s mother said, taking Johanna’s brother by the arm.

Roger nodded, and Edmund now did the same for Johanna—offering her his unbroken arm and leading the way out into the garden. It was a beautiful day, and the scent of the flowers perfumed the air as they walked in the warm sunshine on the lawn.

“I wish I could ride out. I’ve been dying to get back into the saddle. But Doctor Arnold was very firm on the matter,” Edmund said as he and Johanna walked ahead of his mother and Roger.

“And he was right to be so. You can’t go riding out with a broken arm. What if you fell again?” Johanna asked, and Roger blushed.

He did not like to feel himself helpless—unable to do what he had always taken for granted.

“Well...I suppose you’d have to pick me up again,” he said, and Johanna smiled.

“You were very lucky I found you...I dread to think what would’ve happened...well, if I hadn’t. It’s so unfair, isn’t it? One tries to help...” Johanna replied.

“And ends up with a betrothal,” Edmund replied, and Johanna laughed; she was even prettier when she laughed.

“I’m very grateful to you, Miss Follett, and I hope you don’t feel as though I’ve taken advantage in my proposal. I really think it’s for the best—for both of us,” Edmund said.

He did not want her to feel trapped or forced into something she was not certain about. But the alternative was not palatable—whispers of scandal, a ruined reputation, and the possibility Johanna might never find a husband if word of what had happened reached the capital. Society was fickle, and if Johanna's reputation was tarnished, she would find herself attracting only the dregs of the social scene. But Edmund had his own reputation to think of, too, and if he was not to marry Johanna, he could only imagine the sort of woman who might be attracted to a man considered free with his favors if news of what had happened in the woods should become widely known...

"You're right. I've thought about it a lot, and...well, I think it's for the best. I won't say it's ideal, but it'll do," Johanna replied.

Edmund nodded. He could hardly expect more, reminding himself they barely knew one another. And yet, because of the events that had brought them together, the sense of intimacy they had shared—his own vulnerability and her obvious strength of character in helping him—Edmund felt close to her. Far closer than he had ever felt to any other woman of his acquaintance.

"But in time—given the right circumstances, I'm sure we'll grow closer. It's just a matter of getting to know one another, isn't it?" Edmund said, and Johanna nodded.

"It'll take time. But you're right—I'm sure we'll come to an understanding. It's best for us both, isn't it? My mother was going to take me to London for the Season. She'd have married me off to some awful aristocrat—probably older than me and certainly dull. No...this way is much better," Johanna said, and Edmund smiled.

"I hope I'm not dull. You'll have to tell me if I am," he said, and Johanna laughed.

"No, I don't think you're dull. Not at all. You seem to have led a very interesting life so far—and to have an interesting life ahead of you," she said, and Edmund blushed.

He did not think his life had been particularly interesting—and certainly not in comparison to hers. The thought of the stories she had told him of her travels in Europe had inspired a sense of adventure in him. How wonderful it would be to see these remarkable sights for himself and to experience other cultures, other lives, and traditions.

“You’re the one who’s led an interesting life, Miss Follett. My own hasn’t been much to speak of—following the path of duty. That’s what I’ve done. I’m proud of that, though I wasn’t entirely prepared for the burden of responsibility given to me. My father died unexpectedly, you see. And what choice does the son of an earl have but to inherit the title. It’s a strange thing—born into a lack of choice,” Edmund said.

He had been reflecting on his own words a lot recently. His life had been marked by great privilege, but also the knowledge of what that privilege meant. Edmund had not made many choices for himself, and in his proposal to Johanna, he had at last been given the chance to make such a choice, rather than see it made for him.

Johanna nodded. “Yes, I see that. I couldn’t imagine it for myself, though I suppose Roger’s the same. Perhaps that’s why the two of you get on so well,” she said, and Edmund smiled.

“Yes, perhaps it is. I must say, it’s a strange thing—duty. It requires so much of one. I don’t shirk from it, but there are days when I wish it wasn’t mine to bear,” he said.

They had reached the far side of the lawn now, and turning, they had a view back across the gardens to Beaumont Abbey. It was a magnificent house—one of the finest in the county. Edmund was glad to be its master, and yet there were times—particularly recently—when he had felt the burden of responsibility more acutely. He was still young, and to have the path before him so clearly mapped out had given him reason for resentment. Johanna’s stories of travel and adventure had made him realize what he had missed out on—that there was still so much he wanted

to do and see.

“Would you give it up?” Johanna asked, and Edmund sighed.

“How could I? It’s mine—and it’s my duty to continue it as best I can,” he replied.

“You mean by producing an heir?” Johanna asked, and Edmund blushed.

When he had asked Johanna to marry him, it had been for a practical reason, and the avoidance of scandal. But she was right—there would be the expectation of an heir. There had to be, otherwise a fresh scandal would be created.

“I suppose so, yes. But...we can talk about such things later, I suppose. For now...well, I’m glad you came. I know this is all very odd—for both of us. But I think we can make it work. Don’t you?” he said, and Johanna smiled—she had a beautiful smile, a smile that lit up her face, genuine and sincere.

“I think we can, yes,” she replied, and Edmund smiled back at her, wondering if perhaps one day she could come to love him and hoping the same could be said for him, too.

### Chapter 6

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony, which is an honorable estate, instituted of God in the time of man’s innocence, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church...” the minister was saying, introducing the marriage ceremony as Johanna and Edmund stood before him.

The wedding was taking place in the village church, and a good number of guests had turned out for the occasion—despite the short notice of the invitation. It had been only a month since the proposal, and Edmund’s arm was still in a sling. But both their mothers had insisted on a swift arrangement, and there had barely been time for Johanna to alter the dress her aunt had bought for her before the day of the wedding had arrived.

“We did it,” Edmund whispered after the final blessing had been given.

Johanna smiled and nodded, taking her new husband’s arm as the two of them now turned to face the congregation. Johanna’s mother was in floods of tears, as was Edmund’s mother, too. Her aunt appeared more stoical—in private, she had confided her fears as to the swiftness of the arrangements, though she was still in favor of Johanna marrying.

“Life as a spinster isn’t all it’s made out to be,” she had warned, even as Johanna had continued to wonder what life might have been like had she refused Edmund’s offer.

But it was too late now; however Johanna might have imagined her wedding day to

have been, this was not it. The trappings were there, the words were the same. She had made vows and promises before God, and now there was to be a celebration at Beaumont Abbey. Johanna was the Countess of Beaumont—she outranked her own mother. But all of these things were superficial. The marriage was merely a front. It did not mean anything. There was no love behind it, and Johanna could not help but feel as though she was deceiving herself—and others, too.

“Oh, I’m so happy for the two of you. Isn’t this wonderful?” Edmund’s mother, the dowager countess, said as she came to congratulate them.

“Thank you, Mother,” Edmund replied as the dowager slipped her arm into Johanna’s and kissed her on the cheek.

“It’s never easy entering a family, but I want you to be happy at Beaumont Abbey, Johanna. You’re its new mistress, and there’s a lot you’ll have to learn about running a household. But fear not, I’m going to make it my business to help you. I came down here not knowing how long I’d have to stay—long enough to help Edmund find a wife. But since he managed to do that himself, perhaps my time might be better spent helping you instead. Now, let’s think where to start,” she said.

Johanna smiled—what else could she do? The dowager was well-meaning, but Edmund had warned her as to his mother’s overbearing nature. Johanna did not like to think what she would be like if her offer of help was refused, and she nodded, thanking the dowager for her kindness.

“That’s very kind of you, thank you,” she said, and the dowager beamed at her.

“You remind me of myself on my wedding day—so full of hopes and expectations. I just hope...well, I hope you’ll be happy. Happier than I was,” she said.

Johanna felt sorry for the dowager. Edmund had told her something of how unhappy

his mother had been at Beaumont Abbey, and how living in London had given her a new lease on life.

“I don’t want you to stay longer than you intended to, though. I know you don’t care for the countryside,” Johanna said, but the dowager now clapped her hands together in delight.

“Oh, but that’s the perfect idea, isn’t it? You can both come back with me and spend the rest of the Season in London. It can be your debut—all married couples need a debut. Everyone knows you’re getting married—it was announced in all the periodicals, but they’ll want to see you, won’t they? We can leave at once. What do you think, Edmund?” the dowager asked.

Edmund looked uncomfortable, glancing at Johanna, who could not think of anything to say in reply. She did not want to go to London, and yet she knew Edmund’s mother would insist on it.

“Well...we can think about it, Mother. I don’t want to neglect my duties here,” Edmund said.

Others were waiting to congratulate them on their marriage, but Edmund’s mother now looked imploringly at them both.

“It would mean so much to me if you did—London can be a lonely place for a dowager,” she said, and Edmund nodded.

“I’m sure we can find the time, Mother,” he replied, and his mother now brushed a tear from her eye.

“How wonderful,” she said, even as Johanna could think of nothing she wanted less than to spend the remainder of the Season in the capital...

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If Johanna had hoped the idea of their going to London with the dowager might be forgotten, she was mistaken, and it was only a week later she found herself in the capital, staying at Beaumont House—the London residence of the earls of Beaumont, and the dowager’s home. It was a comfortable dwelling in the heart of Mayfair, and Johanna had everything she needed—and far more—to make her stay pleasant. But try as she might, she was finding it hard to settle, longing for the freedom she had known on her travels in Europe, a freedom now denied her. Edmund had been a model husband so far—kind and considerate, a perfect gentleman. But something was still missing—the romance, the sense of feeling toward one another. There was no doubting his handsome looks, and few women would find marriage to an earl a hardship. But as for a spark, a genuine sense of affection, that was missing, and Johanna was beginning to wonder if she could really go on without it...

“You mustn’t forget the ball tonight—the Duke and Duchess of Sherbridge. They’re in London for the Season, and they always host the most magnificent balls. I sent word of our arrival, and the duchess insisted on your both being invited. She’ll be very pleased to have you make your debut this evening,” Edmund’s mother said as they sat at breakfast a few days after their arrival in the capital.

Johanna looked up and nodded. The thought of it did not excite her. She hated the idea of being looked at—of being judged. The ton loved to judge and pass comment, but Johanna did not see why she should have to be the object of such judgment and comment. She and Edmund were married—was that not enough? They were respectable, and any question of scandal had been avoided. Now, she glanced at him across the table, wondering what he thought.

“Ah, yes, Roger mentioned something about it. I suppose we don’t have much of a choice, do we?” he said, and his mother rolled her eyes.



“You make it sound like a chore, Edmund. There will be music, dancing, refreshments—it’ll be a delightful evening,” she said, and it seemed the matter was settled.

Mary—who had come to London to act as Johanna’s maid—helped her choose a dress—red, with a golden sash and lace trim to the sleeves—and ready herself for the evening. Johanna knew she had to make a good impression—impressions were what mattered most. It was style over substance, as far as the ton was concerned. That was the reason she and Edmund were married. Any rumors as to impropriety had been quashed by the announcement of their marriage, and now, there was no question of anything but legitimacy in their relationship. And yet Johanna still wondered if she had been too hasty in accepting the proposal. It had all happened so fast, and now they had made vows binding them together for life.

“Are you looking forward to the ball, my lady?” Mary asked, and Johanna shrugged.

“I don’t know, really. I suppose I am, yes. I just don’t like being looked at and judged. We’re making a debut—it isn’t enough to just be married, we have to be seen to be married in the eyes of the ton. It’s all very strange. Still, it’s what has to be done, isn’t it?” Johanna said, and the maid nodded.

“Is there anything else I can do for you, my lady? Shall I help you choose a piece of jewelry to wear? Your green brooch would go very well with your dress,” she said, but Johanna shook her head.

“No, thank you, Mary. It’s all right. The dowager has already made a suggestion,” she said, glancing at the jewelry box on her dressing table.

Since marrying Edmund, Johanna had come to realize just how forceful the dowager could be. Her suggestions were more than suggestions. What she said was what she expected—whether it was the suggestion of a piece of jewelry, or what to think about

a particular topic of conversation. She and Johanna had not yet found themselves in conflict, but Johanna was already fearing the moment when the inevitable occurred.

“Very good, my lady. I’ll be waiting for your return. I hope you have a lovely evening,” Mary said, and curtsying, she left the room.

Johanna sighed. She was not looking forward to the ball, fearing it would be an uncomfortable situation to find herself in. What would the ton think of her? Would she and Edmund be whispered and gossiped about? She put on the piece of jewelry belonging to the dowager—a diamond-embedded necklace made of silver—and made her way downstairs, where she found Edmund and his mother waiting for her.

“Oh, there you are, Johanna. Don’t you look pretty? And the necklace suits you so well. I’m so pleased,” Edmund’s mother said, and Johanna forced a smile to her face.

“It was very kind of you to suggest I wear it,” Johanna said, and the dowager waved her hand dismissively.

“It was nothing—nothing at all. Come now, let’s get going—we don’t want to be late now, do we?” she said, marching toward the door which was hastily opened by a footman.

Edmund offered Johanna his arm, and she took it, smiling at him as he leaned in to whisper to her.

“I’m sorry if you feel she’s taking over,” he said, but Johanna shook her head.

“It’s quite all right. I’m sure I don’t think anything of the sort,” she replied, but in her heart of hearts, it was yet another reason to question what she was doing, and she wondered if marrying the earl had really been the right decision.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:08 am*

### Chapter 7

“Here we are,” Edmund’s mother said as the carriage pulled up outside a large townhouse a short while later.

Edmund peered out of the compartment window, watching as fashionably dressed men and women made their way up the steps to the open doors, where liveried footmen stood at attention on either side, and burning torches marked the way inside. He glanced over at Johanna and smiled.

“It’s certainly a grand-looking place, isn’t it? One forgets just how busy London can be. I suppose it was the same in Europe—in the cities, I mean,” he said.

Johanna nodded.

“To an extent, yes. But a lot of the cities on the Italian peninsula feel far more ancient—the Great Fire of London did so much to strip the capital of its past. What we see now is all Christopher Wren’s doing,” Johanna said, and Edmund nodded.

He liked the fact of her intelligence. They had such interesting conversations, and Johanna was not the sort of person simply to agree with what he said. If she did not, she would challenge it. Edmund found her a refreshing change from those women his mother had steered him toward in the past. She was passionate and unafraid of speaking her mind.

“Yes, you’re absolutely right—it was such a tragedy. I’d have loved to have seen the old Saint Paul’s,” Edmund said.

His mother cleared her throat.

“Shall we go in? They’ll be waiting for us,” she said, and Edmund nodded.

He opened the compartment door and climbed out, offering his hand to his mother, who came next. But before he could do so for Johanna, she had already climbed down and was making her way up the steps and into the house. Edmund hurried after her, knowing it would not do for the two of them not to arrive together.

“Your name, sir,” the steward in the hallway asked as Edmund caught up with Johanna.

“The Earl and Countess of Beaumont, and the dowager Countess of Beaumont,” Edmund replied, as Johanna now stepped forward.

“I’ll announce you, my lord,” the steward said, but before he could do so, Johanna had entered the ballroom without them, and Edmund’s mother hissed at him to stop her.

“They’ll all be looking!” she exclaimed, even as the steward announced their names.

Edmund was standing in the doorway of the ballroom with his mother, but Johanna had already descended the steps and was greeting another woman with an embrace. All eyes were on them, and Edmund feared what they would be thinking. The haste of the marital announcement had been whispered about in the ton—he had heard the rumors at the club—and Edmund had hoped not to draw attention to themselves until the matter could be forgotten.

“I couldn’t stop her, Mother,” he replied, and his mother tutted.

“Perhaps she needs a little refinement, though I’m surprised her mother didn’t teach

her such things. I suppose she hasn't had a London Season yet. Never mind—make sure you dance together. This is your chance to be seen. Oh, look...the duke and duchess,” Edmund's mother said, and now an elderly couple, both with gray hair, approached, smiling as they greeted them.

“Lady Beaumont, how nice to see you—and Lord Beaumont, you're most welcome. Did I hear your wife announced, too?” the duchess asked, and Edmund nodded.

“Yes...she's over there. She...saw an old friend, I believe,” he said, for Johanna was still talking animatedly to a woman he did not recognize.

The duchess smiled.

“We're so glad you were able to make your debut here with us this evening. It's an honor to have you with us,” she said, and Edmund forced a smile to his face.

“Yes...it's a great honor for us, too,” he replied, hoping their debut would not end in a farce...

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Johanna had not enjoyed making her entrance to the ball. She had wanted to get it over with as quickly as possible and had stepped forward before she was announced. But as she had done so—and realizing her mistake—she had caught sight of an old friend, Tabitha Howe. Tabitha's family had lived in the district of Wilton Grange when Tabitha was a child, and she and Johanna had played together as children. They had lost touch over the years—Tabitha's family having moved to London due to her father's work, but seeing her again after all these years had been a delight, and Johanna had hurried to greet her, quite forgetting her announcement by the steward and the need to create the right impression.

“It’s so wonderful to see you again, Johanna—or should I say, “my lady?” I read about your marriage to the earl in the periodicals, but I didn’t realize you’d be here tonight,” Tabitha said.

She had grown into an attractive woman—tall and slender, with bright green eyes, her long blonde hair tied up in a bun. She was dressed in an elegant green gown with a matching shawl around her shoulders, and wearing emerald studded jewelry—a necklace, brooch, and earrings.

“And I’m so happy to see you, too. Did you know I’ve been away in Europe this past year?” Johanna asked.

Tabitha shook her head, furrowing her brow as though trying to make sense of the timings.

“But...weren’t you courting? You didn’t go together, did you?” she asked, lowering her voice as though the very thought of it was scandalous.

“No, we didn’t. I went with my aunt. Edmund and I only met a month or so ago. It was a swift proposal,” Johanna replied.

She had almost said romance, but had stopped short of doing so, knowing it had not been, even as others would assume as much. Tabitha nodded.

“Oh, I see...how extraordinary. I read about it in the periodicals, of course. But I didn’t know the details,” she said, and Johanna blushed.

It was extraordinary—a strange tale when told to someone without full knowledge of the events in question.

Why had Johanna married Edmund? It was a question she had pondered herself in the

previous days since they had made their vows. Had she avoided a scandal by doing so? The ton was fickle, and while the gossip wheel might well have delighted in the story of an earl and a baron's daughter in flagrante on a carpet of bluebells—such stories would always be embellished with superfluous detail—they would soon find something more scandalous to discuss. Johanna had realized too late how the passing of time was also the passing of memory. What had once seemed the most important thing in all the world would, with the passing of time, disappear into forgotten memory. But a failed marriage...

"I know it was all rather quick," Johanna said, preempting what she believed Tabitha was about to say.

But Tabitha shook her head and placed her hand on Johanna's arm, leaning in to whisper to her.

"But he's terribly handsome, isn't he? I can entirely understand why you'd want to hurry the match. If it was me, I wouldn't want anyone else to get there before me," she said, and Johanna blushed.

"No...you're right. That's just what happened. We fell in love," she said as though it was the most natural thing in the world—which it would have been had it happened.

The musicians were tuning up their instruments, and it would soon be time for the first dance. Johanna looked around her for Edmund, and now she saw him talking to her brother in a far corner of the room. Johanna had forgotten Roger was in London, and she smiled at the sight of him, wondering what the two men were saying to one another...

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"I won't deny I found it all rather sudden," Roger said, raising his glass to Edmund in

a toast.

Edmund smiled. It had been sudden, but not so much as to raise too much suspicion. Most of the people he had talked to found it all very romantic—the chance meeting, the immediate proposal, the suggestion of love at first sight. That none of this had been the case did not really matter—appearances were everything to the ton, and it seemed this particular appearance had fooled everyone. But if Johanna continued to behave with the same streak of independence she had portrayed that evening, tongues would soon begin to wag, and questions would be asked.

“But you approve, don’t you? You don’t feel I’ve taken advantage of your sister, I hope,” Edmund asked.

He respected Roger and trusted him as a friend. They shared a love of horses, and both were interested in the development of agricultural practices on their respective estates. Edmund knew Roger to be a man of principles and he did not want him to think ill of him in this matter, or any other. But to his relief, Roger shook his head.

“No, not at all. In fact...I’m grateful to you. As are my mother and father. We were worried about Johanna. Before she left for the continent, she was as timid as a mouse. We feared she’d never make a match. But from the letters she sent back, we began to have the impression she’d become...well, overconfident. It’s not necessarily an attractive feature in a woman. Men don’t like to feel threatened by the overbearingness of their wives. On her return, our fears were realized. As you know, my mother was going to bring her up to London for the Season in the hope of making a match, but we all feared she’d prove off-putting to the sort of men we’d want to introduce her to,” Roger said.

Edmund nodded, though it was precisely her “over-confidence” he found appealing. Edmund did not want the sort of woman who would simply say yes to everything he said—the sort of woman who would not hold her own or argue her position. He had



been impressed by Johanna's confidence, both in herself and her situation. She had already proved a formidable companion, and Edmund was only too glad to call her his wife for just this reason.

"Well, I suppose it doesn't matter now, does it? She can be as bold as she wishes. I admire her for the way she speaks her mind," he said, and Roger smiled.

"I wonder if you'll still be saying that in a few years' time," he said, raising his eyebrows.

Edmund had not thought about the next few years—or even the next few months. His proposal to Johanna had been spontaneous—perhaps even the result of the bump he had sustained to his head. It had seemed the only choice at the time, but the more he thought about it, the stranger the decision had seemed. He was married, and a marriage was not something that could easily be undone.

"And what of your own prospects?" Edmund asked, hastily changing the subject lest he find himself dwelling on what he hoped was not a terrible mistake.

Roger sighed.

"Well, I'm afraid we're not all lucky enough to be rescued from a horse riding accident by a pretty young woman—even if she is my sister. But your marrying has one advantage," he said, and Edmund looked at him questioningly.

"And what would that be?" he asked, not knowing what his friend meant.

Roger laughed.

"It means one less competitor in the field. I'm the mere son of a baron—how could I compete with the Earl of Beaumont. But joking aside, there's one woman I rather

like—Lavinia Morton. Have you seen her? She's beautiful, and I've already marked her dance card for the second dance—her father always has the first one, apparently. She's over there," Roger said, pointing in the direction of a petite young woman with a pretty face framed by ringleted red hair standing with an older man by the refreshment table.

Edmund knew the woman, of course. The ton was a small world, and its inhabitants passed between one another's houses and attended shared functions, navigating the Season together.

"She's very pretty," Edmund said, and Roger smiled.

"I've asked her to dance—but I'm sure so has everyone else, too. But only one dance card matters to you, of course," he said, and Edmund smiled, glancing over to where Johanna was still talking to her friend.

"Yes...I hope it does to her, too," he said as much to himself as to Roger.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:08 am*

### Chapter 8

“And you’re happy, aren’t you, Johanna? I did wonder what you’d do on returning from the continent. England must’ve seemed like another world,” Tabitha said.

“Yes...I’m happy. It’s taking some getting used to—marriage, I mean. Sometimes, he can seem...distant,” Johanna said, glancing over to where Edmund was talking to her brother.

He had made no approach to her since their arrival, and Johanna was beginning to wonder if he was ever going to ask her to dance. She was glad to have met Tabitha at the ball, but it felt embarrassing to admit her new husband had not shown her the attention she had expected—and for him to even now appear to ignore her.

“Well, I suppose it takes some getting used to, doesn’t it? Being a husband. Just like being a wife does, too,” Tabitha replied, and Johanna nodded.

“Yes, I suppose so. I just feel we’re both living in our own worlds. I don’t know. It’s not quite what I expected,” Johanna said.

“Then why not make of it what you expect? Why wait for him to take the lead?” Tabitha asked.

Johanna smiled. Her friend was right—since arriving in London, she had done little to make her expectations known. It seemed to Johanna the earl believed his duty to have been done. But she wanted more than this—at the very least, she wanted them to be friends. They had gotten on so well at first, in the aftermath of the accident. The

earl's stay at Wilton Grange had been a delight, and Johanna had felt as though their marriage really would be a success—as much as it was based on the avoidance of a scandal. But how it had turned out was not how she had hoped it would be, and now she was questioning whether she had made the right decision.

“You're right. I'm being foolish, aren't I? I should be happy. Being married to an earl, and with all the advantages it gives, should be every woman's dream,” she replied, resolving to do as Tabitha suggested.

Tabitha was about to respond when a voice behind them caused both women to turn.

“Johanna—back from your travels, I see. The Countess of Beaumont. I should curtsy, shouldn't I?” and turning, they found Wilhelmina Morton standing behind them.

Johanna groaned inwardly. Wilhelmina was a friend of the mother of the Parker sisters, who always spent the Season in London with her daughter, Lavinia. Her husband was the member of Parliament for the north of Hampshire, and there was no doubt she knew everything the Parker sisters knew, too.

“Wilhelmina...how nice to see you,” Johanna said, forcing a smile to her face.

“The pleasure's mine, of course. I was beginning to wonder if you'd ever come back. But you had your reasons, of course,” she said, raising her eyebrows as she glanced in the direction of the earl.

Johanna blushed.

“Yes...I suppose I did,” she replied.

“It was a very sudden match. Did you know one another before you left for the

continent? I suppose you must've done," Wilhelmina continued.

There was a tone of implication in her voice. Johanna knew just what she was saying, and it felt unsettling. In marrying the earl, she had hoped to quash any suspicions as to what had passed between them, and she had thought the matter resolved. There had been no word from the Parker sisters, and yet it seemed they had set their rumor ships to sail, and Wilhelmina was one of them...

"No, we didn't. It was a brief courtship, I admit. But we're very happy," Johanna replied.

Wilhelmina smiled.

"I'm sure you are, and I wish you every happiness in the future," she said, nodding, before making her way over to the refreshment table.

Johanna glanced at Tabitha, who looked suddenly uncomfortable.

"I didn't like to mention...well, there's a lot of talk around your marriage, Johanna. They say the haste was because...well, you're with child," Tabitha said, lowering her voice as she spoke.

Johanna was shocked. It was one thing to be accused of impropriety—a stolen kiss or even an illicit liaison—but quite another to have it suggested she was with child.

"But that's nonsense," she hissed, glancing around her, even as she realized some of the other women were looking at her with disapproving gazes.

"I know, and I don't believe a word of it, unless..." Tabitha began, and Johanna raised her eyebrows.

She drew her friend aside, intending now to tell her the truth about the match. Tabitha listened, her eyes growing wide as Johanna described what the Parker sisters thought they had seen.

“And that’s why Edmund felt it was his duty to ask for my hand. There was no whirlwind romance. The entire thing was an exercise in practicality. But if it’s to be assumed I was with child...well, marriage or no marriage, it hardly matters, does it?” she said, sighing, as she glanced across to where Edmund was still talking to her brother.

Tabitha placed a comforting hand on her arm.

“I’m sorry, Johanna. But I don’t know what else you can do but bear the rumors out. You know what the ton is like. There’ll be something else for them to gossip over by next week. But as for you and Edmund...I hope the two of you can find some common ground. A marriage shouldn’t just be about practicalities,” she said.

Johanna felt the same. She wanted something more—perhaps not to fall in love, but to feel a sense of companionship, of friendship, of intimacy, even. At the moment, it was hard to know what she felt. But as she glanced across the ballroom, a new and unexpected feeling struck her. Edmund was no longer talking to her brother, but to Lavinia Morton—an attractive young lady who was fluttering a fan coquettishly as she leaned forward to whisper something in Edmund’s ear. The earl was smiling—laughing—and Lavinia was fluttering her eyelids in a most flirtatious manner. Watching the scene, Johanna could not help but feel jealous. The feeling struck her with an unexpected force, even as she reminded herself she had no right to feel as she now did.

“Would you excuse me, Tabitha?” Johanna said, and now she made her way over to where her husband was talking to the woman.

As Johanna approached, the pair looked up, and Edmund smiled.

“Ah, Johanna, there you are. I’d like to introduce you to Miss Lavinia Morton,” Edmund said.

“Oh, Edmund, we know one another—you don’t need to fuss so over introductions. Dear Johanna, how lovely to see you. Richard was telling me of your adventures on the continent. What fun you must’ve had. And now the happiness of your unexpected match,” Lavinia said, emphasizing her words as she smiled at Johanna, who now slipped her arm into Edmund’s.

