



Isaiah & Isolde (Pennyroyal Green)

Author: *Julie Anne Long*

Category: Historical

Description: Return to Pennyroyal Green

A blood feud that simmers over centuries

A star-crossed-love that echoes across generations and never died.

Two men, one woman, one fateful choice.

Long awaited by lovers of the Pennyroyal Green series, the story of Isaiah and Isolde starts here.

Total Pages (Source): 28

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:25 am

Chapter One

Pennyroyal Green could be read like a clock, if one knew where to look. Isolde Sylvaine glanced over her shoulder at Miss Marietta Endicott's big red brick academy to discover the lowering sun had striped its roof edge in gold, which told her it was about half past four.

She gently elbowed her sister. "I think we're going to be late for dinner, Maria."

Yesterday Isolde had accidentally kicked her writing table while practicing a rigadon step in her night rail, and her sore toe dictated their drifting pace down the hill from Tingle's bookshop.

A temporary limp seemed a small price to pay for knowing the figures in a new cotillion in time for the Pennyroyal Green assembly, which was just about a week away.

"Ah, well. Mama will be none too pleased, but I think we deserved Tingle's after two entire hours of Mrs. Sneath," Maria said stoutly.

Very little of note was accomplished in Pennyroyal Green without the involvement of Mrs. Sneath, a young matron who had three little boys and a battlefield commander's zeal for organization.

She was in charge of the upcoming celebrations surrounding the opening of the new town hall, which is where the assembly would be held, and the Sylvaine girls were on the decorating committee.

They admired Mrs. Sneath immensely, but too much exposure to her no-nonsense briskness crimped their usually irrepressible spirits.

Tingle's is where they went to restore them.

But Isolde and Maria tended to forget that time held no dominion once they crossed the threshold of Tingle's bookshop.

Mr. Tingle was patient with the Sylvaine sisters, as they—quite rightly, in his estimation—savored books with all of their senses.

They brought them up to their ears so they could listen to the whisper of ruffled pages.

They surreptitiously sniffed them, then closed their eyes in raptures over the perfume of ink and paper and glue.

And even if the Sylvaines hadn't the budget to satisfy their connoisseur tastes, customers had more than once purchased a book after witnessing Isolde and Maria delicately ravishing it.

The whole of the way down the hill Isolde had pretended the delicious press of the new book she held against her ribs was Jacob Eversea's arm looped through hers.

The sound of swift hoofbeats, the moist, rich smell of the Ouse riverbank, the very Pennyroyal Green ground beneath her feet, which she felt a little more than usual at the moment, thanks to the untimely thinning of the sole of her shoe—these sensual memories collected over the previous magical spring were part of the weave that connected her to Jacob.

And now the ocean, visible as a silver thread on the horizon if she stood on her toes

(which she could not currently painlessly do), meant Jacob, too.

Because this was all she currently had of him.

Eight months ago, Jacob had gone off to the West Indies on a ship, promising to be home by her eighteenth birthday.

Which had come and gone two months ago.

And just as gossip regarding Jacob Eversea's intentions toward the oldest Sylvaine girl had flourished before he departed, speculation about his current whereabouts now abounded in Pennyroyal Green.

"I'll wager that Eversea lad returned months ago and is just gallivanting about London, having a wonderful time," she'd overheard Mrs. Ludlow confiding to Mr. Postlethwaite in Postlethwaite's Emporium a few weeks ago.

Mrs. Ludlow was purchasing a length of ribbon for the dress she planned to wear to the Pennyroyal Green assembly and hadn't noticed Isolde and her brother George—Jacob's best friend—standing behind them.

They had gone in to collect any family mail.

George and Isolde didn't speak of it on their walk home.

But Isolde had gone straight up to her room, sat down on her bed, then tipped backward and lay in perfect stillness for two hours, abandoned by her native optimism for the first time since Jacob sailed.

While storms, pirates and sea monsters had all seemed plausible—and forgivable—causes for delay, the possibility that Jacob might just be gallivanting in

London had never even occurred to her.

This struck her as a possibly fatal failure of imagination.

George finally interrupted her prone misery when he appeared in her doorway, studied her a moment, and said gruffly, “For heaven’s sake. You know Jacob would never do that.”

Surely, George was right. Everyone knew how unpredictable sea voyages could be! And surely the opportunity to yearn for Jacob was romantic?

But today when the sisters had stopped into Postlethwaite’s Emporium to ask about mail, the unmistakable flash of pity on kind Mr. Postlethwaite’s face left an icy pinprick of dread dead center of Isolde’s heart.

It was confirmation that the gossip about her was likely very different now.

Today their only correspondence was from their dear friend Elizabeth Bellinger in Plymouth, who had married her true love last year at age seventeen, Maria’s age now.

The sisters paused outside of Postlethwaite’s so Isolde could read the letter aloud.

When Isolde faltered over the news that Elizabeth was going to have a baby, Maria gently touched Isolde’s arm.

This Isolde found both precious and intolerable, because it meant her sister knew precisely what Isolde was feeling and why.

Jacob had not even proposed before he left.

But in her apron pocket now was a little enamel celandine, the star-like yellow flower

that heralded spring in Pennyroyal Green. He'd pressed it into her palm the very last time she'd seen him. She carried it with her everywhere. She knew it was as good as a promise.

The churchyard and pub and vicarage came into view as they rounded the cobblestoned curve.

A golden hour hush had settled over the town.

Burnished in the falling light, the familiar shops appeared preserved in amber.

Cooking smoke spiraled from chimneys; the day creatures had retreated to their shelters and the night creatures had yet to stir from theirs.

Apart from her and Maria, not another soul was in sight.

No longer day and not yet night, the hour felt to Isolde like that liminal space between girlhood and womanhood: fraught with portent and promise, tension and magic.

"Maria...Do you remember Lightning and Diamond?" Long before their father had moved his family to Pennyroyal Green, their scandalized mother had caught Maria and Isolde neighing and frisking among the headstones in the churchyard near their Plymouth home.

They were pretending to be ponies named "Diamond" and "Lightning".

"Yes! What did mama say when she caught us?"

"“ Young ladies do not gallop like heathens !”" they quoted in unison, laughing.

“What made you think of that just now, Isolde?”

“I was just thinking how lovely it would be to run like mad when no one is about to see.”

And just like that, they were both wistful.

They were very aware they would need to marry respectably lest they become crushing burdens to their parents or to George.

And while a wealthy heiress might be forgiven for gamboling through town if she took it into her head to do it, the Sylvaine girls knew their own modest dowries allowed very little latitude for such eccentricities, even if their father was now a gentleman with a capital “G”.

But when two girls were young and pretty and fizzing with high spirits, and when Maria's head would of its own accord whip like a weathervane around at the sight of a soldier in a red coat, and when young men had more than once nearly come to blows competing for a chance to hear Isolde's merry laugh—some days treading that line dividing propriety and ruin seemed as perilous as walking a cliff edge.

Suddenly Maria halted and gasped. “Oh no !”

She thrust out her hands.

Which were nude.

“Oh no, indeed, Maria! Did you lose your gloves again?”

Maria snapped her fingers. “I distinctly remember taking them off at Tingle’s when you insisted that I feel the engraved title of that book with my bare fingertips.”

“Ah...er, it was worth it, wasn't it?” Isolde demanded. Guilt twinged, much like her toe.

“Of course,” Maria assured her. “But Mama will make gloves out of my hide if I come home without them again.”

This wasn't far wrong. In the Sylvaine household, the budget usually extended to new books or new gloves, not both.

The Sylvaine's daily life had been characterized by often unnerving financial uncertainty before her father inherited money.

And Maria had a tendency to misplace things not attached to her person.

“Well, I'm sure your gloves are still in the bookshop, and no doubt Mr. Tingle will have found them. So, we'll just...”

They turned as one to stare despairingly up the hill.

Mr. Tingle would be locking up his shop any minute.

“But your poor toe!” Maria fretted.

“You go,” Isolde decided swiftly. “I'll wait” she scanned the quiet square.

“...over there.” Isolde swept out her hand out to indicate the legendary entwined oaks, currently in full fluffy leaf, their combined girth as imposing as the church.

“What could possibly happen to me beneath them?

I'll be quite secretly snug. And you can run! No one will see!”

Maria spun to look up the hill, then back at the trees, then back at Isolde. “But Isolde .” Maria breathed in mock horror. “Galloping is for h eathens .”

Isolde laughed. “Hurry! Run! Run like the wind, Lightning!”

Maria whirled, clutched her skirts in her fingers, and bolted back up the hill, her laughter trailing her.

Smiling, Isolde limped a little over to the trees and tucked herself underneath their vast leafy canopy. It was cozy to imagine she was probably just one of many creatures sheltering in them now. She dreamily imagined their roots fanning out like capillaries beneath all of Pennyroyal Green.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:25 am

She'd been told that the oaks were a metaphor for the Everseas and Redmonds, for all eternity doomed to fight each other for supremacy while needing each other to remain upright and alive.

She'd heard about the alleged curse, too: namely, that an Eversea and a Redmond were destined to fall in love once per generation, with disastrous results.

It all sounded dashing and apocryphal, as the best myths were wont to be.

She'd never witnessed an outbreak of swordplay or fisticuffs in church between Everseas and Redmonds, for instance, which seemed to be the only place those two families were ever together at the same time.

On the surface, at least, all seemed civil between them.

And yet. She'd noticed how Jacob's face went fleetingly dark and hard and remote whenever Isaiah Redmond's name was introduced in conversation.

It made him, for a frightening heartbeat, wholly unrecognizable to her.

And once when they were all picnicking near a pond, she'd been startled to come upon a little adder slithering in the long grasses.

"Reminds me of Redmond," Jacob had said darkly.

Her brother George had been intriguingly cagy when she'd asked about this later. "Jacob is a planner, as we both know.... I think Redmond is more of a... calculator

and...I think it's mainly an oil and water thing with them. And Jacob's not entirely wrong about Redmond."

The word "entirely" had struck her as significant. It meant George wasn't certain Jacob was entirely right, either.

She'd only seen the Redmond heir twice—at church—since the Sylvaines moved to Pennyroyal Green two years ago.

Like George and Jacob, he was usually away at university.

He impressed her as remote and haughty, just like his intimidating father.

But his sister Diana was on the town hall decorating committee, and she was pleasant for someone so grand, if a bit shy.

At least compared to the Sylvaine girls.

Isolde's view from where she stood beneath the trees was the churchyard, which was surrounded by a wood and stone fence twice the height of a three-year-old boy.

She'd derived this unit of measurement on a Sunday after church nearly a year ago, because while the townspeople mingled and chatted, Jacob's wily three-year-old nephew Mathias had sneaked through the thicket of churchgoer skirts and legs and clambered up the fence.

No one noticed until Jacob bolted mid-conversation through the crowd and caught his nephew just as he was about to topple from the top rail.

He'd tucked the giggling boy under one arm and ferried him back to his grateful, frantic sister, then resumed his conversation with the Sylvaines as if nothing had

happened.

Since then, Isolde had revisited this memory again and again, because it seemed to capture an essential truth about Jacob: everyone he loved became as much a part of him as his own limbs. He loved the way he breathed. And in so many ways, he'd demonstrated that this included her, too.

Today, suddenly, it was painful to look at that fence. She jerked her gaze from it.

Tucked into her new novel was a pamphlet she'd purchased describing the steps for the latest dances. She retrieved it to avidly review.

Presently, something flashed at the corner of her eye.

She ignored it, assuming the leaves fluttering in the breeze had allowed in a brief sliver of light.

When it happened again, she lifted her head and swiveled it about in search of the source.

Her breath hitched.

A young man had materialized on the opposite side of the trees.

She watched as he flicked open a gold pocket watch and examined the time.

He closed it again.

A moment later, he flicked it open again.

Then closed it again.

The glint of sunlight on the gold was the source of the winking.

He was tall; one of his long legs was indolently bent.

A mantle of leafy shadows shivered across a fine set of shoulders.

He wore his dark hair in a queue; the exquisite tailoring of his long-tailed coat and the gloss on his boots suggested he could afford the exorbitant tax on hair powder that had caused the usually very genial Mr. Sylvaine to put his foot down and forbid his raven-haired daughters to continue using it.

Fortunately, powdered hair was already going out of style.

Gradually it dawned on her that she was staring at Mr. Isaiah Redmond.

She stifled a gasp and pressed herself back against the tree trunk.

Why on earth was he standing beneath the Eversea-Redmond oaks at this hour?

It amused her to imagine that he'd dropped from them like a great acorn.

Finally, unable to resist, she stealthily craned her head and studied him unabashedly.

Suddenly his head shot up and he turned it like a fox sensing something in the wind.

Their gazes collided before she could dodge out of view.

Two choices, both ridiculous, confronted them: Look away immediately, which seemed unthinkable rude, as they were the only two people currently standing beneath the trees.

Or continue staring.

They both chose the latter.

Thusly there ensued a peculiar moment of profound stillness, which oddly didn't feel as awkward as it should have.

“Miss Isolde Sylvaine!” he finally announced with relieved triumph, as if he'd been furiously working out an equation of some sort in his mind.

She nearly laughed. She supposed she must be out of context, too. Perhaps someone had pointed her out to him one day. He likely knew her only as the outline of her best Sunday bonnet, or as the fourth tallest human in the cluster of Sylvaines who filed into church.

He swept off his cocked hat and bowed, elegantly. Which was, of course, the only way a Redmond would bow.

“Good evening, Mr. Redmond.” It seemed absurd to pretend she didn't know who he was. Curtsying gracefully with a book tucked under one arm and a sore toe proved a test of her balance, however. She nearly wobbled.

A slightly nonplussed silence ensued, during which they regarded each other steadily, and with, it seemed, mutual fascination.

He cleared his throat. “It's astonishing that two people whose names begin with “IS” should find themselves simultaneously beneath these trees at this hour.”

Delight swept through her at this unexpected whimsy.

“That... is... a remarkable coincidence,” she breathed in mock amazement.

He laughed.

And what a good laugh! Another surprise. He'd seemed so very contained , the few times she'd seen him. It had never occurred to her to wonder what his laugh sounded like. Or whether he ever laughed.

“I hope I didn't startle you, Mr. Redmond,” she added, a little more shyly

“No. But you were staring at me rather loudly,” he accused.

She smiled at that.

Whereupon she discovered his own smile was comprised of a complete set of gleaming white teeth. It dazzled in every sense of the word.

Then faded.

“What were you thinking?” He asked swiftly.

She blinked, startled. “Just...now?”

He sounded genuinely—almost urgently—curious.

Good God. She didn't mind a frank question. But she couldn't possibly tell him the truth.

So she hedged. “I'm flattered that you presumed that I was thinking. Men so often need reminding that women actually do that sort of thing.”

His smile was faint and fleeting. “It's just...it's just that your eyes. They are...they're very...”

He pressed his lips together as though the words had escaped before he could run them through a filter. And before her eyes, his cheeks flushed burgundy.

Her own cheeks immediately went hot in sympathy.

He'd thoroughly disconcerted the both of them.

Based on everything intimated by Jacob and her brother, she'd never imagined Isaiah Redmond could be awkward, or silly, or flustered. Let alone say or think things about her eyes.

Redmond enters rooms the way a smuggler glides into a cove, Jacob had once muttered bitterly to her brother George, within her earshot.

Jacob entered rooms like that first blast of sunlight when you part the curtains in the morning.

But Mr. Redmond's blush made her feel tender toward him. Heaven only knew she'd had some experience blurting things.

"Well, Mr. Redmond," she finally said gently, "since you asked...I was wondering....how it would feel to be so important, and to have such important things to do, that I should need to refer to my watch at intervals of every few seconds. As if in so doing I could command time to do my bidding."

This was when she realized she was officially flirting.

It was spring, she was a Sylvaine; he was very handsome; it could not be helped. It meant nothing, surely.

Mr. Redmond's smile began at one corner of his mouth, and by the time it completed

its slow journey to the other it had committed a robbery of both her breath and her senses.

She had lit him up entirely.

He studied her speculatively as he stretched up an arm and idly caressed the leaves dangling just above him. He knew what he was doing and why; handsome young men always did. Admire my fine form, the gesture suggested.

Subdued, she did. It seemed this could not be helped, either.

He languidly dropped his arm to thumb open his watch again. "My father gave the watch to me when I completed my education. It's a family tradition. It's even engraved."

Every one of his words struck Isolde as uniquely fascinating. "Father" pulsed with warmth and pride and a curious sort of abstracted ruefulness. It was odd to hear affection associated with the haughty Redmond patriarch she'd seen in church.

But there was something distinctly steely about the way he'd said the word "family." As if it was synonymous with "fortress".

"Not, of course, that I don't have tremendously important things to do, mind you," he told her more lightly. "Fortunes don't become immense all on their own."

He was jesting. But it seemed clear he was also making a special effort to impress her.

This sent an illicit little thrill down her spine.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:25 am

“Naturally. One must guard fortunes and tend them as carefully as the kitchen garden, lest the rabbits get in.”

His smile flashed again. And as it faded, a thoughtful expression settled in.

She had at first thought the leaf-filtered light was playing tricks, but she realized Mr. Redmond's eyes were indeed green. It seemed a peculiarly intimate thing to know about him.

They were extraordinary, actually.

She inwardly flinched away from that heretical thought. How she longed to be fixed in the blazing, blue regard of Jacob Eversea, who could make her forget her own name by just looking at her.

She wanted to touch the little enamel celandine in her apron pocket now for some sort of reassurance, but she couldn't quite reach it at the moment with anything like grace or subtlety.

Mr. Redmond cleared his throat. “If it is not perhaps too intrusive a question, may I ask what brings you to the oak trees just before sunset, Miss Sylvaine?”

Mr. Redmond didn't add “alone, like a looby or a doxie,” thankfully.

“How could I refuse to answer, when you ask it so eloquently, Mr. Redmond? I am on my way home after a day out with my sister. We attended the meeting of the decorating committee for the assembly at the new town hall. Perhaps you've heard

about it, as your sister is participating, too?”

He nodded encouragingly.

“We’ve been assigned duties—I’m going to help tidy the churchyard, and Maria will help decide upon the decorations in the hall.

And then Maria and I visited Tingle’s bookshop, where Maria inadvertently left her gloves.

She went off to fetch them. I’ve a sore toe, so I’m compelled to stay rooted. Much like these trees.”

His face was alight with flattering attention as he listened to this.

“Has she lost her gloves? Have you a sore toe? I’m sorry to hear both.”

He sounded genuinely sympathetic. But when he glanced down, she was tempted to tuck her toes under her skirt, as if with his interesting light eyes he could peer straight through to the thin place in the sole of her shoe.

“That is very kind of you, Mr. Redmond.”

“Would you be curious to know what I’m thinking now, Miss Sylvaine?” he said almost mildly.

The little hairs at the back of her neck prickled with portent.

“If you would like to share, I’m amenable to hearing.”

“It strikes me as unfair that you’ve had at least thirty more seconds to look at me

standing beneath these trees than I've had to look at you. I feel the imbalance acutely. I am not in the habit of allowing such injustices to stand.”

Her breath hitched.

Mr. Isaiah Redmond was most definitely flirting now, too.

And in an unnervingly adult way.

She felt as though she'd unexpectedly stepped into a swift-moving stream, with all the exhilaration and dangers that entailed.

She nodded thoughtfully. “I take your point. Then in the interest of parity, I shall now turn slightly to the left and cede those thirty seconds to you.”