“The happiest of matches,” Johanna replied, and Lavinia smiled.

“Yes...I’m sure,” she said, glancing at the earl, who blushed.

“Well, I think the dancing is soon to begin. Will you be dancing with Roger, Lavinia?” Johanna asked.

She did not know why she felt threatened by Lavinia, but her mind was racing with fears of Edmund’s feelings toward her. It was irrational—extraordinary, even—but Johanna could not help the way she was feeling.

“Are you all right? You hurried away very quickly when we arrived,” Edmund said.

“I saw Tabitha, that’s all—it’s been over a year. But I need to talk to you about something,” Johanna said as the couple joined the throng of dancers in the center of the ballroom.

A waltz had just struck up, and Edmund now slipped his arm around Johanna’s waist, taking her hand in his, as the two of them began to twirl and whirl to the music.

“What’s wrong? Has something happened?” Edmund asked.

“It’s something Tabitha told me—there’re rumors I’m with child and that’s why we married in such haste,” Johanna replied.

Edmund looked at her in surprise.

“But that’s preposterous—what a monstrous suggestion. Who’s behind it?” he asked.

“Who do you think? The Parker sisters, of course. But it means we’ve got to present ourselves as the perfect married couple. I know it’s all for show, but if we don’t make a pretense of showing ourselves to be in love with one another, then things are only going to get worse,” Johanna said.

Edmund nodded.

“Yes...a pretense, yes, I suppose...but I can’t imagine anyone believing such rumors. You only arrived back from Europe that day,” he said.

“I know, but you know what it’s like—the facts don’t have to fit the rumor. It’s enough for the gossip to begin, and then only ruin lies ahead. I know we’re only doing our duty, but...can’t we make it seem like something more?” Johanna asked.

She had been surprised at the force of her feelings toward him—the unexpected sense of jealousy at seeing him with Lavinia, and now, even as she spoke of duty and necessity, it was as though Johanna wanted to feel something more. Marriage—this marriage, as strange and complicated as it was—meant something. She recalled the words from the prayer book, words she had taken to heart—that marriage should “not by any to be enterprised, nor taken in hand, unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly ...but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God.” That had meant something to her—she had read the words over and over again, reflecting on them



and taking them to heart. She wanted more than mere duty, and the sight of Lavinia's flirtations had roused feelings in Johanna she had not expected.

"I know it's not been easy, Johanna. But I'm sure the two of us can do more than just make a pretense of it," Edmund said, smiling at Johanna, who nodded.

"I know we can," she said, smiling back at him.

He had a grace and poise to him—even as he still complained of a stiffness in his arm, now almost healed—and to feel his arms around her, to have him hold her and lead her in the dance, gave Johanna a sense of intimacy she had not felt before. She was enjoying his company, and it seemed he was enjoying hers, too. Johanna felt a sense of relief, glancing over to where Lavinia Morton was talking to her mother, Wilhelmina. Again, she wondered what Lavinia's intentions toward Edmund might be, but for now, Johanna was content to enjoy the moment—surprised by the force of her feelings toward the man who now held her in his arms.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:08 am*

### Chapter 9

“I’m dining with Lady Strawbridge tonight. You remember Lady Strawbridge, don’t you, Edmund?” the dowager said.

Edmund looked up from his desk and shook his head. He was trying to concentrate on some important business, but his mother seemed determined to interrupt him.

“I’m not sure I do, no,” he replied, not particularly caring who Lady Strawbridge was or why he should remember her.

His mother sighed.

“She’s the daughter of the Duke of Clarence—never married. She and I were at Faversham together. We’ve kept in touch all these years. I should’ve chosen her to be your godmother, but I was closer to Bonnie at the time, and well...but you know her,” the dowager said.

Edmund decided it was easier to agree than argue. Whenever his mother mentioned her finishing school at Faversham, it would be accompanied by a string of names Edmund could make no sense of. He had not seen his godmother, Lady Bonnie Routledge, in years, and as for Lady Strawbridge...

“Ah, yes, I remember now,” he said, lying in the hope of returning to his work.

“Tell Johanna, won’t you?” his mother said, and Edmund nodded.

“I will,” he said, breathing a sigh of relief as his mother left the room.

He loved her dearly, but he was beginning to think it might be better for him and Johanna to return to Beaumont Abbey. Edmund did not think Johanna had settled well into life in London. She busied herself with her hobbies—often making excursions to the parks and monuments to sketch or spending her time at the pianoforte. But Edmund had seen little interest in her making friends or involving herself in the social scene. He worried she would become a recluse, and he was beginning to think it better for her to be back closer to her family and the garden she so loved.

“My lord, may I enquire as to the arrangements for dinner this evening?” the butler asked after Edmund’s mother had left to dine with Lady Strawbridge.

“Ah, yes, thank you, Roberts. I’ll take a tray in here as usual. I’m sure Her Ladyship won’t mind dining alone,” Edmund replied, and the butler nodded.

Edmund had taken to dining alone in the past few weeks. He was busy—the affairs of the estate taking up much of his time—and he did not have the luxury of dining leisurely. The clock on the mantelpiece had just struck seven, but when the butler returned, it was not with a tray of food, but with a note.

“From Her Ladyship, my lord,” he said, handing Edmund the note.

“Where’s my dinner?” Edmund asked, but the butler merely handed Edmund the note.

Unfolding the piece of paper, Edmund began to read—it was only a brief missive, but it made him smile to read it.

The Countess of Beaumont requests the pleasure of the company of her husband at

dinner this evening, to be served in the dining room at eight o'clock. Formal dress, it read, and Edmund now looked up at the butler and laughed.

"It seems I've been given my instructions," he said, feeling suddenly guilty at the thought of having neglected his wife—or of Johanna feeling as though he had.

The two of them lived somewhat separate lives—not by design, but by circumstance. Edmund had his work, and Johanna entertained herself with her hobbies. The common denominator was Edmund's mother, in whose house they were staying, and who kept Edmund abreast with Johanna's activities and vice-versa. Edmund knew he needed to make more of an effort—he had promised as much at the ball. It was not that he did not want to. He liked Johanna a great deal. She was charming and witty, possessed of a keen intellect, with a confidence born from her travels across Europe—an independent spirit he admired. She was pretty, too—beautiful, in fact—and Edmund could not help but find himself attracted to her, just as he had been at the first moment they set eyes on one another. Now, he nodded, rising from his desk and pushing his correspondence aside.

"Shall I tell Her Ladyship you accept her invitation, my lord?" the butler asked, and Edmund nodded.

"Please do—I'd better go and dress for dinner, I suppose," he replied, and the butler nodded.

As Edmund readied himself, he smiled at the thought of the invitation he had received. But behind it, there was a sincerity—a need, even.

I want to make more of an effort. She deserves as much, he thought to himself.

But behind his words, there was a further question—that of his own feelings toward Johanna. He was growing fond of her, and his guilt at not spending enough time with

her was born of that very reason. But as for how Johanna felt toward him...

It's all very practical, he reminded himself.

He had kept his distance for this very reason. It would not do for his own feelings to get carried away. Should he grow attached to Johanna, he might well find himself disappointed—heartbroken, even—if she did not reciprocate. But the invitation to dine with her had intrigued him. Was she merely angry with him for not spending more time with her, or was there another reason behind this unexpected summons? Having finished dressing, Edmund made his way downstairs, curious as to what lay ahead.

“Her Ladyship’s waiting for you in the dining room, my lord,” the butler said.

“Thank you, Roberts,” Edmund said, and now he entered the dining room, finding Johanna standing by the table.

The sight took his breath away—she was dressed in a beautiful, flowing gown, peacock blue with a matching sash and wearing diamond earrings and matching necklace. The table was lavishly set with the best silver cutlery and crystal glassware, and a candelabra illuminated the scene. The wine had already been poured, and two footmen stood stiffly by the sideboard, ready to serve.

“I thought you should have a proper dinner this evening—rather than a tray in the study. We haven’t dined together alone since we arrived in London,” Johanna said, pulling back the chair at the head of the table for Edmund to sit down.

There was a note of firmness in her voice, and once again, Edmund felt a sense of guilt at having neglected her.

“Ah, well...yes...I’m sorry about that,” he said, taking the proffered seat.

“If we’re to be married, we need to appear as a married couple,” she said as the first course—a soup—was served.

Edmund nodded. She really did look very pretty in her finery. She was wearing an opal brooch—studded with diamonds—and Edmund recognized it as one belonging to his mother.

“You’re right...I suppose my mother had a hand in this,” he said, but Johanna shook her head.

“No, it was my idea. I asked your mother if I could borrow her brooch. She was more than happy to allow it,” Johanna replied.

The footmen had now left the dining room, and the two of them were alone. Edmund took a sip of wine, fearing he had inadvertently upset Johanna by failing to spend time with her.

“I’m sorry if I’ve been...distant,” he said.

“You can’t go on behaving like a bachelor. It’s not just the ton who like to gossip. Servants do, too, and I wouldn’t put it past the Parker sisters to slip a few shillings to one of the scullery maids for the tittle-tattle of below stairs. You promised you’d make more of an effort...” Johanna said.

There was hurt in her voice, and Edmund now realized he had been neglectful, even as he had not wanted Johanna to feel pressured into anything she did not wish for.

“I’m sorry, but I thought you’d want time to yourself. You seem more than capable of amusing yourself with your hobbies,” he said.

Johanna sighed.

“Yes, but only because you’re too busy for anything else. I have to make my own entertainment. Otherwise I’d only have your mother’s company, and...well, as much as I’m grateful to her for her kindness...oh, I don’t know, I just don’t really feel I know what I’m doing. I’m supposed to be the Countess of Beaumont, but as for what that means...” she said, shaking her head sadly.

Edmund put down his soup spoon, reaching out his hand and placing it on her arm. It pained him to think she was struggling. He had not realized the extent of her difficulties, and now he could only feel guilty for having neglected her.

“I’m sorry, Johanna. I didn’t realize. I should’ve been more attentive to your needs. I admit, it’s not been easy. You’re right, I’ve been behaving like a bachelor. I thought you wanted it that way...I mean, I thought you were happy with the way things were. I didn’t want you to feel pressured in any way,” Edmund said.

Johanna gave a weak smile.

“And I thought you were happy ignoring me,” she said.

Edmund shook his head.

“Not at all...is this the reason for all this? Oh, Johanna, I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize you felt this way. None of this was intentional on my part, I assure you. But I see now how you must’ve felt. What a fool I’ve been. Can you forgive me?” he asked, and Johanna smiled.

“I can, yes—of course. There’s really nothing to forgive. I just wanted you to understand...well, if this is going to work, we’ve got to make it work. We can’t just expect others to see us as a happily married couple if we’re not going to make the effort to appear as such,” she said.

But to look at her now, to see the obvious hurt in her eyes, Edmund could only feel guilty, and it brought forth in him a strength of feeling he had not expected. He wanted Johanna to be happy, and in realizing she was not, he felt determined to do all he could to make her so. But more than that, Edmund realized his own feelings toward her were changing—they were growing stronger, more pronounced. He had kept his distance from her, not wishing her to think he was domineering or controlling. He had wanted her to have her freedom, but now he realized the neglect he had shown her in doing so. It was clear she wanted more, and in realizing her feelings, his own were brought to the fore.

“You’re right—you’re absolutely right. I’m sorry, Johanna. I don’t know what I was thinking. But I think we can be happy, don’t you?” he said, still with his hand on her arm.

She smiled at him and nodded.

“I think we can, yes—but only if we make the effort to be so. I want...well, I want us to be happy, and not just for show, but because it really means something,” she said, and Edmund smiled back at her.

“Then perhaps this evening can be the beginning of something better?” he said, and Johanna nodded.

“I think it can, yes,” she said, and it felt to Edmund as though there was now a new understanding between them—a new sense of intimacy, born of a common desire for the happiness they both longed for.

“I’m sorry, Johanna—I’m going to try a lot harder from now on, I promise,” Edmund said, just as the footmen returned to clear away the first course.

“We both will,” Johanna replied, smiling at him as she dabbed the side of her mouth



with a napkin.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:08 am*

### Chapter 10

Johanna did not know what had prompted her to arrange the dinner for Edmund—a sense of neglect? A desire for intimacy? Or simply for something to break the monotony of her day-to-day routine? She had not mentioned any of these to the dowager, but Edmund’s mother had been only too pleased to lend her the brooch, telling her she was right to put a stop to the earl dining alone.

“It’s not good for him. And it’s not good for you, either. You’re a young married couple, you should be delighting in one another’s company, not keeping yourselves apart,” she had said.

She was right, of course, and Johanna had begun to fear the promise made by Edmund at the ball had been merely for show. She had taken a risk in arranging the dinner, fearing he would laugh at her, or simply refuse her. But in the honesty of their conversation, it felt to Johanna as though they had come to a new understanding—and a new intimacy, too.

“I trust you had an enjoyable evening together?” the dowager asked, when she entered the dining room the next morning at breakfast to find Johanna and Edmund finishing their coffee.

“Very enjoyable, thank you, Mother,” Edmund replied, glancing at Johanna and smiling.

“I’m going to go to Greenwich this morning and visit Lady Mirabel. She’s not having an easy time with things at the moment. Her husband’s being so difficult with her,”

the dowager said.

There was an implication in her tone—that Johanna and Edmund would join her in this act of charity. But to Johanna's relief, the earl merely nodded.

"Yes, that sounds lovely, Mother. Johanna and I are going to Kew—the gardens there are magnificent," he said, glancing again at Johanna, who smiled.

"Oh, that would be wonderful. I've read about the gardens, but I'd love to see them for myself," she said.

The dowager looked somewhat perturbed.

"I see...yes, very well. I'm sure the two of you will have a lovely time," she said, sitting down at the table as one of the footmen stepped forward to pour her a cup of coffee.

Johanna and Edmund now rose from the table, and Edmund held out his hand, allowing Johanna to go first as they left the dining room together.

"Are you sure you've got time for such an excursion?" Johanna asked, for she did not want him to sacrifice duty for her sake—or to do so under duress.

"I've made time. I want to," he replied, smiling at her.

Now, they readied themselves for their departure, and it was not long before they were in a carriage, heading in the direction of the gardens at Kew. Johanna was excited at the prospect of seeing what she had only read about in books, and the earl talked enthusiastically of the plants they would see, and the ideas they would gain for the gardens at Beaumont Abbey.

“It’s really a blank canvas. My mother was never very interested in the grounds—she prefers drawing rooms to rose gardens. But I know of your love of horticulture, and I was hoping you might take the gardens on as a project. You said you were finding it difficult to know what a countess does all day—I feel the same way about being an earl. I seem to have lots to do, but I’m never really sure if what I’m doing is the right thing,” Edmund said as they rode in the carriage together.

The idea of having a garden of her own delighted Johanna. At Wilton Grange, her mother had been only too glad to allow Johanna’s love of horticulture to find its expression in the garden, but she had still maintained a modicum of control, refusing some of Johanna’s more advanced ideas and tempering her ambitions when it came to the likes of water features and follies.

“I don’t want a garden resembling ancient Greece—they were far too free with their exotic sculpture,” she had once said, when Johanna had suggested a folly in the style of the temple of the muses.

“And I’d have complete control of the design and the planting?” Johanna said, and Edmund nodded.

“You know far more about these things than I do. I’d trust you to create something beautiful—I know you’d do so. There’s the orangery, too. It’s been neglected for so many years, but it’s got great potential. You could see it as a project once we return home. Though there’s the small matter of the Beaumont Dinner,” he said, rolling his eyes.

Johanna smiled. The Beaumont Dinner was something the dowager had mentioned on the day of their arrival in London—almost in the first breath. It was an annual society event, hosted by the Beaumont family in London, and traditionally organized by the incumbent duchess.

“But since you’re new to all of this, I’ll take the lead in making the arrangements,” the dowager had said, and Johanna had found herself swept along in her wake as the preparations had been made.

“I’m sure your mother’s got it all in hand,” Johanna replied, and the earl laughed.

“Oh, yes...I’m sure she has. But it should be you who takes charge of it, Johanna—not her. I’m sorry if you feel she’s somewhat taken over,” he said, but Johanna shook her head.

“I don’t mind. It’s hers to do as she pleases with. I don’t know anything about such things,” she said, but Edmund shook his head.

“You’re the Countess of Beaumont now, Johanna—not my mother. She needs to realize that and stop taking over. I know she means well, but I don’t want you to feel trapped,” he said.

Johanna nodded. The dowager could be overbearing at times, but her heart was in the right place.

“Perhaps I could concentrate my efforts on the orangery and the garden. When I was visiting the gardens at Villa d’Este on the Italian peninsula, I came away with so many wonderful ideas,” Johanna replied.

She recalled the sunken gardens with their deep pools, overhung by shady myrtle and juniper trees, the scent of which perfumed the air. It was Johanna’s dream to have a garden like that—tempered by the English climate, of course.

Edmund smiled. “And perhaps you’ll take some ideas from Kew, too. Look, we’re here now,” he said, pointing out of the carriage window.

For the next few hours, the two of them explored the gardens, promenading arm in arm. They greeted other couples doing the same, smiling and nodding to one another as though sharing that same sense of romance as they saw in others. It pleased Johanna to find herself with Edmund in this way. They were like any other couple, laughing with one another and enjoying the shared delights of the garden. It was a beautiful place—magnificent borders, filled with flowers of every color and shade, tall trees, hedged avenues, and places to sit by bubbling fountains and elegant statues.

“I’m so glad we came here. It’s been wonderful,” Johanna said as they walked back toward the carriage to return to Beaumont House.

“I feel the same—and not only for the gardens,” he said, smiling at Johanna, who blushed.

“Oh...yes,” Johanna said, feeling suddenly shy in his presence.

Something had changed between them—a new sense of intimacy. Their conversation had been easy and his company a delight. There had been no sense of effort or duty involved. It had seemed to Johanna as though the earl genuinely desired her company, and she had felt the same.

“I mean it, Johanna. I’m so glad we shared this time together,” he said, and Johanna smiled.

“I am, too,” she replied.

At the entrance to the gardens was a stall selling flowers—cuttings from the borders, arranged in brightly colored bouquets, and Edmund now paused, purchasing the largest of the arrangements and presenting them to Johanna with a smile.

“For your sitting room—they have a beautiful perfume,” he said.

It was a small gesture, but one that meant so much. Had theirs been a conventional courtship, perhaps this might have been the first step toward romance, a tentative second meeting after an introduction at a ball or dinner. But in the case of Johanna and Edmund, everything was reversed. They were married, and yet the day they had spent at Kew had felt like a beginning—a delightful beginning, but a beginning, nonetheless. Something had changed between them, a sense of shared feelings for one another, beyond that of the practicalities of the previous months.

“That’s very kind of you,” Johanna said, breathing in the sweet scent of the flowers.

“I’m glad you like them,” he said, their eyes meeting as he continued to smile at her.

Johanna felt a shiver run through her at his gaze, and now he placed his hand on hers, turning to lead her back to the waiting carriage. But as he did so, Johanna was surprised by the sight of Wilhelmina and her daughter emerging from the gardens behind them. She had not realized they were there, and now she wondered if they had been following them the whole time—but for what reason? Memories of her previous jealous thoughts now returned as Lavinia waved with a look of surprise—real or imagined—on her face.

“Oh, look, Mother—it’s Edmund and Johanna!” she exclaimed, hurrying over to greet them with her mother following behind.

“Well, now, isn’t this a coincidence?” Wilhelmina exclaimed.

She was older, of course, and yet Johanna was well aware of the fact she outranked Wilhelmina by some considerable distance. The wife of a member of Parliament was hardly comparable to a countess, and it pleased Johanna to think she had the advantage, even as Lavinia smiled flirtatiously at Edmund.

“It certainly seems so,” Johanna replied, though she did not believe it was a

coincidence at all.

“And flowers, Johanna—he must truly love you,” Lavinia said.

It seemed a strange thing to say, as though she was doubting the sincerity of the match, and Johanna could not help but feel a sense of paranoia, remembering what Tabitha had told her at the ball. Was it really believed she was with child? The very thought of it was extraordinary, even as to deny it would only lead to further rumors.

“They’re beautiful, aren’t they? Did you enjoy the gardens? I didn’t think you had an interest in horticulture,” Johanna said.

Lavinia smiled.

“Oh, yes. I’m very interested in...plants and so on. One should be, shouldn’t one? Mother says I need to know such things for when I’m married. One can’t let one’s husband concern himself with such things, can one?” she said.

She sounded ridiculous—all this talk of preparing “oneself” for life as the wife of an aristocrat. Was that truly her sole ambition? If it was, Johanna wondered why she should be so concerned to act flirtatiously toward Edmund. He was her husband, and he would certainly not become Lavinia’s.

“No, one can’t,” Johanna replied.

“But I suppose such responsibilities aren’t for everyone, are they?” Lavinia said, looking pointedly at Johanna as though she was referring to her.

“I think it’s more a case of shared responsibilities. A husband and wife shouldn’t exist separately. Marriage is a union—it gives responsibility to both sides, as well as rights,” Johanna replied.



She was hoping to sound diplomatic, and Lavinia nodded.

“I suppose you’re right, Johanna—and what would I know? You’re the one who’s happily married,” she replied.

Johanna did not care for Lavinia’s tone. She was mocking her—challenging her to deny it. Johanna knew what mother and daughter both were thinking—that there was no truth in the show of the flowers and affectionate looks. But in this, they were wrong, and Johanna had no intention of allowing it to be thought the marriage was only for convenience, or worse, because of a child conceived out of wedlock.

“We are. Very much so,” Johanna said, glancing at Edmund, who nodded.

“We were just talking about the design for the gardens at Beaumont Abbey. You’d both be very welcome to the unveiling of the new orangery we have planned. It’s a renovation, long overdue,” Edmund said tactfully, it seemed, changing the subject.

Lavinia glanced at her mother, who nodded.

“Ah, yes, we’d be delighted. But you’re not leaving London just yet, I hope?” Lavinia asked.

“Not just yet, no. There’s the Beaumont Dinner to organize...” Edmund said, stopping himself as it seemed he realized in mentioning the dinner, he would have to invite Wilhelmina and her daughter.

But Lavinia appeared oblivious to his words, interrupting him with her own invitation.

“We’re holding a masquerade. You must both come. It’s next Friday evening. I adore masquerades. Don’t you?” she said.

Johanna did enjoy masquerade balls. Her aunt had taken her to one in Venice during their travels—a spectacle of extravagant masks and elaborate costumes. But the thought of attending Lavinia’s masquerade did not have the same appeal, even as Johanna feared they could not easily refuse the invitation.

“Yes, I do...” Johanna replied truthfully.

“Then that’s settled, then. Seven o’clock at our house in Mayfair. Edmund knows where it is. Don’t you, Edmund?” Lavinia said, and Edmund nodded, blushing under Lavinia’s gaze.

They now parted ways, Lavinia casting a smiling glance back toward Johanna as she and Edmund climbed into the waiting carriage.

“I’m sorry—I couldn’t very well refuse her,” Edmund said as they set off toward Beaumont House.

Johanna shook her head and sighed.

“I know...I just worry what’s being said about us, that’s all. Lavinia...well, she seems persistent in her attentions toward you. I can only hope Roger doesn’t pursue a match with her,” Johanna said.

She had not meant her words to sound like a challenge, even as Edmund now blushed. Nor did Johanna feel any pride in the persisting jealousy she felt toward Lavinia. In her mind, she had created a rivalry, and despite Edmund’s entirely innocent behavior toward Lavinia, Johanna could not help but feel Lavinia’s own behavior to be less than innocent...

“I should be honest with you, Johanna. There was a time when Lavinia and I might’ve...well, when there was something more between us. It was never made

public, of course. Roger knows nothing about it. I broke it off, though. She's a difficult woman, easily moved to jealousy. I feel nothing for her now, I promise you," he said.

Johanna nodded. She was not surprised—there had to be an underlying reason for Lavinia's persistence. If anything, it made more sense now, even as Johanna feared Lavinia was not yet over the fact of their having parted ways. But in denying his feelings for Lavinia, Edmund had raised a different question—perhaps unintentionally—and it was one Johanna pondered as they made their way back to Beaumont House. If he no longer had feelings for Lavinia, did that mean his feelings for her were growing stronger?

### Chapter 11

“I think it looks better without the feathers,” the dowager said, tutting, as Edmund removed his mask, glancing at Johanna as he did and smiling.

“I think the more flamboyant the better, Mother,” he replied.

“Oh, but they’re such silly things—masquerades. A vain importation from the continent. You didn’t go to such things with your aunt when you were traveling, did you, Johanna?” the dowager asked, looking disapprovingly at Johanna, who blushed behind her own mask—an elaborate design in red and gold, tied around her head with a silk bow.

“I did, yes. I rather enjoy them—but it’s different in Venice,” Johanna said, trying to remain diplomatic.

“Well, I’m glad I’m not going. I don’t really care for Wilhelmina Morton, though I suppose there’s no question of not asking her to the Beaumont Dinner—there’s still so much to organize. Did you check over the seating plan I gave you, Johanna? I’m sure you agree with it,” the dowager said.

Johanna nodded. She had checked over the seating plan, though as for ensuring its propriety, she was at a loss. Whether Lord this sat next to Lady that, or didn’t, meant nothing to her, and in being asked to assist with the arrangements, Johanna had come to realize how little she knew about such matters, and was grateful to her mother-in-law for being the guiding hand behind what was meant to be her own grand debut.

“Entirely,” Johanna said, and the dowager nodded.

“Very good. Well, as long as the two of you enjoy yourselves this evening...” she said, and Edmund now offered Johanna his arm.

“We will do, Mother. It’s only a bit of fun,” he replied.

Once in the carriage, Johanna removed her mask and Edmund did the same, the two of them smiling at one another across the compartment.

“I’m sorry if this is a chore,” Edmund said, but Johanna shook her head.

“No...it’s not. I’m sure we’ll have a lovely evening. Besides, behind a mask, it’s much easier not to be noticed. Perhaps we won’t be whispered about,” she said.

Rumors about her being with child were still circulating, and it seemed the ton was not yet ready to move on to a different source of scandal. But Johanna and Edmund were determined to present a united front, and in doing so, Johanna could not help but feel a growing intimacy between them.

The day they had spent together at Kew had been a delight, and in the days that followed, they had visited the theater and picnicked in the park opposite Beaumont House. There had been no sense of show or duty in these moments, but rather, a shared delight in spending time with one another and discovering the many things they had in common, not least an interest in travel and far-off places. Edmund was fascinated by Johanna’s stories about the continent and her experiences there and had told her of his longing to see such places for himself.

“You don’t need to worry. They’ll soon find something far more interesting to talk about, I’m sure,” Edmund said as their carriage now pulled up outside the home of Lavinia and her parents.

As Edmund helped Johanna climb down from the compartment, they were greeted by a throng of masked revelers on the steps. It felt to Johanna as though she was back in Venice with her aunt. The masks were spectacular—a riot of colors and feathers—and it was impossible to tell who was who.

“Johanna, there you are—I think,” a voice called out, and a woman in a red gown, wearing a gold and silver mask hurried over to her.

“Oh, Tabitha—how did you know it was me?” Johanna exclaimed, recognizing her friend’s voice.

“The coat of arms on the side of the carriage—I knew it was yours. The three hounds and the crossed cutlasses for the earls of Beaumont,” Tabitha replied, and Johanna laughed.

“How observant. I wouldn’t have known them myself if I’d seen them. Shall we go inside?” she asked.

“Why don’t you go in with Edmund? I’ll see you in there,” Tabitha said, and Johanna nodded.

She knew she had behaved out of turn at the previous ball—rushing ahead before she was announced—and now she turned to Edmund, who offered her his arm.

“Let’s go inside before anyone else recognizes the coat of arms,” she said, and Edmund laughed.

“Come along. We won’t be announced, not at a masquerade. We can slip in unnoticed,” he said, and the two of them made their way up the steps, following the crowd into the house.

Telling who was who was nigh on impossible. Some of the masks covered the entire faces of the revelers, others hid only their eyes, and in the mix of colors, feathers, and elaborate designs, the crowd blended into one. The ballroom was of a moderate size, but the guests numbered over a hundred, and the atmosphere was somewhat stifling. Edmund led Johanna to the side of the room, where a long table was laden with refreshments. The musicians were preparing for their first dance, and now Tabitha came pushing her way through the crowd, accompanied by a man in a mask covering only his eyes—a man Johanna recognized from his jawline.

“Roger, I didn’t realize you’d be here,” Johanna said as her brother removed the mask from his eyes.

“Lavinia invited me. She’s over there in the mask with the peacock feathers. I wasn’t going to come, but Tabitha insisted,” he said, glancing at Johanna’s friend and smiling.

“Well, I’m glad she did,” Johanna replied.

“So am I,” Roger replied.

She had feared Roger’s intentions lay in the direction of Lavinia, but to think he might be persuaded toward Tabitha pleased her. Tabitha had been unlucky in love, but she was a charming, gentle creature, entirely deserving of the happiness she so longed for—to be married and raise a family. This was Roger’s desire, too—he had confided as much in Johanna after telling her of his intention to settle down and make himself worthy of inheriting the title that would one day be his. The match was one Johanna wanted to encourage, and now, as the musicians finished tuning their instruments, she made the suggestion.

“Are the two of you going to dance? We are, aren’t we, Edmund?” Johanna said, and Edmund nodded.

“Yes, we certainly are,” he said, and Tabitha and Roger looked at one another and laughed.

“We’ve already marked our dance cards. Come along, you two, they’re starting the first dance,” Tabitha said, taking Johanna by the hand.

The two men followed, and despite the overcrowding in the ballroom, the dancing began.

“I’m so pleased about Roger and Tabitha,” Johanna said as she and Edmund danced together in the waltz.

“They make a delightful couple—truly, they do,” Edmund replied.

“She’s always been so unlucky in love—it’s the fault of the men, of course,” Johanna said, recalling the many times Tabitha had wept in her arms over a failed romance.

“It always is,” Edmund said, and Johanna laughed.

“I didn’t mean it like that. Besides, that’s not true. Not all men are like that. You proved that to me,” she replied.

Edmund seemed surprised at her words, but they were true. There had been no compulsion on his part to marry her. Men behaved dreadfully in matters of the heart all the time—Tabitha was proof of that. It would have been the easiest thing in the world for Edmund to wash his hands of any sense of responsibility. He could have refused to marry her, not even making the suggestion to do so. But he had not. Instead, he’d done the honorable thing, saving her from certain ruin. And now the honorable thing had turned into something more...

“Did I?” he asked, and Johanna nodded.



“Absolutely, you did. You married me, didn’t you?” she said, smiling at him as he laughed.

“And I’m glad I did, and I hope you are, too. And not just to save us from whatever maliciousness the likes of the Parker sisters might have in store. I’m truly glad we found one another, Johanna,” he said.

A shiver ran through Johanna at his words, and she could not help but once again that deepening sense of intimacy between them.

“Very glad, yes. I didn’t think...well, there were practical reasons, of course, but...there’s more to it than that, isn’t there?” she said, and he nodded.

Johanna felt a sense of relief at this—at knowing he felt the same. It was a strange feeling, a sense of mutual understanding. And more than that, a shared intimacy, a growing attachment between them. Johanna did not know what it was like to fall in love. She knew what it was to be attracted to a man—the continent had been filled with attractive men—but as for feeling something more, as for falling in love...

“A great deal more, yes. You’re a remarkable woman, Johanna. I hope you realize that,” Edmund replied as the dance came to an end.

Johanna blushed as the two of them stepped out of the throng, the other couples bowing and curtsying to one another around the room. Johanna did not know quite what to say. It was an admission of something more between them, the unspoken becoming the spoken. She was flattered by his words, by his attentions, by him...

“It’s very kind of you to say so,” Johanna replied.

“And I think you look very beautiful this evening—mask or no mask,” he said.

At these words, Johanna's heart skipped a beat. No one had ever called her beautiful before. It was a compliment she was only too glad to receive, one she would treasure, knowing it came from a place of sincerity. There was no reason for him to say it, no compulsion. But in doing so, Edmund had proved the change she had come to notice in their relationship—that there was now more to it than mere convenience.

“And you look very handsome—with or without your mask,” she replied, smiling at him as he laughed.

“Come along, let's get some punch. I see Tabitha and Roger are getting along well,” he said, glancing in the direction of the couple, who were flirting insatiably in a corner of the room.

Johanna smiled, hoping the evening would mark the beginning of a happy ending for her brother and Tabitha, as well as a moment she and Edmund would cherish, too.

### Chapter 12

“Are you sure you want to dance again?” Johanna asked.

The evening was not yet halfway through, and there were still a number of dances to go. Edmund’s name entirely marked her dance card, except for one instance when Roger had insisted on taking his sister’s hand. Despite her fears for an evening spent as guests of Lavinia and her mother, Johanna had enjoyed the masquerade immensely, her feelings for Edmund growing stronger by the moment. He had behaved as the perfect gentleman, giving her his full attention, and seeing to her every need.

“We could sit this one out. If you’re feeling tired, that is,” he said, and Johanna nodded.

Her feet were aching, but she felt a sense of contentment, too—content to be in Edmund’s company and enjoy the time they were spending together.

“Just for one dance, yes,” Johanna said, and the two of them sat down in a corner of the room.

Many of the other guests had removed their masks, and Edmund did so, too, though Johanna kept hers on for fear of attracting unwanted attention.

“You and my mother are getting on well. I’m glad of it. I was a little worried,” Edmund said, taking a sip of punch.

Johanna smiled.

“Your mother gets on well with anyone who agrees with her,” Johanna replied, and the earl laughed.

“Yes, that’s true enough. But the arrangements for the Beaumont Dinner...she’s not being too controlling, is she?” he asked.

In truth, Johanna and the dowager were getting on well. She had confided in Johanna how she had always longed for a daughter, and now she intended to treat her daughter-in-law as her own.

“Sons are all very well and good for practical purposes, but having a daughter is much better when it comes to matters of a womanly nature,” she had said, and Johanna had nodded and agreed, though she had not entirely understood what the dowager had meant.

But the arrangements for the Beaumont Dinner were progressing well—largely because it was the dowager who had made them, rather than leaving the matter to Johanna. Secretly, Johanna was pleased—she would far rather think about orangeries and sunken gardens, than dinner menus and seating plans.

“Not at all, no. I’m glad of her help. We get on well,” Johanna said, and in this, she could be truthful.

Edmund nodded.

“She likes you a great deal. You’re like the daughter she never had. I think that was one of the reasons she detested life in the countryside so much. She missed the companionship of the fairer sex. I don’t think my father was ever much company, and I was away at school and then at Oxford,” Edmund replied.

“Well, I like her, too—and I’m glad I live up to her expectations,” Johanna replied.

“I wouldn’t worry about that. You don’t need to live up to anyone’s expectations. You’re perfect as you are,” Edmund said, smiling at Johanna and slipping his hand into hers.

Johanna met his gaze, and now she wondered what it would be like to kiss him—for him to kiss her. He had always behaved as the perfect gentleman. There was not a hint of scandal in their behavior, whatever was said about them by others. But now, Johanna allowed herself to wonder what it would be like for his arms to slip around her waist, for their lips to meet in a kiss, for him to draw her further into his embrace. With her hand in his, she moved forward a little, still meeting his gaze, the possibility of that kiss now closer than ever...

“Oh, Edmund, won’t you fetch me a glass of punch—I’ve danced so much I feel quite lightheaded,” a voice above them exclaimed, and Johanna looked up to find a woman in a large, ornate mask, decorated with peacock feathers, looking down at them—it was Lavinia.

Now, Edmund rose to his feet, embarrassed, it seemed, to be caught in this intimacy, as Lavinia removed her mask. The moment was gone, snatched away by the interruption—planned or not.

“Lavinia...I...yes, I can get you a glass of punch,” Edmund said, glancing apologetically at Johanna, who nodded.

“I’ll go and find Tabitha,” Johanna said, rising to her feet as Lavinia slipped her arm into Edmund’s.

“I won’t keep him for long, Johanna,” she said, smirking as she led Edmund away.

Johanna sighed. She did not suspect Edmund of any impropriety concerning Lavinia, but it annoyed her to think how easily he could be led by a woman so clearly out for her own ends.

“Aren’t you with Edmund?” Tabitha asked when Johanna found her on the far side of the ballroom, sitting on her own by the tall windows looking out over the garden.

Dusk was falling, and the servants were busy lighting candles around the room as the musicians prepared for the next dance.

“Aren’t you with Roger?” Johanna asked, and Tabitha sighed.

“I wish I was...Oh, I don’t know, Johanna. You know him better than me. One moment he’s the most charming of companions, and the next it’s as though he’s holding back. What am I doing wrong?” she asked.

“I don’t think you’re doing anything wrong, Tabitha. Roger...well, he’s still getting used to the idea of responsibility. He wants to prove himself, but he’s not yet as grown up as he might like to think he is,” Johanna replied.

Her brother spoke impressively of duty and taking responsibility, but he could be prone to rakish ways. While Johanna’s travels had given her a sense of maturity, she could not help but feel her brother still lacked that final push into adulthood—his behavior toward Tabitha was proof of that.

“Perhaps you’re right. I just wish I knew what to do. That’s all. Should I try harder, or should I try less?” she asked.

Johanna was about to suggest Tabitha allow events to take their natural course, when, to her surprise, Wilhelmina approached them.

“Oh, there you are, Johanna—Edmund’s asking for you. He’s out in the garden. I have a note from him,” she said, handing Johanna a scrap of paper.

Johanna looked at her in surprise. She did not understand why Edmund should be out in the garden when he had gone with Lavinia to get a glass of punch. But looking around her, there was no sign of him, and now she looked down at the piece of paper, written in the earl’s distinctive curled handwriting.

Meet me by the shrubbery—urgently, Johanna read.

“How curious...would you excuse me, Tabitha. Thank you, Wilhelmina,” Johanna said, and nodding to Tabitha, she followed Wilhelmina through the throng to a set of doors leading out onto the terrace.

“You’ll find the shrubbery at the far end of the garden. It’s a bright moon, so you should be able to find your way,” she said, pointing through the open doors.

Johanna nodded, though she still felt confused as to why Edmund should want to meet her in the shrubbery. What was he doing there? And where was Lavinia? Suspicions began to form in Johanna’s mind—a fear of something untoward having occurred. She would not have put it past Lavinia to lead Edmund into some form of scandal—to throw herself at him at an opportune moment and cry wolf against him.

“Edmund?” Johanna called out.

The moon was bright, casting a silvery light across the garden. A solitary granite cherub stood watching her progress from the top of a small fountain in the center of the lawn, and now Johanna called out again.

“Over by the shrubbery,” Wilhelmina called out from the terrace above.

Johanna crossed the lawn, peering into the gloom of the shrubbery, trying to make out a figure. Someone was there, standing amid the bushes, their face concealed behind a mask, the plumage of which she could just make out—it was Edmund, wasn't it?

“Oh, there you are...I didn't think...what are you doing out here? I suppose you're escaping from Lavinia. It'll be the last dance soon. Won't you come back inside?” Johanna said, relieved to know it had not been some elaborate trick on Lavinia's part—or a descent into scandal on Edmund's.

The figure moved suddenly forward, the mask catching the moonlight on the edge of the shrubbery. Through her own mask, it was difficult for Johanna to see properly. Her peripheral vision was obscured, and she could only see straight ahead of her.

“Edmund, no...don't be silly. Are you playing games with me?” she asked as now he slipped his arms around her.

“Johanna,” he whispered, pulling her into his embrace.

His voice sounded strange—rasping—and his scent, that of pinewood and lavender, was unfamiliar.

“Edmund...we really shouldn't be doing this. I know we spoke of becoming closer, and the last few days have been simply wonderful,” Johanna said, trying to pull away from him.

He was behaving entirely out of character. It was bizarre, and Johanna could not understand it. He had been such a gentleman—even at those times when he may well have taken advantage of her for his own pleasures. Why was he doing this now? Did he not think she was being honest when she had told him of the delight she took in their growing intimacy.



“Johanna, please...” Edmund whispered, in that same rasping voice.

“No, Edmund...I don’t like it. We should go back inside. Wilhelmina knows we’re out here. If we’re caught...it wouldn’t be right,” Johanna exclaimed, her tone becoming more forceful.

She was about to push him away, but now he pulled her into an even tighter embrace, trying to press his lips to her. Johanna let out a cry, even as now footsteps could be heard behind them. Terrified of their being caught, she pushed Edmund away, ready to flee across the lawn, but turning, she now found herself face to face with...Edmund.

“What’s going on?” he exclaimed.

Lavinia and Wilhelmina were with him, along with a servant carrying a lamp, the light from which now illuminated the figure in the shrubbery, whose arm was still around Johanna’s waist.

“Are we interrupting something?” Lavinia asked, raising her eyebrows.

Johanna was filled with horror, and now she stared up at the masked man, terrified as to who was behind the mask.

“But...Wilhelmina told me you were out here, Edmund,” Johanna stammered.

“I’ve been with Lavinia,” Edmund said, staring in astonishment at Johanna, who now pulled away from the masked man, who had still not revealed his identity.

“I said nothing of the sort,” Wilhelmina retorted.

“Please, will someone tell me what’s going on?” Edmund demanded, his shocked

tones now turning to anger.

The man in the mask pulled it off, laughing as he revealed himself.

“It’s just a little fun—what’s the problem with that? Why all the fuss?” he demanded.

Johanna stared at him in horror. His name was Lord Fitzroy—Frederick Fitzroy. She had seen him once or twice at the balls and dinners she and Edmund had attended during the course of their time in London, but there was no acquaintance between them. Even if there had been, it would hardly be grounds for this. She was in shock, ashamed of herself for what she had done, and now she turned imploringly to Edmund, desperate for him to believe the truth of what she was saying.

“Please, Edmund, I thought it was you,” she said.

“But a good thing we caught you before something worse happened,” Wilhelmina said, tutting and shaking her head.

“But it wasn’t like that—you’re twisting the circumstances. Please...tell them,” she exclaimed, looking first to Wilhelmina and then to Lord Fitzroy.

“She appeared entirely eager to me. I’ve done nothing wrong,” Lord Fitzroy replied.

“Really, Johanna...you’re a married woman. Sneaking out into the shrubbery for a secret liaison. Dear me, it doesn’t get much worse than that, does it. And after everything Edmund’s done for you,” Lavinia said, and now she turned, taking Edmund’s arm in hers.

But to her apparent surprise—and the slightest relief on Johanna’s part—he shook her off.

“Leave me alone, Lavinia,” he snarled.

He was staring straight ahead, lost, it seemed, in his own thoughts. Johanna looked at him imploringly. It was the most awful thing that could have happened, and the cruelest of ploys on the part of Wilhelmina and Lavinia. Johanna felt angry, foolish, devastated...How could she have been so stupid? She should have known Edmund would never do such a thing, and now she feared losing what she had so recently come to cherish.

“It’s not what it seems. She led me out here. She told me you were here. I do not know this man,” Johanna said, turning to Lord Fitzroy, who still smirking.

“Don’t you? Surely you’ve seen him at any number of balls and soirees in the past few weeks? You’ve had your eye on him the whole time, haven’t you? And now you try to blame us for your own indiscretions. Could you sink any lower, Johanna?” Wilhelmina snarled.

It was a cruel and heartless act, and tears now rolled down Johanna’s cheeks. She was desperate to make Edmund understand—for him to realize she had done nothing wrong, that she would never do something like this. But forces beyond her control were conspiring against her. She had been a fool to fall for Wilhelmina’s ploy, and with both Lavinia and her mother denying all knowledge, and Lord Fitzroy treating the whole thing as a joke, it seemed Johanna had no one to come to her defense. Again, she looked imploringly at Edmund. What was he thinking? Did he really believe the lies being told about her?

“It’s not true...none of it is true. I made a mistake—a terrible mistake!” Johanna exclaimed, but it seemed there could be no reasonable explanation against the falsity of appearance.

She had been caught in flagrante in the shrubbery, about to kiss a man who was not

her husband. Those were the facts, even as the truth behind them was very different.

“And I’m sure we all believe you. Come along, Edmund—leave her,” Lavinia said, shaking her head, as again, she tried to take Edmund’s arm.

But again, he brushed her away, this time with an angry growl. Lavinia looked perturbed, and she seemed about to plead with him when a voice came from across the garden.

“Johanna? Are you out here? What is going on?” It was Tabitha, and Johanna breathed a sigh of relief as her friend came hurrying toward them.

“Tabitha, oh...thank goodness!” Johanna exclaimed, and now she hurried over to her friend, appraising her of the facts, and holding nothing back in her accusations against Wilhelmina and Lavinia.

There was a time when Johanna would have failed to defend herself, to have cowered in the face of such an overwhelming accusation. But now, she was possessed of a confidence she had not previously known, and she begged Tabitha to absolve her by corroborating the facts as they stood.

“But you know you asked Johanna to step out into the garden, Wilhelmina. I was there. I heard you. You told her you had a note from Edmund asking her to do so. You’re a liar if you say differently,” Tabitha said, glaring accusingly at Wilhelmina, who folded her arms with a defiant glare on her face.

“Oh, I see—shoot the messenger, shall we? And how do you explain Johanna being found in the arms of a man who’s not her husband?” she demanded.

Tabitha faltered, glancing at Johanna, who looked at her imploringly.

“It’s not true, Tabitha...well, the note, yes...I thought I was meeting Edmund. But it’s all a cruel set up,” she said as tears continued to roll down her cheeks.

“It’s all right, Johanna. I believe you,” Tabitha said, and now she put her arms around Johanna, as Lavinia and her mother scoffed.

“You believe her? Oh, well, then that must count for something...” Lavinia said, rolling her eyes.

“It’s obvious what’s happened. I think Edmund, you should...” Lavinia began, but Edmund looked up suddenly, his face etched with anger.

“Enough!” he cried, and Lavinia fell silent.

Johanna’s heart was beating fast. What was Edmund going to do? Was he angry with her? Who did he believe? She did not dare say anything, even as Edmund now stepped forward, holding out his hand to her.

“Well, I didn’t realize she was married,” Lord Fitzroy said, shaking his head and laughing.

But at these words, Edmund turned, and to everyone’s surprise—not least, Lord Fitzroy, he struck the arrogant aristocrat hard across the face with his fist, sending him sprawling back into the shrubbery with a cry.

“Come along, Johanna. We’re going home,” he said, taking Johanna’s hand in his and leading her back across the lawn toward the house and leaving the others looking stunned.

“Edmund...wait. Edmund!” Lavinia called out, but Edmund only walked quicker, shaking his head and muttering under his breath.

Johanna hurried alongside him. She still did not know who Edmund believed, but the fact of his having pulled her away gave her a glimmer of hope. This had surely not been what Lavinia was expecting. She had played the part of the sympathetic shoulder, offering comfort in the face of the obvious setup she and her mother had created. Edmund had refused her, and now Johanna wondered if he would reject her, too, for having been foolish enough to fall for the ploy. Did he suspect her of desiring the liaison?

“Edmund, please...” Johanna said, but he only walked faster, hurrying her up the steps onto the terrace and into the ballroom.

Whispers were circulating, fans fluttering, and eyes watching as they made their way through the throng. The dancing had come to an end, and now it seemed the guests were interested only in learning what had transpired out in the gardens between their hosts and Johanna and Edmund.

“Leaving so hurriedly, my lord?” one of them asked.

Edmund ignored him, and having pushed their way through the crowd, they emerged into the hallway, where a footman hurried to open the front door for them. A line of carriages, including their own, was waiting outside, and they hurried down the steps, not pausing until they were safely in the compartment with the door closed.

“Edmund, I...” Johanna began, but he interrupted her.

“I know, Johanna. I know it wasn’t your fault,” he said, and as a wave of relief swept over her, she began to sob, grateful to him for rescuing her once again.

### Chapter 13

“I was so foolish, Edmund. I believed what Wilhelmina said—she even had a note from you, well, I thought it was from you. I’ve been so na?ve,” Johanna said, after she had explained her version of events to him.

Edmund shook his head, the light of the lamp burning in the carriage illuminating his features. He looked terrible—pale and withdrawn, as though the shock had been overwhelming.

“You’re not to blame, Johanna. I knew what they’d done the moment Wilhelmina came running to find me. A cruel trick, but one with unfortunate consequences for us both,” Edmund replied.

“But we know what happened—you know I wouldn’t ever...well, it’s unthinkable,” Johanna replied, still feeling utterly relieved at knowing Edmund believed her.

“Yes, but it’s not just us, is it? It’s the ton. They already have their suspicions about our marriage—that it was too hasty, that you were with child, that we were caught in a compromise in the woods together. It might all have died down, but if Lavinia and her mother put it about that...well, you were caught with another man,” he said, shaking his head.

Johanna had not thought of that. She had believed Lavinia’s plans had been thwarted—that her attempt at being the sympathetic shoulder had failed. But this...

“They’ll hold it over us, won’t they? Lavinia wanted you for herself. She’s jealous,

and now she'll stop at nothing to ruin us both," Johanna said, and Edmund nodded.

"I'm afraid we're in for a bumpy ride, Johanna," he said, and now he reached his hands across the compartment, taking hers and sighing.

Johanna was grateful to him for what he had done—for believing her, and for standing by her. She had been terrified of losing him, and in that terror, she had come to realize the depth of her feelings toward him. She was falling in love with him, and to think there were forces acting against them, trying to drive them apart, filled her with sorrow.

"I'm so sorry, Edmund. I was naïve. I thought it was you behind the mask," she said, but Edmund only squeezed her hand, a weak smile coming over his face.

"You weren't naïve. They played a cruel trick on you—a terrible trick. On us both. I'm sorry for my own naivete. I thought I could maintain an acquaintance with Lavinia—that she'd accept my having married and be done with it. I thought Roger had intentions toward her, though I can only hope he'll put them aside," Edmund replied.

Lavinia had played them all for fools, but as for getting what she really wanted, she was now further away than ever. Johanna knew there was no question of Edmund looking elsewhere, and in that, at least, she could take comfort. Their reputation in the ton might well now be ruined, but they would weather the storm together. In that moment, Johanna felt closer to Edmund than ever before, and as he held her hands in his, she knew she would never have even looked at another man as she now looked at him.

"You don't need to be sorry, either. She's the one that's done—her and her wicked mother. But they can say what they want. We know the truth, and that's all that matters," Johanna replied.



Edmund nodded.

“We do, but I fear it’s Lavinia’s version of events the ton will believe. Our reputations are already tarnished—questionable, at least,” Edmund said, and Johanna squeezed his hands.

“Well...at least we’re questionable together,” she said, and now Edmund really did smile.

“You’re a wonderful person, Johanna. I see it more and more with every day that passes. I can’t imagine my life without you now,” he said, and Johanna blushed.

She felt just the same—surprised by the depth of her feelings and the intensity with which she had begged him to believe her. To know he did meant everything to her, and Johanna was now determined to stand her ground, to stand with her husband against whatever the ton should think to believe about them.

“I feel just the same. We’ll weather the storm, won’t we?” she said, and he nodded.

“We’ll weather it together,” he replied, smiling at her, their hands still clasped together, and a new depth of feeling now existing between them.

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“I think it’s best if we cancel the Beaumont Dinner,” the dowager said, after Johanna and Edmund had explained to her the next morning what had happened at the masquerade ball the previous evening.

Johanna had expected her mother-in-law to be angry—to blame her, even, for courting the attention of another man, however unintentionally. But to Johanna’s surprise, the dowager had believed her—sympathized with her, even.

“Oh, but are you sure? I know you’ve been looking forward to it,” Johanna said, but the dowager shook her head.

“I’d only worry about the two of you—and what others would say. Besides, we don’t want to endure the embarrassment of refused invitations. What a cruel trick to play on you both. I certainly shan’t be speaking to Wilhelmina again. But these storms can be weathered. It’ll blow over, I’m sure,” she said, looking at Johanna and Edmund sympathetically.

Johanna knew the storm the dowager spoke of was about to break, and she wondered as to the form it would take. Would she and Edmund be ostracized from society, receiving no invitations and having their own refused? Or would they be the objects of attention, invited into society for the very reason of ridicule, a ritual humiliation at the hands of their peers?

“They’ll be waiting to see if I pursue an annulment to the marriage,” Edmund said, when later that day, he and Johanna were sitting in the garden.

They had received no callers that day, no invitations—nothing but societal silence.

“Because of the impropriety?” Johanna asked, and Edmund nodded.

“It’s grounds for annulment—unfaithfulness. I don’t doubt the narrative Lavinia and her mother are putting forward—that you were caught in a compromising position with Lord Fitzroy, something he’ll have no compunction in denying, and despite our denials, the truth of the matter stands,” Edmund replied.

“I hope his face still hurts. You struck him quite a blow,” Johanna said, and Edmund laughed.

There was some minor satisfaction in the memory of their parting shot in the

gardens—Lord Fitzroy lying dazed in the shrubbery, and Lavinia angry at not having got her own way. But the price of that satisfaction was still to be paid, and Johanna knew that even now, Lavinia and her mother would be busy spreading the rumors of the illicit encounter.

“He deserved it, the arrogant man. I have no time for the likes of him. I’m sure he didn’t know you were married, but it’s no excuse to treat a woman in such a way. Had you been in the first flush of your debut and discovered in such a compromise, your name would be ruined. We know that well enough, thanks to the Parker sisters. I just don’t understand why there are so many vindictive people in this world. Why can’t they just accept the happiness of others instead of trying to destroy it?” he exclaimed.

His words were impassioned, and Johanna could not help but admire him for them. She admired him a great deal, more than any other man she had ever known. He was good and honorable, a man of duty and integrity. The very thought of him behaving improperly toward anyone was unthinkable. Johanna shook her head and sighed.

“I suppose it’s jealousy...I have to admit, the first time I saw you with Lavinia...that’s when I realized...well, I felt a certain jealousy, too. I’m ashamed to admit it. But it’s such a powerful feeling,” Johanna said.

It was not a nice thing to admit to. Nevertheless, that was how she had felt, and that feeling had made her realize the strength of others she had shied away from. Edmund smiled.

“There was never anything to worry about. Now, let’s talk of happier things—I’m secretly rather pleased to think there’ll be no Beaumont Dinner. But tell me about your plans for the orangery,” he said, and Johanna smiled.

She had been thinking a lot about his suggestion of her taking charge of the gardens

at Beaumont Abbey, and around the orangery, too. She had paid a visit to the British Library, examining texts on the cultivation of citrus trees and on the kinds of fruits she might attempt to grow.

“Well, I think we’ll begin with oranges and lemons—but I want to grow them on trellises. It’s a technique I’ve read about in several books I’ve consulted. The trees can be trained over trellises, giving them a structure over which to grow. I think it could work very well in the orangery at Beaumont Abbey,” Johanna replied.

The earl smiled.

“It sounds like an excellent idea,” he said, and now Johanna continued to explain her plans for the orangery and the garden, happy to have something to distract her from the impending troubles to come, and glad to have Edmund at her side to weather them with.

### Chapter 14

“Miss Tabitha Howe, Your Ladyship,” the butler announced, as Tabitha stepped into the drawing room, greeted by Johanna who had sprung to her feet at the announcement.

“Oh, Tabitha, I’m so pleased to see you!” Johanna exclaimed, throwing her arms around her friend and kissing her on the cheek.

“I’m so pleased to see you, too. I thought I’d wait a day or so. Is everything all right? Between you and Edmund, I mean? There’s talk of an annulment. But none of it is true, is it? It’s all Lavinia’s doing—her and that awful mother of hers,” Tabitha said.

Johanna led Tabitha to sit with her by the window, and now she explained what had happened after she and Edmund had fled the scene.

“He doesn’t believe a word of it—he knows it was a setup. What’s more, Lavinia hasn’t got what she wants. She thought he’d fall into her arms as the great comforter. But he didn’t. He believed me, and that’s all that matters. But who’s talking about an annulment? What’s happened?” Johanna asked.

She had shut herself away for the past two days, not going out, and having no one call on her. She knew nothing of what was being said or of what lies Lavinia and her mother were spreading.