She at once turned and presented him with a three-quarter view of the right side of her face. She and her sister had determined that this was her best angle one evening upon making faces for an hour or so in the mirror and at each other.

This angle also afforded her a view up the hill. The shadows were lengthening. The gold light deepening to apricot and flame.

Oh, please hurry, Maria, she thought . I don't know what is happening to me. I don't know what I'm doing .

Simultaneously she thought: Please take forever, Maria.

“Are you timing it with your gold watch?” she asked Mr. Redmond.

She thought he might laugh.

But he didn't reply.

Suddenly the notion that he didn't speak because he couldn't while he gazed at her made her heart lurch, then thunder as madly as...

...as madly and joyously as Jacob Eversesa racing up to their house on his mare.

“Thirty,” Mr. Redmond said quietly.

Somehow, she wasn't surprised he had indeed timed it to the second.

She slowly turned to face him.

He seemed subdued, almost transfixed. As if he had come up against a conundrum.

“There now. I believe we are even. Are you a great believer in fairness, then, Mr. Redmond?”

It was a moment before he spoke, as though he'd needed to compose himself.

“I think...fairness is relative, and should be considered in the context of the circumstances.”

He still sounded distracted.

She didn't quite take his meaning, and this was both exciting and a trifle disquieting.

She was certain that Jacob would have snorted at the notion of fairness being mutable.

Yes or no, right and wrong: those were the choices.

Some people mistook Jacob's brisk certainty for simplicity.

She had come to know that a thousand thoughts whirled through his mind before he came out with a statement that sounded immovably definitive.

Mr. Redmond asked, "Did you come away from Tingles with anything interesting?"

Oh, dear.

The problem was: She had, indeed.

"A book and a pamphlet," she confessed.

He detected her hesitation and narrowed his eyes in amusement. "What sort of book?"

She hesitated. Then she sighed. "Laugh if you must." She handed over both of them.

He accepted her proffered purchases with great care into his elegant hands. She was startled to realize he hadn't far to reach. Somehow, they had inched closer to each other with every word they'd exchanged.

"Laugh at you?" he replied, absently. "I?"

As if they'd known each other forever.

He examined the pamphlet first. "Ah! I see you have a new cotillion with...apparently a great many leaping steps. Intriguing. It looks challenging, indeed. And what have we here..."

Excruciatingly slowly, he read the title of the book: "A Venetian Romance . By A

nonymous .”

He looked up at her with mischievously shining eyes. “Such a prolific author, Anonymous.”

Now he was teasing her. Her cheeks were warm. “You are humoring me, Mr. Redmond.”

“Not at all.” he said gently. “I suspect some stories are so potent they simply torment the author if they remain untold, even if the author must remain unknown.”

And with that, he had stolen her ability to be glib.

Because that sounded like an innuendo.

Her heart was thudding now in a way it hadn’t in...eight entire months.

He looked up again. “Do you enjoy dancing very much then, Miss Sylvaine?”

“Oh, very much. It's how I...” She couldn't very well tell Isaiah Redmond that she'd injured her toe while dancing boisterously by herself in her night rail. “Yes, very much. I’m looking forward to the assembly. What brings you to the oak trees just before sunset, Mr. Redmond, if I may ask?”

“I've arranged to meet my friend, Mr. Finchley, here. And then we'll be off to the Pig & Thistle for darts and a pint. The winner will buy dinner. He's a bit late. Hence my obsession with my watch.”

“And do you enjoy playing darts very much?” She was teasing him.

He smiled indulgently. “I enjoy winning very much. And I invariably do.”

Something unsettling glinted around the edges of those words.

She could well imagine that this sort of enigmatic arrogance might set a more forthright man's teeth on edge—and Jacob was both forthright and accustomed to winning at nearly everything—and yet she found Mr. Redmond's confidence alluring, despite herself.

“Well, if you ever find yourself without your watch, Mr. Redmond, you can always have a look at the roof of Miss Endicott's academy. At about half past four on a clear day, the sun lays a stripe of gold along the edge. All of Pennyroyal green is a clock if you know how to use it.”

“I have never thought of Pennyroyal Green in quite that way before, Miss Sylvaine. But I suspect I shall always think of half past four as a magical hour from now on.”

Her heart skipped.

There ensued a fraught silence, during which they regarded each other in absolute stillness.

Mr. Redmond was half in shadow, half in sunlight, and wholly riveting.

“I think perhaps this conversation might be rather bold,” she said quietly.

It needed to be said.

She'd suddenly felt a need to tether herself to the anvil of propriety, because the pull she felt toward him frightened her. He was already too close. She suddenly, rashly, wanted nothing more than to be even closer.

He gave a thoughtful nod, as if this was a shared problem.

“Do you mind?” His voice was soft and low. He sounded gently, solicitously curious.

So she gave this some honest thought.

“Less than I ought to...perhaps?” she confessed worriedly, on something close to a whisper.

This time his smile was slow and tenderly enveloping.

Something odd and terrible in its beauty happened to her then.

The sensation was both internal and external, as though the very world and her place in it was subtly re-arranging.

Such was her emotional vertigo she reached into her apron pocket and fumbled about until she found the little carved celandine and closed her fingers around it.

She turned away and discovered that Maria was hurtling down the hill. She saw Isolde and thrust her arm triumphantly skyward. Her gloves were clutched in her fist.

Isolde stepped away from Isaiah and out of the alarmingly enchanted, leafy shadows into what remained of the daylight, and waved and smiled.

Whereupon Maria grinned, tossed her head, and broke into a mock gallop.

As she approached, it was clear she was making clopping noises with her mouth.

Isolde's hand flew to her throat in a panic.

Short of bellowing “No, Maria! Not now! Dear God! Don't be a horse!” there was nothing at all she could do to stop her sister from galloping all the way down the hill

and coming to a halt with a whinny, a snort, and a head toss.

Which is what she did.

She also pawed the ground.

Isaiah Redmond lunged backward a step put up his arms like a pugilist. As if one never knew what a whinnying girl might do.

“Tingle had my gloves.” Maria was panting happily. “I left them on the?—”

She froze when she saw Mr. Redmond.

Then —Whoosh !—her face went scarlet as the tip of a lit cheroot.

A torturous silence ensued.

Maria’s eyes darted wildly between Isolde and Isaiah.

Finally, she bravely cleared her throat and squared her shoulders.

“Forgive me, Mr. Redmond. I... I didn't see you. If I'd seen you, I...I wouldn't have...”
Her nerve failed.

“Whinnied?” Mr. Redmond completed quietly.

Isolde briefly closed her eyes. “It's a game Maria used to play when we were...we were little girls...we were horses named Diamond and Lightning, and...”

Her words evaporated in the rays of amazement radiating from Mr. Redmond's green eyes.

“I don't really believe I'm a horse, Mr. Redmond,” Maria finally assured him, kindly.

Improbably, she curtsied, as if to demonstrate the truth of this.

Isolde was tempted to throw her head back and whinny out of solidarity with her sister.

“Redmond!”

A young man Isolde had never before seen was huffing toward them, red-faced from hurrying, his hand slapped to his hat to hold it on. Men never suffered any loss of reputation if they ran.

“So sorry old man, to keep you waiting,” the young man panted.

“Good evening to you, Mr. Redmond,” Isolde said swiftly. “I hope you win your dart game.”

The sisters dipped swift little curtsies. Isolde looped her arm through Maria's and off they strode, at an absurdly dignified pace, thanks to Isolde's sore toe.

For a long while, Maria and Isolde carefully did not meet each other's eyes or exchange a word lest they explode into laughter.

But when they reached the little bridge over the main street, Isolde risked a look over her shoulder.

Isaiah Redmond touched his hat.

He'd known she'd turn back.

Just as she'd known he'd be watching her.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:25 am

Chapter Two

“ I t's remarkable how much better food tastes when one doesn't need to pay for it,” Finchley said blithely. He gulped down some ale.

Isaiah eyed him balefully. “I shouldn't get too accustomed to the flavor of victory, if I were you.” He gave his meat pie a desultory poke with a fork.

He hadn't been entirely truthful with Miss Sylvaine when he'd told her he 'liked' to win.

I win; therefore I am , was closer to the truth.

He ruthlessly tallied his own worth in failures and triumphs, and every loss that ought to have been a win made him feel, if only briefly, as though the trap door between him and the abyss was splintering beneath his feet.

He was conscious that this was not entirely rational.

Then again, competitiveness had served him well, even as it frequently caused him great and secret suffering.

He never undertook a single endeavor without intending to master it.

His dart aim was, in fact, legendary in Sussex.

So losing at darts to Finchley maddened him.

It didn't show. Most people assumed Isaiah's preternatural composure was just another feature of his Redmond birthright, like his green eyes.

But he'd in fact been obliged to cultivate it, much the way he'd honed his aim. Mainly because it had been as necessary to his survival as a shell is to a clam's.

He'd played shamefully today. As surely as if he'd been blinded by light.

After a fashion, he had been.

Leaf-dappled light on a girl's shining dark hair.

He suddenly resented his dinner companion, because he wanted to close his eyes and be alone with that image.

But Finchley was here to discuss potentially joining Isaiah's still nascent but already successful investment group, the Mercury Club, which suddenly had an opening for a new member.

"Why did those pretty girls dash off so abruptly?" Augustus wanted to know.

"Isn't that what pretty girls normally do at the very sight of you?" Isaiah replied idly.

"Ha," Augustus replied complacently, around his mouth full of victory sausage. He hurriedly added, "They weren't as pretty as Miss Tarbell, of course."

Isaiah nodded slowly, once, amused by the diplomatic fawning. Finchley knew—all of the ton knew—Isaiah had been courting Miss Fanchette Tarbell, the daughter of the Chancellor of Exchequer. "Is anybody?"

Miss Tarbell had floated through the London social season with the serenity of a

swan on a lake, comfortable with, but not insufferable about, her overwhelming supremacy.

She was exquisite from every angle. She bestowed her pearly smiles judiciously, she was polite and kind to less-blessed young ladies, and she was gracious, if remote, with all the poor young bloods who stammered in her presence.

But whatever she saw in Isaiah's eyes when they were first introduced had caused her to blush and drop her fan.

Females of all ages had been making cakes of themselves over him since he was about fifteen years old.

The bold attention had been discomfiting at first. He'd been shy and awkward as a little boy, sometimes so overwhelmed by impressions and emotions he'd go mute or stammer, which earned his father's lashing scorn.

Speak, boy! he'd bark at him. What the bloody hell is the matter with you?

Your brother could charm the birds from the trees .

Isaiah had never met his sainted dead brother, but his alleged legion of gifts seemed to multiply in direct proportion to Isaiah's failings.

He was nearly twenty now. Not only had he learned to harness the power of his remarkable good looks, he gradually came to understand that he possessed that separate but indefinable quality known as presence , the thing that made heads turn when he entered a room.

It made men want to impress him, be a part of his circle.

And if Isaiah had never quite conquered his inner tides, he'd learned that silence could be power, too. Silence could fascinate. Intimidate. Unnerve. Punish.

Seduce.

Even... perhaps even cherish.

His pulse had ticked faster than the timepiece in his hand during those thirty silent seconds beneath the oak tree.

He was tempted to rub at his chest now, as though he could feel the outline of Isolde Sylvaine's delicate profile permanently etched there, like his initials on his watch.

It made him almost as restless as if it was an actual wound.

And silence, as it so happened, was indirectly why Finchley was sitting across from him now. The membership opening in the Mercury Club had been created after former member Mr. Peter Markhart muttered "how does Redmond walk with that stick up his arse?" within Isaiah's earshot.

Whereupon Markhart had ceased to exist, as far as Isaiah was concerned.

He ignored Markhart in club meetings; he refused to respond if Markhart spoke to him.

He looked right through him in all social circumstances.

Awed by the thorough, icy ruthlessness of the shunning, the other club members had followed suit.

Reduced to a babbling, wretched nonentity, Markhart had disappeared from the social

scene almost entirely.

Finchley was unlikely to make a similar mistake.

“Who were they?” Augustus pressed. “The girls beneath the trees?”

Isaiah found himself strangely reluctant to say her name aloud. “They are the Misses Isolde and Marie Sylvaine of Pennyroyal Green.”

Augustus paused in sawing at his sausage and gestured with his knife. “Sylvaine? They must be George Sylvaine's sisters... I heard a rumor that Jacob Eversea is courting a girl named Isolde. Unusual name for an English girl. Hard to forget. Surely there can't be two Isoldes in Sussex?”

At the best of times, hearing the words “Jacob Eversea” was akin to biting down on the tines of a fork.

Tonight the jolt was brutal.

Isaiah's mouth went acrid with a jealousy that left him, for a moment, speechless .

“Your knowledge of local gossip rival's my sister's, Finchley.” He took pains to sound bored. “How is it possible for Eversea to be courting anyone on English soil at present?”

It galled him that he somehow always knew Eversea's whereabouts. He supposed it was for the same reasons two rival wolves might always be particularly attuned to the scent of each other on the wind.

It was given to understand that Eversea men tended to go off on long sea journeys to faraway lands upon leaving university, which was apparently meant to build their

characters or some such rot.

Isaiah could not see how any Eversea had ever been improved by this.

Like most normal wealthy young men, Isaiah had toured the continent for a few months and returned to England apace.

Something about just the very presence of Jacob Eversea made Isaiah feel more acutely all of his secret inadequacies, the way a stiff wind could find all the cracks in an apparently sound building.

Isaiah had once found himself confronting Eversea during a fencing competition at university two years ago. Both were exceptionally skilled, aggressive, nimble swordsmen. Both were hellbent on victory.

The crowd knew this, and watched in held-breath tension. A gasp went up when Eversea seemed to lose his footing and stumble. He fell hard on his back.

An instant later Isaiah was crouching over him, the point of his foil touching Jacob's throat, caught in the grip of a reflex forged by centuries of bad blood between their families.

He'd been disqualified from the competition.

Isaiah both savored and feared that memory. Because he knew the hate burning in Eversea's eyes during that moment lived in him, too, beyond the reach of reason.

He was glad Eversea was somewhere out on the ocean.

What a pity it would be if pirates got him.

Would Isolde Sylvaine suffer if pirates got Eversea?

His stomach muscles tightened against the notion of grief shadowing her bright little face.

Eversea probably made her laugh all the time.

At university, one could find Jacob Eversea by following the sound of laughter. He effortlessly gathered crowds of friends with his showy charm.

Lodged in Isaiah's heart like a splinter was the suspicion that Eversea was the sort of son his father would have preferred.

Fanchette seemed inured to the kinds of emotional surges that prompted shouts of mirth or thunderous scowls; she seemed to do everything with grace but nothing with abandon.

When Isaiah said something in jest, she usually tipped her head and eyed him with rueful indulgence, as though he was a naughty child who ought to know better.

He found this equal parts charming and irritating.

He was about as far from 'naughty' as a man could get.

But he loved how all eyes were on them when they rode together in Rotten Row.

He knew they looked magnificent together.

He was enchanted and bemused by the contrast between her otherworldly beauty and her strictly prosaic interests and expensive and particular tastes.

It was like listening to Aphrodite go on and on about the latest bonnet trimmings.

Her artless assumption that he would be interested in listening to her go on about such things he found touching and almost childlike.

But she listened with flattering attention when he talked about his plans to become even wealthier. They both loved opera and horses and fine objects and they both wanted the best of everything.

Which obviously meant each other.

And perhaps most importantly, Isaiah knew his father craved a relationship with Chancellor Tarbell. “Once you’re in with the politicians, Isaiah, my boy, the world is your oyster,” he’d told him more than once during one of his many lectures about life.

“So. More girls for me, I suppose, because I imagine you’ll be leg shackled e’er long to the exquisite Miss Tarbell, you lucky old dog.” Augustus patted his lips with his napkin. “Surrounded by a brood of handsome little brats, and all that.”

This was the plan, of course. Just as one did not go through all the steps of loading a musket unless one intended to fire it, Isaiah knew the only possible conclusion to a lengthy, formal, public courtship of a girl like Miss Tarbell was a proposal.

Anything else would be unthinkable dishonorable. Disastrous for both families.

He knew both of their families tacitly approved and expected this outcome, and it worked in Isaiah’s favor that the Redmonds were wealthier than the Tarbells.

And so, Isaiah’s heart had sped with triumphant anticipation when he’d told his father that he hoped to propose to Fanchette during the Tarbell’s visit to their home in

Pennyroyal Green this week, and perhaps even announce his engagement at the upcoming assembly.

His father's face had suffused with a rare warmth.

He'd gripped Isaiah's shoulders; briefly, he'd pressed his forehead to his.

“Good God, but it will be a splendid match, Isaiah. I've never been so proud of you, son.”

It had almost felt like love.

“Every man should be blessed with wife and progeny, Finchley,” Isaiah told his friend, dryly. “And of course, the world deserves more Redmonds.”

When Finchley laughed, Isaiah's tension eased a little. He sometimes forgot he could be liked for his own sake.

He looked forward to being the patriarch of his own family.

It would be no hardship to bed a beautiful woman whom he could fluster into a blush by just smoldering at her.

Certainly, if he dwelled upon the idea of a naked Fanchette, he could conjure lust. But doing it for the sake of coaxing forth an erection seemed ungentlemanly, something an Eversea might do to pass the time. He did not burn for her.

Did Jacob Eversea burn for Isolde Sylvaine?

The dimple at the corner of Isolde's lush little mouth flashed before Isaiah's mind's eye and the bands of muscle across his stomach tightened.

Had Eversea... kissed her?

The thought pressed the air from him. Isaiah's hand spasmed into a fist. He flattened it deliberately.

"I'd rather like a few brats of my own," Finchley allowed wistfully. "Tumbling about the place. After I get my oats sown, of course."

Tumbling about the place . Children did that sort of thing, didn't they?

He pictured Fanchette eyeing their children with that same fond, rueful indulgence when they were tumbling about.

And children could be silly, wasn't that true?

Neither his father nor his mother had been able to tolerate rambunctious silliness for long.

Let alone...whinnying.

For God's sake.

But Isaiah recalled the breath-catching radiance in Isolde's face when she'd turned to wave at her sister. Such...unguarded ... love.

Something about that expression had fleetingly made him feel profoundly alone and restless. It had started up an ache in him.

Light. That was it. That was how he'd felt in Isolde Sylvaine's presence.

Made of light.

Isaiah took a breath and addressed the business at hand.

“Then you’ll want to grow your wealth now, Finchley. To finance the wild oats, and to support your family. And what better way to do it than to combine talents with similarly brilliant men? Allow me to explain how our club works.”

.

Chapter Three

Jacob leaned forward into the salt spray, gripping the ship's rail for balance. He remained a bit unsteady on his feet from the fever that had swept through the crew and passengers, killing two of them.

But every morning he sprang from his bunk a little faster, gulped in the tonic of sea air, and rejoiced in the sheer, shocking glory that was being alive.

One by one, the rest of the crew and passengers emerged from their berths as if from their coffins, pale, thin, sobered but unbowed and growing more cheerful by the day.

They hadn't fought off pirates on the way to Barbados only to die on their backs in their bunks going home, after all.

They had nursed each other through an exhausting, humbling, grotesquely intimate yet ultimately triumphant ordeal.

He had promised Isolde he'd be home by her birthday, and he could almost feel the shards of his broken promise lodged in his throat. He loathed to disappoint her. Just as he'd hated to leave her.

But as long as Jacob could recall, restlessness had billowed in him like the wind in sails.

He'd literally reeled the first time he'd seen her, as though Cupid had shot an arrow into the bullseye of his heart.