“I’m afraid it’s the talk of the ton. I was at a luncheon party yesterday—Lord and Lady Coatbridge. Everyone was talking about it. They say the newly married

Countess of Beaumont was caught in the gardens of the home of the member of Parliament for North Hampshire in a position of compromise—caught red-handed,” Tabitha said, shaking her head sadly.

It was shocking—though hardly surprising. Had Lavinia and her mother not used the apparent facts against Johanna and Edmund it would have been a miracle. But as for the advantage they would gain...

“And they think an annulment is going to come from it, do they? And what’s going to happen then? Is Edmund suddenly going to realize his love for Lavinia and fall into her arms?” Johanna asked.

Tabitha looked at her sympathetically.

“It’s a terrible situation, Johanna. I feel so sorry for you both. Getting married was supposed to prevent a scandal, not cause one. You must feel...trapped. Perhaps an annulment would be best,” she said, but Johanna shook her head.

Since explaining to Tabitha the reasons behind her marriage to Edmund, Johanna’s feelings toward him had changed—a great deal had changed. This was no longer a marriage of practicality or convenience. Johanna felt something for Edmund, just as she now knew he felt something for her, too. She was falling in love with him—the pain she had felt at the thought of losing him was proof enough of that.

“No, it wouldn’t be. I don’t want to lose him. I love him, Tabitha, and he loves me, too. He’s saved me twice from ruin now and tarnished himself in the process. But I couldn’t imagine my life without him, not now,” Johanna said, taking hold of Tabitha’s hand as tears welled up in her eyes.

The thought of losing Edmund was unbearable, but in that thought was also the realization of all she had gained through him. There was no longer any convenience

in their marriage—not in Johanna’s mind, at least. Together, they would present a united front, and whether ruined or vindicated, they would still have one another.

“Oh, Johanna...how pleased I am to hear you say that. I did wonder if there was more. You certainly made a delightful pairing at the masquerade, until...well, you and Edmund deserve your happiness, and no one has the right to take it away from you,” Tabitha replied.

Johanna sighed. She was grateful to her friend for her words, but it seemed the ton would not allow the matter to rest so easily—not if Lavinia and her mother had anything to do with it, at least.

“But I fear they’re going to try,” Johanna said.

Tabitha paused, furrowing her brow as though thinking hard.

“You have to be seen together. That’s the way to counter the rumors about the annulment. I know it would be so much easier to shut yourselves away and have nothing to do with anyone. But if you can show yourselves together as the happily married couple you are...Well, it’ll prove to everyone that Lavinia and her mother are wrong. They might still believe you were caught in a compromise, but they won’t believe you and Edmund are finished,” she said.

Johanna thought about this for a moment. Tabitha was right. If she and Edmund became recluses, the rumors would continue to circulate, and if she disappeared from society entirely, the rumors about her being with child would only grow stronger. But to be seen together in public—as difficult as it would be to endure the harsh stares and whispered comments—would prove to everyone they were happily married and would not be going their separate ways.

“It’s a good idea...but where would we be seen at? I doubt we’d be welcome at any of

the balls or dinners in the next few weeks, and my mother-in-law has decided to cancel the Beaumont Dinner. She thinks no one's going to come to it," Johanna replied.

Tabitha nodded.

"Yes, I see the problem...oh, but it's simple. You don't have to be invited anywhere. You could promenade in the park. We could have a picnic—you, me, Edmund, the dowager, perhaps even your brother..." Tabitha said.

Johanna had heard nothing from Roger since the night of the masquerade. She did not know if he had remained long enough to be privy to the events that had unfolded, though she felt certain he would know about them now.

"I haven't heard anything from Roger. Have you?" Johanna asked.

"He sent me a bouquet—roses. They were beautiful," Tabitha said, and Johanna smiled, glad to know her brother had done the right thing in turning his attentions away from Lavinia.

"I'm glad to hear it. I was hoping...well, you deserve to be happy, Tabitha. And I hope my brother realizes that," Johanna said.

Tabitha squeezed her hand.

"And you deserve the same, too, Johanna. We'll both find the happiness we deserve. I'm sure of it," she said.

At that moment, the door out into the garden opened, and Edmund appeared. He smiled at the sight of Johanna sitting with Tabitha and crossed the garden to where they were sitting beneath the shade of an apple tree.



“Ah, I was wondering where you were,” he said, greeting Tabitha as she rose to her feet.

“I should be going now—I have errands to run. But you won’t forget what I said, will you, Johanna?” she said, and Johanna shook her head.

“No, I won’t—I think it’s an excellent idea. I’ll send you a note to make the arrangements,” she said, and kissing her friend on the cheek, they parted ways.

“She didn’t have to leave on my account—I hope she doesn’t think badly of me for some reason,” Edmund said, but Johanna shook her head, and now she explained to him what Tabitha had told her, and what the solution to their problem might be.

The earl listened, nodding in agreement as Johanna suggested how they might begin to restore their beleaguered reputation.

“If we’re seen together, it’ll prove to everyone we’re not intending to separate, and perhaps even show there’s no truth in the rumors Lavinia and her mother are spreading. We won’t be invited to any social events, but plenty of people go out to promenade in the park, don’t they? If we’re seen having a picnic with your mother and my brother—Tabitha, too—word will soon get out,” Johanna said.

She hoped he agreed with her—that the two of them could present a united front in this unfortunate trail of events, and put a stop to any rumors before they got out of control. Edmund’s mother was right—this was a storm to be weathered, but a glimmer of light had now appeared on the horizon. Edmund nodded.

“Yes, I think it’s a good idea, Johanna. And thank goodness for Tabitha, too,” he said.

“She’s been a dear friend to me. Even though we’ve not seen one another for so long.

But it's not her we need to convince. It's the rest of the ton. Now, let's think about the arrangements," Johanna said, knowing this would be their one chance to prove Lavinia and her mother wrong.

### Chapter 15

“It seems a sensible idea. Being seen in public will quell any rumors about a possible split. Oh...I feel so sorry for you both. It was all supposed to be perfect, wasn't it?” Edmund's mother said, shaking her head.

Edmund nodded. He was feeling the weight of the burden he now carried—the burden of his own duty, and that of protecting Johanna, too. He could not believe the depths Lavinia had stooped to, urged on by her equally vindictive mother. On the night of the masquerade, when Wilhelmina had come running to inform him of the indiscretion, he had immediately suspected something was not right, and he had not for a moment believed Johanna to be involved in an indiscretion. But what had happened as a result was almost as bad...

“Well...yes, though not at first,” Edmund admitted.

He had not been entirely honest with his mother as to the nature of the marriage—his haste in proposing, and Johanna's haste in accepting. His mother looked at him curiously.

“What do you mean?” she asked, narrowing her eyes as she spoke.

“What I mean is...well, there was the suggestion our meeting in the woods on the day of the accident was improper. We were seen by the Parker sisters. I knew they'd behave in just the same way Lavinia and her mother are behaving now. That's why I asked Johanna to marry me. I knew you were coming from London to help facilitate a match, and I preempted you, as did Johanna with her own parents. It was a

convenience,” Edmund admitted.

He was glad to finally unburden himself, even as his mother now rolled her eyes.

“Oh, Edmund, really...what do you think I am? I only wanted you to be happy, and you weren’t doing very much about making it so yourself. But...is it still a matter of convenience?” she asked, and Edmund shook his head.

On that matter, he felt certain. Any sense of an arrangement was now forgotten. Had the relationship between him and Johanna remained a matter of convenience, he would have quietly separated from her. But with his feelings for her growing stronger by the moment, any thought of their parting ways was anathema. He had fallen in love with her, and he had no intention of taking the easy way out.

“No, Mother. Not at all. I love her. I love her more than I can say. What happened at the masquerade was cruel and unnecessary. I still can’t believe Lavinia would sink so low. What she did was wicked,” he said.

His mother smiled at him.

“You speak with a conviction of the heart, Edmund. And I’m sorry if you thought I was being overbearing. I haven’t found things easy since your father died. Not that we got on very well—ours was hardly a model marriage. But there was stability there, and he was too dull to ever think about taking a mistress. I miss him, Edmund, and I suppose perhaps I’ve thrown myself too readily into other people’s lives—yours, especially,” she said, brushing a tear from her eye.

Edmund stepped forward and put his arms around her. He had not meant to upset her, and he had not realized the extent of her hurt over the death of his father.

“It’s all right, Mother. I’m sorry, too. But it all turned all right, didn’t it? You’ve got

the daughter you always wanted in Johanna,” he said, and his mother smiled as Edmund kissed her on the cheek and stepped back.

“Yes, you’re quite right. Johanna’s a delight. I feel so sorry for you both, I really do. As long as you’re certain, Edmund,” she said.

But Edmund was certain. He had never been more certain of anything in all his life. It was true he had had his doubts, and in the days before the wedding, he had seriously questioned whether he was doing the right thing. The very idea of the proposal, its implications...there had been so much to come to terms with. But all of that paled into insignificance when he thought of Johanna and what she had come to mean to him. He had fallen in love with her, and the cruel circumstances of the masquerade ball had only served to make those feelings grow stronger.

“I am, Mother. I promise,” he said, and now it was her turn to kiss him on the cheek and slip her hand into his.

“Very well, let’s see to it the ton realize, too,” she replied.

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“We should walk the full length of the avenue—that’s where we’ll be seen,” Johanna said as she and Edmund climbed down from their carriage at the entrance to Hyde Park.

It was a beautiful day—bright and sunny—perfect for promenading and being seen. Around them, fashionably dressed men and women were doing just the same, walking arm in arm, talking and laughing with one another. Tabitha and Roger had just arrived in separate carriages, and along with the dowager, they were to make up a picnicking party on a grassy spot close to the Serpentine. The servants had been sent ahead, and it was intended for Johanna and Edmund to walk across the park in order

to be seen by as many people as possible.

“And with our heads held high. We’ve got nothing to be ashamed of,” Edmund replied.

“I’ll walk a few steps behind—you two go ahead,” Edmund’s mother said, and the party now set off with Roger and Tabitha leading the way.

“At least one good thing’s come out of this—Roger and Tabitha,” Johanna whispered, smiling at the sight of the couple laughing with one another as they walked arm in arm.

Edmund smiled.

“Yes, I’m glad of that. Your brother had designs on Lavinia, but it seems he’s realized the error of his ways,” he said, and Johanna nodded.

She and Edmund were walking arm in arm, and now she realized their presence was being commented on. Whispered remarks were being made as they passed, and other couples were stopping to watch. It was just what they had hoped for, as unnerving as it was to experience.

“I think it’s working,” Johanna said as they passed a couple she recognized from a ball they had attended some weeks previously.

“The Earl and Countess of Beaumont—I thought they were to separate after the scandal at the masquerade. But they look perfectly contented to me,” Johanna heard one woman whisper to her husband.

Walking on along the avenue, Johanna heard similar whispers, and with so many people having so obviously noticed them, she felt certain news of their happy

marriage would soon spread around the ton. She was grateful to Tabitha for suggesting the idea of the promenade, and as they arrived at the spot for the picnic—beneath a weeping willow tree next to the Serpentine—it felt to Johanna as though a burden had been lifted from her. No one could possibly think there was anything untoward in her relationship with the earl—with her husband.

“I think we’ve convinced them. Don’t you?” Edmund said as they sat down at the table the servants had set out for them.

The dowager had arranged an elaborate picnic—cold chicken, cold tongue, a raised pie filled with game, a side of Stilton and other cheeses, bread and butter, dried fruits and sweetmeats, an apple pie, and to drink, lemonade and ginger beer. It was served on an elaborately set table, with fine china and glassware, silver cutlery, and napkins. Johanna was now feeling optimistic. She and Edmund had been seen together, and no one could possibly doubt they were not the happily married couple they truly were. Whatever the rumors about her might be, Johanna hoped those who had seen them would soon dispel the false accusations with an account of what they had seen.

“I’m sure of it, yes. It was a good idea of yours, Tabitha,” Johanna said, glancing across at her friend, who now looked up from her conversation with Roger and smiled.

“I told you it would work. All those busybodies who saw you—they’ll delight in telling the rest of the ton Lavinia was wrong,” Tabitha said.

There was a confidence in her tone, and Roger, too, now nodded.

“Tabitha’s right, Johanna. You don’t need to worry. Now, let’s enjoy this wonderful picnic together, shall we?” he said, raising a glass of lemonade to the dowager, who smiled and did the same.

Johanna had been relieved to hear from her brother the previous day. Roger had told her he did not believe a word Lavinia was saying, and that he had cut all ties with her. More importantly, he had assured Johanna he would do all he could to defend her if news of the apparent indiscretion should reach the ears of their parents. Johanna had feared as much, and she had been dreading the arrival of an angry letter from her mother, telling her she had disgraced herself in the eyes of society and brought shame on the family. But no such letter had yet arrived, and Johanna could only hope her mother either did not know or knew better than to believe hearsay and rumor.

“Do you think it’ll all just die down now?” Johanna asked as Edmund cut a slice of the game pie for her.

“I don’t know—we’re not out of the woods yet, I don’t think. It could be said we’re merely putting on an appearance. But others can believe what they want, Johanna. We know the truth. And that’s what matters,” Edmund replied.

Johanna was grateful to him for his words—for accepting the truth as truth, and not believing some twisted version of events. He could so easily have cast her aside, dismissing her on the grounds of her infidelity. He would have been entirely in his rights to do so. But he had not. He had stuck by her, and more so than that, their relationship had deepened as a result. Johanna was under no doubt as to how she felt. She loved him, and in his actions and his words, he had proved his love for her, too.

“Exactly, we don’t need anything more...” Johanna replied, but she was interrupted by the shrill voice of a woman behind her, who now addressed the dowager.

“Ah, Lady Beaumont. How nice to see you. I’m glad we’ve bumped into one another. It saves me from writing to you,” the woman—an elderly woman dressed in a green dress with a matching shawl around her shoulders, accompanied by her husband—said as Edmund’s mother now rose to her feet.



“Lady Porter, how nice to see you, too,” she said, addressing the woman, who nodded.

“Yes. I just wanted to let you know we’ll be unable to accept the invitation to the Beaumont Dinner this year. I presume you’ll be distributing them soon,” she said, looking pointedly at Edmund’s mother, who now looked embarrassed.

“Ah, well, there’s been some question as to whether we hold the dinner or not,” she replied, and the woman nodded.

“Yes, I fully understand,” she said, glancing disapprovingly in Johanna’s direction.

Johanna now understood what was happening, and it pained her to think the family’s reputation should suffer because of Lavinia’s rumors concerning her. She wanted to protest, but before she could do so, Edmund had risen to his feet.

“But if we do decide to issue invitations to the dinner, I’ll be sure not to include one to you, Lady Porter. That way, you won’t have to waste time refusing it,” he said, glaring at the woman who now harumphed and stuck her nose into the air.

“Good day to you,” she said, turning and beckoning her husband to follow her.

The dowager sat down at the table with a sigh and shook her head.

“Oh, dear. I’m sorry...” Johanna said, but Edmund patted her hand and gave her a reassuring smile.

“It’s all right. It’s not your fault. But it seems we’ll have to do more if we’re to convince the ton as to the sincerity of our denial and the truth of the facts,” he said.

Johanna’s heart sank. She had hoped this was the beginning of the end—that they had

quelled the rumors before they took hold. But Lady Porter's words had proved otherwise, and Johanna could not help but feel sorry for the dowager, who it seemed was also to suffer the humiliation of rejection for her association with Johanna and Edmund.

"How terrible—what a cruel thing to do," the dowager said.

There were tears in her eyes, and despite Edmund's reassurances, Johanna could not help but feel guilty for the part she had played. The Beaumont Dinner meant a great deal to the dowager, and for it to be canceled—snubbed, even—was surely a bitter blow. The damage to the family's reputation would be irreparable, and if something was not done to quash the rumors once and for all, they would only persist.

"We must do something to expose Lavinia's plans. We all know she was lying, but there must be some way of proving it. Where does Lord Fitzroy fit into all of this?" Johanna asked.

She had been pondering the matter ever since the night of the masquerade. Wilhelmina's involvement was obvious, and Lavinia believed she stood to gain everything her jealous nature had desired. But what of the man in the mask? What had Lord Fitzroy gained from impersonating Edmund? He had received a punch on the nose for it, and for all the trouble he had gone to, Johanna had not even as much as kissed him, let alone fallen into deeper scandal with him.

"Johanna's right—the answer must lie with him. If Lavinia gave him something—paid him, or bribed him in some way—perhaps it can be revealed," Roger said.

Edmund looked thoughtful. The high spirits of earlier were now replaced with dejection. Tabitha shook her head and sighed.

“But he’s hardly going to admit it, is he? He’s the sort of man who tosses women aside without any regard for their reputation. He’s had his fun, and it won’t matter to him how many lives he’s ruined in the process or how many reputations he’s damaged,” she said.

Johanna felt despairing.

“It’s to do with money. She must’ve promised him something—a sum of money in exchange for doing what he did. Perhaps Lavinia even suggested he could marry you if...well, if I was to annul the marriage,” Edmund said.

“But it needs to be proved,” Roger persisted.

“Yes, and it will be. I’ll go and speak to him myself. That’s the only way to resolve the matter. To hear it from the horse’s mouth, so to speak,” Edmund replied.

Johanna looked at him in horror. He would only be opening himself up to further humiliation. Lord Fitzroy was surely angry with Edmund, and if the two of them were to fight, and word got out...

“No, Edmund, you can’t!” she exclaimed, taking his hand in hers.

“This can’t go on, Johanna. Your brother’s right. The answer lies with Lord Fitzroy. It’s money he wants, and I’m certain Lavinia’s got him in her pay. But we can be cleverer than that,” Edmund said as now a smile came over his face.

“But what do you mean?” Johanna asked, and Edmund now beckoned all of them to lean forward.

“We’re going to hold the Beaumont Dinner, come what may. But we’re going to use it to our own advantage,” he said as he outlined his plan...

### Chapter 16

Lord Fitzroy's lodgings were in an unfashionable part of town, and as the carriage pulled up outside, Edmund pulled down the window to look out at the dilapidated building matching the address on the card he had in his hand.

No wonder he needed the money, Edmund thought to himself as he opened the compartment door and climbed down onto the street, instructing the carriage driver to wait for him.

"I won't be long," Edmund said, and the driver nodded.

"Very good, my lord," he said, tipping his hat.

The street was quiet, the buildings—once handsome—had fallen into disrepair, and the road was dirty, clogged with mud and rubbish. The windows of Lord Fitzroy's lodgings were grimy, half-shuttered, and with curtains pulled across inside the glass. Edmund made his way up the steps and knocked. His contact at Lord Fitzroy's club had assured him the errant aristocrat would be at home at this time, and the door was now opened by a servant—a young valet of perhaps sixteen or seventeen—who looked at Edmund suspiciously.

"Can I help you?" he asked as Edmund presented his card.

"I'm here to see His Lordship. I'll wait if he's otherwise engaged," Edmund said, stepping over the threshold before the servant could answer.

“I’ll tell His Lordship,” the boy replied.

Edmund looked around him with interest. The hallway was shabby. Paper was peeling from the walls, and old, rickety pieces of furniture were arranged without care—a table in the center, two chairs, one with its leg broken, and a small bookcase containing a number of dusty volumes. A narrow staircase led up to a landing above, where a grimy window let in a small amount of light. It was hardly palatial, and if Edmund had needed any further proof of his suspicions as to the parlous state of Lord Fitzroy’s finances, this was it.

“I presume he’s home?” Edmund asked when the servant returned a few moments later.

“His Lordship will see you,” the boy said, in a tone that did not match his grubby waistcoat and ill-fitting breeches.

He led Edmund along a narrow corridor to a door at the far end, knocking before entering and announcing Edmund from his calling card. Edmund waited for the customary summons but entered the room to find Lord Fitzroy standing by the hearth. The room was similarly furnished to the hallway, with a dusty Persian rug covering the floorboards and odd pieces of furniture scattered here and there. The remnants of a meal lay on a table by the hearth, where a fire was burning, and a number of questionable political periodicals lay scattered on the floor, suggesting Edmund had interrupted the aristocrat from some seditious pastime. Lord Fitzroy smiled.

“And what honor do I owe a visit from the Earl of Beaumont? You can leave us, Charlie. I’ll call for you if I need you,” Lord Fitzroy said, dismissing the servant with a wave of his hand.

The door was closed, and Edmund and Lord Fitzroy were left alone.

“I want to talk to you about what happened at the masquerade ball,” Edmund said, and Lord Fitzroy laughed.

“Do you need evidence for the annulment?” he asked, offering Edmund a drink from a decanter of brandy on a table at the side of the hearth.

“I won’t, thank you. And no. There’s to be no annulment,” Edmund replied.

“Oh, come off it. Your wife doesn’t love you. If she did, she’d hardly have thrown herself at me. Would she? I couldn’t keep her away from me. I’m sure what you’re doing is very honorable, Edmund...my lord...but you mustn’t worry about her. She’ll be well provided for. I wouldn’t leave her bereft. She’s a very attractive woman,” he said, smirking at Edmund, who clenched his fists in anger, even as he knew he had to remain calm.

Lord Fitzroy was testing him—pushing him to see how far he would go.

“There’s nothing honorable about it. We both know the truth behind it. You were part of the conspiracy. Wilhelmina and Lavinia put you up to it. How much did they offer you?” Edmund demanded.

Lord Fitzroy narrowed his eyes.

“What are you talking about?” he demanded, looking suddenly uncomfortable.

“I know about your debts. It wasn’t difficult to discover you owe money to a dozen creditors, and that there’s a black mark against your name at the club for gambling beyond your means. And look at this place. If it wasn’t for your title, you’d have nothing. No...I know all about you, and I know Lavinia and her mother paid you handsomely for what you did on the night of the masquerade. But what else did they promise you? Johanna’s hand in marriage after I’d annulled our own? Is that it?”

Edmund said, looking pointedly at Lord Fitzroy, who faltered.

“I owe money—what of it? You can’t prove anything. Besides, it’s not me who’s to blame. I assure you your wife didn’t try very hard to resist me,” he said.

Edmund now saw red, and he lunged forward, ready to strike the man if he continued his vein of insult.

“I won’t hear such things said about my wife. I love her, and I know she loves me, too,” he snarled.

Lord Fitzroy shrugged, regaining something of his composure, as though he thought he again had the upper hand.

“Well, it hardly matters, does it? It’s what others think that counts. Your reputation, your wife’s reputation, your family’s reputation...it all lies in ruins. The name of Beaumont is a disgrace. You can believe what your wife says. But if you persist in your marriage, you’ll only be a laughingstock,” he said.

“And if I don’t care about being a laughingstock? If I tell you I love my wife and married her for the very fact of it?” Edmund retorted.

“Then I wouldn’t believe you,” Lord Fitzroy replied.

“And why did you do what you did? I know Johanna didn’t realize what she was doing. She didn’t throw herself at you like some...well, I won’t say the word. Why can’t you do the honorable thing and admit the reasons for what you did? Look at this place. It’s obvious to anyone, isn’t it? I say it again, you wanted money,” Edmund said.

Lord Fitzroy smiled. “Prove it,” he replied.

Edmund glared at him. He would gladly have struck the errant aristocrat or challenged him to a duel. It was a matter of honor. Of Edmund's honor and that of Johanna, too. Edmund knew Lord Fitzroy had the upper hand—as did Lavinia and her mother. But he had not come to Lord Fitzroy's house to leave empty-handed.

"I can't. But what if I offered you something better?" Edmund replied.

Lord Fitzroy narrowed his eyes.

"I'm listening," he replied.

"You're a pawn in Lavinia's game. Perhaps I can't prove it, but you are. She's using you, just as she uses everyone. She's a jealous, manipulative creature, and her mother only encourages her. They're not interested in you. They only care about breaking the marriage between Johanna and I, believing—entirely erroneously—that I would fall into her arms. They offered you Johanna as a prize. But she doesn't want you. You'll be the laughingstock once she's finished with you. Mark my words," Edmund said.

His passions were rising. He felt the injustice of what had happened, and the pain it had caused both him and Johanna. Lavinia only cared about herself, and Edmund intended to do all he could to stop her from gaining the advantage. Lord Fitzroy looked suddenly perturbed.

"It was only a bit of fun. I don't know why you're so concerned about it. It'll all blow over," he said, shrugging his shoulders.

"I think I'll have that drink after all," Edmund said, nodding toward the decanter.

Lord Fitzroy poured him a glass, smiling as he handed it to him.

"Tell me what advantage I can gain by listening to your proposal," he said, and



Edmund now took a deep breath.

“You might’ve heard the Beaumont Dinner was canceled. Well, I still intend to have it, and I want you to be there,” he replied, downing the glass of brandy in one gulp as he began to explain his plan.

### Chapter 17

“He plans to invite Lavinia and Wilhelmina to the Beaumont Dinner?” Tabitha exclaimed.

“That’s right, but he hasn’t explained exactly why...I don’t know, Tabitha. I don’t like it. I know the rumors about me are circulating. They’re being believed, too. It’s simply awful. I just wish...oh, I just wish I’d never gone to that awful masquerade ball,” Johanna said.

She was fearful as to what the future held. She and Edmund had avoided one scandal, but now it was as though they had stepped out of the frying pan and into the fire. Edmund had tried to reassure Johanna, telling her he had everything in hand. But lately, he was being somewhat secretive, and the fact of his intending to invite Lavinia and Wilhelmina to the Beaumont Dinner seemed like disturbing a den of vipers...

“But you did, and there’s nothing to be done about it except to hope it won’t cause too much trouble. Rumors fly about all the time. It’ll all be forgotten about by next month,” Tabitha replied.

“That’s easy for you to say. You and Roger are the perfect couple,” Johanna replied.

The two women were promenading in the park. Johanna had accompanied Tabitha reluctantly. She had hated the thought of people looking at her, and several had already done so, whispering behind their fans. It was humiliating, and Edmund had done nothing save talk about a vague plan to set matters straight. She was relieved he

believed her, but if the rest of the ton were not convinced, the pair would live their lives always as the married couple dogged not by one scandal, but by two.

“We’re not the perfect couple, Johanna. Scandals come in many forms. None of us are immune. Anyway, I haven’t even seen him today,” Tabitha replied, as though a day apart was reason to believe they were not madly in love—which they so obviously were.

“No...he’s doing a job for Edmund,” Johanna replied.

Tabitha looked at her curiously.

“A job for Edmund? What sort of job?” she asked, and Johanna smiled.

“Spying. He’s gone to Lavinia’s house—her father’s house—to speak to the servants. Lavinia and Wilhelmina always go out to promenade in the morning, and Lavinia’s father will be at Parliament for the day. Edmund thinks he can discover something from the servants, but it wouldn’t do for him to go. He might be recognized. Again, I don’t know the reason. Edmund’s been so vague recently. I think he’s trying to protect me. But I want to know,” Johanna said.

She did not like being kept in the dark over such serious matters. The organization of the Beaumont Dinner had been handed to the dowager, and Johanna felt like a pawn in a game, even as Edmund continued to assure her it was for her own good. Roger appeared to be a willing participant in Edmund’s plans, but the thought of him sneaking around and spying was distasteful. Johanna could only imagine what their mother would say...

“How curious. It seems a very strange thing to do. But I suppose Edmund knows what he’s doing, but...oh, look, there’s Lavinia and her mother,” Tabitha exclaimed, clutching Johanna’s arm as she spoke.

Johanna looked up to see Lavinia and Wilhelmina walking toward them, arm in arm. There was no question of their avoiding them, and as the pair approached, Lavinia smirked.

“It’s always better to walk unmasked, I find,” she said.

Johanna glared at her.

“Good day, Lavinia. Good day, Wilhelmina,” she said.

There was no point in adding fuel to the fire. Lavinia was a master at using anything she could for her own gain. If Johanna was rude to her in any way, Lavinia could be certain of using it against her.

“I’m surprised you dare be seen in public, Johanna. There’s no point lying about what happened. We all saw you. Why don’t you do the honorable thing and admit it? The whole ton is talking about it,” Wilhelmina said.

Again, Johanna had to try hard to control her temper. It was the injustice of it all that hurt the most. Had she really been involved in a scandal with Lord Fitzroy, then she would deserve to be the source of gossip. But it was not the case, and Johanna was determined to stand her ground, even as she knew what Edmund had told her to do.

“I have nothing to be ashamed of, and...well, I don’t want us to fight over this, Lavinia,” she said.

Lavinia narrowed her eyes.

“What do you mean?” she asked as though finding something suspicious in Johanna’s words.

“I mean...I don’t want us to be...enemies,” Johanna continued.

Edmund had told her to be civil to Lavinia. It was imperative they lull her into a false sense of security, and make her believe there was every possibility of her plan succeeding.

“Is that so? Well...I don’t know about that, Johanna. You and I have rather different views on the matter at hand. Besides, it wouldn’t do to be associated with scandal, would it?” Lavinia replied.

It was clearly not what she was expecting, even as she appeared curious as to why Johanna should be behaving in such a friendly manner toward her.

“There’s no scandal, Lavinia. I promise you. But putting that aside for a moment. I’m glad we bumped into one another. I wanted to invite you to the Beaumont Dinner. Both of you,” Johanna said.

It went against all her instincts to do so. She hated the idea of inviting Lavinia and Wilhelmina into their home, but Edmund had been insistent.

“It’s the only way for the plan to succeed,” he had said, and Johanna had had no choice but to go along with it.

She wanted desperately to clear her name, and for the ton to realize she and Edmund’s marriage was legitimate. As the days and weeks had gone by, Johanna’s attraction to Edmund had grown ever stronger, and her feelings for him, too. She was falling in love with him—perhaps she already had done so—and she knew he was doing this for her, and for that reason, she was willing to go along with it, despite the difficulties Edmund’s plan presented. Lavinia raised her eyebrows.

“You want us to dine with you and Edmund at the Beaumont Dinner? On your

invitation?" she asked.

Johanna knew Lavinia would never accept an invitation from her alone. Edmund had anticipated that.

"No, not just my invitation. Edmund's, too. He was insistent on it. He wants you there. He'd have invited you himself if we hadn't bumped into one another like this," Johanna replied.

Johanna knew the fact of it being Edmund's invitation would change everything. Lavinia would now think she was the favored one and that her attempts to comfort Edmund in the aftermath of the apparent scandal had not gone unrecognized.

"Would he?" Lavinia replied.

It was an appeal to her vanity, and it seemed to have worked...

"He said so this morning at breakfast. That's why I thought to ask you now, you see. Can't we put this horrible business behind us once and for all? I know you think I did something terrible, and I'm sorry for the impression you have of me. But for Edmund's sake, can't the two of us get along? I know he very much wants you at the dinner," Johanna said.

It pained her to say these things. It was all a lie, but a necessary one if Lavinia's schemes were to be defeated.

"Fight cunning with cunning," Edmund had said, and though the thought of sitting down to dinner with Lavinia and Wilhelmina filled Johanna with dread, she was willing to do so if it meant an end to the ordeal she had endured at the hands of the mother and daughter.

“Well...if Edmund wants me there, how can I refuse?” Lavinia replied.

Johanna forced a smile to her face.

“Oh, I’m so pleased to hear you say that, Lavinia. I’ll send a formal invitation in the post. But for now, I can only look forward to your company. Edmund’s going to be so pleased,” she said, and Lavinia smiled.

“Well...I was always...a good friend to him,” Lavinia said.

“You were, and...between you and me...” Johanna said, leaning forward and lowering her voice to a whisper.

This was it. This was what Edmund had told her was going to happen, though he had assured her there was no truth in it.

“If you see her, let it be known we intend to announce the annulment of our marriage at the dinner. Tell her it’s an important family occasion, and we have the opportunity to set matters straight. She won’t be able to resist being there then,” Edmund had said.

“What?” Lavinia asked, leaning forward, as though she was a priest in the confessional.

“Edmund and I have agreed to annul our marriage. I know what I said about loving him, but it’s all become too difficult. The things people say...” Johanna said.

In saying these words, she was more certain than ever of her belief in the opposite. There was to be no annulment. Not now, or ever. This was no longer a marriage of convenience, but a marriage of mutually growing affection, of love, even. But Edmund had been clear—Lavinia had to believe she had a chance of what she

desired. At Johanna's words, she let out a cry of exclamation, her eyes growing wide as now she clutched at her mother's arm.

"Really...well, that changes everything," she said.

There was no act of commiseration, no sympathy or sorrow expressed. This was good news to Lavinia, and it was just as Johanna had hoped. Lavinia was a foolish creature to believe Johanna's words, but the appeal to her vanity had worked, and as they parted ways—Lavinia telling her mother they had to go at once to a modiste—Johanna smiled to herself, knowing Edmund would be pleased.

"What if this doesn't work? What if Lavinia suspects something?" Tabitha whispered.

They had come to the end of a long avenue of trees leading to the center of the park, and as Johanna glanced back, she saw Lavinia and her mother climbing into a waiting carriage at the far end of the avenue.

"I'm sure she suspects something. But the lure of Edmund is something she can't resist. She'll be at the dinner," Johanna smiled, and even though she did not know what Edmund had planned, she felt certain it would not be long before Lavinia and her mother got their comeuppance.

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"And you think she believed you?" Edmund asked, when later, Johanna told him what had happened in the park earlier that day.

"I think she wanted what she believed could be hers enough to be tempted by what I was saying," Johanna replied.



Lavinia was not stupid. She was a scheming, cunning woman who would stop at nothing to get what she wanted. The invitation had obviously tempted her—that it came from Edmund had only made it more tempting, and that the dinner would be the occasion for the announcement of the annulment only added to the anticipation that this would be Lavinia’s moment to step forward and take her rightful place as the Countess of Beaumont.

“You did very well,” Edmund said, smiling at Johanna, who blushed.

“Yes, but I still don’t understand what this is all about. I don’t know why you want her and her mother to come to the dinner, and I don’t know why we have to tell such a lie, either,” Johanna said.

They were sitting in the drawing room, and Edmund now reached out and took Johanna’s hand in his.

“It’ll be all right, I promise. Lavinia and her mother won’t have a leg to stand on after this. I promise you,” he said, squeezing her hand as he spoke.

“I just wish I’d never gone to that awful masquerade. And what of Lord Fitzroy? I suppose he’s coming, too, isn’t he?” Johanna asked.

She was dreading the thought of seeing her masked pursuer again. The thought of it filled her with fear. What if he tried to do something else to her? The memory of their encounter in the shrubbery filled her with horror. It had been a wicked ploy, one Johanna could never forgive. She was only grateful she had not given in to the passions she rightly felt for Edmund. In this, he had been reserved—the perfect gentleman when it came to matters of romance. That was why Johanna had been so surprised in the shrubbery. The behavior of the masked man had been so unlike that of Edmund as to have surely made her realize it could not have been him.

“I’ll deal with Lord Fitzroy. But suffice to say, he realizes he’s been taken for a fool, too. I think he’s even beginning to see the error of his ways. But why don’t we forget all about these things for a while? Would you like to go on a picnic? Just the two of us? We needn’t go far. I know you don’t feel comfortable being seen out at the moment. But I thought we could sit together in the garden. After all, there’s no scandal in our being alone together,” he said, smiling at Johanna, who blushed.

It was a kind and thoughtful suggestion, one Johanna now readily agreed to. She liked the time they spent together. Edmund was sincere in his words and in his actions. There was no compulsion on his part for the two of them to spend time together. If this was a merely functional arrangement, he could have simply left her to her own amusements, but this was different, and Johanna could only feel grateful to him for the suggestion.

“I’d be delighted, thank you,” she said, and a short while later, the two of them found themselves sitting beneath the boughs of a shady oak tree in the garden, eating a picnic Edmund had had the cook prepare for them.

“Isn’t this lovely? A chance to forget all about Lavinia and her mother for a while. To forget about the whole ton. Can you imagine if we’d simply eloped to Scotland and married at Gretna Green?” Edmund asked.

Johanna laughed.

“That really would’ve caused a scandal. Lots of people do it, though,” she said, and Edmund nodded.

“And here we are, paying the price for having tried to do the right thing instead,” she replied, shaking her head.

“It’ll be all right in the end, I promise,” Edmund said, offering her a jam tart.

Johanna sighed. He kept reassuring her, and yet still she had her doubts. She wanted to believe him—to trust him—and yet part of her still wondered whether Lavinia would still have the upper hand.

“I know, but...after everything that’s happened, you can’t blame me for being cautious. I was foolish...” she began, but Edmund interrupted her.

“You weren’t foolish, Johanna. It was a cruel trick to play on you. Crueler than cruel. It was wicked. We both fell victim to Lavinia’s schemes. But she’s not the only one capable of forming a plan, you know. But I don’t want you to worry. I’m your husband, and I’m the one who should be looking after you,” he said.

Johanna smiled.

“And who was it who took care of you? Aren’t I capable of resolving our difficulties, too. If it was up to me, I’d...well...I don’t know what I’d do. But I’d do something,” Johanna said, and Edmund laughed.

“I wasn’t questioning you, Johanna. I promise. The way you took care of me after the accident was exemplary. But it’s because of me you’ve been dragged into this. It’s me Lavinia wants. She’s besotted, and she sees you as the person standing between her and the apparent happiness she thinks can be hers,” Edmund replied.

There was a passionate tone in his voice, and put like that, Johanna could not deny the truth of what he said. But she was his wife. The two of them had made their vows—for better or for worse. Edmund had been loyal to Johanna, and she had every intention of being loyal to him, too. They were husband and wife, and in these little moments they shared, they were growing closer in their intimacy and understanding of one another.

“Well...I suppose that’s true. But we’ll face her together. I won’t let her

destroy...well, this,” Johanna said, and Edmund smiled.

“It makes me happy to hear you say that. You’re right. She won’t force us apart. She thinks she can. She thinks she has. But we won’t allow her to. There’s going to be no annulment. If anything, I feel more grateful for our marriage with every passing moment,” Edmund said.

It pleased Johanna to hear him say this, and it was just how she felt, too—a growing realization this was the right thing to have done.

“Then the stage is set,” Johanna said, and Edmund nodded.

“The stage is set, and now the actors assemble,” he replied, smiling, as he offered Johanna another jam tart.

### Chapter 18

“I hope we have enough forks. Did someone check we had enough forks? Roberts, did you make sure there are enough forks?” the dowager exclaimed.

“Yes, Your Ladyship. There are enough forks, knives, spoons, and everything else that could possibly be needed,” the butler replied.

There was a hint of frustration in his voice, one Johanna fully understood. Arrangements for the Beaumont Dinner that evening had reached a fever pitch, and the dowager had involved herself in every minutiae of the arrangements, allowing Johanna to do nothing.

“You don’t need to help. It’s easier if I do it myself,” she had told Johanna when the question of who should see to the flower arrangements had arisen.

Johanna wanted to help, but she felt entirely helpless in the face of the dowager’s insistence on seeing to everything herself.

“Yes...good, enough forks. And glasses...no, don’t answer, Roberts. I’ll go and see to the table setting myself. It’s always better to have a woman’s eye in these matters. Don’t you think, Johanna?” the dowager asked.

Johanna had no chance to respond before her mother-in-law had swept out of the room, calling for the footmen to follow her to the dining room. The butler let out a deep sigh, though he said nothing as he now followed. Johanna was left alone, smiling to herself at the thought of the dowager fussing over the arrangements. She

wanted the dinner to be a success, even as Johanna was now feeling increasingly nervous. Invitations—previously retracted—had been issued far and wide, and Johanna knew there was much expectation on the part of the ton as to what was to be. Lavinia and Wilhelmina had accepted their invitations, and the scene was now set for whatever Edmund intended.

Whatever that might be, Johanna thought to herself.

She could not imagine what announcing an annulment would do—other than cause further speculation and intrigue. But Johanna was willing to trust Edmund to make the right decision, and with the time for the dinner to begin now fast approaching, Johanna went to get herself ready to greet their guests.

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“Lady Brixton, how lovely to see you...and Sir Robert, you never look a day older. Oh...I must go and greet the Potters. They’ve come from such a long way,” the dowager said, steering Johanna through the crowd gathered in the drawing room for drinks.

Johanna had not realized just how many people would be attending the dinner that evening, and she was relieved to have the dowager to help her in greeting them—the names alone proving impossible to remember.

“I don’t like half of them, and the others I only invite out of charity. But it has to be done,” Johanna’s mother-in-law whispered, though she did not elaborate as to who fitted into which category.

Edmund was talking to Roger, and Johanna now spotted Tabitha arriving. She made her excuses to the dowager and hurried across the room to greet her.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Johanna whispered.

She knew the principal reason any of the people gathered for the dinner that evening had accepted was the fact of the unfolding scandal surrounding her and Edmund. Thanks to Lavinia, what had happened in the shrubbery was now common knowledge, and there was no doubt in Johanna’s mind as to her being the center of attention.

“Are you all right? I still don’t think this is a very good idea,” Tabitha whispered.

“Edmund thinks it is. He says he wants to look after me...I just wish he’d tell me, and...oh, I wasn’t expecting them to be here,” Johanna exclaimed, and now she caught sight of her parents being ushered into the drawing room by one of the footmen.

“Oh, I thought you knew. It was Roger’s idea, or so he told me. I thought you knew. I’m nervous about meeting them, too,” Tabitha said as Johanna’s mother now made a beeline for them.

Johanna had not seen her mother in several weeks, and not since the scandal of the masquerade had broken. But the look on her mother’s face told her she had heard everything...

“I don’t understand why we’re here, Johanna. What a thing this is. A dinner in the midst of a scandal. Oh, what were you thinking? I know it’s not what everyone thinks. But you were so foolish to allow yourself...” she began, without even greeting Johanna or Tabitha with any kind of courtesy.

Johanna interrupted her.

“Mother, I don’t know what lies you’ve heard. But none of it is true. I’m sure the

Parker sisters are delighting in spreading rumors about me, but nothing happened. Who do you believe? Your daughter or a pack of gossips with nothing better to do than spread lies?" Johanna said.

Her words were impassioned, and her mother now looked at her in surprise.

"Well...when you put it like that, Johanna...I'm sorry, it's just...well, I'm worried about your reputation. That's why we came. It was all so rushed. The wedding, I mean. We hardly knew the duke, did we? And then there was the question of what happened between the two of you in the woods..." she said.

Again, Johanna raised her eyebrows.

"Nothing happened, Mother. I give you my word. I've been the victim of circumstance. Cruel and unwarranted circumstances. I'll explain more later. But right now...oh, Lavinia's here," Johanna said, glancing at Tabitha who drew a sharp intake of breath at the sight of Lavinia and her mother, who had just been announced into the drawing room.

Heads were turning, and whispers circulated as Lavinia advanced toward Edmund, who had turned to greet her. Despite knowing the truth, Johanna could not help but feel threatened by the sight of her adversary, who had dressed, not so much for a dinner, but for a ball. She looked resplendent in red, the color of seduction, the trail of the dress swishing across the floor as she walked with the confident air of a woman who felt certain of her advantage, shoulders back and head held high.

"Look at her," Tabitha whispered, shaking her head in astonishment.

"She's certainly accepted the invitation," Johanna replied, watching as Lavinia held out her hand to Edmund and smiled.



“Lavinia, I’m so glad to see you,” he said, taking Lavinia’s hand and raising it to his lips.

Lavinia smiled, and had she not known better, Johanna might well have felt a sense of jealousy at seeing her husband apparently so charmed by the arrival of this red-clad seductress. It was clear Lavinia thought her time had come, and the smug look on Wilhelmina’s face also said the same. She was standing behind Lavinia, and now she greeted Edmund with a curtsy.

“My lord,” she said before offering Edmund her hand.

“What happens now?” Tabitha whispered, and Johanna took a deep breath.

“We let the evening unfold,” she replied, even as she was still not entirely certain how it would do so.

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“Look, there’s Lord Frederick, too. What a gathering,” Tabitha said, shaking her head.

It had been decided the first course of the dinner would be served outside in the garden, allowing the guests to mingle with one another on the lawn before sitting down at tables arranged below the terrace. The dowager had led the party outside, and now Johanna and Tabitha were standing on the terrace, looking down at the gathering below.

“Edmund told me to talk to him. I can’t bear the thought of it. He scares me. I keep thinking about him in the mask, the way he took hold of me in the shrubbery. It makes me shudder,” Johanna said, shaking her head as she watched Lord Frederick laughing with one of the guests.

“He’s obviously here for a reason. Look, Roger’s going to talk to him. Oh, I wish I knew what was going to happen,” Tabitha said.

Johanna felt the same. She did not know what Edmund had planned, though she was willing to trust his judgment. He had trusted her on the day they had first met, and now she wanted to do the same, even as she feared the possibility of Lavinia still gaining the upper hand. She was a cunning, devious woman, and to see her now, flirting with Edmund, was to be reminded of how close Johanna had come to disaster. But it was also a reminder of how Johanna’s own feelings had changed. No longer did she have any doubts as to what she had done—as to what she had chosen in marrying Edmund. She had made the right choice, and with every passing day, she was falling more in love with him.

### Chapter 19

“It really was so kind of you to invite me, Edmund. I was only too pleased to accept. I’m sorry about the other night. It must’ve been terrible for you to find out about...well, the infidelity,” Lavinia said, lowering her voice as she put her hand on Edmund’s arm.

It was as much as Edmund could do not to shudder as she did so, but this was all part of his plan. Having greeted Lavinia, he had excused himself and gone to talk to several of the other guests before the party had made its way outside to mingle before the first course was served. Here, Edmund had allowed himself to separate from the group, standing alone, for he knew Lavinia would approach him.

“Yes...it was terrible. And I’m sorry for my reaction toward you, Lavinia. You were only trying to help. I know that. You were very kind. Had you and your mother not led me outside...well, I’d never have discovered the truth. Would I?” he said, and Lavinia shook her head.

“No, you’d still be in the dark, and goodness only knows what depths she’d have sunk to. I think it’s very brave of you to admit the marriage hasn’t worked. It takes courage. She’ll be damaged for life, of course. But that’s not your problem, Edmund. You deserve to be happy,” Lavinia said, still with her hand on Edmund’s arm.

Again, he found it hard not to shudder at these words. She really was an odious creature, even as there had been a time when Edmund had been fooled by her act. Now, he knew Lavinia wanted only her own advantage, and Edmund had every intention of denying her it.

“That’s very kind of you to say, Lavinia. I have to admit, it’s not been the easiest of times. But I’m grateful for friends like you,” Edmund said.

Lavinia nodded, still with her hand on Edmund’s arm. She leaned forward, lowering her voice as she spoke.

“You can always count on me, Edmund. I mean it. I can only imagine how you’re feeling. It’s all been so hurried. When you married Johanna in such haste, I was ever so worried. But you’ve realized the error of your ways. She can’t be trusted,” Lavinia said, shaking her head and tutting.

There was no holding back. Lavinia clearly believed she had the advantage and that Edmund was now hers. Edmund was counting on her naivete to continue, and now he leaned forward so their faces were almost touching.

“I was wondering...perhaps we could skip the first course. I’d like you to see something. There’s a summerhouse at the end of the garden. It’s quite secluded,” he said.

Edmund knew Lavinia would not be able to resist, and now she looked at him with excitement in her eyes, her grip on his arm tightening as she spoke.

“Would we be...alone?” she asked, seeming hardly able to contain her excitement at the prospect.

“Oh, yes...quite alone. We could slip away now if you’d like. I’m sure your mother wouldn’t mind. Not if it was with me...” Edmund said.

He was playing his hand now, and relying on Lavinia continuing to allow heart to gain over head. What he was proposing was scandalous, any woman would know that. But it seemed her infatuation was now to get the better of her as she nodded, her

eyes wide with excited anticipation.

“There’re enough people here. We won’t be seen. Unless she’s watching us, of course,” Lavinia replied.

But this was all part of the plan, and Edmund now turned, pointing surreptitiously toward where Lord Fitzroy was talking to Johanna.

“Oh, I think she’s made her choice,” he said, and Lavinia gasped.

“The harlot...she’s shameless,” she exclaimed.

Edmund had wondered if Lavinia might have questioned the fact of such blatant an appearance by Lord Fitzroy, but she seemed only to take it as fresh evidence of Johanna’s obvious infidelity, and now there could be no question of her desiring to succeed in her own intentions. But that was the point; Edmund had known Lavinia would not be able to resist his invitation, and now he pointed to a path leading across the lawn and down to the bottom of the garden.

“Shall we?” he asked, offering Lavinia his arm, and Lavinia nodded.

“And what happens when we get there?” she asked, her voice brimming with excitement.

“Oh, you’ll have to see,” Edmund replied, as now he led her down the garden path, just as she and her mother had done the same to Johanna...

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“I just want to apologize. That’s the truth,” Lord Fitzroy said.

Johanna looked at him in surprise. There had been a delay in serving the first course, and the guests were still milling around on the lawn as the dowager circulated, making excuses. Tabitha was with Roger, and finding herself alone, Johanna had been approached by Lord Fitzroy as she helped herself to a glass of punch.

“Well...if you really mean it,” Johanna replied, for she was not the sort of person who held a grudge.

Lord Fitzroy nodded.

“Your husband and I had a long talk. He told me...certain things...about Lavinia and her mother. I feel rather foolish, actually. I thought it was all a bit of fun. But it was my reputation she was risking, too. I had debts, you see—mounting debts. I like to give the impression of wealth. I’m probably seen as something of a rake...but I genuinely believed I was being introduced to a woman who might reciprocate my advances. When I realized that wasn’t the case, I still went along with it—urged on by Lavinia. But Edmund offered me an alternative view,” Lord Fitzroy said.

Johanna sighed. She was not the sort of person who bore grudges, though Lavinia and her mother had certainly tested that resolve. She was willing to forgive him and forget the whole matter, but she wanted to understand how Edmund had persuaded Lord Fitzroy as to the error of his ways. In their first encounter, it had seemed Lord Fitzroy exuded confidence, and now Johanna feared it might have been a financial settlement that had settled the matter, rather than a genuine change of heart.

“And what was it?” Johanna asked.

“He suggested Lavinia would be only too glad to destroy my reputation along with yours if necessary. She told me you wanted a way out of the marriage—that you weren’t happy at the prospect of a life lived as a result of convenience. The way she explained it, there was a genuine scandal involved, one you wanted to extricate

yourself from. I never realized you might actually be in love with him,” he said.

At these words, Johanna was somewhat taken aback. She had known Edmund had gone to visit Lord Fitzroy and that some kind of deal had been made. But the manner of Edmund’s persuasion now revealed something of his true feelings for her. He had told Lord Fitzroy he loved her. It was a simple thing, but entirely heartfelt. Edmund had no reason to say it if it was not true, and now Johanna could only feel grateful to her husband for all he had done for her.

“Well...I’m glad you understand it,” she said, and Lord Fitzroy nodded.

“Actually, I rather envy him. I envy anyone who finds true love. Being a rake has its advantages as far as pleasure’s concerned, but sometimes I wish for something more than fleeting pastimes,” he said, shaking his head sadly.

“And I hope one day you find more,” Johanna replied, feeling genuinely sorry for him.

“And that’s what Edmund persuaded me of, too. Did you see him and Lavinia slip away to the summerhouse just now?” Lord Fitzroy asked.

Johanna looked around. She had not noticed anything, but now she saw no sign of either Edmund or Lavinia. They were gone, and the dowager now called the company to order.

“My lords, ladies, and gentlemen. It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all here this evening to the Beaumont Dinner...” she began.

Lord Fitzroy now leaned forward to whisper in Lavinia’s ear.

“We’re to follow them to the summerhouse. He’s there now with her. We’re to

appear before anything untoward can occur on Lavinia's part. She thinks she's being seduced. Make it seem as though we're bickering with one another as we enter. Edmund's going to reveal he knows Lavinia paid me for what I did," he said.

But before they could go, Johanna stopped him.

"Why are you doing this? What do you gain from it?" she asked, and Lord Fitzroy sighed.

"Perhaps a chance for a new beginning," he said, and Johanna smiled at him.

"Very well...I just hope Edmund knows what he's doing," she replied.



### Chapter 20

“Isn’t this fun?” Lavinia said as she followed Edmund into the summerhouse.

Edmund did not think it was fun at all, but he continued the act as he and Lavinia had made their way along the path leading to the bottom of the garden. They had left the chatter of the guests behind, and as they entered the summerhouse, Edmund could only hope Lord Fitzroy and Johanna would not be far behind. He knew what Lavinia was thinking—that there was every possibility of seduction and that if he should submit to her, he would be hers. But Edmund had no intention of submitting to Lavinia’s charms—as lacking as they were. In all things, he compared her to Johanna, and in all things, he found her lacking.

“Yes, it’s a beautiful summerhouse. I like to come here and read or practice the violin,” Edmund said.

“You should’ve brought it this evening and serenaded me. Oh, Edmund, I feel so happy at the prospect of our...well, I think we both know why you brought me here, don’t we?” Lavinia said.

Edmund smiled. He wanted her to go on thinking that thought for as long as possible. He was lulling her into a false sense of security. Her guard was down, and he needed only to lead her on a little further...

“Yes, it’s not been easy. And to think of the shame to come,” he said, shaking his head.

“Oh, but a man’s shame isn’t the same as a woman’s. And besides, there’s no shame for you, is there? It’s her that’s at fault. She’s the one who did this, not you. Annul the marriage, and then I’m sure you’ll find a very...understanding response,” she said, placing her hand on his arm and smiling.

She was the shameless one—like a vulture circling above a dying animal waiting to swoop. She believed she had gained her victory and the prize was hers for the taking, but Edmund had no intention of her gaining it. He was about to lay his final card on the table—the trump to outdo Lavinia’s own previous flush. Now, he heard footsteps coming along the path outside the summerhouse, and as Lavinia looked up in surprise, Edmund smiled at her.

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“It’ll be dark soon. We don’t have much time,” Lord Fitzroy said as Johanna followed him along the path to the summerhouse.

She knew the dowager would be wondering where she and Edmund had gone, making excuses as she tried to buy time before their return. But as the dinner was about to be ruined anyway, it hardly seemed to matter...

“This is certainly going to give the ton something to think about, isn’t it? They all believe they’re going to hear an announcement about an annulment,” Johanna said, shaking her head at the very thought of it.

“Well...they’re about to hear something far more interesting. They’re about to learn what Lavinia’s really like. I was such a fool to allow myself to be bought like that,” Lord Fitzroy said.

Again, the question of whether Edmund had offered Lord Fitzroy money came to mind, and Johanna could not help but ask it, knowing she did not want to think

Edmund had put his assets at risk for her sake.

“I just don’t like the thought of money changing hands,” she said, after she had asked the question.

Lord Fitzroy paused and turned to her.

“No, Edmund didn’t give me money. But he’s allowed me to put what little money I still have into some safe investments of his. He’s going to help me get back on my feet and clear my debts. Lavinia offered me money, and she offered me you, as well. I’d have been shamed in both ways,” he said, shaking his head sadly.

Johanna now felt reassured, and as they approached the summerhouse, she saw Edmund and Lavinia standing inside.

“What do we do now?” she whispered, and Lord Fitzroy cleared his throat.

“We pretend to argue...now, Johanna, I won’t hear you say such things...I’ll marry you, but it has to be on my terms. I won’t be dictated to by a woman,” he said, raising his voice as he spoke.

Johanna played along as the two of them hurried toward the summerhouse, each pretending to be oblivious to the occupants inside.

“Kiss me here if you really mean it. I’ll have the annulment by tomorrow. It hardly matters, does it? We can be married at Gretna Green within a week,” she said, jabbing Lord Fitzroy in the arm as she spoke.

“Kiss you here? Oh, yes, you’d like that, wouldn’t you?” he replied, as now he pulled open the door, revealing the startled face of Lavinia looking back at them.

As they entered the summerhouse, Johanna met Lavinia's eye with a defiant gaze. This was it, The decisive moment. Lavinia's expression altered. She looked suddenly perturbed, glancing at Edmund as though suspecting something was amiss.

“What's all this about? What are they doing here? Or did you think you could have your dirty little liaison here before the first course?” Lavinia exclaimed, glaring at Johanna, who continued to hold her gaze with defiance.

“I could say the same about you, Lavinia—leading my husband to the summerhouse like this. And for what reason? What did you think to gain from it?” Johanna asked.

Lavinia pointed at her angrily.