He loved her, and Isolde—beautiful, funny, kind, stubborn, fiery, perfectly imperfect Isolde—loved him, too.

This incurable Cupid's wound was the central miracle of his existence.

The rest of his life must now necessarily take shape around it.

But within him remained the tiniest cinder of fury at having been so ambushed by love. Control had been snatched from him: he'd been given no say in it at all. Love had yanked his destiny onto another course just when he was on the brink of fulfilling a lifelong dream.

And Jacob had always known he'd had no business courting a woman just when he'd intended to leave on a sea voyage. But he'd been no more able to deprive himself of her company than he could voluntarily cease breathing.

And this was why he hadn't proposed before he departed.

Because if he had proposed to her, he would have wanted to kiss her.

And if he had kissed her, he knew he'd never have been able to leave her.

And God help him, despite her, despite everything, no matter what...he'd wanted to go on this journey.

He'd needed to go. He did not know how to explain it to Isolde, so he hadn't tried.

He had often felt as though he ricocheted off the luxurious boundaries of his life as though they were the bars of a cage.

He fully understood how lucky he was. He was an Eversea , for God's sake.

That magnificent house he loved in Pennyroyal Green as well as an outrageous fortune would be his one day.

But some force in him needed spending, some voracious curiosity needed sating, before he could settle once and for all to become a husband and father.

At times, his questing nature seemed to him the best, truest part of him.

And at other times, it felt like a fatal flaw.

In his weaker moments, his mind would seek out and probe, like the socket of a lost tooth, the image of Isaiah Redmond's icy composure, enviously analyzing it.

Did anything buffet the man? Redmond attracted a certain type of sycophant with his smug, unyielding certainty.

But his need to impress struck Jacob as gratingly obvious. A terrible weakness.

He invariably found some relief in the memory of Redmond standing over him pointing a rapier at his throat, his eyes glinting hate. That wasn't composure.

On most days, Jacob remained convinced Redmond had tripped him during that fencing match. Because he knew Redmond would not be able to bear losing to him in front of all of those people.

Jacob knew Isolde cherished his questing spirit.

She'd always listened with dazzled eyes to his dreams of travel and asked sincere questions.

She never seemed to judge or press or fuss or want him to be anything other than who

he was.

He knew she had suffered in anticipation of the day they would be parted.

She did not for an instant try to make him feel guilty for it.

And they both knew that if she'd asked him not to go, he might have stayed.

And then again, he might still have gone.

Either way, they both would have regretted it. Because nothing would have been the same between them after.

So in parting, all he'd said was: "Wait for me, Zold? Think of me?"

"Always," she'd whispered, as he'd pressed the enameled celandine into her palm. "Of course."

These words and that moment were as good as vows exchanged, as far as he was concerned.

Soon enough they would exchange vows in the Pennyroyal Green church with their families looking on.

He imagined telling her—perhaps when they were in bed at night, preferably naked and happily sated—about the Chinese and Turkish and Greek and Arab and African traders and merchants and sailors and gentlemen he'd met.

How he'd tasted rice wine and ouzo and coffee blacker than sin and thicker than lava; he could now curse and enjoy filthy jokes in five languages.

He might never visit their far-flung homelands as he longed to do, but for the rest of his life they would all exchange letters asking after each other's families.

This colorful web of relationships formed across the world was a large part of how the Everseas had grown their wealth over the centuries.

"Better education than Cambridge, my boy," his father insisted. Jacob agreed.

And though he was young he was hardly naïve; he knew much of world trade was inextricable from some form of human suffering.

But he discovered that the plantation in which his father had won shares was dependent on the vile practice of slave labor, like most plantations in the West Indies.

It was one thing to read about the practice; it was another to witness it. Jacob had been badly shaken.

He knew it would eventually be up to him to be the Eversea family's moral standard bearer, and as long as he lived, no Eversea would ever wittingly support that ungodly bondage. He'd given the plantation shares back to the owner, rather than sell them.

He was a little nervous about telling his father.

He hoped he would respect this decision.

If he needed to, Jacob would simply immovably stand up for what he knew was right, in the same way he had made it clear nearly a year ago that they could not distract him with the likes of diamond of the first water Fanchette Tarbell, or any other girl for that matter.

He was in love, and his choice was irrevocable.

He hadn't told them as such in explicit terms, but nothing could have been clearer.

Not once had they outright said they did not quite approve of his choice.

They were not, however, shy about implying it.

“Do you happen to know how much income is associated with the Sylvaine's property?” his father had asked idly one night.

Jacob had stared at his father for a long, thoughtful moment. Isolde's dowry was modest, at best, Jacob was fairly certain. If she even had one.

“Surely, you're not suggesting that I, as an Eversea, can't just make as much money as I want or need?”

He'd skipped all the other questions his father wanted to ask and went right to the crux of the matter.

Improbably, after a moment, this made his father produce a rueful half-smile.

Jacob had come along when his parents had given up hoping for an heir. He'd already been denied a military career. Jacob seldom asked for more than the blessings he already had. He was a good son. He knew they were loath to deny him the wife he wanted.

Besides, he was indeed on his way to amassing a fortune of his own.

Nerve and instinct guided the choices he made regarding investments or risks, whether it was to sink his allowance in canal shares or play a little deep in five card loo.

His family—he wanted a very large one—would never want for a bloody thing.

The idea of starting a family with Isolde made him feel weak with longing.

For his twentieth birthday, the sailors on his ship had insisted on gifting him with a visit to an Englishwoman who had set herself up in Barbados as a courtesan. She was expensive and very selective about her clients. But she was flatteringly enthusiastic once she'd gotten a look at Jacob.

The Eversea family tree featured more than its share of rakes, all of whom seemed to have thoroughly enjoyed their adventures.

But Jacob wasn't one of them. He might burn for Isolde, but he did not trouble the maids or any other women for intimate attentions.

He did, however, possess considerable expertise in self-gratification.

“The world is a happier place, aye, when a man knows how to please his woman? ‘Tis the best way to keep her from casting longing glances at the footman's arse,” the courtesan told him, matter-of-factly.

His imagination did not extend to a circumstance in which he could not keep Isolde Sylvaine, any more than he could imagine a life without her, so this at least didn't seem like something he ought to worry about.

But the pilgrim spirit in Jacob decided to give it a go.

And now he was humbly grateful. For the courtesan had generously guided him through an unanticipated frontier: the shocking variety of pleasure that could be had from one's own body, and the immense satisfaction that could be had from hearing a woman moan and beg and say his name on a keening cry because he'd touched her in

certain ways. It was quite a revelation.

What an extraordinary blessing it would be to bring these skills to Isolde as an offering—to be able to love her, body and soul, in every sense of the word.

He was returning with other gifts for her, too: a fiery opal that flashed with new colors every time it was turned into the light; it was in the shape of a heart, like her face.

A string of fine pearls, lustrous as her skin.

From an Arab craftsman living in Barbados he'd commissioned an exquisite wood music box, upon which a tiny dancer pirouetted to a Bach minuet.

He'd bought bolts of silk in the colors she loved best, blue and rose and pearl.

His wife would be the best-dressed woman in Sussex and beyond.

Sex, violence, illness, commerce—Redmond, that craven pleaser of authority, might have been a wrangler at Cambridge, but Jacob would wager the Eversea fortune in perpetuity that this journey was a better education.

He was returning wiser, soberer, lustier, humbler, more grateful.

An altogether better human. In all ways a grown man.

Perhaps the biggest revelation to him was that he saw and felt Isolde in everything. Not a conscious moment passed, not a beauty or strangeness or horror had he witnessed, without wondering what she would think of it, or wishing he could share it with her.

As he leaned over the rail, not one speck of land was visible behind or ahead of him.
Not one cloud interrupted the sky.

But everywhere was blue, blue, blue. Blue like her eyes.

And soon she would be his, forever.

It seemed to him the rest of his life unfurled before him with a promise as endless as
the sea.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:25 am

Chapter Four

Isolde considered it a striking coincidence that dancing alone in her night rail had indirectly led to meeting Isaiah Redmond.

Because she'd been dancing by herself when she'd first seen Jacob Eversea, too.

Nearly three years ago, when Isolde's father inherited the money and property in Sussex that would transform him from schoolmaster into gentleman, he moved his family to Pennyroyal Green at once.

Whereupon the Sylvaines cheerfully threw themselves into local society: they volunteered for church committees and sewing circles; they attended social evenings at The Pig they invited their new neighbors to tea and dinner and for evenings of music and games.

They learned the main sources of local news and gossip: Smithfield Curtis, the tobacconists, The Pig he soon had a number of pupils. Clever George, to everyone's delight, was sent to Cambridge thanks to the inheritance; he was going to be a barrister.

The Sylvaines were pronounced good company by their neighbors and considered a happy addition to the town. Soon their house was a lively place.

The Sylvaine siblings had been delighted to discover their property included a crumbling folly built to resemble an open pavilion.

It was surrendering without a fight to the encroach of nature: ivy laced around its pillars and wildflowers nodded from fissures in the flight of five steps which led to a railed mezzanine of sorts.

A grassy meadow unfurled before it—“perfect for Pall-Mall and cricket and fencing,” George enthused—and a row of oaks and hedges divided it from the narrow path that curved off the main road and meandered up to their house.

Their father hoped to one day widen it to make the passage easier for larger carriages.

Isolde and Maria immediately put the folly to use as a besieged castle, Juliet's balcony, and most often, a stage from which to orate, sing, and practice their rigadoons, chassés, pirouettes and all the other steps in the day's popular dances.

The meadow often rang with their laughter and squabbles over whose turn it was to play Titania or Lady Macbeth.

On this fateful day, Maria had been compelled to redo her French lesson, which, according to their tutor, was “Shocking. Honestly, Miss Maria, we both know you're not a halfwit.”

As Isolde's lesson had passed muster and she wasn't needed anywhere else, she slipped out of the house with her sketchbook and dashed out to the folly to enjoy the last of the day's warmth.

It was the first time she'd ever had the entire meadow to herself.

Late afternoon sunshine had turned the dandelion fluffs into tiny, glowing lamps and painted a bright rectangle from the meadow all the way up the folly's steps.

Isolde scrambled up it and performed an exuberant pirouette on the stage, followed

by a frisky demi-jeté, pretending she was one of Shakespeare's wild, earthy, elemental creatures.

So when an urge to belch overtook her, she opened her mouth and tossed her head like a bugling buck just for the pleasure of hearing it echo in the clearing. Just like she'd heard George do many times before, because boys could get away with anything, it seemed.

"And that concludes my performance," she told the dandelions, as she dipped a graceful curtsy.

When she was upright again, she staggered backward with a gasp.

A man was watching her from the road.

He was mounted on a black horse. They had paused between the trees, and both man and horse were motionless.

For a blessed instant she thought he might be—she prayed he might be—merely a trick of shadows and light.

His light eyes glinted bright as arrowheads in the lowering sun.

For as long as it took her heart to thud five or six times, they regarded each other.

And then he flashed the brightest, boldest, wickedest smile to ever curve a man's mouth, doffed his hat and bowed in the saddle with an ironic flourish. His hair was black.

Seconds later he was gone, leaving behind only the echo of hoofbeats.

She would soon learn that Jacob Eversea went nearly everywhere as fast as he could, as if his very spirit resented being confined to a mortal costume made of mere skin and bone, and had instead been born for soaring.

Two hours later she found herself sitting across from him at the dining table.

Her family was entertaining the vicar and his wife for dinner, and a few more neighbors were expected to arrive later for some casual, lighthearted music and dancing.

And it seemed that Mr. Jacob Eversea himself had seized the need to return a book he'd borrowed from George as an opportunity to gallop his new mare to the Sylvaine's house. They were both home from university.

And as Jacob was already acquainted with the vicar and his family—the Everseas owned the living in Pennyroyal Green—he cheerfully accepted an invitation to stay for dinner.

Whereupon Isolde's mother spirited their everyday candelabra away from the dining table and whisked their one fine silver candelabra into its place, exchanging a wide-eyed, wondering glance with her husband as she did. They hadn't even known that the Eversea heir and George were acquainted.

The flickering candlelight revealed to Isolde that Mr. Eversea sported a little cleft in his square chin and that his thick, black brows were what made his blue eyes seem unusually brilliant.

He was in fact so arrestingly good looking that Isolde felt she had only two options: to stare in bald fascination, or look determinedly away in order to preserve her composure.

When Mr. Eversea's head was turned toward her father, she stared.

If he recognized Isolde as the dancer at the folly, nothing apart from perhaps a certain amused crinkling at the corners of his eyes when they were introduced betrayed this. Then again, she'd changed out of her day dress and apron into her pink silk. Perhaps it was as good as a disguise.

It soon became clear that Mr. Eversea had no airs at all. His charm filled the room like sunlight.

He complimented the food and their décor with such sincere warmth her mother blushed like a girl, and he respectfully, almost diffidently asked her father for advice on a rare and costly book called *Poisonous Plants Native to Sussex* he was considering acquiring from Mr. Tingle.

This was so precisely the way to get her parents to like him it was like witnessing a magic trick.

Isolde was touched and amused, particularly because her instincts told her that Mr. Jacob Eversea didn't have a diffident bone in his body.

This theory was supported by the fact that every time Mr. Eversea glanced in her direction during dinner his pupils flared like a candle flame caught in an updraft.

And every time they did, Isolde's heart skipped in a painfully thrilling way.

"Jacob is always doing that," George told everyone, as he accepted the gravy boat from the vicar. "Dragging me into tiny, cave-like bookshops so he can buy orphaned books emblazoned with long, eccentric titles."

This made her father prop his head on his hands and beam fondly at the two boys, as

if he could not imagine a more delightful pastime.

Isolde was happy and proud for George, because his easy, teasing rapport with Mr. Eversea suggested their friendship was genuine and equal, despite Mr. Eversea's heady social stature and the fact that the Sylvaine house could fit inside the Eversea house four times over.

He seemed perfectly comfortable to be dining in a house where the food was passed around from hand to hand, rather than served by footmen.

"I've been looking in particular for books about China. My plan to is to spend a year or so there when I finish my education," Jacob volunteered. "I've been preparing for it for quite some time now. I hope to be leaving in a few months."

Devastation jolted Isolde. Just the journey by ship to China would take a year.

It seemed sickeningly inconceivable that this evening could very well be the last time she ever saw him.

"I believe I might be able to recommend a book or two on the subject of the Orient, Mr. Eversea," her father mused. "We'll have a look at my library. How did you and George happen to meet?"

"We've taken to studying in a little coffee house near university," Jacob told her father. "As it so happens, we got caught up in a philosophical discussion because of a book I'd found. Us and Wyatt Neeley—you've met him—and a few others."

"It was written by Reverend George Berkeley," George confirmed. "He has some interesting ideas. Or mad ones, depending upon whom you ask."

"Berkeley? I don't think I've read him." Her father sounded surprised, as his habits

with regards to books were awfully similar to Jacob's.

"Berkeley suggests something to the effect that objects exist only when they are perceived," Jacob explained. "He used trees as an example—do they exist only because we look upon them?"

A little silence ensued as everyone pondered this absolutely astonishing possibility.

"Fascinating," her father breathed finally, and Isolde knew he meant it because he was leaning forward on his elbows in the way he had when he wanted to plunge into a topic.

"If I'm understanding you correctly...he's positing, for example, that this dining table only exists because we're all currently perceiving it? That our perception creates reality?"

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:25 am

Everyone glanced somewhat nervously down at the dining table, as if it might dissolve into the ether.

“We all best continue to perceive it,” Isolde mused. “Lest we get gravy stains on the carpet.”

Mr. Eversea flashed a fleeting and heart-stopping grin at her, then turned back to her father.

“Yes, sir, that more or less sums up the theory,” Jacob concurred. “Or, to use another example...let’s say a beautiful, well-bred young woman is dancing alone in the woods and suddenly belches. If no one was about to hear it, would it make a sound?”

Isolde nearly choked.

The audacity of the man!

Her cheeks were instantly aflame.

Everyone laughed. Even her mother, who would have been horrified to learn Isolde had blithely hurled etiquette overboard like so much jetsam the moment she was out of sight of the house. Such were the charms of Jacob Eversea.

She stared at him indignantly, shuttlecocked between furious embarrassment and a sort of perverse joy. In truth, she was very impressed at the ambush. He was a wicked, wicked boy. She ought to feel thoroughly mortified. But she was delighted with him. It could not be helped. This was who she was.

Seconds later, he turned to meet her indignant gaze, his eyes shining with deviltry. Concern shadowed his brow when he noted her expression. His eyebrows leaped up in a question.

She bit back a smile and gave her head a slow, nearly imperceptible shake. “The point is obviously moot, Mr. Eversea,” she said gravely, “as no well-bred young woman would ever dream of doing such a thing.”

Relief flared in his features and he grinned.

She exhaled, as if his comfort was her concern.

It was her first hint that Jacob would never cease challenging her, but would rather die than deliberately hurt her.

.

The rest of their guests arrived after dinner, and if they were surprised to find the Eversea heir in their midst, they recovered quickly enough.

After all, most of them had watched him grow up.

Her mother had dusted off the bottle of elderberry liqueur and everyone had a taste.

Furniture was cleared away from the carpet in the big sitting room, fiddles emerged from cases, and a happy squabble about who would play the first dance on the pianoforte got underway involving ladies almost combatively complimenting each other’s musical talents.

And somehow in all the milling about Mr. Eversea at last made his way to Isolde’s side.

When she turned toward him, a few long, wordless seconds ensued, as if the heady atmosphere created by their mutual proximity was something to which they would need to grow accustomed, like a pair of mountaineers reaching a summit. Isolde's heart sped fatefully.

“Well, Mr. Eversea. I would call you incorrigible but something tells me it's a word you've heard so many times it has quite lost its novelty. Rest assured I shall arrive at an appropriate word just for you before the evening is out.”

“I look forward to it,” he told her somberly. His eyes were glinting. “After all, finding just the right word seems the least you can do for an honored guest. Have you a teeming vocabulary, then, Miss Sylvaine? Are you a very well-read woman?”

“Oh, very . Do well-read women frighten you?”

He recoiled a little in mock alarm. Then he snorted softly. “Of course not. Nothing does.”

This bit of outrageous bravado made her smile.

“I did worry that I might have hurt your feelings,” he confided, in a lowered voice. “And I apologize if I did. It was just...you seem as though you wouldn't...”

She knew what he meant, so she rescued him.

“I've two siblings,” she replied briskly.

“You've some familiarity with my brother, George, so you have some notion of all I've endured.” She draped her hand across her forehead in feigned melodrama, and Jacob laughed.

“And I do know the ladylike thing would be to pretend hurt feelings, but thanks to him it’s well-nigh impossible to offend me through ordinary means at this point.

You’ll have to do far, far worse. This is not an invitation to take it up as a challenge, by the way.”

He grinned. “Oh, I’ve two sisters. Both married and older than I am, and if you think George is an education, you ought to meet them. I think George is a capital bloke,” he added hurriedly. “The best.”

“There are worse brothers, I’m sure.”

“Oh, of a certainty. Just ask my sisters.”

She laughed.

George was, in fact, a good brother. He was irritable and irritating in the correct proportions for a sibling, could make her and Maria snort with helpless laughter, and he was pragmatic, thoroughly decent and trustworthy. His regard for Jacob made Jacob trustworthy by default, in her estimation.

It seemed the vicar’s wife had won the honor of being the first to play; she was claiming the pianoforte bench like a hen snuggling into a nest. Now the conversation centered about what, precisely, she would play first.