“You're the one leading others on. The two of you should be ashamed of yourselves. The way you've treated Edmund. It's wicked,” she snarled, appearing to regain her composure.

Did she think she had the upper hand? Johanna glanced at Edmund. She did not know what he was about to do. She had trusted him up to now, but despite Lord Frederick's words, a certain doubt still filled her mind. Lavinia could so easily have manipulated him. What if Johanna herself was walking into a trap?

“No, Lavinia. The way you've treated us all—that's what's wicked,” Edmund replied, pulling his arm away from Lavinia's hand as she stared at him in astonishment.

“Edmund? What do you mean? What are you saying? You don't mean it Edmund...just now...the things you were saying?” she exclaimed, and Edmund shook his head.

“Lies, Lavinia. You're not the only one who can tell them. But fortunately for the rest

of us, we saw through them—including Lord Fitzroy. We know you paid him to try to seduce Johanna at the masquerade, and we know you promised her to him by way of making the deal sweeter. But it wasn't to be, Lavinia, and for one simple reason. Love. I love Johanna, and she loves me. Your promises were empty, and I think you knew it, too. Lord Fitzroy never had a chance. You fooled him, just as you fooled the rest of the ton with the spread of your vicious rumors," he said.

Lavinia faltered, gasping as though a bullet had just pierced her heart. She staggered back, clutching her hands together as she let out a wail.

"You...you...no...it wasn't...you can't..." she stammered, but Edmund shook his head.

"We know you gave Lord Fitzroy money. He still has it, and he's willing to testify as to the promises you made to him as to what Johanna was meant to be to you. But she was never going to be his bride, and I was never going to be your husband," Edmund said, and now he slipped his arm around Johanna and drew her into his embrace.

She smiled at him, feeling entirely overwhelmed with relief as to what had just happened. It was as though a great weight had been lifted from her mind, and she smiled, slipping her arm around him and gazing at him with a look of love. He had proved his words to Lord Fitzroy, and now there could be no doubt in her mind as to how he felt for her.

"There was never going to be an annulment, Lavinia," Johanna said, shaking her head.

"I lied to you, Lavinia. But you were too quick to believe you were about to get everything you wanted," Edmund said, and Lavinia shook her fist at him angrily.

"You can't prove it. I can still ruin you. I can say this was all a plot...that you led me here to ruin me, and when Johanna appeared, you tried to make it seem I was the one

in the wrong. I won't...you can't..." she cried, but Edmund shook his head.

"It's no use, Lavinia. No one's going to believe you. Not when we have the testimony of your maid, Rebecca," he said.

Lavinia paused, staring at him in disbelief.

"What...what do you mean?" she demanded.

"Well, it seems you don't treat your servants very well, and your maid, especially. The promise of a job in my household and a raise in her salary was more than enough for her to admit to being the one forced to make a forgery of my handwriting from letters I'd sent you in the past. She even showed Johanna's brother the notebooks in which she'd practiced. She was very good, actually. But I hold no animosity toward her," he said.

At this, Lavinia let out an anguished cry, cursing each of them in turn.

"I loved you, Edmund. I'd have been yours—all yours. But instead...you chose this wicked harlot," she exclaimed, and now she lunged toward Johanna, as though ready to strike her.

Johanna shrank back, and Edmund stepped between them, pushing Lavinia back so she stumbled and fell to the floor, screaming in anger as she did so.

"But I'm willing to give you a choice, Lavinia. As is Lord Fitzroy. He'll keep the money you gave him, of course. But you're to make it known you were mistaken over what you thought you saw in the shrubbery at the masquerade. Make it known far and wide. Let the whole ton know it was a foolish mistake, and you hold no animosity toward Johanna over what you thought you saw. Furthermore, tell the ton—and I'm sure you'll find a way—that any question of an annulment was simply

wrong and that the Earl and Countess of Beaumont love one another very much,” Edmund said as he put his arm around Johanna once again.

“And if I refuse?” Lavinia snarled.

Edmund smiled.

“If you refuse, I’ll ruin you. We’ll tell the ton you forced your maid to forge a note luring me into the garden and that you paid Lord Fitzroy for his part in the seduction, promising him a bride in exchange for him risking his reputation. You’ll be a laughingstock, and so will your mother. Not to mention the difficulties your father will have when it comes to re-election,” Edmund replied.

At the mention of her father and mother, Lavinia faltered. As with any scandalous gossip, it was not only the subject that was at risk, but their family, too. A rumor like this would surely put paid to her father’s intent on re-election, and ruin her mother, who lived to dispense gossip, rather than be the subject of it. She, too, was just as guilty, but it seemed Edmund had been willing to spare her, if Lavinia agreed to his terms. But now, she snarled, the anger etched on her face, as she shook her head.

“I won’t do it...I won’t let you get away with this, Edmund—none of you. Who’s going to believe a maid over a lady? And as for his testimony,” she said, pointing at Lord Fitzroy, who raised his eyebrows.

“Is my testimony so unbelievable?” he asked.

“So what if I paid you? It hardly matters, does it? I’ll just deny it. You’re nothing but a rake. The only thing that makes you respectable is your title. Why do you think I chose you? I know what you’re like, and so does everyone else!” Lavinia exclaimed.

Johanna felt suddenly worried. Had they simply unleashed Lavinia’s anger, rather

than resolved their problem? If she would not admit the truth, Johanna's reputation would still lie in tatters, whether an annulment came or not...

"How dare you speak about me in such a way," Lord Fitzroy exclaimed.

But now, to everyone's surprise, the sound of voices could be heard outside the summerhouse. It seemed the other guests had come looking for them, and a triumphant smile now came over Lavinia's face.

"I'll tell them now. I'll make a scene. I'll say Johanna and Lord Fitzroy were here—caught in the act—and that Edmund tried to seduce me," she exclaimed.

But as she stepped forward, Lord Fitzroy grabbed her around the waist and pulled her into his embrace, his lips meeting hers as the door of the summerhouse was pulled open by none other than Lavinia's mother. Edmund still had his arm around Johanna, and as Lavinia's mother let out a cry of anguish, he pointed at the kissing couple with a look of horror on his face.

"She just seized him!" he exclaimed.

Behind Lavinia's mother were a dozen other guests, and the dowager, too—all of them witnesses to the apparent act of passion between Lord Fitzroy and Lavinia.

"Lavinia? What are you doing?" Lavinia's mother exclaimed as Lord Fitzroy now stepped back with a satisfied look on his face.

"Causing a scandal. That's what she's doing. And I hope you all saw it," he declared before giving a deep bow to Lavinia and laughing as he pushed his way through the crowd and hurried off back along the path toward the house.

Lavinia was too shocked to say anything, even as her mother questioned her again.



“Lavinia? What have you done...why did you come down here? Were you meeting him? I don’t understand,” she said, shaking her head in disbelief.

The other guests were whispering among themselves, pointing at Lavinia and shaking their heads. She had been given a choice, but her own selfishness had brought about her ruin. Her reputation lay in tatters, but what of Lord Fitzroy?

“Why did he do that?” Johanna whispered, and Edmund smiled.

“I think he realized she deserved it. He’s done us all a considerable service. The ton have something new to gossip about, and Lavinia can hardly seek to tar you with the same brush as paints her. But Lord Fitzroy knows his own reputation won’t suffer for too long. It’s never the same for men as it is for women,” he replied.

Lavinia was still standing in utter shock at what had just occurred. She was practically speechless, and now her mother seized her by the arm and hurried her away.

“We’re going home, Lavinia. You can explain yourself to me there—and to your father, too,” she said, and the two of them now pushed their way through the crowd.

Edmund and Johanna stepped forward, standing in the door of the summerhouse as the crowd of guests looked on expectantly.

“I want you all to know there’s to be no annulment. That was just a vicious rumor. There’s no truth in it. Johanna and I are happily married—very happily,” Edmund called out, and turning to Johanna, he kissed her on the cheek.

Johanna smiled, feeling once again relieved at the thought that their ordeal at Lavinia’s hands was over.

“What happened?” Tabitha said, hurrying up to the pair after the dowager had called the party back to the lawn for the first course to be served—though no one was particularly interested in eating, what with so much to talk about.

“Lavinia got her comeuppance. That’s what happened,” Johanna replied.

“But I don’t understand. Why was she kissing Lord Fitzroy? Were they having an affair? It hardly seems possible,” Tabitha said, but Johanna shook her head.

“There’s a lot to explain,” she said, just as Roger came up to them.

“Mother and Father want to know what’s going on,” he said, and Johanna smiled.

“Tell them...it’s all going to be all right,” she replied.

It was truly what she believed—that a marriage of convenience, born out of the threat of a scandal, had turned into something wonderful. She wanted to be alone with Edmund, and as the guests filed back to the lawn, where dinner was now being served, Johanna caught his hand and held him back.

“Are you all right?” he asked, and Johanna nodded.

“More than all right. I’m so grateful to you, Edmund. For a moment...well, I didn’t know what to think. I was afraid she’d gain the upper hand. She nearly did, didn’t she? Oh, but it’s over now, isn’t it?” she said.

She wanted to hear him say so—to promise her things would now be better, and that their marriage could grow in love and intimacy as it was supposed to. And without the fear of Lavinia or anyone else seeking to ruin it. He smiled at her and nodded.

“It’s over, Johanna. I promise you. No more Lavinia, no more Wilhelmina, just you

and I,” he said, and leaning forward he kissed her on the cheek, and Johanna felt certain he was telling the truth.

### Chapter 21

Johanna and Edmund left London for Hampshire later that week. They wanted to get away from the London scene, with its intrigues and gossip. The fact of Lavinia's shaming had put paid to any rumors about them, but Johanna still felt the bitter taste of having been the subject of so much vitriol. She wanted nothing to do with the ton, or their ways. She was content with returning home to Hampshire and fulfilling the duties of a countess. There was the orangery to see to, and Johanna's plans for it were extensive. She had thrown herself into the project and was now overseeing the final developments. It was exciting, and at last, she was beginning to feel as though she was finding her place.

"I don't know why I ever thought going to London was a good idea, Mary," Johanna said as she gazed out of the window across the gardens at Beaumont Abbey.

It was late September now, and although the flower borders were no longer at their best, the gardens still looked spectacular with the dew lying on them and the sun rising on the horizon. The maid smiled.

"I thought you didn't want to go, my lady. You only did so because His Lordship suggested it," Mary pointed out.

Johanna turned back from the window and smiled.

"Yes...you're right. I didn't want to go at all, did I? But society had to be satisfied, and so did the dowager," she replied.

Edmund's mother had been devastated at their leaving. She had begged them to stay, but Edmund had told her he, too, had had enough of London society.

"You could always move back to Hampshire," he had told her, and his mother had looked at him incredulously.

"Some society is better than no society, Edmund," she had replied—though she had promised to visit in the coming months, hinting at the prospect of a grandchild.

But in returning to Hampshire, one question had remained unanswered—what exactly was the nature of the arrangement in which Johanna and Edmund now found themselves. Johanna had confided in Tabitha to her confusion over it.

"He defended my honor to the last, and he's proved himself time and time again. But as for our being in love..." she had said, after Tabitha had told her how very much in love she was with Roger, and he with her.

"It'll take time, I suppose," Tabitha had said, and there had been some reassurance in that.

But Johanna was still confused as to her own feelings toward Edmund. Or rather, she was confused as to whether those feelings would be reciprocated or not. Falling in love was not something easily discernible. She had great affection for Edmund and could not imagine being married to anyone else, and there was the testimony of Lord Fitzroy, too. He had told her how Edmund had told him of his love for her. But it was one thing to hear a person loved one, and quite another to be told it by them. In London, he had told her everything was over, that it was just the two of them now, and yet ever since, he had kept a formal distance from her, always polite and kind, but never expressing that affection that was his right. Johanna wanted to hear Edmund say it, to hear him tell her his feelings for her, and since their return to Hampshire, he had seemed somewhat distant.

“I think I’ll wear the blue today,” Johanna said as Mary held up a dress for her to choose.

“With the lilac shawl, my lady?” the maid replied, but Johanna shook her head.

“No. I’m going to be on my feet all day. There’s a lot to do in the orangery. The new chairs are arriving, and I’ll have to be on hand to direct the footmen where to put them,” Johanna replied.

She was looking forward to showing Edmund her progress with the orangery. It had been completely redesigned, and various plant specimens—all manner of citrus fruits—had been brought from Kew. In a few years, the orangery would be one of the finest hothouses in England, and Johanna felt proud of what she had achieved in such a short space of time. She had plans for the garden, too, and intended to create a sunken water garden like those she had seen in Italy.

“You’ll certainly leave your mark on the house, my lady,” Mary said, after Johanna had finished dressing.

Johanna nodded, but she felt somewhat heavy hearted, too—sorrowful even over her confusion as to Edmund’s feelings.

“Yes, and the earl, too, I hope,” she replied.

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“And that’s the last of the letters I need to write finished...I’m sorry, Roger. I’ve kept you waiting,” Edmund said, looking up from the envelope he had just sealed to find Johanna’s brother watching him from his place by the hearth.

They were sitting in Edmund’s study at Beaumont Abbey, and Edmund had just

finished writing a letter to a tenant, promising him an extension on the rent he owed. Since returning to Hampshire, he had been busy. The affairs of the estate waited for no one, and he had found many pressing matters awaiting his attention.

“It’s quite all right. I know you’re busy. I’ve hardly seen you since you and Johanna returned from London,” Roger replied.

“Yes...I’m sorry...I’ve just had so much to do. I’ve hardly seen Johanna, either,” Edmund replied.

“That’s who I came to see you about, actually,” he said, and Edmund looked at him curiously.

“Is she all right? I must confess, I’ve not had as much time to spend with her as I might’ve liked,” he replied, and Roger nodded.

“That’s what she said to Tabitha, too. Well...not in so many words. I don’t want you to think I’m sharing gossip. The two of you have had quite enough of that to contend with. No...it’s just something she said in passing when the two of them were taking tea. She said she hoped you’d be pleased with the orangery, though you hadn’t asked about it, and it seemed...well, it seemed to Tabitha as though Johanna was rather sad about the fact,” he replied.

Edmund felt a sudden sense of guilt as to his friend’s words. He was right, he had not asked about the orangery, preferring to leave it to Johanna before the promised grand unveiling. The affairs of the estate had taken up a good deal of his time, and there had been evenings when he had dined alone in his study, rather than joining his wife in the dining room.

“Ah, yes...I’m sorry about that. I’m just so wary...well, she’s been through a terrible ordeal, and I don’t want her to feel pressured in anyway over the fact of our marriage.

I was only too willing to defend her honor, and the fact of my affection for her is...unquestionable. But I just wonder...is she happy?" he asked.

Roger pondered the question for a moment and nodded.

"I think she is, yes. But I can't help but feel she'd be far happier if her husband paid her a little more attention," he replied.

Edmund nodded. He knew when to take advice, and he was not the sort of man to arrogantly believe he possessed the upper hand in all things. But to hear Roger's words and to think he might've hurt Johanna unintentionally filled him with sorrow. He had not known how she felt, as much as there had been a growing affection between them, brought about, in part, by their shared goal of overcoming Lavinia's cruel intentions.

"You're right...and I'm sorry, Roger. You must think me a terrible man. It's just...I've been so busy, and...well, it's no excuse, is it?" he said, and Roger smiled.

"I can hardly blame you, Edmund. You've been through a considerable ordeal. What of Lavinia? Have you heard anything more from her?" he asked.

Edmund shook his head. On that front, there was mercifully little by way of news. Lavinia had retreated from society. Her father's name was ruined, and it seemed likely he would not be asked to stand again as the parliamentary candidate for the district. Her mother, too, had largely disappeared from the social scene, and it was rumored she was planning to take Lavinia to Florence, where the two of them could live quietly for a few years until the scandal died down.

"Nothing, no. And I don't wish to, either. I've no desire to hear from her ever again. If anything, I feel rather sorry for her. Not that I pity her in the sense of wanting to help her, but I can't help thinking she could've been happy if she'd simply accepted



the fact of my marriage to Johanna. There were plenty of men who'd have fallen in love with her. But she chose the path of jealousy, and it was the wrong path for so many reasons," Edmund replied, shaking his head.

"Well, I suppose you don't have to think about her again. I heard she's gone to Florence," Roger said, and Edmund nodded.

"And I'm sure they'll welcome her with open arms," he replied, raising his eyebrows as he spoke.

But his thoughts were not on Lavinia. He was thinking of Johanna, and feeling guilty at the fact of his having somewhat neglected her over the past few weeks. It had not been intentional, but he had still felt uncertain as to how to proceed in their relationship. He did not want her to feel pressured in any way—as though the fact of his having saved her from scandal was a matter of a debt owed. He was loyal to her and had a great affection for her beyond anything romantic. But his heart told him something else. It told him he loved her, and after Roger had left, Edmund went to seek out his wife in the orangery...

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*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:08 am*

### Chapter 22

Johanna was humming to herself, rearranging the furniture in the orangery in her mind as the footmen stood patiently waiting.

“What do you think, Mary? The chairs over there or here? Would we sit there? I don’t see the point in chairs one doesn’t sit in. But this house seems to be full of them. No...here, at the far end, with the view out to the garden,” Johanna said, making a final decision as the footmen now moved the chairs into place.

“It’ll be a nice place to sit, my lady,” Mary said, and Johanna sighed.

“Yes...I can sit here on my own. No, I’m being melodramatic. I’m sure I’ll have lots of people to sit with. When my mother calls on me, or Tabitha, we can sit in here. It’s not as though we don’t have plenty of rooms to choose from, is it?” she said, shaking her head as she thought of the large house with many rooms, where she and Edmund could live entirely separate lives if they so wished.

But Johanna did not want to live a separate life from Edmund. She wanted to sit with him in the orangery—and in the drawing room, and in the dining room, and in the garden. She wanted to be part of his life, and for him to be part of hers, too. She wanted him to be her husband.

“I’m sure the chairs look very nice there, my lady,” Mary said, clearly not wanting to take sides in the matter.

Johanna shrugged.

“Yes, put them there, then we can see where the plants from Kew might go,” she said, glancing over to where several large pots containing a variety of different citrus trees that stood waiting to be placed.

It was warm in the orangery, and the footmen were struggling with the furniture. Johanna was about to go and fetch further help, when the door to the orangery opened, and Edmund appeared unexpectedly. He smiled at Johanna, who now wondered what he was doing there. She could not recall him having set foot in the orangery since they had arrived back at Beaumont Abbey, and now she wondered if he was about to criticize some aspect of the work or tell her there was too much noise—for the moving of the furniture and pots had caused quite a racket.

“I’m not disturbing you, am I?” he asked, and Johanna shook her head.

“No...not at all. I’m only too glad to be disturbed. I was going to come and find you later. I thought you might like to see our progress. It’s not finished, of course. But I thought the chairs looked rather nice over there. Don’t you?” she asked, pointing to where the footmen had just positioned the new pieces of furniture.

“I think whatever you think, Johanna. But I was wondering...would you like to go for a ride? I’ve missed riding out, and I thought perhaps we could go to Bluebell Woods,” he said.

Johanna was surprised by this suggestion—but pleasantly so. She had not ridden out since their return from London, and the invitation was a welcome one. She smiled at him and nodded.

“I’d like that,” she said, and he smiled back at her, offering her his arm as he did so.

“Unless you’re busy, of course...” he said, but Johanna shook her head.

“Not at all, no. I think it’s a lovely idea. We can continue arranging the citrus trees when I return,” she said, and the matter was settled.

It was a strange, but welcome, turn of events, and Johanna wondered why Edmund had now had this change of heart. Since returning to Beaumont Abbey, they had passed as ships in the night, and there had been some days when the two of them had barely exchanged a word. But the thought of riding out to Bluebell Woods, of returning to that place where they had first met, filled Johanna with a sense of excitement, and certainly, it would be a delightful ride on such a beautiful day, when the sun was shining and the sky was bright blue.

“Not that there will be any bluebells at this time of year. I suppose the name should change, shouldn’t it?” Edmund said as the two of them walked toward the stables.

“We could call it...Accident Wood,” Johanna said, and Edmund laughed.

“I’d rather not be reminded. Ah, look, here’s Pegasus for you,” he said as they entered the stable yard to find Johanna’s horse being brushed down by one of the grooms.

“He’s in good form today, my lady. Are you thinking of riding out on him?” the groom asked, and Johanna nodded, reaching up to stroke the horse’s nose as he whinnied and shook his head.

“Yes, thank you. Will you saddle him for me?” she asked.

Johanna was eager to get back into the saddle, and with the earl’s horse readied, too, they set off to ride across the estate in the direction of Bluebell Woods.

“I promise not to have an accident today,” Edmund called out as they slowed to a trot at the entrance to the woods.

It was autumn, but the day was warm, and it was pleasant to find themselves under the shade of the trees, where the leaves were just beginning to turn from green to shades of gold and red. The path wound its way through the trees, and Edmund followed Johanna as she led them deeper into the woods.

“It was a lovely idea of yours for us to ride out like this,” Johanna said, turning back to Edmund, who smiled.

“Well...I thought you might like to talk. We haven’t had much chance to talk since we returned from London. All that business with Lavinia, and then there was so much to see to here. But I was thinking earlier...the night when it all happened. Afterwards, I felt I could do anything. Anything in the world. And do you know why?” he said.

Johanna had reined Pegasus in, and now she shook her head, wondering what he was going to say.

“I’m afraid I don’t know,” she said, and he smiled at her.

“Because I had you with me. You stood by me, Johanna. You didn’t flinch. And you didn’t question me when I told you I had a plan to put an end to Lavinia’s mischief. That means more than I can tell you. It made me realize...well, it made me realize this isn’t just a matter of convenience. Perhaps it was at first, but not any longer. In fact...I couldn’t imagine my life without you, and I’m sorry if I’ve not made that clear over the past few weeks,” he said.

Johanna’s heart skipped a beat. She had not been angry with him for the fact of their finding themselves distanced from one another. There had been a sadness on her part, but Johanna had reminded herself of the nature of their arrangement. Whatever her own feelings, she could not force those of another. That had been Lavinia’s mistake, and Johanna was not about to allow it to be hers, too. But to hear him say this presented her with a very different truth...

“I thought...well...I wasn’t sure what to think. I thought you were busy. I knew you were, but I’d hoped...well, I’d rather hoped we’d have spent more time together. Like this,” she said, and now she slipped down from the saddle as Edmund did the same.

“I know...and I’m so sorry if you feel I neglected you. It wasn’t intentional. It took...well, it took a gentle word of encouragement to remind me of my obligation. No...that’s the wrong word. It’s not an obligation at all. Johanna, I want you to know I don’t see this as a marriage of convenience, and if that’s what it is to you, then please, I understand. We avoided the scandal of what the Parker sisters thought they saw right here in these woods by marrying, and I’ve tried to make you happy since the day we made our vows. But I’m also well aware of my shortcomings. I can be unthinking, self-interested, and lack any real empathy for others. I think it’s because I was raised without siblings. I’ve never had to share anything, and my mother...well, you know what my mother’s like,” he said, but Johanna shook her head.

She did not see any of those things in him. He was not like that at all. How could a self-interested man without empathy do what he had done? In all things, he had put her first, and Johanna did not doubt for a moment that he would continue to do so. She admired him for the way he had unfailingly sought to defend her, and it was one of the many reasons why she had fallen in love with him.

“Your mother’s been very good to me. I won’t hear a word against her. And she loves you very much, Edmund. You know that. She could’ve prevented our marrying if she wished. But she didn’t. She saw the value in it,” Johanna said, and Edmund smiled.

“You’re right. She did. And I love her very much, too. But I can get exasperated at times...oh, but none of that matters now. It really doesn’t. I just want you to know how much I value you, and more than that...I want you to know I love you,” he said as he reached out and took Johanna’s hand in his.

Her heart skipped a beat, and as she gazed into his eyes, there could be no doubting

the sincerity of his words. To hear him say he loved her, to know the truth of what had once seemed an impossibility, filled her with such joy as to be quite indescribable. It was one thing to fall in love, but quite another to know oneself was loved in return, and by that person one has fallen in love with. And to hear it said in the very place of their first encounter, and after so much time had passed, was to feel as though they had left the past behind and could look to the future with hope.

“And I love you, too,” Johanna replied.

Edmund looked almost surprised as though he had expected her to talk, not of love, but of practicality and convenience. Had he really not realized her growing feelings for him? But there was no doubt in Johanna’s mind as to how she felt. She loved Edmund, and now she knew for certain he loved her, too. He had proved as much in his defense of her, and now he had told her with words. He took both her hands in his, smiling at her with what seemed like a look of relief on his face.

“I’m pleased I didn’t make a fool of myself,” he said, and Johanna shook her head.

“How could you possibly make a fool of yourself by saying such a thing?” she asked, and their eyes now met in a loving gaze.

“I don’t know...I just...I’ve never felt like this about anyone before. At first, I thought I was just being foolish. But the more time we spent together—the more time we were married, at least—I came to realize I can’t be without you. It’s the strangest of feelings, but the most wonderful, too. And after what happened at the masquerade ball, I felt more certain than ever. There was no question of my not being in love with you. I knew you’d never betray me like that, just as I’d hoped you’d know I’d never have done the same with Lavinia,” he replied.

His words were but a further confirmation of their feelings for one another. It had been the same for Johanna, too. There had been no question of her believing

Lavinia's lies or of believing Edmund might really hold a torch for her. The very idea was out of the question. Johanna and Edmund had found one another by accident, but what had followed had been very much real. Their courtship had been unconventional—married before falling in love—and yet now they were embarking on a future together like any other married couple who had discovered that first spark of love, now kindled into flame.

"I know, and now we don't have to worry about Lavinia, or Wilhelmina, or anyone. All that matters is us," Johanna said, and now Edmund leaned forward and kissed her on the lips.

It was the first time he had done so, and the kiss lasted for what seemed like an eternity, the two of them caught up in a moment frozen in time. As he kissed her, Johanna knew there was no question of his feelings toward her—or of her for him. He loved her, and she loved him. That was all that mattered, and as their lips parted, she smiled at him, as he smiled back at her.

"I love you," he whispered, leaning his forehead against hers, and still with their hands clasped.

"And I love you, too," Johanna replied.

The moment was suddenly interrupted by the sound of footsteps, and looking up, Johanna found the Parker sisters standing arm in arm along the path, watching them with interest. Johanna was about to offer a retort before either of them could say anything, but to her surprise, Hortensia smiled.

"What a delightful scene," she said, and her sister, Mildred, nodded.

"It's so nice to see two people so in love," she said.



For a moment, Johanna wondered if they were being sincere, or if this was not some ploy to spread further scandal.

“Well...we are,” Johanna said.

“Yes, we can see. And...we want to apologize to you both. What we saw and what we thought we saw the last time we encountered you here were very different things. We’re sorry if it caused you any difficulties,” Mildred said.

“Yes, it’s very fortuitous we bumped into you like this. We were going to call on you. We heard what happened to Lavinia,” Hortensia said.

Had Johanna been the sort of person to stoop to the level of her detractors, she might have told the Parker sisters they deserved whatever might be coming to them. But Johanna was not the sort of person to hold a grudge. If anything, encountering the Parker sisters in the woods like this was a reminder of why she and Edmund were now married and in love. Had it not been for the threat of scandal, the suggestion might never have been made.

“Oh, it’s quite all right. There’s no need to apologize. Really, there isn’t. We’re only too glad you made a mistake,” Johanna said, glancing at Edmund, who smiled.

The Parker sisters looked momentarily perturbed.

“You are?” Hortensia asked.

“Yes, if you hadn’t thought something untoward was occurring, we’d never have had the need to marry in such haste,” Johanna replied.

There was no reason to hide the truth from them now. It was Lavinia, not Johanna, whose name was mud, and given what had happened in the summerhouse in London,

Johanna knew the sisters would think twice about spreading further lies and gossip. Hortensia nodded.

“Well...all’s well that ends well, I suppose. But what are you going to do next?” she asked, and Johanna looked at Edmund and smiled.

“We’re going to be happy,” she replied, still with her hands clasped in his and knowing they had the happiest of futures lying ahead of them.

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“What are we going to do now?” Edmund asked as the two of them led their horses by the reins along the path through the woods.