Jacob settled comfortably against the wall next to her.

“Not to belabor it, but your afternoon performance today was one of the best things I’ve ever seen in my life, Miss Sylvaine.

And among the best things I’ve seen in my life are a cow almost as tall as a barn,

Pennyroyal Green sunsets, a head of foam on the dark at The Pig & Thistle, and the expression on Isaiah Redmond's face when I won the Sussex Marksmanship trophy last year.”

She loved every word of this recitation: it was daft and deft and charming and arrogant, a vivid glimpse into his world and his mind.

“I can attest to the glory of Pennyroyal Green sunsets, Mr. Eversea,” she replied. “I confess I'm deeply envious you saw such a cow.”

“Oh, you really must see it, Miss Sylvaine.

It's in Gorsely, a quarter day's journey from here when the roads are good and one has a barouche, and I do. The farmer won't mind giving us a look if we send a message on ahead.

We'll get up a picnic and go, George and your sister and I and perhaps my sister and little nephews, too.”

He said this firmly, with the ease of someone accustomed to taking charge of things and unaccustomed to being countermanded, and with a familiarity that would have seemed brazen if it hadn't felt so natural and destined: of course she would be going to see a gigantic cow with the Eversea heir she'd only just met.

“I should like that very much, indeed.”

“And if you wouldn't like it...”

“I would, of course, say so.”

He smiled at her as if she'd said something darling, something which confirmed for

him some unspoken suspicion, and for an instant, she merely basked in that smile.

“Celandine,” he said.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I saw the first celandine of spring today. Immediately after I saw you at the folly.”

“Did you? Is it a favorite flower of yours?” She was hungry to know everything about him.

“I always think it looks like the forest is suddenly sprinkled with little suns when they begin to bloom. Every year, whenever I see the first celandine in Pennyroyal Green, it’s a sign to me that something new and hopeful and beautiful is about to begin.

When I was a little boy, I would wish on the first one I saw. ”

Well.

For the second time tonight, he’d stopped her breath.

The slightly challenging tilt at the corner of his mouth told her that he knew it, too.

But his eyes were serious.

She suddenly felt out of her depth.

This bold, cocksure boy had just said this unexpectedly poetic thing, which somehow managed to be both subtle, vulnerable, and frank.

His meaning was unmistakable.

And it also felt like he was daring her to ask a question.

When she did, her voice was low. “What did you wish for?”

He didn’t reply. But his slow smile wound round her heart like a lariat.

And then the vicar’s wife applied her fingers to the keys in a sprightly minuet, and Jacob and Isolde found themselves opposite each other as dance partners.

After an exchange of bows and curtsies, the gathered guests began to move in the figures of the dance.

Nothing frightened Jacob Eversea. Or so he’d said.

But his smile vanished the moment their hands met for the first time. His expression went grave and intent and almost dumbfounded. As if he didn't know quite how she'd done it, but she'd taken him captive.

Oh, he was frightened, she’d warrant.

Because she was, too.

She suspected he, too, could feel a current rush through him from where their hands joined. As if they’d been swept up into the same, fast-moving river together.

Perilous stuff, indeed.

“Well, Miss Sylvaine. Have you arrived at a word to describe me?” His voice was gruff.

“Enchanted,” she said shortly.

He blinked. Something raw and almost furious flashed across his features, as though he'd been caught naked.

Her own audacity amazed her. Still, she thought he ought to know that he wasn't the only one with the capacity to surprise.

Her instincts told her that her entire being—the shy parts, the bold parts, the clever and stubborn parts, the worthy and unworthy parts, every bit of her—was safe with him.

She supposed this was her way of testing this theory.

He regarded her with a certain cautious appreciation, which softened into something like surrender.

Then he gave his head a slow shake, like a man who was had just learned his ultimate fate and was peacefully content to submit to it.

“Yes, of course you are enchanted,” he managed, finally, with a certain amount of bravado. His voice was graveled. “But have you thought of a word for me ?”

They smiled at each other.

Earlier that week she'd stood with her father in the garden during that deep blue hour between sunset and nightfall, admiring the sharp, dark outlines of the first swifts to arrive that spring from wherever they wintered in some sunnier clime.

They soared and circled and dove, clearly exhilarated to be alive.

“Did you know swifts almost never land?” her father told her absently. “They do nearly everything in flight.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:25 am

And that was what falling in love with Jacob Eversea felt like to Isolde.

The cow was just as spectacular as Jacob promised, and it was the beginning of what would be the best season of her life so far. Jacob had a talent for organizing expeditions and a dilettante's spirit of adventure. The Sylvaines were his willing lieutenants, and so off they went on excursions.

He took them to all of his favorite places in Pennyroyal Green: mysterious fairy-ring clearings in the woods, ancient stone bridges, up rugged paths into the hills behind Miss Marietta Endicott's academy to a place where a cluster of willows nodded over a magical sun-dappled ponds where all the little creatures of the woods, the ones that flew or hopped or padded around on all fours, seemed to convene.

They visited neighboring towns. They brought picnics, and sometimes Jacob's little nephews, too.

They fashioned and then raced little boats on the river; they played Pall-Mall in the clearing in front of the folly.

On days when no excursions were planned, Maria and Isolde occasionally cajoled Jacob and George into joining them in acting out scenes from Shakespeare plays or La Morte d'Arthur, tales of King Arthur.

And while George's facility with a soliloquy boded well for his future as a courtroom barrister, Jacob delivered all of his lines with stentorian gusto, to great comic effect, and his version of Romeo died with such flamboyant groaning and thrashing that the girls collapsed with shrieks of laughter.

“It’s just that I think Romeo could have easily handled it all better,” Jacob said with mild indignation, later, only partly jesting. “He was a bit of an idiot.”

Often Jacob called upon them in the evenings, too, and stayed a few hours to chat comfortably with Mr. and Mrs. Sylvaine or play a round or two of whist or chess.

He obligingly sang when one of the ladies of the house or a visiting neighbor sat at the pianoforte. No one was excluded from his regard.

But the true reason Jacob visited the Sylvaines was clear to all. He was not fundamentally enigmatic, and his expression when he looked at Isolde required no interpretation.

He didn’t send over hothouse flowers, or pay formal calls to sit in the parlor over tea while her mother hovered nearby, or any of the other things that typically announced a Courtship with a capital “C”.

But he gently captured little frogs and placed them in Isolde’s palm for her to admire before they leaped away, or told her which flowers she ought to eat if she were ever lost in the woods alone.

He braided celandine into a crown and gave it to her to wear when she played Titania in a scene on their Folly Stage.

He was always the perfect gentleman, in manners and bearing, even when he teased.

Everything was proper when he was about.

They were never, ever alone, and always adequately chaperoned.

But the two of them had secrets.

Like a pair of pickpockets, they stole vanishingly swift touches, every one of them seemingly innocent, yet every one of them erotically charged.

Each accidentally-on-purpose brush of skin against skin rendered them mute for long seconds.

When he stood behind her and helped her perfect her aim during archery, his hands lightly, briefly guiding hers, or when she crossed a swift creek on stepping stones and he tucked his hand beneath her elbow just as she was about to slip—a quicksilver rush of longing stole her breath.

Especially when he was close enough for her to smell.

He smelled marvelous. Like grass and horse and boy and clean clothes.

And on these occasions, she'd seen hot spots of color rise his cheekbones, as if he was withstanding the impact of her nearness.

Then there came the day when they were walking along with the group and he halted abruptly. She turned, surprised, to find him holding out the corner of her shawl to her, laughter in his eyes.

She still had a grip on one side of it. She hadn't even realized that she'd dropped the other.

“Thank you! How on earth did you know I dropped?—”

He said very evenly, as though delivering important information, “Because when you laugh, your eyes light and your whole face goes brilliant and your head tips back, and you often give a single happy clap. And nearly every time all of that makes you lose your grip on your shawl. I knew you were about to drag it on the ground.”

She stared at him, breathless.

He might as well have said “I love you”.

Because it was clear he’d memorized the details of her, cherishing them the way she cherished details about him.

When their knuckles lightly brushed as he handed the dragging end of her shawl to her, Jacob’s shoulders moved in a long, steadying breath.

“We’ve been seeing quite a lot of young Eversea,” her father mused after Jacob departed their house one day, about a month after his first visit. He’d brought a bottle of brandy to Mr. Sylvaine as a gift. “This is the kind of brandy only a very rich man could afford.”

Her father seemed unusually pensive, dryly amused, as he rotated the bottle on the table in the candlelight.

The entire family was sitting about, actively perceiving the table so that it wouldn’t disappear, enjoying slices of ginger cake.

“Ah, but the Eversea’s fortune is self-made, father,” George said. “You admire that sort of thing, don’t you? You’d best, as I intend to be rich and self-made and all that, too.”

Their father snorted softly and leaned back in his chair, thoughtfully drumming his fingers.

“As a schoolmaster I had the pleasure of meeting men from many walks of life. Fathers of pupils, mainly. Funnily enough, there’s often almost an innocence to the titled ones who are born into immense wealth.

They are content with themselves and their place in the world.

They needn't make any effort to connive , as it were, or struggle.

It simply wouldn't occur to them to do it, because everything is comfortable for them at all times.

And just as often there's a certain ruthlessness to the self-made types.

The men driven to become something much grander than the lot to which they were born.

They are never quite at ease, and men like that always seek a solution to their discomfort.

Both conditions have their, shall we say, pitfalls. ”

His family was quiet.

“Just an observation,” he added mildly, tapping tobacco into his pipe. “I think Jacob is genuinely a very fine person.”

“Fine person” was about the highest praise her father would give a man. Isolde exhaled.

“But he's a bit...restless...perhaps?” her father added.

Isolde's heart lurched.

Her father was never casual with words, and the word “restless” landed on the raw.

Because while Jacob's fearless, voraciously curious spirit enchanted her, and she loved hearing him talk about the medicines and myths, and emperors and sages, and art and history of the Orient—a filament of fear flared hot inside her every time he did.

She was increasingly uncertain she would be unable to bear it when he left.

She had also witnessed in him qualities she could not quite reconcile with what she felt to be true about him.

One afternoon, Jacob and George decided to practice fencing in the clearing near the folly while she and Maria looked on.

She had never seen anyone move like Jacob with an epee in his hand. Every one of her muscles locked and her lungs seized as she watched. His lethal grace, precision, speed and ferocity excited and unnerved her.

How odd to realize that Jacob had been exquisitely trained to kill, should the need arise. Not only that, but he seemed capable of it. Born for combat.

He'd wanted to join the army as an officer; his parents would not allow it. For the first time she wondered what sort of toll it might take upon a man to be denied his true calling.

Finally, the boys had collapsed on the grass, laughing. "Pity Redmond wasn't here to give you an actual contest," George remarked good-naturedly.

Jacob had growled low in his throat.

As far as Isolde knew, Jacob had said nothing to anyone about his intentions toward her, as obvious as they seemed.

But she knew parliament was in session, which meant the London social season was in full sway, which meant most if not all of the wealthy young bloods of marriageable age were in the city, too.

The Sylvaines could not afford a London season for Isolde and Maria, but echoes of the ton's festivities reached them by way of the gossip sheets sold at Postlethwaite's and Tingle's: it seemed a Miss Fanchette (Isolde had never heard a fancier name, her own name notwithstanding) Tarbell, the daughter of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, had been anointed this season's diamond of the first water.

Mr. Isaiah Redmond's name had even appeared once in a flattering context, which meant he had departed Pennyroyal Green for London weeks ago.

Which made Jacob's continued presence in Pennyroyal Green conspicuous.

It didn't take long for everyone in town to realize what kept him at home.

Whereupon Isolde found herself fixed in the beam of curious eyes when she was in company.

Some of those gazes sparkled when they gently teased her.

At a meeting of the Society for the Protection of Sussex Poor Mrs. Sneath archly observed, "why, Miss Sylvaine, you're positively radiant.

Must be all the good works you're doing lately. "

One evening Isolde arrived at a sewing circle just in time to overhear Mrs. Hart remarking, "He could do worse, but I don't think an Eversea has ever married a local girl. Then again, the Redmonds only make triumphant marriages."

This was greeted with assenting murmurs and knowing, muffled laughter of the sort one likely only understood after living in Pennyroyal Green for decades.

Chapter Five

Then, one day, without warning or explanation, Jacob disappeared.

It began when an entire morning passed without a visit from him. Which was disappointing but not very unusual. The Sylvaines expected they would likely see him in the evening, so no one remarked upon it.

Still, for the entirety of the day, Isolde pitched her ears for his mare's hoofbeats. The sound always sent her heart aloft.

The night wore on, each Jacobless hour more torturous than the last for Isolde, until all of the Sylvaines were compelled to go up to their rooms to sleep.

Two more days and two nights passed in just this way.

Isolde was unprepared for how cataclysmic his sudden absence would feel, or for the deafening silence it seemed to create in both her inner and outer worlds. Tense shock nearly rendered her mute. She couldn't bear to meet at her parents' worried eyes at the dinner table. She picked at her food.

George shrugged off Jacob's absence. He did not seem surprised about it. But if he knew where Jacob was, he didn't reveal it.

Then a fourth entire day passed.

Isolde spent the fifth night without a visit from Jacob staring at her bedroom ceiling

rather than sleeping.

On the sixth night, Isolde accidentally overheard her parents whispering in the dining room. “He is an Eversea,” her mother said. “Perhaps we ought to have expected it?”

A vise clamped around Isolde’s heart. She could not bear to remain and listen to the rest.

Jacob finally called at the Sylvaine home on the evening of his seventh day away.

His beard was beginning to darken his jaw, his cravat was limp and his coat was a bit rumpled.

He seemed weary and uncharacteristically somber but satisfied in a sort of steely way, as though he’d gone straight to the Sylvaine home upon emerging victorious from some struggle, the nature of which could have been either internal or external or both.

“I hope you’ll forgive my sudden absence without explanation.

I was called away to London by my family rather abruptly.

” He said this almost stiffly as tea was brought in to their sitting room.

All the Sylvaines were gathered around, as had been their custom.

“My parents requested my presence at a ball and a few other events to which my entire family was invited. I obliged them and our hosts. After which I explained to my parents that henceforth I would be sending my regrets to all other invitations this season, as I did not intend to return to London from Pennyroyal Green.”

His words were shot through with something fascinatingly and impenetrably implacable. As if they were a door between this room and a hidden world of conflict and machinations.

The pop of the fire fair echoed in the silence that followed.

Isolde's breathing went shallow and ragged as a painful epiphany swooped in.

How ridiculously naïve she had been. Naturally the Everseas were ambitious for their only son and heir. No doubt they thought Jacob could "do better" than marry a Sylvaine. Perhaps Jacob had been skirmishing with his parents over this very thing for weeks.

He'd never once let on.

Her own parents had probably suspected this all along.

What had Mrs. Hart said? I don't think an Eversea has ever married a local girl.

Isolde couldn't look directly at Jacob. Her cheeks were scorching. She aimed her gaze at the fire instead.

She'd been such a fool. She had been so enveloped in, so certain of, Jacob's regard that she had not once imagined he might be spending these evenings away gazing into the eyes of some beautiful heiress while he danced with her. Perhaps even Miss Fanchette Tarbell.

Finally, her mother said kindly and gently, "We're always very happy to see you, Jacob. Did you enjoy London?"

Jacob lifted and let fall one shoulder. "It was pleasant, thank you." He turned to

Isolde. “But this is where I prefer to be.”

It sounded so like a declaration that Isolde, her mother and Maria sucked in swift, surreptitious breaths.

Jacob’s face went softly radiant with relief when Isolde turned to slowly smile at him.

Thusly, their days of socializing and leisure resumed as if he’d never left at all.

For nearly a fortnight.

But hovering like a bird of prey over those days following his return from London was Jacob’s impending departure for the Orient.

Being with him often felt a bit like holding onto the string of a kite dancing in a stiff breeze.

Isolde liked this feeling perhaps more than she ought to; every day he returned to their house she felt as though she’d won him anew, and this made her feel powerful and exhilarated and always ever-so-slightly unsettled in a good way, the way she did when choosing just the right stepping stones to get her across a swift stream.

Paradoxically, she believed in his steadfastness. Because she had come to know that he never swerved when he decided upon a course of action. For instance, going to the Orient.

This made her wonder whether he hadn’t yet quite decided upon her .

She noticed that her parents were just slightly cooler to Jacob now. They, too, had fallen in love with him, but every day he appeared at their house but did not state his intentions toward their daughter, the possibility of broken hearts and social

embarrassment intensified.

But more than once Isolde had looked up in the midst of swinging a mallet during Pall-Mall or passing around plates for a picnic to find Jacob standing apart from everyone, gazing at her, his expression wondering, almost puzzled, but wholly enthralled.

As if he somehow found it safer to experience the enormity of what he felt about her from a distance.

And when their fingers brushed, or when a pirouette in a dance brought their faces close together—a need for him she did not fully understand coursed through her body with such force she nearly swayed.

Jacob's hands trembled when he accidentally touched her, on purpose or not, which betrayed the increasing tension in his own body.

They were in love. Something would need to be done about it before they did something reckless.

This “something” all depended upon Jacob.

Oddly, in the fortnight since he'd returned from London, he'd not spoken of leaving for his journey all.

One afternoon, as George and Maria were packing up their Pall-Mall set and squabbling happily over something absurd—Maria was convinced one of their balls always rolled faster than another, and George was exasperatedly explaining about mass and velocity—Jacob said, “Isolde, may I speak to you for a moment?”

The fact that he'd used all the syllables of her first name—he usually called her

“Zold’ or Miss Isolde—implied something serious was afoot.

Her heart leaped into a gallop.

He sat down on the steps of the folly, and she sat beside him.

And for long moments, he said not a word.

But his face was so pale and taut Isolde’s dread ramped.

Finally, she spoke. “Jacob....is aught amiss?”

He drew in a breath. “My father won half of a sugar plantation in Barbados in a game of five-card loo.”

This was such a very Eversea thing to do that Isolde almost smiled. But such was the tension of the moment, her lips couldn’t quite perform the proper curve.

He took another breath. “I have,” he said carefully, then paused to clear his throat, “volunteered to go have a look at this plantation for him, to determine whether it’s something the Everseas actually want to or ought to keep.”

Isolde could almost feel the ground drop out from beneath her.

She pressed her hand against the stone of the folly, to brace herself. She couldn’t speak. Her breath went shallow and ragged.

“That is, I am going to do this, instead of going to China. In other words ...I will not be going to China at all.” His voice was hoarse. “I will instead be away for six months only.”

She stopped breathing She stared at him, dumbstruck.

The moment was perilous and delicately beautiful.

For the West Indies were only a six-week journey away by ship.

She knew his decision must have been forged during sleepless nights, during those moments where he stood apart to watch her, during the all-too-brief moments when they touched each other. She knew the courage it had taken to make it.

The profound weight of the responsibility she bore for his sacrifice settled down over her. He'd done it for her.

Because she loved him, she wanted him to have everything he ever wanted. So, her heart broke a little for him.

But she was his dream, too, and he likely had calculated she could not, and would not, wait for him forever.

His face went soft and bright and his shoulders dropped in relief as he drew in a breath.

Which is when she realized her own face must have gone luminous. Her eyes began to burn with unshed tears.

She glanced up and noticed George standing still, shading his eyes and staring across at the two of them. He was frowning faintly.

Isolde cleared her throat. "Well, what a fascinating journey that will be. I know you'll learn so much and make new friends. And six months will go by so quickly."

They would go by torturously slowly. But she would endure that time for him.

Color was gradually returning to Jacob's face. "I'll be gone for my own birthday, but I promise I'll be home in time for yours. And I will write if I can."

She almost said "thank you". But that would have implied that foregoing his dream of China was something she had asked of him. And never, ever would she have done that.

It would take more than six weeks for a letter to make the journey from the West Indies to Pennyroyal Green. They both knew she would be fortunate to have one even one letter from him in six months.

"When do you leave?"

And when he hesitated, she knew. And her heart plummeted.

"At the end of this week." His voice was a rasp. He swallowed. "So, this afternoon is farewell, for now."

For an instant, it was like a black veil had dropped over the sun.

She couldn't speak. Everything—the wind sweeping through the grass, the distance voices of her brother and sister— had suddenly gotten quite loud and harsh and sinister.

The sooner he left, the sooner he would return, she told herself.

And the sooner the rest of their lives together would begin.

Wasn't this the case? Why else would he take her aside to tell her this?

She had absolutely no frame of reference for this moment. She felt hopelessly young and lost.

She seized upon the truest thing she knew and clung to it: she loved him and she was certain he loved her. She could not imagine this changing.

And so...she chose faith.

When she did, she was able to draw a breath, and the sun came out again.

“Isolde...” He cleared his throat. His voice was so hoarse it was nearly a whisper. “If you would prefer me to sta?—”

“Jacob,” she interjected gently but firmly. “I cannot wait to hear about the people you meet and the things you see and learn. And having you home again will be the best birthday gift I can imagine. I am truly so happy you will be able to see a bit of the world.”

He exhaled his relief.

She knew how much it had cost him to even try to get that sentence out.

She didn’t anticipate he would propose now.

Because he couldn’t do it and just leave her to wait.

And yet, for a fleeting moment, a little cinder of something almost like anger flared inside her, for the fact that she was a woman, which meant her destiny would depend almost entirely upon a man.

Suddenly his hand was gently beneath hers, warm and rough, and he was pressing

something cool into her palm.

It was an enameled celandine. A pretty thing. It glowed gold in the sun.

It immediately blurred as her eyes filled with tears.

“Wait for me, Zold? Think of me?” His voice was shredded. His heart was in his eyes.

“Of course. Always,” she assured him on a whisper.

Her last memory of Jacob was the echo of his hoofbeats as he galloped away.

Chapter Six

I saiah hovered in the doorway of the library at Redmond House and studied his sister Diana, who was curled on a settee near the fire, frowning down at the pages of a book.

He tried to imagine her galloping and whinnying; it was impossible.

His and Diana's manners had been as ruthlessly, meticulously guided and pruned by their parents as the roses in the garden.

But much like Isaiah, Diana was apparently all the wrong things, at least in the eyes of their father.

It was never explicitly said, of course.

But it was often implied. For instance, a few months ago, Diana had worn a new green dress to dinner.

"You look lovely, Diana," their mother, who had been considered a great beauty in her day, told her, then turned to her husband.

"Darling, don't you think that color suits your daughter? "

Their father had contemplated his beaming, hopeful daughter.

"You have quite a distinguished nose, Diana," was all he said finally, brightly. "I just

realized you're the spit of your great Uncle Edward."

Verdict delivered, he'd returned to his mutton.

If one went by the portrait that hung in the hall, their Great Uncle Edward Redmond had a nose like the prow of a ship.

After dinner, Isaiah had come upon his sister sitting on this very library settee, quietly sobbing into her hands.

He'd settled down next to her and gingerly dropped his arm about her shoulders.

Stiffly, she'd accepted his presence, his awkward affection, and his handkerchief.

For a few wordless moments they'd sat together, bleakly united.

They were oft pitted against each other in the war for their parents' approval and affection, but in this they were paradoxically also allies.

Isaiah liked his sister's face. Her complexion was rosy, her hazel eyes were bright and filled with humor and intelligence, and her brows were bold, which was interesting.

And while her nose was assertive, he thought it suited her.

He did not think of girls in terms of separate body parts.

Surely some men might think she was pretty?

But no one would ever call her a great beauty. She was too aware of this, and was no doubt anticipating the blows her pride might take when it was time for her to make

her formal London debut alongside her beautiful mother and—if all went according to plan—her brother’s stunning wife, Fanchette.

Isaiah considered his sister quite a fine person—and besides, she was a Redmond, which certainly counted for a lot.

But he also knew if they didn’t get her married off and married well, she could become his responsibility for the rest of his life.

His alliances would determine her opportunities, too.

This was another reason why his engagement to Fanchette Tarbell would be a triumph.

Diana glanced up and saw him. She gestured with her book. “Sylph . A biography. Good heavens, the Duchess of Devonshire is quite the reprobate. Appalling, really.”

“Mmm. I see. And yet you seem to have devoured most of it.”

She laughed. “All right. Appalling and riveting. I’ll give it to you when I’m finished.” She clapped it shut and laid it aside. “Did you vanquish Finchley at darts?” He’d just returned from The Pig & Thistle.

Isaiah settled into the chair across from her, and sighed. Neither of them ever truly sprawled.

“On the way back, I noticed the outside of the new town hall is almost completely painted. How goes the preparation for the assembly?”

Her eyebrows went up. She’d noticed he’d dodged the darts question.

“Very well, I think. We’ve decided on fresh flowers in abundance scattered about and colorful bunting and exquisite little lanterns...

” she trailed off and eyed him, somewhat puzzled.

“It will be beautiful,” she said gently, as if reassuring him.

“A fitting backdrop for the creation of indelible memories.”

She likely concluded he might be nervous about proposing to Fanchette. After all, aside from his parents, Diana was the only person in the world who had seen him tremble when his father harangued him for stammering.

He was both touched and irritated that she could see him so clearly. He really would prefer that no one alive be able to inventory any of his past or present vulnerabilities.

He smiled neutrally. “Who is ‘we’?”

“Well, we’ve ten people on our decorating committee. More if you count the vicar. He pops his head in now and again.”

Isaiah paused, considering how to approach his objective. “Are you enjoying yourself?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact. The local matrons and girls are all agreeable and we get on well. Then again, perhaps they feel obliged to be nice to me, given that our house casts such a great shadow over the land.” She said this dryly.

But he knew she, too, struggled with the notion of being liked for just herself.

“Or perhaps they simply like you because you’re easy to like.”

She flushed with pleasure.

He leaned forward slightly, hands clasped.

“Do you know...I just had an idea. It might be a gracious thing for you to have a picnic for the committee to celebrate your work. Mrs. Fordyce likely wouldn't mind starting a war among the local cooks over who makes the best tea cakes in Pennyroyal Green.

You know how proud she is of hers.” Mrs. Fordyce was the Redmond family cook.

Diana's face lit. “Oh, Isaiah. That is a lovely idea! And it's so like you to consider everyone's pride and start an internecine war for the fun of it at the same time.”

He laughed. But it was hard to imagine an ordinary sort of wealthy bloke, like Finchley, for instance, appreciating a woman who used words like “internecine”. And this made him feel both protective of his sister and a trifle impatient, because it would be easier for all of them if she didn't.

“I think I will ask mama if we can have a picnic...” she said happily.

“We could hold it in the rose garden. Perhaps the day of the assembly, as a way of celebrating our achievements. We'll have a light repast—cheese and little cakes and jellies, fruit, that sort of thing, because we'll have so many refreshments at the assembly.

Fanchette should have arrived by then, the roads and weather willing, so she'll be able to join us. ”

The day of the assembly was a little more than a week away, and this wasn't at all what Isaiah had in mind when he'd gone looking for Diana in the library.

He rifled his brain for another tactic.

“You know...Isaiah...” Diana ventured almost timidly. “We could use the assistance of a tall person to help us decide how and where to hang our bunting. Given that you’re the Redmond heir, after all, and we’re pillars of society, and so forth. If you’ve the time to spare?”

Inwardly, he exulted.

But he hesitated for show.

“I think our group would be honored and pleased if you took an interest. And I don’t often get an opportunity to show off my brother,” she coaxed.

He snorted softly. “Nicely played. I suppose I could spare a few hours. But I’ve felt a bit cooped up lately. I don’t suppose I can help with any of the outdoor work?”

She arpeggiated her fingers on her chin, thinking. “Well, Mr. Tingle is helping with the painting outside of the town hall... perhaps you can help in the churchyard with weeding and the like? That’s another outdoor task. But I can’t recall you ever doing any gardening.”

He pantomimed shoveling. “It’s a bit like that, isn’t it?”

She laughed. “Very well, then. We’re meeting at the hall tomorrow afternoon. Come with me, and we’ll tell Mrs. Sneath you’d like to help in the churchyard.”

“Very well.” He let the last word trail into a yawn. “My fate is in Mrs. Sneath’s hands, then.”

But what tingled in his veins was triumph.

He did know a twinge of guilt. But he'd gotten what he'd wanted, and his sister was none the wiser that she'd been the means to his end. And Diana would benefit, too, would she not?

For the first time in his life, however, he was reluctant to examine why he wanted what he wanted.

All he knew is that he felt twice as alive as he'd been only yesterday at the very idea of seeing Isolde Sylvaine again.

"Well, I think I'll go change into a shirt that doesn't stink of cheroot smoke from the Pig & Thistle." He stood again.

"Off you go, then," Diana replied absently, returning to her book.

Just as he reached the doorway she called, slyly, "And I'm sorry about your darts loss to Finchley."

He laughed, startled, and mimed taking a dart to the back.

She indeed knew him too well.

Isaiah couldn't fidget with his gold watch while he was holding a full bucket of water, but he did know it had been five minutes past two o'clock when Mrs. Sneath handed it to him.

She'd left him with her thanks, which were the perfect balance of brisk (because she was always brisk) and obsequious (because he was a Redmond), as well as a handful of rags and a little brush. These he'd stuffed into his pockets.

He'd been told the vicar would be helping out in the churchyard today, too, but a few

minutes ago the elderly Mrs. Barton, a Pennyroyal Green parishioner, had rushed through the gates into the churchyard, apparently in urgent need of spiritual counsel.

Reverend Holroyd had hustled her into the church.

Isaiah's instincts told him they wouldn't emerge soon.

So, Isaiah stood alone in the shadow of a willow, his face aimed in the general direction of the gate, his back to the stone bench featuring a carving of a little boy angel. He'd averted his eyes from that bench his entire life.

Today as he'd wandered through the churchyard, he'd realized one could track the rise of the Eversea and Redmond fortunes by the dates on the headstones. About a century ago both families began retiring their expired members into family mausoleums instead.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:25 am

And while Fanchette Tarbell and her family rolled ever closer to Pennyroyal Green from their Northumberland estate, every single one of Isaiah's senses were pitched for the arrival of another girl entirely.

He straightened alertly when the gate squeaked.

He heard her before he saw her; she was humming a lilting tune. An enormous straw hat came into view. Beneath it was a girl, merrily swinging her own bucket of water. The skirts of her practical brown dress, covered in an apron, swayed gracefully at her ankles.

She stopped so abruptly when she saw him that the only sound for a moment was the water sloshing in her bucket.

The stillness during which they regarded each other felt to him as complex as a conversation.

A faint, pretty flush moved into her cheeks.

They both knew why he was here.

"Well. I'm beginning to wonder if I'm destined to encounter you beneath trees from now on, Mr. Redmond."

"I'm relieved that you said 'destined,' and not 'cursed', Miss Sylvaine."

She tipped her head and assessed him. "I suppose there are worse fates," she

concluded, airily.

He smiled slowly. “How fares your toe today?”

“Almost completely restored to health, thank you for asking, Mr. Redmond.”

“My sister and I agreed it would be noble of me to volunteer. Mrs. Sneath sent me out to the churchyard,” he told her.

Her brow furrowed in mock concern. “Is ‘noble’ really the word for it?”

He grinned, and she grinned, and suddenly the very air seemed made of champagne.

“I also see you were given the bucket with the red handle, Mr. Redmond. That’s the best one.”

He glanced down at it, confused and a little flustered. “Then I insist you have it.”

Her eyes were dancing. “I’m jesting,” she told him gently. “But as it so happens, I do like the red handle better, so I shall accept your kind offer, thank you.”

He was absurdly overjoyed to have something to give to her.

She lowered her bucket of water to the ground. He transferred the red-handled one into her outstretched hand.

That hairsbreadth of space between where their fingers almost-but-not-quite touched during this exchange hummed like the air before a thunderstorm.

He was gratified and fascinated when the color in her cheeks deepened.

“How did you come to be assigned to the churchyard, Miss Sylvaine, when all the other ladies are helping with the bits and bobs in the hall?”

She hesitated. Then her eyes lit conspiratorially.

“I will confess something to you, Mr. Redmond. Mrs. Sneath thought it best that that Maria and I be given different committee assignments, as we’ve a tendency to make each other giggle, which causes everyone else to giggle, too, and this is apparently, I quote, ‘disruptive’.”

“So difficult to believe,” Isaiah commiserated somberly.

Her smile was brilliant. “Isn’t it? But it’s a fair point.

I admire Mrs. Sneath very much, mind you.

And as it so happens, I like it out here, even if there’s a slight possibility that she invented this chore out of exasperation with the Sylvaine sisters.

And Maria prefers to help with the inside decorations, and so all’s well that ends well.

I welcome the opportunity to get better acquainted with Pennyroyal Green’s former citizens.”

She swept out a hand to indicate the Hawthornes and Tingles and Postlethwaites and all the other families who had called Pennyroyal Green home over the centuries slumbering beneath the sod.

Most of the headstones were well-tended and tidy, kept so by family members; others were furred by lichen and moss and weeds.

Church volunteers usually managed the maintenance, but it wasn't always easy to keep it up.

The street fair accompanying the town hall opening would attract people from villages all around, and Pennyroyal Green wanted to look its best.

"Have you ever cleaned moss from anything before, Miss Sylvaine?" Isaiah retrieved the rags from his coat pockets.

"Well, not as such. I've certainly worked a little in a garden before, as well as in a house.

But we now have five people in to do for us since we moved to Pennyroyal Green," she told him happily.

"Bess is in charge of the kitchen and housekeeping, and we've two maids of all work, and Thomas for the heavier chores, and little Dougal who helps with everything.

He sleeps in the kitchen by the fire and helps turn the spit.

He has the reddest hair I've ever seen."

Isaiah didn't know why he was charmed to his core by this recitation. A battalion of servants facilitated the Redmond's existence—two dozen, at least. Fanchette's family likely employed close to that many, too.

He imagined Fanchette would smile vaguely while gracefully backing away from Miss Sylvaine and her talk of five servants and a boy who sleeps in the kitchen. She had an uncanny skill for bestowing warmth in precisely calibrated degrees based on someone's social rank.

“It’s a fine thing to have help,” he decided to say.

Miss Sylvaine cast a dry look up at him. “You’ve probably five hundred and sixty-two servants.”

“Five hundred and sixty-one. We recently had to let go one who failed to polish my scepter to my satisfaction.”

She smiled, looking surprised and pleased, as though he’d passed some sort of test, and he felt as though she’d pinned a medal to his chest.

“Well then, Mr. Redmond, since the vicar hasn’t yet appeared, why don’t we start here. I’ll do the weeds if you clean the marker.” She gestured to a furry green stone.

They both crouched and set to work.

He tried to look handsome and earnestly industrious as he scrubbed gently at the lichen and whisked it away with the little brush.

A pair of birds exchanged trills from somewhere above them in the trees.

He was distantly aware of the wheels of a cart and hooves clattering on cobblestones beyond the churchyard fence, of a voice raised to call to a neighbor in greeting.

If it wasn’t precisely bustling, the Pennyroyal Green main street wasn’t sleepy, either.

Presently his industry revealed the words on the headstone.

Eleanor McElroy

1682-1720

“Well.” Miss Sylvaine sounded pleased and reflective. “That’s not a lot of information. I don’t know of any McElroys in town. Do you?”

He shook his head. “Perhaps my parents would.”

“And look how lovely you’ve made her stone. Are you good at everything then, Mr. Redmond?”

“I do hold myself to an exacting standard,” he told her earnestly. “I was a wrangler at Cambridge and I was the top boy in all of my subjects, too.”

He realized too late that he’d sounded like an absolute prig—worse, a nine-year old prig— whereupon his cheeks went warm. It was just that he felt a peculiar urgency to impress her as much as he could as quickly as possible.

But she merely raised her brows.

“Oh my. A wrangler ! Isn’t that the highest level in mathematics a student can reach at Cambridge? Well done, indeed, Mr. Redmond. Is it really necessary to be so clever when you’re already rich?”

He gave a short, startled laugh. The cheek of her!

But her sidelong glance was full of mischief and challenge, and her lashes cast little shadows on her cheekbones, and these two things made it impossible for him to feel anything but enthralled.

“As with my dart game, I endeavor to continually refine my expertise in all things over time.” He said this ironically. He gestured broadly at the newly clean headstone. “What are you best at, Miss Sylvaine? You don’t strike me as a bluestocking.”

She startled him by sitting back abruptly and eying him indignantly for three silent seconds.

“Oh, ho! I can tell by your tone that you consider that a compliment, and I'm not at all certain it is, therefore I shall not thank you for it.” She used the late Mrs. McElroy's headstone to push herself to her feet, then brushed her hands together briskly.

“Because I fear I read everything I can get my hands on, Mr. Redmond. Not just dance steps and romantic novels, both of which I adore. My father has a phobia about being bored at the dinner table, and so we are all prepared for lively debate. I'm certain, in fact, there are a lot of things I can do better than you can. ”

“For instance...” he indulged, as he stood, whisking his hands together to get dirt and lichen off his gloves. He was far too eager to hear her say anything at all.

She paused and studied him thoughtfully. “Whinny. I'll wager you can't.”

“Why on earth would I ever need to whinny?” He replied with great practicality.

“What if....” she tipped her head back in thought, treating him to a view of her lovely, long white throat and the blue ribbon tied beneath her chin. “What if an apocalypse occurs, and everyone apart from you and all the horses in the world perished? You'd be obliged to learn their language.”

He gave a short laugh.

He thought she might laugh, too.

Instead, her smile wavered. And then, to his alarm, her expression went somber and bleak.

He instantly felt bereft of all light, as if she was the sun blotted out by an eclipse.

“It's just so sad...” she finally said wistfully. “And so very disappointing. Because it's very clear that you're afraid that you can't whinny. You haven't a shred of adventure in you, have you?”

She was jesting. Wasn't she? She was calling his bluff.

It was just that her devastation was so bloody convincing. Her eyes were limpid with woe.

Into his mind flared the image of Jacob Eversea, standing on the deck of a ship somewhere on the ocean, sailing headlong into adventure.

He was certain that feckless bastard was unafraid to try anything .

“Bah. I'm afraid of nothing.” He shrugged. Hedging.

Though he was in fact afraid of everything he felt in this moment.

“Bold statement,” she said idly, examining the fingertips of her gloves, as if bored. “But probably mere words.”

He was now less amused but increasingly impressed at her tactics.

“Are you daring me, Miss Sylvaine?” he said mildly.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:25 am

His stomach did a languid, delicious flip when she fixed him with a level gaze. Her eyes were a sort of faceted blue ringed in darker blue.

“What if I am?” she said softly. “Do you never take dares? Are you so very, very obedient, Mr. Redmond, so proper, so upright?”

He threw back his head back and released a whinny so competent birds exploded from the trees in fright.