“Well...I haven’t really given it much consideration. I suppose there’s the orangery to finish, and then I want to start making plans for the garden, too. I know it’s autumn now, but there’s no harm in drawing up a design ready for the spring. I want to consult various books on plants and some histories of the gardens of Italy—I’ll need someone to translate them, of course. Or...oh, do you mean you and I?” Johanna asked, and Edmund laughed.

“Both, I suppose. Whatever we do, I want to do it together,” he said, and Johanna smiled.

She was glad he felt this way, glad he had realized how a married couple should be together, rather than distant or even separate. Johanna had seen many couples of this sort, the marriage an arrangement, their lives apart. It was what she, herself, had resigned herself to, and yet, now there was no doubt as to the path that lay before them. They would be together, not as a forced match or an arrangement, but as a happy couple, in love. It sounded so simple, and yet it had taken so much to achieve.

“I feel just the same. I don’t want us to be apart—not ever. Whatever we do, we do it together,” she said, and Edmund nodded, pausing as he reached out to take Johanna’s hand in his.

“Always,” he said, smiling at her as they stood gazing into one another’s eyes.

It was another moment of realization—the joy of knowing she was not alone. Johanna had once thought she wanted the life her aunt led. In it, she had seen freedom and possibility. But in the match she now enjoyed, with the man she loved, there was just as much freedom and possibility, along with the certainty of knowing herself loved, too.

“Then what do you propose we do? After the orangery and the garden, and, well...just being together,” she said.

“Well, we certainly won’t go back to London,” he said, and Johanna laughed.

“I’d be glad never to go back to London as long as I live. I hate the place, and there’s absolutely no reason why we should ever need to go back there,” Johanna replied.

Edmund laughed.

“Don’t let my mother hear you say that,” he replied.

“Oh, but I think she’d understand. She detests the countryside, I detest the ton. One way isn’t so different from the other, is it? But if I’m to organize next year’s Beaumont Dinner, then it’s going to be held here, and we’ll decide precisely who to invite—and who not to invite,” Johanna said.

Edmund laughed.

“I’m sure my mother won’t mind. She might even deign to come here if she thought you needed help,” he said, and Johanna laughed.

“Oh, I’m sure she will. But I want to promise you something. I’ll do my best to be the Countess of Beaumont. I don’t quite know what it means yet, but...” Johanna began, but Edmund interrupted her.

“Please, Johanna, I don’t ever want you to think you have to be anything other than yourself. I don’t really know what it means to be the Earl of Beaumont. I have my title and my responsibilities. I try to fulfill them as best I can, but as for what it really means, I don’t know, and perhaps I never will. Please, just be Johanna. That’s the woman I’ve fallen in love with, and that’s the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. The rest doesn’t matter,” he said, and leaning forward, he kissed her on the lips.

Once again, Johanna felt a sense of relief, as though a burden had been lifted from her. She did not have to pretend to be something she was not or to change herself into something she did not want to be. It had always been her greatest fear—that she would have no choice but to conform to being something other than she wanted to be. In the past, she had feared the idea of marriage and had been set to avoid it completely. But circumstances had brought about the necessity of change, and for those circumstances, she could now be grateful. That, too, was a strange feeling. So much heartache, so much sorrow, so much anguish, and now...joy. Johanna had no doubt as to her joy in the life she now had ahead of her, and in a strange way, she could be thankful for the fact of all that had happened.

“Then I’ll be Johanna, if you’ll be Edmund,” Johanna replied, and Edmund smiled and nodded.

“I think that’s a very good idea indeed. As for what happens next...well, let’s leave it up to fate,” he replied, and Johanna smiled.

“And a little thought, too,” she replied, and he laughed.

“A little, yes. You never know...I might surprise you,” he replied, and again he leaned forward and kissed her, and as he did so, Johanna knew she had found a happiness she had never thought possible, one to cherish for the rest of her life.

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“Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony, which is an honorable estate, instituted of God in the time of man’s innocence, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church...” the minister was saying, facing the congregation as Tabitha and Roger stood before him.

Johanna slipped her hand into Edmund’s, squeezing it as the couple began to make their vows. It was early spring, and the wedding was taking place in the village church. Johanna’s mother was in floods of tears at her side, and after the final blessing, she shook her head, turning to Johanna with a smile on her face.

“Oh, isn’t it wonderful? Both my children married, and to such excellent matches!” she exclaimed.

Johanna smiled, glancing at Edmund, who shook his head.

“Am I really such an excellent match?” he asked, and Johanna’s mother furrowed her brow.

“Oh, really, sir—isn’t it a truth universally acknowledged that a mother wants only the best for her daughter? And certainly in terms of matrimony. When I was at the home of the Fortescues the other day—you remember them, Johanna, he’s the one with gout—I was addressed as the mother of the Countess of Beaumont. It was quite the honor,” she said, and Johanna smiled.

“Well, if it makes you happy, Mother,” she said, and her mother nodded.

“It makes me very happy to see my children happy. Look, here they come now,” she said, nodding toward Tabitha and Roger, who were now coming down the aisle, arm in arm.

Tabitha looked very pretty in her dress—she and Johanna had chosen it together from the modiste, an ivory-colored gown with a matching shawl. She was wearing jewelry her mother had gifted her, and the smile on her face radiated happiness. To see her now reminded Johanna of her own wedding day and the contrast in feeling she had experienced. On the day of her own vows, Johanna had not been certain of anything, and certainly not of her feelings toward Edmund. But all that had changed, and the past six months had been a blissful, happy time filled with the delights a newly married couple were meant to share.

“I’m so happy for you, Tabitha,” Johanna said, kissing her friend, who smiled and took Johanna’s hand in hers.

“Can you believe it? I hardly know what to think. It’s...wonderful,” she said, glancing at Roger, who was shaking Edmund’s hand.

“It’s the strangest feeling, isn’t it? The vows you make...they mean everything,” Johanna said.

Again, she had not realized it at the time. The gravity of what she had promised had only slowly dawned on her, but to see Tabitha make those same vows was to be reminded of just how serious they were. Marriage was for life, and it was not to be entered into without due and proper consideration.

“It feels like a dream,” Tabitha replied.

They now made their way out of the church. A carriage was waiting to take Tabitha and Roger to Wilton Grange, where further celebrations would take place, and having

seen them off, Edmund offered Johanna his arm.

“It’s a beautiful day. Shall we walk?” he asked, and Johanna nodded.

“I think that’s a very good idea,” she replied, knowing her mother would still be in a flood of tears over the affair and preferring to leave her aunt to deal with the overflow of emotion. Arm in arm, she and Edmund walked across the village square toward the road leading to Wilton Grange. It was still early in the springtime, but there was a freshness in the air, and the promise of new life to come. Johanna was looking forward to seeing her plans for the garden come to fruition and watching as the plants in the orangery put forth their first tentative buds.

“Seeing Roger and Tabitha married reminded me of just how lucky we are,” Edmund said, and Johanna looked up at him and smiled.

“It reminded me of the same. We have so much to be thankful for, Edmund. We really do,” Johanna replied.

“Do you remember I told you I wanted to surprise you? On that day in Bluebell Wood?” he said.

Johanna nodded. She often thought of that day—the day they had both revealed the true extent of their feelings for one another. It was the day Johanna thought of as the beginning of their marriage—a day to rejoice in the memory of and be reminded of often.

“I do, yes. But I was beginning to wonder if you’d forgotten about it,” she replied, smiling at him as he laughed.

“Forgotten? No, not at all. Quite the opposite, in fact. I’ve spent a great deal of time thinking about it. But I had to wait,” he replied, and Johanna looked at him curiously.



“Wait for what?” she asked.

“For today. I couldn’t very well take you away from your best friend’s wedding, could I?” he said.

Johanna was confused. She could not imagine what kind of surprise might have prevented her from being absent on such an important day...

“I wouldn’t have missed the wedding for the world,” she said, and Edmund smiled.

“I know, but it’s the world I want to give you, Johanna. haven’t you always spoken of your love of traveling? It’s been such a delight to hear the stories of your adventures with your aunt. I was thinking...no, I’ve intended for us to travel together ever since the day of our marriage. It’s been a dream of mine, too, and I can’t think of a better companion along the way,” he said.

Johanna’s heart skipped a beat. She had feared her days of traveling were over. They had their duties to attend to. Edmund was the earl. He had responsibilities, and Johanna, too, was beginning to find her place as the Countess of Beaumont.

“You mean...we’re going to travel together?” she asked, and Edmund nodded.

“I’ve booked passage for us on a boat across the channel. We’ll go to Paris first, and then on to wherever the fancy takes us. I’ve always wanted to see Verona—I suppose it has something to do with Shakespeare,” he said.

Johanna could hardly believe it, and now she threw her arms around him and pulled him into her embrace.

“Oh, Edmund...you don’t know how happy it makes me to hear you say that. Ever since I returned from Europe, I’ve wanted to go back. We could go to Florence and

Venice—to Rome, even. I can show you everything my aunt and I saw. Oh...how wonderful!” she exclaimed, and he smiled at her.

“I’m glad to see it makes you so happy, Johanna. That’s all I’ve ever wanted—for you to be happy,” he said.

“And I am. I can’t imagine being happier. But when do we leave?” she asked.

Edmund now slipped his arm around her and leaned forward to whisper in her ear.

“We leave tomorrow,” he said.

“Tomorrow? But...how can we possibly leave tomorrow?” Johanna exclaimed.

It had taken months of planning and preparation before she and her aunt had left for the continent. There had been so much to organize and see to. How could Johanna possibly arrange matters in time? There was the packing to do, not to mention the arrangements she would have to make regarding the running of the household.

“Because I’ve arranged everything. I’ve had Mary seeing to your clothes these past few weeks. Everything’s packed. She’ll come with us, too,” Edmund said.

Johanna laughed.

“I wondered why she kept telling me various shawls and bonnets were missing. She’s been packing, hasn’t she? Oh, but what about the estate? How long are we going to be away for? Can you really just...leave it all behind?” Johanna replied, and Edmund nodded.

“I’ve asked Roger to take care of things while I’m away. He’s more than capable, and it’ll be good experience for him when it comes to running your father’s estate in years

to come. And my mother's going to come down, too," Edmund said.

Johanna raised her eyebrows.

"Your mother? But she hates the countryside," she said.

Edmund laughed.

"Yes, she does. But what she likes is being in charge of things. I suggested she was indispensable under such circumstances and that we'd need her here to oversee the household. I promised she could organize the Beaumont Dinner in our absence. It was enough to persuade her. She arrives this evening," he replied.

Johanna could hardly believe what he was saying. It was a dream come true and a hope she had long since given up on realizing. To imagine herself back in Europe, surrounded by the marvels and beauty of the ancient world, was quite overwhelming.

"Oh, Edmund...it's simply wonderful. I can't begin to tell you of all the wonders we'll see. And the sun...the warmth of it. It's like nothing you've experienced before. And the thought of sharing it together...I can hardly believe it," Johanna said.

"But it's true. We leave tomorrow. I'm surprised the secret has remained hidden for so long. I've had to tell all sorts of people. But I've sworn them to secrecy," Edmund said as they continued their walk to Wilton Grange.

"Does Tabitha know?" Johanna asked, for she had always thought there could not possibly be any secrets between them, given how well they knew one another.

"She knows, yes. I had to let Roger in on the matter to make the arrangements for managing the estate. Everyone knew...except you," he said.

Johanna still could not believe it. She was overjoyed at the prospect, and her mind was now filled with all those things they would see and do together. It was one thing to have experienced them for the first time with her aunt, but quite another to share them with the man she loved.

“Thank you...” she said, resting her head on his shoulder as they walked arm in arm.

“You deserve all the happiness I can give you, Johanna. I can’t imagine my life without you. We came so close to losing one another, and now I don’t ever want to risk losing you again. It’s going to be a wonderful adventure,” he replied.

“It truly is,” Johanna replied, knowing there was no one she would rather share it with than him.

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“You’ll write to me every day, won’t you, Edmund? Oh...I’m sure there’s something I’ve forgotten. What about...” the dowager said, but Edmund interrupted her.

“Mother, you were the Countess of Beaumont for twenty-five years. You know far better than I do what needs doing and what doesn’t,” Edmund said, glancing at Johanna, who smiled.

“I’m sure it’ll all be fine. And you’ve got the beautiful new orangery to enjoy, too,” Johanna said, leaning forward to kiss her mother-in-law goodbye.

The dowager sighed and shook her head.

“Oh, I know, but...you’ll come back, won’t you? Don’t stay away for years,” she said, and Edmund laughed.

“We’ll be back. I promise you. And I might not write every day, but I’ll certainly write most days,” he replied.

His mother raised her eyebrows, but the time for their departure had come, and the carriage was waiting outside Beaumont Abbey. Johanna had returned home from the wedding celebrations at Wilton Grange to find her bags all packed, and she had passed a restless night, growing ever more excited at the prospect of departing on their adventure. The previous evening, she and Edmund had mapped out some of the journey they wished to undertake, with Johanna insisting on their taking in various famous gardens along the way. There was so much still to see and do, and the thought of sharing it with Edmund filled her with joy.

“Go on—before I change my mind. Look after him, won’t you, Johanna?” the dowager said.

Johanna nodded, kissing the dowager on the cheek and assuring her she would. Her own parents were there, too, and her mother now began to sob as she turned to her.

“It was just the same last time, wasn’t it? To see my daughter off on another adventure...oh, I thought I’d seen the last of your gallivanting across the continent. Will you ever settle down?” she asked.

“One day, perhaps. But for now...there’s so much to see,” Johanna replied, then she kissed her father before turning to Tabitha and Roger.

“Look after one another,” Tabitha said, and Johanna kissed her on the cheek, slipping her hands into hers and squeezing them.

“We will. I promise. And you do the same. I want at least one niece or nephew by the time I return,” Johanna said, and Roger laughed.

“Be careful what you wish for—we might say the same to you, too,” he replied.

Edmund cleared his throat. The carriage driver was growing impatient, and having said their farewells, Johanna and Edmund now climbed into the compartment. Edmund pulled the window down, and the two of them leaned out to wave everyone goodbye.

“Take care—and make sure you write,” the dowager called out.

The carriage set off, and Johanna felt just as she had done on the day she and her aunt had set out for their adventure across Europe—but with some differences. Now, Johanna was older and wiser. She had grown up, and her youthful naivete was gone. She was married, and to think she would be sharing the adventure with the man she loved filled her with delight.

“Isn’t this wonderful,” she said, slipping her hand into Edmund’s as the carriage drew out of the gates of Beaumont Abbey.

“I couldn’t think of anything more wonderful. This is my first time abroad. I’ve dreamed of something like this for so long,” he replied.

“But why didn’t you go on your grand tour when you were younger? A man doesn’t have the same restrictions placed on him as a woman does. I was lucky—even traveling with my aunt might’ve been frowned on by some. But my parents wanted me to broaden my horizons before I settled down. They wanted me to see the world and to know something of other people and places. It was far-sighted of them, I suppose,” Johanna said.

She had not appreciated at the time just how lucky she had been. Her parents had given her a freedom denied to most women, and for that, Johanna could only be thankful. Edmund smiled.

“Well...there’s something about me you might not have fully appreciated, Johanna,” he said, and Johanna looked at him with a puzzled expression.

Over the past few months, she believed she had come to know him better than anyone. What was he about to tell her?

“What do you mean?” she asked, and he smiled.

“I don’t have a lot of confidence in myself. The thought of adventure fills me with excitement, but to think of doing it on my own...no, I couldn’t possibly. But with you, it’s different. You’ve given me the confidence to live as I should be living, rather than burying myself in work. Without you, I’d never have done this, and I’d never have had the courage to stand up to Lavinia. You complete me, Johanna,” he said, and Johanna smiled.

She would never have suggested her husband lacked confidence. If anything, he exuded it. In their dealings with Lavinia, it had been Johanna who had felt herself lacking the confidence she needed to face up to her detractors and overcome them. She couldn’t have done it without him. And now Johanna realized something more.

“We need one another, don’t we? That’s what marriage means. It creates a new kind of bond—one of equality. As husband and wife, we’re more than just two individuals. We can do anything if we put our minds to it,” she said, and he nodded.

“Yes, I hadn’t thought about it like that. We complete one another,” he said, and Johanna smiled.

That was just how she felt. She could not imagine her life without him. Since the accident in the woods they had been gradually growing closer and closer to one another, and now it felt as though they were one. Johanna could not have felt happier, and the thought of sharing the future with him filled her with joy.

“And I feel completed,” she replied.

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“Can you hear that?” Johanna said, cupping her hand to her ear.

Edmund paused, furrowing his brow as he listened intently.

“Someone’s singing?” he said, and Johanna nodded with a smile on her face.

They had just emerged from a narrow street into the vast open square of the Verona amphitheater. There, towering above them, were the walls of the arena, the ancient Roman arches catching the evening sun in a mellow golden yellow.

“It’s the opera. They perform here—opera, plays, concerts. My aunt and I came to a performance of Romeo and Juliet—it’s their city, after all. Come along, let’s go in and listen,” Johanna said, taking Edmund’s hand in hers.

It was a sultry night. The day had been hot, and Johanna and Edmund had spent it exploring the ancient city, stopping into its churches where the thick walls and small windows kept the worst of the heat at bay. But the evening had proved more pleasant, and after they had dined at a hostelry and sampled an excellent wine, they had set out to explore the city by night.

“Listen to that voice. It’s quite extraordinary,” Edmund said as they emerged into the arena, where the stage was set for a magnificent operatic spectacle.

A large woman in a flowing dress was singing loudly, her voice carrying across the arena filled with people. Johanna did not know which opera they were seeing performed, but for a while, they stood in silence, overawed by the spectacle. It was like nothing on the London stage, and to see it performed in such a remarkable setting



was breathtaking.

“I could stand here all night,” Johanna whispered, and Edmund put his arm around her.

“So could I. We’re the luckiest of people, Johanna. I couldn’t imagine my life with anyone but you. And to share all this...to experience it together...well, it’s quite breathtaking,” he said.

Their journey had taken them across Europe from Paris, and down through France, visiting towns and cities along the way. They had spent time in the Alps, marveling at the immensity of the valleys and towering peaks before descending to the plains of the northern Italian peninsula. Turin, Milan, and now Verona had followed, and they intended next to make for Venice before turning their sights south toward Florence and Rome. Everywhere they went, Johanna found herself remembering details from her previous travels and experiencing something new every day. And to see those sights with Edmund at her side was more than she could ever have wished for.

“Isn’t it wonderful,” she said, resting her head on his shoulder as they stood watching the performance continue.

Above them, the stars lit up the night sky like a thousand little lamps glowing against the darkness beyond, and the moon was perched on the rim of the arena wall, as though peering over to watch the performance, too. There was nowhere Johanna would rather be, and no one she would rather be there with than Edmund.

THE END?

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:08 am*

The morning sun filtered through the glass panes of the orangery, casting a warm, golden light on the verdant oasis within. Johanna, with her sleeves rolled up and a smudge of soil on her cheek, was in her element. Her three children, little mirrors of their parents, were busily tending to the plants under her watchful eye. Laughter filled the air as they watered the rare orchids and marveled at the mango tree, which had grown impressively large, nearly bursting out of its pot.

“Be gentle with the orchids, Lilith-May,” Johanna advised her eldest, who was carefully misting the delicate blooms. “They are very sensitive.”

“Yes, Mama,” Lilith-May responded, her eyes wide with concentration. At seven years old, she had inherited her mother’s love for plants and her father’s meticulous nature. Her younger brothers, Henry and Thomas, were less focused on delicacy and more on enthusiasm, their small hands eagerly digging into the soil.

“Look, Mama! I found a worm!” Henry exclaimed, holding up his wriggling discovery with pride.

“That’s wonderful, Henry,” Johanna replied with a smile. “Worms are very good for the soil.”

As she spoke, the door to the orangery creaked open, and Edmund stepped inside, his glasses immediately fogging up in the humid warmth. He removed them with a laugh, wiping the lenses with a handkerchief.

“Good morning, my industrious gardeners,” he greeted, his voice full of affection.

The children chorused their greetings, and Johanna looked up from her work, her face lighting up at the sight of her husband. “Good morning, Edmund. Come to check on our progress?”

“Indeed,” he replied, moving closer to inspect the mango tree. “This fellow seems to be thriving.”

“It is,” Johanna agreed, placing a hand on the tree’s sturdy trunk. “But it might need a larger pot soon.”

“We can arrange that,” Edmund said, his gaze shifting to his wife. He took in her appearance—disheveled hair, dirt-streaked apron, and cheeks flushed with exertion—and felt a rush of love and admiration. She looked much as she had the first time he had seen her in the woods, only now, there was a contentment in her eyes that warmed his heart.

“Are you ready to help with the plans for the annual dinner?” he asked, though he already knew her answer.

Johanna smiled. “I will be, after we’ve all had a good wash. We’ve been up to our elbows in soil all morning.”

Edmund laughed, the sound rich and full. “You all look it. I can’t imagine a more delightful picture.”

As he spoke, he reached down and brushed a stray lock of hair from Johanna’s face, his touch tender. “You know, you looked just like this when I first saw you. Dirty, disheveled, and utterly enchanting.”

Johanna blushed, her smile widening. “And you, falling off your horse and all,” she teased. “We’ve come a long way since then.”

“Indeed we have,” Edmund agreed, leaning down to kiss her softly. “And I love you more each day.”

“And I you,” Johanna replied, her eyes shining with love and happiness.

As they stood there, surrounded by their children and the flourishing plants they had nurtured together, Johanna felt a profound sense of gratitude. Life had brought them many challenges, but it had also bestowed upon them countless blessings. The love that had blossomed between her and Edmund had only grown stronger with time, and the family they had built was a testament to their shared devotion.

“Right, children,” Edmund said, straightening up. “Let’s give your mother some peace to finish up here. Time to clean up and prepare for the day ahead.”

With a mixture of groans and giggles, the children followed their father out of the orangery, leaving Johanna to finish her work. As she looked around at the thriving plants and thought of the evening’s festivities, she felt a swell of contentment. This was her life—full, vibrant, and deeply fulfilling.

Johanna took a deep breath, savoring the fragrant air of the orangery. She finished tending to the last of the plants, ensuring they were all properly watered and placed to catch the best light. The children’s laughter echoed faintly from the house as they prepared for their baths, Edmund’s steady presence keeping everything in order.

A short while later, Johanna made her way back to the house, her apron still streaked with soil. As she entered, she was greeted by the bustling activity of the household preparing for the annual dinner. The scent of roasting meat and baking bread wafted through the air, mingling with the floral aroma that clung to her clothes.

“Mary, I’ll need to bathe and change before we begin the preparations for the dinner,” Johanna said, catching sight of the maid bustling about the kitchen.

“Of course, my Lady. The bath is already drawn,” Mary replied with a curtsy.

Johanna made her way to the bath, the warm water a soothing balm for her muscles after a morning of work. She soaked for a few moments, letting the steam relax her before scrubbing away the remnants of soil. Once clean and dressed in a fresh gown, she felt revitalized and ready to tackle the tasks ahead.

She found Edmund in the study, reviewing a list of guests for the dinner. He looked up and smiled as she entered, his eyes reflecting the love and admiration he felt for her.

“Feeling refreshed?” he asked.

“Very much so,” Johanna replied, crossing the room to stand beside him. “Now, let’s see about these plans.”

They spent the next hour going over the details for the dinner, ensuring that everything was in order. The annual dinner was a significant event, bringing together family and friends, and it required meticulous planning. Edmund and Johanna worked seamlessly together, their years of partnership evident in their efficient collaboration.

As they finalized the seating arrangements, Edmund paused to look at his wife. “Do you remember the first time we hosted this dinner?” he asked with a nostalgic smile.

“How could I forget?” Johanna replied, laughing softly. “I was so nervous, afraid that something would go wrong.”

“And yet, it was a success, just like it will be tonight,” Edmund said, reaching out to squeeze her hand. “We make a good team, you and I.”

“We do,” Johanna agreed, feeling a surge of affection for her husband.

With the preparations complete, they joined the children, who were now scrubbed clean and dressed in their best clothes. Lilith-May, Henry, and Thomas looked adorable in their formal attire, their excitement for the evening palpable.

“Are you ready to impress our guests?” Edmund asked them, his tone playful.

“Yes, Papa!” they chorused, their enthusiasm bringing smiles to their parents’ faces.

As the evening approached, guests began to arrive, the grand entrance of Beaumont Abbey bustling with activity. The house was beautifully decorated, the flickering candlelight casting a warm glow on the elegant décor. Johanna and Edmund stood at the entrance, greeting each guest with warmth and grace.

Tabitha and Richard were among the first to arrive, their young daughter in tow. Johanna embraced her friend, delighted to see her. “It’s wonderful to have you here,” she said, her eyes bright with happiness.

“And it’s wonderful to be here,” Tabitha replied, glancing around. “You’ve done a marvelous job with the decorations, Johanna. Everything looks splendid.”

“Thank you,” Johanna said, feeling a sense of pride.

As more guests filled the house, Johanna’s aunt arrived, her eyes twinkling with delight as she took in the scene. “My dear Johanna,” she exclaimed, hugging her tightly. “You’ve truly created a beautiful life for yourself.”

“Thank you, Aunt,” Johanna replied, feeling a lump in her throat. “It means so much to me to have you here.”

As the evening progressed, the dining room filled with the hum of conversation and laughter. The meal was a resounding success, each dish perfectly prepared and served

with impeccable timing. Edmund stood to make a toast, raising his glass to the assembled guests.

“To family, friends, and the joy of being together,” he said, his voice clear and steady. “May we continue to share in these moments of happiness and love.”

The room echoed with the sound of clinking glasses and heartfelt cheers. Johanna looked around, her heart swelling with gratitude. This gathering of loved ones, this celebration of life and love, was everything she had ever dreamed of.

After the toast, Edmund leaned in to whisper in Johanna’s ear, “You are the heart of this home, Johanna. Thank you for everything you do.”

“And you are its strength,” she replied softly, their eyes meeting in a tender gaze.

The evening continued with music, dancing, and more laughter, the joy of the occasion enveloping everyone present. Johanna moved through the crowd, speaking with each guest, ensuring everyone felt welcome and appreciated. She was the perfect hostess, her warmth and kindness touching everyone she encountered.

As the night drew to a close, Johanna and Edmund found a quiet moment together on the terrace, the cool night air a refreshing contrast to the warmth inside. They stood side by side, looking out over the moonlit gardens.

“This is our life,” Johanna said softly, leaning her head on Edmund’s shoulder. “And I couldn’t be happier.”

“Nor could I,” Edmund replied, wrapping his arm around her. “We’ve built something beautiful together, Johanna. And I look forward to every moment we share.”

They stood there in silence, savoring the peace and contentment that filled their hearts. The future stretched out before them, bright and full of promise, and they knew that whatever challenges might come, they would face them together, their love growing stronger with each passing day.

The soft murmur of the party continued in the background as Johanna and Edmund enjoyed their quiet moment. They watched the flickering lanterns cast playful shadows across the garden, the scent of blooming flowers mingling with the cool night air.

“Do you remember our first dinner like this?” Johanna asked, a hint of nostalgia in her voice.

“How could I forget?” Edmund replied with a chuckle. “We were both so nervous. But look at us now.”

“Yes, look at us,” Johanna said, her eyes reflecting the soft glow of the lanterns. “We’ve come so far.”

A sound of laughter floated up from the terrace doors, drawing their attention back to the lively gathering inside. Edmund glanced back and then turned to Johanna with a tender smile.

“Shall we join them again?” he asked.

“Yes, let’s,” she replied, her heart light with happiness.

As they reentered the house, they were greeted with smiles and warm words from their guests. Johanna’s aunt approached, her eyes shining with pride.

“My dear Johanna, you have created such a wonderful home,” she said, embracing



her niece. "I couldn't be happier for you."

"Thank you, Aunt," Johanna replied, feeling a rush of emotion. "It means the world to me to hear you say that."

Nearby, Tabitha and Richard were dancing with their daughter, their joy evident in every movement. Johanna watched them for a moment, her heart swelling with gratitude for the love that surrounded her.

As the evening wound down, the guests began to depart, each one expressing their thanks and well-wishes. The house slowly quieted, the remnants of the celebration lingering in the air.