Isolde gasped and staggered backward a few feet and clapped her hands over her mouth. Her eyes were flared in shock.

After the alarmed flapping of wings faded, all was deafening silence.

Isolde remained frozen. Her eyes were still wide with what appeared to be horror.

Isaiah’s knees nearly buckled from humiliation. Inwardly, he flailed in panic.

What the bloody hell had he done? Why had he done it? How had a Redmond come to be whinnying in a graveyard? Was he ruined? Would she mock him?

Who the devil was he anymore? He was tempted to turn tail and run.

“I thought...” he stammered. “But you said...”

Finally, she slowly, almost somberly, lowered her hands.

“It’s just...” her voice was an anguished hush. “Your whinny was so much better than mine, Top Boy. I’ve never heard a better one. I’m bitterly jealous.”

He froze. His jaw dropped. He clapped it shut. Outrage surrendered almost at once to a flood of what felt like the purest happiness.

“Holy Mother of God. You are a minx .”

Suddenly, an answering whinny from an actual horse echoed from somewhere out on the main street.

They both burst into laughter.

They crouched down behind headstones like naughty children when the vicar popped out his head from the church, reflexively faintly smiling at the sound of merriment, even if it was occurring among the departed. Such was life. Presently he disappeared back into the church.

“You are a dangerous person, Miss Sylvaine,” Isaiah said with a sigh, finally. “A menace.”

“Your poor face.” Miss Sylvaine’s eyes were shining with laughter tears. “You were so worried. I’m sorry. What must you think of the Sylvaine girls?”

For a luxurious few moments, they merely regarded each other.

He was reasonably certain that she could see in his eyes what he thought of one particular Sylvaine girl.

Everything was wrong about this, at least according to everything he’d been taught.

He had an ironclad sense of honor and propriety.

They ought to be chaperoned. He was not, had never been, a cad.

And if this girl had been claimed by Eversea, Isaiah wouldn't dream of overstepping, not even for the pure visceral pleasure of triumphing over him.

Gentlemen simply did not do that sort of thing. He was above all a gentleman.

Any day now he would be engaged to be married to a beautiful girl he greatly esteemed, and this alliance would bring happiness and honor to his family. Every beat of his heart brought Fanchette closer to Pennyroyal Green, and to that moment.

Yet when he looked into Isolde's eyes, he could feel something long misaligned in his spirit notch back into its place. The result was an almost dizzying relief. As if he could finally, at last, take a full breath.

"You're not sorry at all," he accused softly, teasing.

She smiled again. The dimple at the corner of the pale pink curve of her lower lip beset him with the sort of spiky restlessness that was the very reason she ought to be chaperoned.

She sighed contentedly as she looked about. "I think I'd like to be buried here."

He was amused. "Surely not for a good while yet."

"Oh no, not until I have at least ten or twelve grandchildren."

It was impossible to imagine this laughing, lithe girl as a grandmother.

But as a mother...

He suddenly imagined little girls like her and her sister, gamboling like horses around the lawns of Redmond house, and his heart squeezed painfully.

His heart accelerated to a gamboling pace as he asked the next question.

“Are you so very certain your life will always be in Pennyroyal Green, then, Miss Sylvaine?”

She abruptly went still. As though he’d pressed a bruise.

Then she smoothed her hands along her apron and matter-of-factly squared her shoulders, visibly tucking herself and her confidences away from him. Her expression was unreadable.

She carried her bucket over to the next nearest headstone that was wearing a little coat of lichen.

He stood, too, and followed her slowly.

He realized his heart had ticked up a notch in anticipation of her answer, which would either devastate or elate him, and by rights, should do neither. It should not matter to him at all.

Very belatedly, very carefully, she replied: “I suppose not.”

She sounded subdued.

His heart gave an unwise leap. If she was engaged to Eversea, this would be the moment to say so. Wouldn’t it?

Unless she was feckless, or coy.

He would swear on his life that she was neither.

Perhaps she was concerned that speaking the word “Eversea” aloud to a Redmond was like holding a crucifix up to a demon.

Had she heard anything about his connection to Fanchette? He’d only been mentioned once in the newspaper this season. And never directly in connection with Miss Tarbell.

“Are you certain you’ll be in Pennyroyal Green your whole life, Mr. Redmond?”

“Someone has to live in that big house the Redmonds built a century ago.”

She smiled at that. Which was much better.

“Have you ever wanted to see the world beyond Pennyroyal Green?” She was plucking weeds now; his view was the top of her straw hat.

He knelt across from her and set to work on the stone with the little brush.

“After university, I did the usual Grand Tour then came home. I enjoyed it very much.”

“The world world,” she said. “The places across the vast oceans, not just across the channel.”

This sounded both like a challenge and a serious question.

Jacob Eversea had just officially entered the conversation, if Isaiah was not mistaken.

He was suddenly oddly nervous and excited, as if he was confronting the man himself across a chessboard.

“I’ve always felt that Pennyroyal Green is a world unto itself, in many ways.”

She looked up swiftly, her eyes flaring in surprised pleasure.

She dropped her gaze again. “It seems that way to me, too. But I do love hearing about other parts of the world. It makes life here in Pennyroyal Green even more vivid.”

An unworthy, wayward surge of jealousy shortened Isaiah’s breath. With an unendurable clarity he imagined her listening with starry eyes to Jacob nattering on about distant lands, the way Fanchette listened to him go on about his investment group.

“What boy doesn’t dream about that sort of adventure?”

I confess I have. But I’m my father’s heir.

I’ve a duty to our family to uphold. What if something became of me on my journey?

In light of this...it seemed to me selfish, perhaps even callous, to leave behind loved ones who would worry about me.

Especially since I know I intend to build my life and fortune here in England. ”

What the devil was he doing?

He didn’t know. He only knew what he’d just said was both truth.

And strategy.

She stiffened. Her face fleetingly tensed, as if she'd absorbed some inner blow.

She turned and wandered distractedly through the stones.

Isaiah stayed rooted to the spot, on the theory that perhaps a little physical distance from her would help clear his head and sort out his motivations. Because he suffered for two reasons: his truth had caused her pain.

And if she was hurt, it meant she must care very much for Eversea.

“Your sense of duty is very noble,” she finally allowed politely. “Your loved ones are fortunate.”

“Duty is love, Miss Sylvaine.”

She turned her head swiftly toward him.

He didn't know why that “I” word would shimmer and echo in the air between them like heresy, or a magic spell. He wasn't a poet. He never glibly came out with things like that.

He understood it was because he'd never before had a reason.

She appeared to be mulling this assertion. He sensed there were a dozen things she wanted to say, and he wanted to hear all of them.

“Duty is one expression of it, surely,” she agreed, finally.

The very way she moved—the sway of her skirts, the set of her shoulders, all of

it—made him think untoward thoughts about other expressions of it.

Suddenly she halted near the little angel bench to read the inscription.

Bloody hell.

She slowly turned to him. A hesitant question was written all over her face.

Reluctantly he told her, “Yes. Nathaniel Duncan Redmond was my older brother.”

“Oh, my goodness. He was only nine years old.” Her voice drifted with sadness.

He moved closer to her. “Tragic, I know. He was remarkable. Far more brilliant than I, of a certainty. Could charm the birds from the trees. Born with intellectual and athletic gifts of all sorts. He was everything a man would want in a son and heir.”

He’d managed to make his tone match his usual internal dialogue about his brother: somber, yet lightly ironic.

Why he would tell her these things, he didn’t know. It was just that it oddly didn’t seem much different than saying them aloud to himself.

“He sounds remarkable, indeed,” she said gently. “And I’m not a wrangler, but I can do arithmetic, Mr. Redmond.” She tipped her head toward the dates on the plaque. “And if you’re just recently out of university, I do wonder how you know these things about him.”

He smiled faintly. “You’re right. I never met him. He died of an illness two years before I was born. But my father made certain I knew all about him. And my mother arranged to have the bench made.”

“Good heaven, your poor parents.” She paused. “It can’t have been easy at all for you to grow up that way, Mr. Redmond. Amidst their grief. I’m sorry for your loss, too.”

He went warily still. No one— no one —had ever before made such an observation to him. Let alone with such tenderness.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:25 am

It occurred to him that it had never felt like his loss.

His invisible brother had been a rival and an enemy and after a fashion the weapon wielded by his father to mold Isaiah and his sister.

He'd been someone to resent. An unsettling invisible presence, like a ghost. He had seemed to belong to his parents, but never to him.

But his brother would have been the heir, with all the responsibility that entailed. He could have been a dear friend, a rival, a confidant, anything.

A surprisingly powerful, bittersweet sorrow swept through him for the first time, as though it had simply been waiting for a safe place and a safe moment to make itself known. Which was apparently in this quiet, homely churchyard, in the presence of this particular girl.

He sat down on his brother's bench, and exhaled in a gust.

He was embarrassed and angry with himself for being momentarily too overwhelmed to speak. He willed his face to remain impassive.

Presently Isolde settled down next to him, at a discreet distance.

When he felt the gentle pressure of her hand on his arm, he looked down at it, astonished.

He lifted his head to find her expression soft as a featherbed.

His brother would never know what it was like to look into the sweet face of a girl who saw what Isaiah was trying to hide, and didn't judge him. His throat felt tight.

"Please forgive me, Mr. Redmond. I didn't mean to distress you," she said gently.

He shook his head. "I was just thinking what a shame it is he will never be able to meet you, Miss Sylvaine."

He didn't mean to mutely gaze like a sap into her eyes, but he didn't ever want to forget how she looked during this moment. Regardless, neither of them turned away. Time itself seemed suspended.

The gate squeaked.

Isolde snatched her hand back from his arm just as the tall Mrs. Sneath strode swiftly into view.

They both shot to their feet at once.

Mrs. Sneath halted. Her intelligent gaze ricocheted between Isolde, Isaiah, and the angel bench, along the way evolving from shock into suspicion into concern into curiosity into sympathy.

At last, it settled into careful blandness.

"Good afternoon, Miss Sylvaine and Mr. Redmond. Is the vicar about?"

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Sneath," Isaiah said smoothly.

He bowed, his heart pounding absurdly, as Isolde curtsied.

“He stepped into the church with a parishioner who had need of counsel. Miss Sylvaine just happened to notice that this bench is dedicated to my late brother and was moved by the tribute.”

“As anyone would be, Mr. Redmond,” Mrs. Sneath replied diplomatically and kindly.

Miss Maria Sylvaine appeared at the churchyard gate then, too. She stopped abruptly. Much like Mrs. Sneath, her eyes darted between the people standing there.

Then widened and remained fixed inquiringly upon her sister.

“Oh, lovely! There you are, Maria. My sister is here to walk me home. Good afternoon, Mrs. Sneath, Mr. Redmond.”

Isolde dipped a curtsy and slipped out through the gate, looping her arm through Maria’s.

And almost hungrily, Isaiah watched until they were out of view.

Isolde didn’t think she’d soon forget the sight of Mrs. Sneath’s eyes bulging white as eggs. Everyone knew well-bred young ladies simply didn’t cozily sit next to heirs they’d only just met, let alone touch them.

She felt like the worst sort of Jezebel.

And almost unbearably exhilarated.

It took all of her fortitude not to turn around to ascertain whether Isaiah was watching her leave, but she was certain he was.

“We finished the decoration planning today, so we won’t be back at the hall until the

evening before the assembly to arrange all the furbelows,” Maria told Isolde cheerfully.

“I promised Mrs. Hatchett I would look after her children in the afternoons this week while she visits with her sister, who is going to have her second baby. And we’re going to have a picnic at the Redmond house on the day of the assembly!

Miss Redmond invited all of us! It will be in their rose garden.

I should probably meet you in front of the Redmond House on that day, since I’ll be coming from the Hatchett’s house on the other side of town and you’ll be coming from the churchyard. ”

Isolde found she couldn’t yet say a word.

“And how was the churchyard today?” Maria prompted.

As her silence continued, she could feel Maria’s comprehension, and her next question, forming like incoming weather. And she gasped when realization hit.

“Hold one moment.... Isolde... was Mr. Redmond there to visit the vicar?”

Isolde shook her head.

“Did he actually help today with the work in the churchyard?” Maria’s delivery was half an octave higher now. “With you ?”

Isolde nodded slowly. She didn’t dare meet Maria’s eyes.

“Oh my good heavens. Do you like him?” This was dramatically whispered.

Eventually Isolde nodded again.

Maria scurried ahead of her, then walked backward so she could look at Isolde's face. Her own face was a picture of astonishment.

"Isolde, did Mr. Redmond know you would be there?" Her sister sounded deadly serious now.

Isolde bit her lip. "I mentioned it under the oaks the other evening," she admitted.

"Isolde" Maria breathed a universe of awe, trepidation, glee, worry, and warning into that one word.

"I know ," Isolde replied in precisely the same tone.

Chapter Seven

Isaiah departed the churchyard feeling lighter in every imaginable way. Lighter, as if relieved of a burden. But also, as if he could either too easily be blown off some pre-determined course, like a feather, or soar, like a bird.

Lighter, as if his very heart glowed inside him.

He didn't trust any of this. All of it was wildly new. None of it seemed within his control. All of it therefore felt dangerous, even traitorous to the person he was just yesterday morning, when he'd looked forward to seeing Fanchette Tarbell and her family and to the start of rest of his life.

He'd last seen Fanchette in London a mere fortnight ago. Compared to the vivid reality of Miss Sylvaine's heart-shaped face, the notion of Fanchette seemed like a half-remembered dream.

His groin tightened at the thought of Isolde's soft-looking mouth. He swiped his hands restlessly down his face and released a hot, shuddering breath.

Just after the Sylvaine girls departed, the vicar had casually mentioned to Isaiah and Mrs. Sneath that he'd be visiting with an elderly parishioner in her home at about two o'clock for the rest of the week.

So the best and most honorable thing for Isaiah to do would be to stay away from the churchyard tomorrow.

He resolved to send his apologies to Mrs. Sneath.

He realized he had reflexively walked the whole of the way up the hill to Tingle's Bookshop, so he stopped inside to see whether Tingle had gotten in any recent foreign newspapers.

As he counted out pence for an Italian broadsheet, he was arrested by the sight of a book on the shelf behind Mr. Tingle.

He stared at it in silence for so long that Mr. Tingle was compelled to prod him with a gentle, "Mr. Redmond?"

Isaiah lost the battle with himself. "I'll have that book as well, Mr. Tingle." He pointed.

Mr. Tingle's slight hesitation revealed his surprise. "Very good, sir. A bit of a change from your usual fare, isn't it?" He pulled it from the shelf and slid it over to Isaiah.

"If you would be so kind as to put it on the Redmond account?" was all Isaiah said as he tucked it under his arm. He was out the door before he finished his sentence.

Isolde clapped the dirt and moss from her gloves, then stood and stretched.

She'd arrived a little after noon, and for the first hour in the churchyard she'd worked companionably yet separately with the vicar, who cheerfully chattered about the virtues of manual labor until he departed at just before two o'clock to visit an elderly home-bound parishioner.

She'd assured him she'd be safe enough walking the short distance home soon after; heaven forbid young ladies should remain unchaperoned for more than three seconds.

But she dawdled.

Even so, Mr. Redmond had not appeared at all today. She'd been so certain he would, after yesterday.

The answer to whether she was relieved or devastated by this—a question she'd been entertaining for the past few hours— was moot when she heard the creak of the churchyard gate. Because her heart shot skyward as if it had been smacked with a Pall-Mall mallet.

Her whole being just knew .

He's calculating , George had said.

Something told her that Mr. Redmond, who had lingered in the churchyard with Mrs. Sneath and the vicar yesterday, had likely learned of Reverend Holroyd's scheduled parishioner visit.

His footfall was muffled by soft earth and moss as he moved closer. Her heart thudded.

He paused abruptly at a distance when he saw her. For a moment it seemed as though he could not speak, only stare.

Finally, he bowed. "Good afternoon, Miss Sylvaine. I hope you'll forgive my tardiness."

She realized she loved his voice. Its depth and cadence were somehow both stirring and soothing, innately intimate.

"I forgive you, Mr. Redmond. I had every faith you would eventually arrive, as it

would be ignoble of you to shirk your civic duty.”

For the next two or three heartbeats, they did nothing but smile at each other.

Thusly they once again said about million things without actually saying them.

“As you appear to be bucketless today, I’ll happily share mine,” she added. “I was about to start over here.”

She didn’t tell him she’d been about to leave for home.

“You’ve a generous spirit, Miss Sylvaine.”

They worked in silence for a time, too companionably, too comfortably. Very efficiently. Her cheeks were warm and she didn’t look up because she knew—she could sense—his eyes on her. Feast them, she thought mischievously.

In no time at all the name on the headstone was once again revealed:

Violet Marguerite Llewellyn

1630-1660

“‘Violet’ is such a pretty name. Her parents called her after a flower. Isn’t that lovely, Mr. Redmond?”

“Perhaps because babies are soft,” Isaiah mused.

This painfully charming observation made her heart squeeze. “Do you know of any Llewellyns in Pennyroyal Green?”

Isaiah shook his head.

“I wonder what Miss Llewellyn’s story was?”

He sat down and leaned back on his hands. “I think...Miss Llewellyn was from a wealthy family. Her father was someone important. Perhaps a titled gentleman of some sort. No! I have it—a wealthy, powerful magistrate.”

“A magistrate?” she was enchanted. Her knees were beginning to ache from crouching. “Intriguing. Was Violet beautiful?” she asked mischievously. Her own audacity sometimes amazed her.

“Oh, undoubtedly, she was wondrous fair,” he affirmed, holding her gaze a potent beat longer than necessary, reminding her that Mr. Redmond was older and capable of being bold in a subtle way that felt to her unnervingly sophisticated. She ought to be careful.

“This magistrate in fact had two daughters, I think,” he added, idly.

“Perhaps her sister’s name was Lily! Another flower!” she suggested.

“Perhaps her name was Lily. And I think their magistrate father was very strict.”

“Poor girls. He wouldn’t let them go anywhere unchaperoned, that sort of thing?”

“Even more strict than that. And while Lily was inclined to be obedient, her sister Violet—” he gestured at the stone “—was impetuous. Her father had arranged an excellent marriage with a man of wealth and stature, a powerful duke who was in love with her, but Violet fell in love with... Signor Massini, a gifted artist. And on the evening of her wedding to the duke she was kidnapped by Signor Massini and a band of his friends.”

“Kidnapped! Good heav...”

She caught on. Her jaw dropped for a good three seconds and stared at him with absolute delight.

“You...you...you rascal ! Mr. Redmond! That’s the plot of A Venetian Romance !”

He’d just changed all the names. She’d in fact read the entire book just last night, too. She’d found it impossible to put down.

Once again, the churchyard echoed with their laughter.

She sighed happily. “What made you read it?”

He absently rubbed a little dirt from the last digit on Violet’s headstone. He was still smiling. But he didn’t look at her.

“Did you like the story?” he finally asked.

All at once she understood this was both a question and his answer.

He’d bought a book—a romantic novel, no less—because he’d wanted to know her.

Her heartbeat sped. She knew very well how the seeds of fascination could sprout and, with little encouragement, run riot. That was how it had been with Jacob.

She felt tender toward Isaiah yet again.

She also felt shy and exposed, and as uneasy as if she were fumbling in the dark.

Because what on earth were they doing? He’d been in London for the season; it was

entirely possible he was courting another woman.

Her enamel celandine throbbed reproachfully in her apron pocket.

She was all but promised to another man.

Wasn't she? These weren't questions they could easily ask each other.

Her parents would be deeply unhappy to see her cozily chatting— alone —with a young man they'd never formally met, regardless of his last name. If she'd explained "But it feels like I've always known him," they would lock her in her bedroom until she was an old maid.

Still. Not one bit of reason or guilt seemed capable of infiltrating the wayward joy in her heart.

She cleared her throat. "Well, the slightly florid style of the author Anonymous notwithstanding... and even though I love my way of life here...it's a way of experiencing another sort of world... and it's exciting to empathize and feel all those emotions along with the hero and heroine."

Her words emerged a little breathlessly.

Isaiah took this in, still absently rubbing at the number on the stone.

"It would definitely have been a less compelling story if she'd listened to his father," he said dryly.

"Perhaps she wanted to please her father, but her heart gave her no say in the matter."

He was quiet. When at last he slowly looked up at her, the vanishingly swift flicker of

yearning in his eyes made her heart skip a beat.

“I suspect...her father just wanted to make certain she would be secure for the whole of her life, and making an alliance that would strengthen the family would be the best way to do that. My father always says that families are like castles. You’re only as strong as the weakest stone.

You can’t allow the facade to crumble or crack. ”

She was struck again by the complicated warmth and pride with which Isaiah said the word ‘father’.

But she had formed her own opinion about the Redmond patriarch.

She knew grievously wounded creatures could be dangerous, but it seemed to her that the Redmond patriarch had deliberately wielded the alleged saintliness of his poor lost son as a sort of cudgel against Isaiah, and it shook her.

And Isaiah surely faced all the pressures of being an heir.

Just like Jacob.

She was suddenly freshly grateful for her own lovable, uncomplicated father.

“What if someone in your family went astray, Mr. Redmond? Took it into their heads to fight a duel or rob a mail coach?”

“Oh, that’s an easy question. No Redmond has ever been a rogue, so I’ll never have to consider that.”

She laughed.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:25 am

But then she realized he was only partly jesting.

He added, “And if anyone trespasses or tries to harm my family, well...”

“Out comes the boiling oil?”

“Whatever is required.”

The back of her neck prickled with some combination of thrill and fear.

What must it be like to have the money and social power to quietly avenge wrongs and bury transgressions?

She’d never had to worry about either of those things outside of a Shakespeare play.

She recalled what her father had said about the potential ruthlessness of self-made men.

But she was surprised to realize that a part of her yearned toward the unequivocal safety and certainty and solidity Mr. Redmond described.

The Sylvaines had known more than a few alarming upheavals in fortune before her father inherited money.

The Eversea lineage contained a fair number of colorful rogues, none of whom seemed ever to meet any significant consequences. Perhaps the Everseas protected their rogues, too. Or perhaps they were, as Jacob had more than once maintained,

deucedly lucky.

“And do the Redmonds lock their rogues in their own castle dungeon?” She pressed.

“What rogues?” he repeated patiently.

This probably wasn't the moment to mention that she'd heard the whole Eversea-Redmond feud had begun in the tenth or eleventh century when an Eversea allegedly stole a cow (or was it a pig?) from a Redmond. Or perhaps the other way around, depending upon whom one asked.

“So, when the other day you said fairness is relative , you meant it literally.”

He gave a short, startled laugh. “Perhaps.”

“Did you like *A Venetian Romance* ?”

His hesitation suggested he was giving this some thought. “I was not unmoved by the plight of our characters.”

She gave a soft laugh. “In other words, you merely endured the book.”

His mouth quirked at the corner. “I enjoyed it! I'm probably not a very good judge of novels. I seem to be better at prosaic things, like numbers.”

“Why do you like numbers?”

They were now sitting about Violet Llewellyn's final resting place as though they were on a picnic.

Isolde's already dusty-hemmed skirts were flared out around her; her bottom rested

half on moss and half on dirt.

It was cooler; the sun had shifted. It had grown quieter, too.

Over the past few days, she had become intimately familiar with the ambient sounds of the heart of Pennyroyal Green—birdsong, carriage and cart wheels and hooves over cobblestones, the distant rise and fall of laughter and conversation, dogs barking.

The quiet reminded her it was now well past the time she ought to have set out for home.

“I suppose it’s because even though the rules binding them are ancient and unchanging, I can use them as a sort of crystal ball to forecast the success of an investment in the future.

They can help create order from chaos. With them, I can measure how far I’ve come and how far I need to go when it comes to growing the kind of wealth that will keep the family I raise, and all the Redmonds, safe and prosperous for generations to come, and...

” he waved a hand almost helplessly. “There are so many reasons.”

“So, numbers are your way of fortifying your castle.”

“I suppose they are.” He sounded pleased.

“It doesn’t sound dull at all. You’ve made it sound almost like poetry.”

For a moment she merely basked in his slow, warm, relieved smile, moved that such an impressive young man had clearly been worried about impressing her.

“Mr. Redmond, I’m afraid I must leave for home now. I am expected.”

He scrambled to his feet at once.

After the briefest of hesitations, he extended his hand to her.

It would have been churlish not to do it.

And yet.

How absurd that it felt like a dare.

She eyed it hesitantly.

When she finally slipped her hand into his, a current raced through her body.

He felt impossibly strong, and she felt gossamer, as he raised her to her feet.

She was blushing furiously again by the time she was upright.

She released his hand at once and cast her eyes on the ground.

The quality of the silence suggested they were both shaken by this brief intimacy.

She knew how Jacob would feel if he’d ever learned Isaiah Redmond had held her hand.

Piercing guilt and a surprisingly muscular rebelliousness batted her heart between them.

Jacob wasn’t here.

Mr. Redmond cleared his throat. “I will escort you home.”

This was another predicament: as a gentleman, he could hardly abandon a lady. But they both knew that if even one person saw her promenading through town alongside the Redmond heir, within hours it would be all Pennyroyal Green talked about.

Furthermore, propriety demanded that she protest.

“Mr. Redmond... that’s a very kind offer, but there’s no need. Quite truthfully, I can find my way home blindfolded, in the dark.”

He drew in a breath. “Miss Sylvaine...I understand and share your concerns. I know of a path that diverges slightly from the main street, if your toe is equal to it. And we are friends, are we not? I should not be able to live with myself if I did not see you to at least the start of your road.”

She was the girl who had crossed fast-moving streams over stones as Jacob led the way. She was, at heart, a taker of risks.

“Well, I should loath to be the reason for your demise,” she said gravely.

They set out into the falling light.

All along the far edge of the churchyard, through the clearing where two oaks spent eternity entwined, between the trees lining the river, and across a short, ancient wooden footbridge, Isaiah felt as though his heart was dancing on a tether, struggling to gambol ahead of him.

This path was as familiar to him as his own hand, but he suddenly had no idea where it would lead.

How odd that a walk should feel like an insurrection.

Just days ago, the idea of veering from his proscribed future would have seemed as outlandish as the characters of *A Venetian Romance* leaping from the confines of the book.

At any moment he could turn his head to see Isolde's face alight with curiosity and the delight of discovery, which felt like a rare luxury.

And while they saw no one else along the way, he knew it didn't mean they remained unseen by any villagers.

But the intoxication of each other's company made this concern seem as distant and irrelevant as the sound of carts clattering down the main street's cobblestones while they were working in the churchyard.

When they reached the place here Isolde ought to turn and walk up to her home, he pointed to an ancient tree stump tucked between the trees lining the road.

"That stump marks a little trail that meanders right through the trees and leads to our family's rose garden. A few escapee roses from our garden bloom along it every year. I think I might be the only one who's ever noticed them. I might actually be the only one who knows about this path."

"Oh, that's delightful! Are any blooming now?" She craned her head to peer through the trees.

"I haven't yet looked this season." He hesitated. "Would you like to investigate?"

She stared at him. "Of course, I do." She sounded almost indignant, which made him give a short laugh. "But Mr. Redmond...a walk is one thing. I feel it needs to be said

that I'm not the kind of girl who plunges into shrubbery with men."

"I know you aren't. And I'm not the sort who.

.." heat rushed his face. "...leads young ladies into shrubberies. You are safe with me. I just..." he made a sort of encompassing gesture.

Just want this day to never end. I know my all of my secrets are safe with you.

Things he didn't dare say aloud. Things that might in fact frighten her.

Her eyes searched his face while his heart ticked faster.

Her skirts whipped her ankles when she whirled and dove into the trees and onto the path.

"Are you coming?" she called over her shoulder.

"Of course." Exultation almost dizzied him.

They couldn't walk side by side on the narrow path, so he simply enjoyed watching her head swiveling to and fro to take in the sights, the way her shoulder blades moved beneath her dress, the way the leaves stippled her with little shadows. The remains of the day were as softly warm as a shawl.

She stopped abruptly about twenty meandering feet in. "Mr. Redmond, look!"

One of the wayward rose bushes sported a dusky pink bloom the size of a baby's fist. In a matter of days, it would unfurl to a size that would fill his palm.

How furious his father would be if he'd known one of his prize roses had escaped.

Isolde touched it gently. “It’s the color of the dress I’ll be wearing to the assembly. You’ve only ever seen me in colors that match dirt.” She twitched her skirts ruefully.

He fell mute. He expected his eyes told her she would look lovely in anything, because her own eyes went soft.

“You must have it then.” He gently plucked it and handed it to her. He was stunned to realize his hands were trembling.

A shade the color of the rose spilled into her cheeks as she accepted it with pretty gravity.

She ducked her head to bury her nose in it.

Longing surged in him so violently he nearly swayed.

If only this interlude were a story he could read whenever he wished. If only he was a character in a book who could sweep her into an embrace and mold her lithe form against his hard body. The skin of his arms hummed at the very notion of holding her.

What would happen if he did it now? To both his thrill and horror, his cock stirred.

“Friends of our family are coming to visit Pennyroyal Green. They will likely be attending the assembly, too.”

His words emerged almost hoarsely. He’d needed to say it in order not to hate himself. Though of a certainty he’d already breached the fine line between honor and dishonor and he could not undo it.

Something flickered in Miss Sylvaine’s gaze as she searched his face: puzzlement, a question. Then caution. For while his words sounded like a non sequitur, she would

likely conclude that they were not.

“How lovely,” she replied with evident sincerity, after a hesitation. Miss Sylvaine was neither a fool nor naïve. But she was kind. Dear God, how he yearned toward her kindness, even as he felt he did not deserve it.

“I must dash,” she said swiftly. “Thank you for the adventure, Mr. Redmond.”

“Until tomorrow?” he called on a rush.

She didn’t reply, but her smile flashed like a shooting star over her shoulder just before she disappeared from view.

Chapter Eight

That night, Isolde leaned over the rose bud Isaiah had plucked for her—she'd tucked into a little glass vase on her writing desk—to open her bedroom window.

She leaned out and whispered. "Jacob, where are you? Please come home."

Her words hovered in the chilly dark, white and gossamer, like a handkerchief waved in distress. Then drifted away.

Anxiety was rubbing away her starry-eyed faith in him like mist on a windowpane. She resented that she could now clearly see how her parents and other seasoned adults in Pennyroyal Green probably saw him: The... Everseaness of informally courting her, then leaving without a proposal.

Did they think her a fool?

Was she a fool?

She slammed the window shut as if a host of pitying, judging people stood outside.

They didn't know Jacob like she did.

She was steadfast. Wasn't she? She was spirited, but not fickle. She might have enjoyed a moment or two of flirtation in her life, but until Jacob, not one man had ever captured her imagination.

Which was why something else that she could now clearly see frightened her.

She had fallen in love with Jacob quickly, passionately, moment by memorable moment.

But what she felt when she was with Isaiah somehow transcended time and place. She knew a strange sense of vastness and... rightness ...in his presence. As though she had not only always known him.

But had always loved him.

Beneath his reserve, something devastatingly tender and beautiful wanted to emerge.

But she was forced to admit to herself that the mysteries of him held allure, too—that streak of something unyielding and unforgiving she sensed, a tamped intensity that promised both passion and danger, the kind held by mysterious dark rooms and unfamiliar wild woods.

And this aspect of her own character was a revelation.

She felt as though Isaiah needed her.

And oh, it was seductive, indeed. To be needed by such a fine man.

Did Jacob need her?

If he did, would he have been able to leave?

How ironic that she had never needed him more than at this moment.

What cruel mutation of spirit made it possible to love—and want —two men?

She wanted their arms around her, their lips on her lips, their skin pressed against her skin—she could imagine it too vividly. The kind of physical longing she felt for Jacob—heated, consuming—was different from desperate and fierce way she now longed for Isaiah. But they were equally compelling.

Was this aberrant? Was she the only woman in the world who had ever felt this way?

Who could she possibly ask? Maria would certainly be sympathetic and fascinated, but no help at all. And she doubted there were enough smelling salts in the world to revive her mother if she ever brought the matter up.

And she didn't know Isaiah's intentions.

She could not think him a cad, and yet surely a man of his stature and fine looks must be spoiled for choice when it came to eligible young women?

She couldn't ask another soul currently in Pennyroyal Green about him without arousing suspicion.

The most logical person to ask, George, was away at Lincoln's Inn, though he would be home in time for the assembly.

She hadn't the nerve to ask Isaiah outright.

If only she could see Jacob. Perhaps longing for Isaiah would then drift away like her breath in the night air.

But was she really that fickle? She didn't think so.

And Isaiah was beginning to seem like the only real thing in the world.

She felt like she was perilously perched on the pointiest peak of the world's highest mountain. The view was heavenly, infinite, exhilarating.

It was also very lonely.

And one wrong move could send her tumbling endlessly down to her destruction.

Jacob made straight for his family's London townhouse when he disembarked the ship.

His parents were presently visiting his sister Pauline in Hampshire, or so he was told by the footman who'd answered the door with the gratifying, drop-jawed delight reserved for prodigal sons. Pauline was expecting another baby.

Jacob contemplated this happy news and daydreamed about his own future family of little girls that looked like Isolde and little boys that looked like him as he rifled through his father's clothing press for clean shirts and trousers and stockings, all of which proved a little too loose on him.

Then he hailed a hack and drove to his favorite barber near White's for a haircut and the kind of ruthlessly close shave he didn't dare attempt on unpredictable high seas, lest he sever his jugular vein.

He watched his dark, waving hair hit the floor in tufts.

Eventually the barber thrust a mirror before him.

He inspected the tanned, hard, handsome stranger who looked back at him, a little disoriented, not displeased.

Then Jacob took this newly revealed version of himself off to White's gentleman's

club.

Like Postlethwaite's and Smithfield Curtis in Pennyroyal Green, White's was a veritable gossip tributary, and would likely be the most efficient way to discover what he'd missed politically and socially over the last eight months.

The first person he saw was his old friend Wyatt Neeley from Cambridge, who was enjoying a plate of sausages and the morning newspaper. Neeley leaped up, agog, and fell upon Jacob in an exuberant greeting.

He hadn't seen Neeley since he'd last debated spiritedly with him and George Sylvaine in a coffee house near university.

"It's bloody good to be home." Jacob extricated himself from his friend's affectionate patting. "I'll tell you all about it after I have a quick look at the betting book. Tell the waiter to bring me what you're having, will you?"

The betting book was always a reliable source of entertainment, and often more eloquent than The Times when it came to capturing the flavor of current events. The pages were occasionally smudged by brandy or fingerprints.

He was amused and pleased to find himself in it almost immediately.

Lord Carlyle wagers F. McGinty ten pounds that Jacob Eversea was swallowed by a sea serpent

"Ha ha! Sea serpent! Wait until you hear about the pirates!" He called over his shoulder to Neeley.

C. Monkton wagers R. Sedgewick five guineas that Mr. Isaiah Redmond will wed Fanchette Tarbell before the end of the year

A hefty sum, but probably a safe wager, Jacob thought dryly. Redmond always did what was expected of him, and Jacob knew he'd been courting Miss Tarbell, because it's precisely what a Redmond would do. He turned the page.

Lord Barstoke wagers Lord Emhurst twenty pounds that Mr. Isaiah Redmond will wed Miss Isolde Sylvaine before year's end .

He stared at those words until they blurred.

He was not conscious of breathing.

He could not feel his limbs.

In recent weeks Jacob had heard the sound of a sword plunged killingly deep into another man's flesh. He'd been tormented by hallucinatory fever dreams filled with writhing evils.

Nothing compared to the horror of reading those words.

He hadn't realized this was his worst nightmare until he saw it emblazoned in White's Betting Book.

It was dated only a few days ago.

"Anything wrong, old man?" Neeley was at his shoulder. Which was when Jacob realized he likely hadn't moved for a conspicuous amount of time.

Jacob turned swiftly. Neeley took an alarmed step backward.

"Christ. Why are you looking at me like that, Eversea? I'm not a pirate."

Neeley knew nothing about Jacob's attachment to Isolde. And Jacob wasn't going to attempt to explain it now.

"My apologies." Jacob's voice sounded muffled to him in his own ears, as if he was speaking underwater. "It's just I'm certain George would be none too pleased to see his sister's name associated with such a fiction." He pointed to the page. "She hasn't even had a London season."

Neeley peered at the betting book.

"Ah, I think I know how this came about. Finchley—you know how he is, Redmond boot licker, never forgets the name of a pretty girl—was here with Barstoke a few days ago, claiming he saw this Miss Sylvaine with Redmond underneath those famous trees in Pennyroyal Green or some rot. Barstoke—you know how he always needs to best everyone—said he heard from a fellow in line at Smithfield Curtis tobacconists that a girl named Isolde has been seen walking about with Redmond. And Emhurst—he's Barstoke's cousin, not certain you've ever met him—was here and called both of them liars, just for the fun of it I suppose. Hence the bet."

Jacob stared at him. "Walking. About." He issued the words gingerly. As though they were lit grenades.

"Yes, you know that thing you do to get around on dry land? Ha!" Neeley thumped Jacob on the back.

"So, it's probably just the usual nonsense intended to muddy Redmond's smug waters.

Pity they had to drag George's sister into it.

But better Redmond leg-shackled than the rest of us, eh?

Regardless, on dit is he'll announce his engagement to someone at the Pennyroyal Green assembly this Saturday.

You won't want to miss that, eh, Eversea? ”

A hard, fast ride on two changes of hired horses got Jacob to Sussex before mid-day the day after he'd returned to English shores. He'd packed his saddlebags carefully and lightly with only the things he considered critical; the rest of his trunks remained at the Eversea London townhouse.

As he rode, he recalled George Berkeley, the philosopher who'd posited that nothing becomes real until it is perceived.

Over the past few months, he had learned to hold himself at an emotional remove from horrors until it was safe to feel.

And this is what he did as the gratifyingly swift horses ate up the miles between him and Isolde.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:25 am

In Pennyroyal Green, he stopped at home long enough for the servants to ecstatically fuss over him and to learn that his parents planned to return from visiting his sister in time for the assembly tomorrow.

Then he washed his sweaty, dusty body and changed into clean clothing, this time his own. All of it fit him too loosely, too.

He was distantly aware that he was perilously exhausted. Nerves, dread, coffee, and a fierce sense of purpose kept him artificially alert.

He glanced at himself in a hallway mirror as he left the house, and nearly recoiled from his reflection, just as Neeley had in White's. His eyes were burning like an avenging prophet's.

When he finally plunged into that fount of Pennyroyal Green gossip, Smithfield Curtis Tobacconists, the familiar pungent scent of the shop nearly made him sway on his feet.

The proprietors were standing together at the counter. Their heads lifted in unison at the jangle of the bell.

Then their face lit with delight.