Johanna and Edmund escorted the last of their guests to the door, sharing final farewells before closing it softly behind them. They turned to each other, the silence of the house wrapping around them like a comforting blanket.

"Another successful dinner," Edmund said, his voice filled with satisfaction.

"Indeed," Johanna agreed, a contented smile on her face. "And many more to come, I hope."

"Without a doubt," Edmund replied, taking her hand in his. "Shall we check on the children before retiring?"

"Yes, let's," Johanna said, her heart full as they ascended the stairs together.

They peeked into each child's room, finding them fast asleep, their faces peaceful and their dreams undoubtedly sweet. Johanna felt a surge of love and protectiveness as she watched over them, her heart swelling with the realization of all they had built.

Finally, they retired to their own room, the fatigue of the day catching up with them. As they settled into bed, Edmund pulled Johanna close, his warmth a comforting presence beside her.

“Goodnight, my love,” he whispered, his voice tender and filled with affection.

“Goodnight, Edmund,” Johanna replied, her heart full to bursting. “I love you.”

“And I love you,” he said, kissing her forehead gently.

As they drifted off to sleep, their hearts beat in unison, filled with the promise of many more happy days to come.

THE END

### Chapter 1

Berkshire, England, Summer, 1811

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times... no, that doesn’t sound right. What about... in the beginning they weren’t friends... oh, no, that’s not right, either. She should say something... I was by the river when it happened.

But why would she be by the river? She doesn’t have to be by the river. Actually, I don’t know where she is... oh, why is the first line always the hardest?” Charlotte Davidson asked herself, putting down her quill and sighing as she looked at the blank page in front of her.

She was sitting in her father’s library, surrounded by thousands of books, and yet inspiration was lacking. It had been lacking all morning. The desk was piled high with discarded pieces of paper.

They were all attempts at starting the novel she desperately was trying to write. It was her dream to launch a book she had written out into the world, like a ship into the ocean. Her mind was brimming with ideas, but translating those ideas onto the page was proving difficult - impossible, even.

“I’ll never be able to do it,” Charlotte thought to herself, looking around her at the shelves of books, and wondering why so many other authors managed to do what she found impossible.

The idea was there. She could see her heroine, Isabella Stuart, in her mind’s eye, as

clear as though she was standing in front of her. She was tall and slim, with long blonde hair and bright green eyes, just like Charlotte herself. But Isabella's life was very different from her own.

She lived in the Highlands of Scotland, where towering mountains and crystal-clear lochs provided the setting for an adventure. An epic tale where Isabella Stuart would fall in love with the laird of Dunloch Castle.

It might be an impossible dream; a lowly shepherdess marrying a laird. Charlotte had all the characters for her book mapped out. She knew what they looked like, how they sounded, and their story.

She had thought out every detail on her walks across the meadow to the church across the brook, and while sitting in the garden under the shade of an ancient oak tree. Some of it she had even dreamed, finding herself a character in the story, as Isabella herself.

Then why am I finding it so difficult to make her speak on the page? I can see her, I can hear her, but writing the first words... Charlotte thought to herself, despairing at the thought of ever writing the novel she had so long dreamed of.

Charlotte knew what her parents thought of her attempts at writing a novel - her mother in particular.

"Why don't you concentrate on writing your own story, Charlotte? You fill your head with dreams of other people's stories and neglect your own? What have you done in your own life?" her mother had asked, when Charlotte had tried to tell her something of Isabella's story.

Charlotte's father had a similar view on the matter, and both her parents had made it clear it was high time Charlotte considered marriage for herself, over that of imagined

heroines who always got their happily ever after. But Charlotte was not interested in her own story. It was dull, just like her life. That was why she lived in a dream world of her own creation.

It was not that she was ungrateful for her life - she had a great deal to be grateful for, not least loving parents, and a comfortable home in which to live. She knew her good fortune, but despite being far luckier than most, Charlotte still wanted more.

Her mind was filled with the adventures of her heroines, and now she wanted to share those adventures by writing them down in the novel she intended to write - the novel she was finding it impossible to begin.

I just don't know where to start. She has to be doing something, but I don't know what. I know what I want her to do, but I don't know how to get her to the point of doing it, Charlotte thought to herself. She took a deep breath and furrowing her brow.

She took up her quill again. The nib hovered over the page, and Charlotte pictured Isabella appearing above a heather clad hill with the mountains and lochs of the Scottish Highlands stretching out before her in a tapestry of greens and sparkling blues.

"I wandered, lonely as a cloud... oh, no, that's Mr. Wordsworth. Think... why can't I think? I know... the loch was unusually blue that day. Oh, nonsense. What does that even mean? Unusually blue? No... I want to tell you a secret..." Charlotte wrote, imagining the novel as a confession, the confession of a woman who has fallen in love with a man who was forbidden to her.

She smiled at the thought of it - of Isabella sharing her most intimate thoughts with the reader. The story might already have occurred, and Isabella, now happily married, would tell it while sitting on a ridge of heather, looking out over the mountains and lochs of that most romantic of landscapes.

Her quill worked quickly, scratching across the page as Charlotte's picture of Isabella found form and voice. It excited her to think she was creating something - telling a story others would gain pleasure from.

"I was born in the shepherd's hut at the foot of the mountain, on a winter's night when the snow lay thick. My father was out tending the sheep, and it was my aunt who held my mother's hand as the baby arrived..." Charlotte wrote.

But all of a sudden, doubt crept in - Charlotte could hear her mother's voice telling her she was being ridiculous, obscene, even.

"Writing about a woman giving birth - how awful," she would say, forgetting the story of the virgin and child she so rapturously listened to in church on Christmas Day. The stories of the Bible, with all their grizzly details, were perfectly acceptable, but for a woman of Charlotte's rank and class to even dream of writing something so... outrageous, was tantamount to scandal.

"Marriage, Charlotte. That's what's missing in your life. You need a husband - or you at least need to show some interest in acquiring one," Charlotte's mother had said.

Her mother came from aspirational stock. Her own father had been a wealthy merchant, and there was a vague connection to royalty through a distant cousin twice removed - a story that always managed to be told whenever the family entertained someone new.

Charlotte's father was a self-made man, who had begun with nothing but a good education - having been educated at Eton due to a family connection. Now, he, too, was a wealthy merchant, and was one of the leading importers of tea from China and the Orient.

Charlotte had grown up surrounded by wealth, though she knew the family was

somewhat looked down on by those of inherited, rather than self-made, fortune. The lack of title meant they had to work harder for those things they had achieved, and Charlotte knew she was something of a disappointment to her parents, more interested in her education than securing a match ...

“I wish I could be Isabella,” Charlotte thought to herself, sighing, as she looked down at what she had written.

Reading it back to herself, the thought of Isabella telling her one story seemed foolish - it meant there was the guarantee of a happily ever after, rather than the prospect of discovering whether Isabella succeeded in finding happiness or not. The page was discarded, joining the others in a pile on the desk, as Charlotte sat back and sighed.

“I’ll never be able to do it. I’ll never be able to write a novel,” she said out loud, just as a gentle tap came at the library door.

It opened slowly, and the face of Charlotte’s maid, Sara, appeared. She was wearing an anxious expression, and now she breathed a sigh of relief as she closed the door behind her.

“Oh, thank goodness I’ve found you, Miss Davidson. Your mother’s looking for you. I thought you’d want to know. She’s upstairs now, calling for you. I was just bringing some linens down the back stairs and I heard her voice. If you’re quick, you could slip out into the garden before she starts looking down here,” Sara said, and Charlotte smiled.

The two were the same age - twenty-three - and Sara had been Charlotte’s maid since they were both sixteen. They were more like friends than mistress and servant, and this would not be the first time Sara had warned Charlotte her mother was searching for her.

“Oh, what does she want now? I thought I was safe in here for the rest of the day,” Charlotte said, shaking her head as she hurried to clear away her writing things.

“Did you manage to start on your book, Miss Davidson?” Sara asked, and Charlotte shook her head.

“I made a dozen starts - all of them were terrible,” Charlotte replied, looking dejectedly at the piles of paper.

She knew why her mother was looking for her - she had been out that morning, paying a visit to her friend, Lady Wilton, the Dowager Duchess of Pendelbury. Lady Wilton always made suggestions as to who might be a suitable match for Charlotte, and whenever Charlotte’s mother returned from visiting the ageing aristocrat, she would declare she had arranged the perfect introduction.

It had happened three times already this season, and all the matches had been ghastly. There had been Rupert Lloyd, a clergyman of Lady Wilton’s acquaintance, and a man who spoke only about himself and his achievements - a trait Charlotte found distasteful.

Next had come Dominic Cadwell, Captain Dominic Cadwell, a military man who, though handsome, had proved more interested in a fleeting affair than longevity. Even Charlotte’s mother had agreed he was unsuitable.

Finally, Lady Wilton had introduced Marcus Fothergill, the son of a baron. He had been charming, and the two of them had gotten along well until the point when a disagreement over politics had sparked a heated argument, one Charlotte had easily won, much to Marcus’s annoyance.

“Women shouldn’t have opinions on such things,” he had told her, and that was the end of that.



Now, Charlotte dreaded the thought of yet another failed introduction, and though she knew she would have to face her mother eventually, she decided to hide, rather than do so immediately.

“The garden, Sara. I can hide under the weeping willow. She won’t come outside to look. It’s here she’ll look next. I need to hurry. I can use the back stairs, can’t I? Come along, help with my things. I’ll write outside instead,” Charlotte said, and the two of them laughed as they scooped up the ink and quill, the discarded pieces of paper, and Charlotte’s precious notebook, in which she wrote everything that came to mind about her plots and characters.

Opening the door cautiously, Charlotte found the corridor deserted, and now she stepped out of the library, turning to Sara and beckoning her to follow.

“Is it safe, Miss Davidson?” Sara asked, and Charlotte nodded.

“I think so. I can’t hear anything. Come along,” Charlotte whispered, and they made their way along the corridor in the direction of the backstairs.

The house was large and rambling, spread over three floors, but Charlotte knew every hiding place, and she listened for any sound of footsteps up ahead, ready to dart into one of the empty bedrooms they passed as they made their way towards the backstairs.

The library was on the second floor, facing south, to benefit from the morning sun. It was Charlotte’s favorite place in the house, but it was also the next most likely place her mother would look for her, and now she paused to listen again for footsteps. It was the landing where they were most likely to be caught.

It had a gallery that looked over the hallway below, where a wide staircase led down to the marbled floor, across which lay the door to the drawing room. Should her

mother appear from upstairs, or from the drawing room at the wrong moment, they would be caught.

“I don’t hear anything,” Sara whispered, and Charlotte nodded to her and smiled.

“If she asks, tell her you haven’t seen me all day - say you think I’ve gone out. I’ll get into trouble either way, so it hardly matters.

At least this way I can have some peace and quiet. I just need to start writing, that’s all - it’s the first line, and...” Charlotte began, but the sound of the drawing-room door opening caused her heart to skip a beat, and snatching the ink well from Sara, she hurried across the landing and through the door to the backstairs, breathing a sigh of relief when she knew she was safe.

It made Charlotte smile to think of her mother searching all over the house for her. But knowing the reason was less of a cause for amusement. In truth, Charlotte did not feel ready to marry, and her lack of confidence in talking to men meant she was always the last one on the wall at the many balls her mother insisted on taking her to.

Charlotte preferred her own company, or that of those friends she had known since childhood. She loved to read and write, to play the pianoforte, and to paint. Horses were her favorite subject, and the house was filled with the equestrian portraits she had painted.

But all of this was a disappointment to her mother, who made no secret of having desired a boy, rather than a girl. Illness following childbirth had prevented a second child, and Charlotte had grown up knowing herself to be a disappointment.

“I know they love me. I just wish they’d let me walk my own path,” Charlotte thought to herself, as she made her way down the backstairs to the door leading out into the garden.

But Charlotte knew she was not like the heroines she conjured in her mind - not like Isabella, who had the freedom to choose whatever she wanted. The course of Charlotte's life was decided for her, and if her parents were to choose who she married, her husband would continue to decide things for her. That was the order of things, and there could be no escaping it.

As she closed the door behind her, the gardens presented a sense of freedom, albeit limited to the shrubbery at the far end and the red brick wall surrounding the formal beds. There was a weeping willow in the far corner, by the gate that led into the vegetable garden, and beneath the drooping branches, Charlotte knew she could hide herself away.

This was her intention, and glancing up at the drawing-room windows to check her mother was not looking out, Charlotte hurried across the grass, making her escape.

But he had no choice but to carry on - the meeting was arranged, and looking at his pocket watch, he realized he was already late.

"What's he going to think of me now?" he asked himself, as with trepidation, he approached the house, his shirt reminding him of the unexpected encounter he had had with Thomas Davidson's daughter.

### Chapter 2

“There’s no easy way to say it, my Lord. The money’s gone. There’s nothing left - only the assets. But that would mean selling Downside, and I’m sure...” the lawyer, Mr. Haxby, said, but Jacob Kirk, the Earl of Swadlincote, interrupted him.

“I won’t sell Downside. It’s the family side. The Swadlincotes have inhabited Downside since the reformation. It was our gift for loyalty to the crown,” he said, shaking his head in disbelief at the thought of what had happened.

The lawyer sighed.

“Then my Lord, you must think of something and fast. The money’s gone. Your investments haven’t paid the proper returns. And you’re... overspending hasn’t helped, either,” he said.

Jacob shook his head. He knew he had been foolish - reckless, even with his inheritance. He had grown up with no concept of earning money - only spending it. Whatever he had wanted, he had had, and there had never been any question of going without.

He was the Earl of Swadlincote, and the Swadlincotes had always been a family with money. But the lawyer’s news was sobering, and Jacob knew he had to take responsibility or risk losing everything.

“We can sell some of the paintings - or the Chinese vase,” Jacob said, glancing across the drawing room to where a large and ornately decorated vase stood on a pedestal.

It had been a gift from the Chinese Emperor to his grandfather during a trade negotiation, and Jacob had always been told it was worth a fortune. The paintings, too, had their worth - as did all manner of artifacts around the house. His forebears had been great collectors, and Downside was filled with all manner of interesting objects with the potential to sell.

“My Lord, that would only be a temporary measure. Your expenses are too great. You need an income - something to sustain the estate and yourself,” Mr. Haxby replied.

“Work?” Jacob replied.

It seemed an astonishing thought. His father had always been so disparaging of those men who had “made their fortune.”

“A man doesn’t make a fortune, he inherits it,” his father had once said, and Jacob had grown up knowing the difference between old money and new.

But the social scene was increasingly filled with those men - and their wives - who had benefited from the ever- expanding opportunities of empire. Money was being made through hard work and shrewd investments, and those with inherited wealth were fast being outnumbered by those who had started with nothing and now had everything.

“You still have some money left, my Lord. My advice would be to invest it shrewdly with the help of someone who... knows what they’re doing,” Mr. Haxby replied, raising his eyebrows as Jacob shook his head.

The very thought of it was humiliating - to go with a begging bowl, him, an earl...

“And would one of these men who knows better than me agree?” Jacob asked.

The lawyer shrugged.

“These men are interested in profit, my Lord. That’s what matters to them. If you present an attractive proposition, there’s no reason why one of them shouldn’t be glad to advise you, or even enter business with you,” Mr. Haxby replied.

Jacob did not like the idea of begging. But it seemed he had no choice but to do so. Downside was at risk, and the thought of being the earl who had lost the family’s wealth was humiliating.

And there was Olivia to think of, too. Jacob was in love with Olivia Wright, the daughter of the Earl of Burton-Upon-Trent. They had been childhood friends, and Jacob intended to ask for her hand in marriage. But if the money was gone, what sort of life could Olivia expect when they were married... if they were married?

“Then I suppose I have no choice,” Jacob replied, shaking his head sadly.

He felt humiliated, even as he knew his misfortune was entirely of his own doing. His parents had given him no sense of responsibility when it came to money. His father had lived off his inheritance, and his mother had had whatever she desired.

They had died together in a carriage accident three years previously, and Jacob’s grief had expressed itself in lavish spending as a means to forget the unexpected responsibility he had found placed on him. Now, the money was gone, and he had no choice but to seek the solution Mr. Haxby suggested.

“I can suggest some possibilities, my Lord. There’s a man in the district - Thomas Davidson. He’s a merchant - a trader in tea from the Orient, I believe. He’d be the best person to approach,” the lawyer said.

Jacob had heard of Thomas Davidson, though he knew very little about him,

preferring to mix with men of aristocratic rank and their families.

“I see... and what else do you know about him?” Jacob asked.

“He’s married to a woman with a vague connection to royalty, and has a daughter, Charlotte. They live at Bexton - ten miles or so from here. I could arrange for you to call on him, if you wish,” Mr. Haxby said, raising his eyebrows.

Jacob’s pride was dented - but what choice did he have? If he was to have any chance of saving the house and estate, and of marrying Olivia, the money had to be raised.

“Very well, Mr. Haxby, make the arrangements. I won’t sell the Chinese vase just yet,” Jacob replied, and the lawyer nodded.

“Very good, my Lord. I’m sure Mr. Davidson will be very pleased to make your acquaintance,” he replied, and Jacob sighed, wondering what he was letting himself in for.

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“A higher collar, my Lord?” Harold Hayes, Jacob’s valet, asked, holding a tall, starched collar in his hand.

“No... the half size. I don’t want to feel like I’m choking. But I’ll wear the gold cufflinks,” Jacob said.

“Forgive me, my Lord, but aren’t you trying to show... the need for money?” Harold asked.

He had been Jacob’s valet since he was a young man, and at thirty years old, he was old enough to offer advice to the younger earl, who now nodded and smiled.

“Ah, yes... you’re right. He’s meant to feel sorry for me, isn’t he? The penniless aristocrat,” Jacob replied, and the valet nodded.

“Perhaps the tweed jacket, my Lord - and the brass cufflinks,” he said.

Jacob agreed. Harold was a confidant - the sort of valet one could trust to act discreetly in all things. Jacob had told him of his financial difficulties - though not to their full extent - and that today he was to call on a man named Thomas Davidson, a merchant and businessman who resided in the district and who he hoped to enter in a business arrangement with.

It was all very unsatisfactory - the thought of begging to a self-made man. Jacob was an earl, and his family was an ancient and noble one. Thomas Davidson was no one, and yet he was the only one who might be able to help.

“Do I look the part of a poor beggar?” Jacob asked, as he stood in front of the mirror in his bedroom a few moments later.

Harold smiled.

“Your Lordship looks... gentlemanly, as ever,” he said, and Jacob smiled.

“A tactful response, Harold. Well... it’s time I faced the lion’s den, I suppose. Goodness knows what he’ll think of me,” Jacob said, shaking his head.

It was his lawyer, Mr. Haxby, who had set up the meeting with Thomas Davidson. They were to meet that afternoon at the merchant’s home, but as for the details of their encounter, Jacob was in the dark.

He had a little money left to invest, and intended to propose a joint venture with the businessman, not wanting to reveal the full extent of his misfortune, but intent on



making money, too. He wanted Thomas Davidson to think he was doing him a favor, even as it would certainly be the other way around...

"I'm sure he'll think you are a gentleman worthy of his time, my Lord," Harold said, and Jacob smiled.

"Well... we'll see. Thank you, Harold," Jacob said, and the valet gave a curt nod and left the room.

Jacob sighed, glancing at himself again in the mirror and wondering what he was doing. It felt humiliating to be begging for money in this way, even as he knew he had no choice but to do so. The house, his reputation, his very well-being was at stake, as were the prospects of his marriage to Olivia.

He had said nothing to her of his troubles, and had written to ask she and her mother to dine with him that evening, hoping to make some progress in his attempts at securing a more formal agreement between them. But Olivia had appeared reluctant at the thought of such an arrangement, and despite their long friendship, Jacob was beginning to wonder if she would ever feel as he did.

"One thing at a time," he told himself, glancing at himself once again in the mirror, before leaving his bedroom and making his way down to the hallway, where the housekeeper, Mrs. McDonald, was waiting for him.

Mrs. McDonald had been with the family for as long as Jacob could remember. An older woman, with silver- streaked black hair and bright blue eyes.

She had a stern face, but behind the facade was kind and gentle demeanour, and since the death of Jacob's parents she had been as much a mother to him as a housekeeper - occasionally becoming exasperated at his antics, but always there to give a listening ear. Jacob was only twenty-three years old, and burdened with such responsibility at a

young age, he was glad of Mrs. McDonald's steadying hand to guide him.

"Are you ready, my Lord?" she asked, holding out his coat, and Jacob nodded.

"As ready as I'll ever be. It feels... embarrassing, though," he said, and the housekeeper smiled.

"Sometimes we have no choice but to ask for help, my Lord. There's no shame in it," she replied, and Jacob nodded.

"You're right, Mrs. McDonald. Better this than the alternative," he said, and the housekeeper nodded.

"Good luck, my Lord," she said, as she helped him into his outdoor coat, and as Jacob left the house, he knew it was not only his own fortunes he had to save, but those of his household, too.

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The carriage pulled up at the entrance to the drive leading to the home of Thomas Davidson and his family, Thrushcross Grange. Jacob had told the driver to drop him there, for he had not wanted to arrive in a carriage and give the impression of wealth. Instead, he would walk the last distance and approach the house through the gardens - it was the brass cufflinks approach, and he hoped the merchant would see he was serious about making money.

Thanking the carriage driver and instructing him to wait, Jacob made his way up the drive, turning off into the garden - he intended to feign getting lost to avoid any formal introductions to the rest of the family, not wishing to suffer the humiliation of being entertained by new money. This was business, and that was that.

“Let him take pity on me - the genteel poverty of the aristocracy,” Jacob thought to himself, as he made his way through a large vegetable garden, with its neat rows of cabbages, leeks, and potatoes.

Jacob could see the house over a tall redbrick wall, its chimneys rising up into the sky. The gardens were pleasant, and a gate at the far end of the vegetable garden led into what appeared to be an orchard. Jacob was early, and he lingered a few moments among the vegetables, consulting his pocket watch for the right time to approach.

“But what am I going to say to him? There has to be a reason for consulting him. He’ll think it odd, otherwise,” Jacob thought to himself.

The time had now come, and Jacob intended to appear on the terrace, apologizing for getting lost and asking to be taken immediately to the merchant’s study. Taking a deep breath, he made his way towards the gate leading into the orchard, imagining what he would say and how he would be received. He had never met Thomas Davidson, and the thought of humbling himself in this way was far from attractive. It felt humiliating, and yet it was a necessity, too.

“Just get on with it,” he told himself, and now, still with his mind filled with thoughts of humiliation, he hurried through the gate into the orchard.

But as he did so, he collided with a woman coming through it at the same time. She, too, appeared lost in thought, and as they bumped into one another, the ink pot she was holding - along with an armful of papers - flew into the air. There was much apology on her part, but as Jacob looked down at himself, he saw his shirt and coat were covered in black ink...

“You foolish girl,” he exclaimed, taking her for one of the maids, as now she stared at him in horror.

“Foolish? How dare you speak to me like that? I apologized, didn’t I? You’re the foolish one for hurrying through the gate like that,” she exclaimed, glaring at him, as Jacob felt somewhat taken aback by the force of her words.

She was pretty - yet forceful, too - tall and slim, with blonde hair and piercing blue eyes. She was dressed simply, in a cotton dress with a shawl wrapped around her shoulders, and now she proceeded to pick up the papers and ink pot, as Jacob looked down at himself in dismay.

“There’s ink all over me,” he said, glaring at the woman, who shrugged.

“Well, I didn’t throw it over you purposefully, did I?” she said, and to this, Jacob had to agree.

But what was he to do now? His shirt was ruined, and he could hardly go and see Thomas Davidson in such a state as this.

“No, but... I’ve got a very important meeting with your master and now my shirt’s ruined,” he said.

She looked at him and shrugged.

“Is that so? Well, I’m very sorry for your inconvenience. But there’s nothing much I can do about it, is there?” she asked, just as another woman appeared behind her in the orchard.

“Miss Davidson, quickly. Your mother’s about to come outside. She’s calling for you,” she said, and before Jacob could say anything further - suddenly realizing the mistake he had made - the woman had hurried off across the vegetable garden with the other woman following behind her.

“The daughter - oh, how foolish I’ve been,” Jacob thought to himself, looking down at his shirt and despairing of ever making the right impression now.

But he had no choice but to carry on - the meeting was arranged, and looking at his pocket watch, he realized he was already late.

“What’s he going to think of me now?” he asked himself, as with trepidation, he approached the house, his shirt reminding him of the unexpected encounter he had had with Thomas Davidson’s daughter.

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“Who was that man?” Charlotte asked, watching as the figure of the man she had just collided with hurried off across the garden.

Sara shook her head.

“I don’t know, Miss Davidson. I’ve never seen him before. Perhaps he’s a friend of your father’s,” she replied.

“But why would he be coming through the garden? Why didn’t he just go to the front door?” Charlotte said.

It had been a most surprising encounter, but not one Charlotte blamed herself for - he had collided with her, and she had not appreciated his growing angry over his ruined shirt. Whoever he was, he had no right to be in the garden, and certainly no right to shout at her for what had only been an accident. It was all very curious, and as Charlotte watched the stranger hurry away, she wondered again who he was and what he was doing there.

“I’m sure it’s nothing, Miss Davidson. But you shouldn’t linger here - not if you don’t want your mother to find you,” Sara said, and returned to her senses. Charlotte nodded.

“Yes, come along. We’ll hide on the far side of the vegetable garden. She won’t look for us there - I think she knows about the weeping willow. Come on,” Charlotte said, and taking Sara’s hand in hers, the two of them hurried off across the vegetable garden, seeking a place to hide.

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“What an impression to make,” Jacob thought to himself, as he made his way up a flight of steps from the lawn to the terrace.

His plans were ruined, and he could only imagine what Thomas Davidson would think of him when he appeared, covered in ink, begging for money. What sort of impression was that to give?

“The wrong one,” he told himself, as a figure - a woman - suddenly appeared from a door in the middle of the terrace.

“Charlotte? Charlotte? Are you out... oh, can I help you?” she asked.

She was tall and slim, with dark brown hair and high cheekbones. There was no mistaking a relationship between the young woman and this older woman. Jacob could only presume it was her mother.

“Mrs. Davidson, I presume?” Jacob asked, adopting a deferential air.

The woman nodded, narrowing her eyes at the sight of Jacob’s ink covered shirt.

“Yes, that’s right. And who might you be?” she asked, addressing him as though he was some vagabond or chancer, and not the Earl of Swadlincote.

“Jacob Kirk, the Earl of Swadlincote. I have an appointment with your husband... Mrs. Davidson?” Jacob said, and the woman’s demeanour softened, even as she continued to look curiously at his ink covered shirt.

“Oh, my Lord... yes, my husband’s expecting you. We didn’t expect you to arrive by the.... garden way,” she said, and Jacob blushed.

“I got a little bit lost, I’m afraid,” he replied, and the merchant’s wife nodded.

“I see. Well, please, won’t you come this way? I was looking for my daughter, Charlotte. You haven’t seen her, have you?” she asked.

Despite his annoyance at Charlotte for having spilled ink all over his shirt, Jacob had the feeling the merchant’s daughter would not thank him for revealing the fact she was hiding in the garden. Instead, he shook his head.

“No, I haven’t seen anyone,” he replied, and Mrs. Davidson gave an exasperated sigh.

“That girl... well, you’d better come with me,” she said, beckoning him to follow her.

Jacob was led into a drawing room - a grand room, though furnished in a modern style. The furniture was not old, nor were the hangings or the paintings. His own home at Downside was filled with memories of the past, with centuries of collecting and acquisition. But all of this was new - a symbol of a new way of living, of money earned and spent, rather than an inheritance of right.

“It’s very good of your husband to agree to see me, Mrs. Davidson,” Jacob said, as the merchant’s wife led him out into a large hallway with a central staircase leading up to a galleried landing above.

“My husband’s a busy man, my Lord, but never too busy to turn away guests. This way,” Mrs. Davidson said, and she knocked at a door on the far side of the hallway, flanked by pedestals on which stood two rather gaudy marble lions, which seemed to glare at Jacob as he stood waiting for an answer.