“Good God, look who's walked in! Well, it's damned splendid to see you, young Mr. Eversea!” Smithfield thrust out his hand for Jacob to shake. “Had to pinch meself, I did. Ain't ye the spit of yer father now, fine figure of a man he is, too.”

“I’m proud that you think so, Smitty, but since when have you needed to flatter me to get me to buy my favorite blend?” Jacob shook their hands.

They all chuckled good-naturedly.

“Rumors have been colorful, sir, about your whereabouts. We was all a bit worried, we was, when your ship did not come in on schedule.” Mr. Curtis twinkled at him.

“Saw sea monsters implicated in my demise in the betting books at White’s,” Jacob told them.

They all laughed companionably again.

Jacob slid a few pence over to Smithfield, who pushed over Jacob’s packet of tobacco.

“My bet would have been on pirates, them bastards,” Curtis volunteered.

“Oh, there were pirates, all right,” Jacob told him. “But I’m an Eversea. We’re harder to kill than cockroaches.” He winked. “And it doesn’t ever pay to double-cross us.”

This assertion caused a poignant little lull.

“So, what are your plans now that you’re back in Sussex, Mr. Eversea?” Mr. Smithfield asked pleasantly.

Jacob paused. “I thought I would call on the Sylvaine family today.”

He did not imagine the slightly too-long pause that followed. Or how the features of the men opposite him suddenly tensed.

“Maybe you’ll want to stop by the churchyard on your way,” Mr. Curtis suggested. “You might see one of them.”

The swat Smithfield gave Curtis’s elbow was very subtle. Just a tap with the backs of his fingers.

But Jacob noticed.

The three men regarded each other for another few seconds of fraught silence.

Curtis cleared his throat. “The town committee has been cleaning up the churchyard, and it looks right nice. Thought you might like to see it. That’s all.”

“Thank you,” Jacob said evenly. “I think I will stop by to have a look. Good day to you, gentleman.”

For the week leading up to the assembly, the squeak of the churchyard gate had heralded Isaiah’s arrival at half past two.

This arrangement was tacit. In the hour they were alone in the churchyard, Isaiah and Isolde cleaned only one or two stone markers.

But their conversation skipped like a stone over a brook from topic to topic, sometimes sinking unexpectedly deeply for a time, often circling back effortlessly to a previously mentioned detail.

They traveled back over Isaiah’s secret path when it was time to leave. Every day they walked a little more slowly; every day they stopped, for an all too brief time, to count the new blooms on the wayward roses. As of today, there were five.

At the little wooden footbridge, Isaiah learned that Isolde’s middle name was Emily.

He told her that he had two middle names, Joseph and Arthur, like the famous king.

What a coincidence, she exclaimed, as they approached the path to the rose garden. She and her sister sometimes performed scenes from Arthurian tales or Shakespeare plays on the steps of their folly.

When he told her that his favorite line from Shakespeare was “I would not wish any companion in the world but you,” he was unutterably grateful he’d read *The Tempest*. Because he felt like a magician when her cheeks flushed and her eyes went soft and dazzled.

But when she went quiet he felt raw and off-balance yet again. He didn’t recognize the ardent, unguarded person he was with her. But he felt safe to risk feeling foolish for the first time in his life.

“*The Tempest* is one of my favorites of his plays, but lately I find the idea of storms at sea distressing,” she confided, finally, hesitantly.

And thusly Jacob Eversea returned to the conversation, if Isaiah was not mistaken.

With him came the familiar conflicting surge of emotions: fury at Eversea for being the cause of Isolde’s suffering. A pang at the sweetness of her loyalty to Jacob.

Heart-twisting jealousy.

A certainty that he, Isaiah, could care for her better.

Which mattered not, because this interlude would end with Fanchette’s arrival, which could very well be in a few hours.

The paradox was this: In these moments with Isolde, he understood he was happy.

But surely happiness in general was illicit, meant to be ephemeral?

Perhaps happiness was inebriation, if daily life was sobriety?

Because why else would people he greatly esteemed be gravely hurt or disappointed, if not biblically wrathful (his father), if they ever learned the source of his happiness was the daughter of a mere former schoolmaster?

And yet he doubted feckless Eversea saw it that way.

His nights were a torment of stunned joy, heated fantasizing, guilt and dread. He slept little. He knew he ought to tell Isolde about Fanchette, but the words lodged in his throat. A selfish desire to leave these moments with her untainted by reality overcame his honor and good sense.

By the day of the picnic and assembly, Isaiah was absorbed and edgy.

Isolde had told him the previous day that she would be arriving earlier than usual at the churchyard, in order to finish her work and get to the picnic at the Redmond's house on time.

It was the last day she would be cleaning headstones.

They both knew he would be there, too.

They didn't see Reverend Holroyd, or anyone else for that matter, when they both arrived at the churchyard at eleven o'clock that morning. And surely this was serendipity?

A peculiar breathless tension beset both of them. Neither spoke as they cleared a marker, the final one, for a Thomas Miles Pryne who had departed the earthly plane

in 1683.

Finally, Isolde cleared her throat. “I’m looking forward to the picnic today. I like your sister. She's very nice.”

“Is she?” he replied absently.

He looked up to find Isolde’s eyes dancing with laughter. In honor of the picnic, she was wearing a dress in Indian cotton printed in little blue flowers, the precise shade of her eyes. Over this was her apron.

“Don't you think she’s nice, Mr. Redmond?”

“Mmm. One generally uses more specific words for our relations, don't we? Do you go about thinking of your brother as 'nice'?”

“Ah, I see what you mean. I suppose not. He's beastly and heroic in the right proportions. Tolerable company if one is desperate.”

All of those words thrummed with affection.

The only trouble Isaiah had with George Sylvaine was that he was Jacob Eversea’s bosom friend.

“I wonder if my sister would similarly describe me. Neither one of us was allowed to be beastly for very long, however tempted we were. Beastliness often involves a rumpus of some sort, and my father could not ever tolerate that.”

“It toughens you up, having a beastly sibling,” she remarked complacently. “Even a pleasantly beastly one. And I imagine a father who won't tolerate a rumpus toughens one up, too.”

He went still. She'd said it so lightly that it somewhat defanged one of the central truths of his existence: He'd indeed required toughening in order not to incur the scorn of his father. In order to bear the scorn.

Perhaps therein lay its blessing? Its purpose?

"I do worry about Diana sometimes." He hadn't meant to say that aloud.

But Isolde's eyes were sympathetic. "What do you worry about?"

He hesitated. "She is clever and...she thinks about everything a good deal. And women who think too much often suffer for it, I fear."

"You're likely right. But perhaps everyone who thinks too much suffers."

He gave a short, rueful laugh. "Yes. Forgive me. It's just that I'm all too aware that..."

"Men dictate the paths that women are allowed to tread. Men are free to do what they please, for the most part. And women simply are not."

This emerged a little heatedly.

An issue close to the bone for her, of a certainty. He thought about Jacob Eversea merrily sailing on a ship somewhere. Was Isolde Sylvaine's regard such a superfluous blessing in Eversea's life that he'd simply taken it, and her, for granted?

"Not without consequence," he agreed shortly. "And Miss Sylvaine, not all men are free to do what they please. And even when they are, some consider everyone else before they do it."

It was merely truth, another one that might hurt her or diminish Eversea in her eyes.
And to what end?

What did he hope to gain? Or to win?

The sudden silence hummed with tense undercurrents.

“It’s very good of you to be concerned about your sister, Mr. Redmond,” she finally said quietly.

“I’m not good.” He said it gruffly. “But I am loyal. I’m not certain it’s the same.”

Isolde studied him, puzzled, sympathetic, searching, her dark brows drawn together.

“I often wonder if the way other people see us is more charitable than the way we see ourselves. It’s not a weakness to care. It’s a vulnerability, perhaps, not a weakness. You needn’t allow it to be, anyway.”

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:26 am

She said this gently. But it was also such a stubborn, definitive, astute assertion that it jarred him. In part because he was unaccustomed to being countermanded by a woman. He both did and did not like it.

She'd said it as though she saw in him qualities that made him worthy of being gazed upon by her lovely eyes. Qualities he had perhaps dismissed as of no worth.

It made him want to be the person she thought he was.

Perhaps he already was that person?

What if he was only this person with her? A strange panic clawed at him.

His throat felt tight. "You are a good person," he said quietly and firmly. As if correcting a fine point.

Her cheeks pinkened. "You ought to know. You were the top boy at university, after all."

This time his laugh was pained. As if his spirit had to stretch to contain the sheer magnitude of all he felt about her.

"I have worries, too, Mr. Redmond, and some are frivolous and admittedly selfish. I am not at all perfect and I do not always feel like a good person, either."

"If I could, I would take all your worries away."

He'd said it without thinking, and too fervently.

Which shocked both of them.

Because that little catch in her throat was the sound of him taking her breath away.

Her eyes had gone stunned and starry. Her hand flew to her heart.

She looked to him like precious softness itself and it seemed absurd not to gather her into his body to protect her, to be as close to her as possible. Suddenly, at the mercy of his reflexes, he was moving toward her to do exactly that, and she was moving to meet him.

“Isaiah!”

He froze, jolted.

Then spun about.

His sister stood in the doorway of the town hall, beckoning him with swoops of her hand.

What the devil ? Isaiah shaded his eyes. The curricule the Redmonds used for short drives in good weather waited outside the town hall, a pair of matched grays in harness.

Why on earth had Diana driven into town when the picnic was due to begin in less than an hour?

“Isaiah, will you come and help me adjust the bunting?” she called.

He closed his eyes and swore softly. “If you’ll forgive me, Miss Sylvaine.”

He pivoted, and went.

Damned if Isaiah could see anything wrong with the bunting, but he gamely climbed the ladder beneath the swag at which his sister pointed. They were alone in the town hall. It was redolent of newness: paint and plaster and fresh-cut wood. The building ought to last for generations.

“Why on earth are you here, Diana? Shouldn’t you be home preparing for the picnic?”

“Isaiah...what are you doing?”

“I thought I was meant to adjust the bunting,” he said dryly.

“I meant, what are you doing with Miss Isolde Sylvaine?”

His lungs seized.

He slowly turned to look at his sister.

Her expression wasn't wholly judgmental. It was also worried, and soft, and a little frightened.

That's when he knew that confusion and desperation were likely written all over his face.

Which made him furious, which was how he felt any time he felt exposed.

He turned abruptly away again. How and why did she suspect anything?

Did anyone else suspect anything?

He loathed worrying his sister.

How he wished to God he dared confide in her.

The only person to whom he'd ever confided his real worries was Isolde.

“She's very amiable, Isaiah, isn't she?” Diana went on brightly, in a rush. “Miss Isolde Sylvaine. Her manners and her sister's manners are a bit, ah...lively. But she's a good girl and a good person.” She said all of this gently, but firmly.

They both knew the unspoken end of the that sentence was: ... and that's all she is.

She hadn't money, a title, or a particularly distinguished family name. She would elevate no one's stature or fortunes. No Redmond would even consider such a match.

And if he was a gentleman—if he was a genuinely decent man—he would not trifle with Miss Sylvaine. That was Diana's implication.

Especially since his own engagement was presumed imminent, and there would be no recovering from the social disaster of jilting the Chancellor of the Exchequer's daughter.

Barring road accidents or highwaymen, Fanchette would likely arrive this afternoon.

He knew his sister was by way of giving him a verbal shake, as though he'd inadvertently taken opium and needed sobering.

How on earth had she noticed? Had he been obvious, after all?

Or was it merely a passing suspicion? His thoughts roiled.

He was forcefully reminded that everything he did reflected on her, and their family. Everything he did influenced her opportunities in the world.

And she was already so uncertain of them. His stomach felt leaden.

“I know,” he said quietly. “I know she is a good person.”

He couldn’t meet his sister’s eyes.

“ I’m very much looking forward to seeing Miss Tarbell,” Diana added more cheerfully, still firmly. “I’m sure she’ll be the most beautiful girl at the Assembly and all of our friends here in Pennyroyal Green will be quite in awe of her.”

After a moment Isaiah said, quietly, “No doubt.”

Isolde released a long, shuddering breath as the door of the hall closed behind Isaiah and his sister. She feared her heart might explode like a firework.

If she was not mistaken, whatever was happening between her and Mr. Redmond had nearly just ignited into something from which there would be no return.

How on earth had it come to this point? The momentum seemed dizzying yet inevitable, as though the two of them were at the mercy of a natural law. There was no turning around mid-air when one decides to take a flying leap, after all.

She was uncertain what to do now. She’d earlier agreed with Maria that she would meet her at the foot of the Redmond’s drive just before noon, since they would be approaching from opposite ends of town. It was a short enough walk for both of them.

Should she wait for Mr. Redmond and Miss Redmond to emerge from the church?

But the curriele was only a two-passenger carriage.

And she could not, of course, walk alone with Isaiah.

The town hall door suddenly swung open. Isolde watched Isaiah and his sister board the curriele. Isaiah glanced swiftly, once, in her direction, then ducked his head as he took the reins and snapped them over the backs of the gray horses.

The swift little carriage drove away.

Isolde stared after them, stunned. Perhaps there was an emergency involving the picnic or something else at their home?

But it stung like a shunning.

An odd foreboding settled over her. She shrugged, as if to shake it off.

With hands suddenly clumsy with nerves, she moved to the side of the churchyard opposite the vicarage and fumbled with the latch on the gate.

It finally gave.

She closed the gate behind her. When she turned, she jerked and took a step backward, shocked, her heart jolting.

A man was standing near the fence.

He was half obscured by the drooping willow boughs, and so still she could have easily missed him if she hadn't paused.

Her senses knew first. Spangles rained from her scalp over her arms and her eyes blurred in shock.

Then her very being clanged with an almost violent joy, like the bell in the church tower.

“Jacob?” It was more of an exhale than a word.

But the man didn’t reply.

Perhaps she was hallucinating him?

Finally, he said, “You look well, Isolde.”

A peculiar unease crept into her joy. It was, indeed, his beloved, familiar voice. But his tone was flat and his expression unreadable. So very unlike him. Never had he regarded her in any neutral way.

His eyes seemed more brilliant in his sun-gold face, which was all elegant planes and angles now. Not a hint of boyish softness remained. His shoulders seemed broader. He was lean. Too lean.

He was Jacob same, yet so different. Thrillingly so.

Frighteningly so.

She suddenly felt very shy and uncertain.

Perhaps he felt shy, too?

The notion of a shy Jacob Eversea seemed more outlandish than a hallucinated one.

She took a tentative step closer. “But when did...”

The rest of her sentence evaporated in the face of his mercilessly inscrutable expression.

“I arrived in Pennyroyal Green a few hours ago and stopped in at Smithfield Curtis. Whereupon Mr. Curtis suggested I might want to visit the churchyard this morning to admire the preparation for the town hall celebration.”

The back of her neck prickled with portent. Something was terribly, terribly wrong.

“How...how long have you been back in England?”

“Yesterday. I visited White’s to catch up on the news. Had a look at their betting book, in fact.”

Bewilderingly, his delivery was almost accusatory.

Suddenly, all at once, his familiar spirit seemed to reanimate his cold stillness. He huffed out an impatient breath. “Isolde...I heard you.”

A terrible tension, some suppressed emotion she couldn’t identify, thrummed in his words.

“I beg your pardon, Jacob?”

He yanked off his hat and pushed a hand through his hair. “I...I heard your voice. Yours and...” It was as though the next word was so covered in brambles and excrement he could hardly get it out. “...Redmond’s.”

Realization crawled over her skin on icy, spidery legs.

He'd been watching her and Isaiah for some time.

Someone must have told him she would be here.

With Isaiah.

And Smithfield Curtis was one of the main gossip hubs for Pennyroyal Green.

Clink, clink, clink . A cascade of far-too-late realizations crashed like dominos in her mind. Her heart began rabbit-kicking with dread.

"Mr. Redmond is helping with tidying up the churchyard in preparation for the festivities," she said stiffly. But her mouth had gone dry. "As was I."

The flash of cynicism in Jacob's eyes frightened her. "You were laughing with him, Isolde."

"I often laugh. You know that I do. With everyone." She'd tried for insouciance, but the words sounded gruesomely brittle in her own ears. They sounded like guilty guilty guilty.

A horrible silence ensued.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:26 am

“Isolde.” Jacob said her name quietly, gravely. Warily. The way one might address someone who had just revealed symptoms of madness. As if he was going to give her one last chance to be honest. “No, you don’t. Not like that, you don’t. Not with just anyone. Please don’t try to tell me that.”

He was suffering, and she had done this to him.

Hot shame scorched her cheeks.

But as she finally found her footing in this exchange, her temper began to simmer.

“How long were you standing here without saying a word, Jacob? How long were you spying on me?”

His head went back a little, as if she’d confirmed something.

Determinedly, visibly, he gathered his composure with a shift of his shoulders, a long pull of air.

Both his pain and his dignity horrified her. It called to mind a judge who already tried and sentenced her. He was the very last person in the world she would ever want to hurt and she could not bear it.

“I heard you before I saw you...and I was so bloody grateful to hear your voice, I stood and listened. I couldn’t quite make out all the words.

I considered calling out to you. But when I saw with whom you were speaking...

I suppose I couldn't believe my eyes. I could not decide whether I ought to just leave.

Because I began to feel as though I was.

..” His pause felt elegiac. Then resignedly, hoarsely, he said, “...intruding upon something very intimate.”

Her stomach roiled.

“But how did you...” her voice had gone arid.

“My impression, Isolde, is that anyone in town could have told me where you were.” The bitter irony in his voice flayed her.

And with that, brutal clarity descended. If even one person in the town knew she'd been in the churchyard or strolling with Isaiah, it was entirely possible everyone in the town knew. Such was the gossip stream in Pennyroyal Green.

She recalled the vicar popping out his head from the church when they were laughing, Mrs. Sneath's bulging eyes, the clatter of cart wheels on the road.

God only knew how many villagers had passed the churchyard and seen them.

It might have been a servant in a kitchen garden or looking out a window, who told another servant...

Isaiah and Isolde had been so wholly absorbed in each other that none of the possible ramifications of this had even penetrated.

She was as aghast as if she was realizing all of this about a stranger, not herself: How could this person be so shockingly careless? With her reputation.

With Jacob's pride.

With Jacob's heart.

She knew her stunned silence incriminated her.

"Is this...is this thing with Redmond my punishment for leaving?" Jacob sounded bewildered. "Do you hate me so much?"

She reared back, astounded. "What on earth ? How can you think that of me?"

"If I hadn't said anything about it now, if you hadn't seen me, would you even have told me about this later, when I saw you?" he pressed, relentlessly.

"I wouldn't bother to tell you because I wouldn't want to hurt you or upset you over nothing ."And yet her too-strident defense might as well have been a confession.

Not only that, she'd just betrayed both men with this lie.

She grew more appalling in her own eyes by the second. And likely in Jacob's, too.

But Jacob's injured self-righteousness had momentum. "If, as you say, you wouldn't want to upset me, it implies you know full well how I feel about him. And yet here you are. Here you've been . With him. Isn't that true?"

With that, her simmering temper combusted.

"I do not recall you ever specifically requesting that I never speak to Isaiah Redmond. If you had, I might have done it anyway. Because you aren't my lord and master, Jacob Eversea, are you? You're not my husband. We're not engaged. You've no rights over me at all."

He flinched. God help her, she savored the landed blow.

Another ghastly silence ensued. Behind them, Jacob's mare whickered softly. Her reins were looped about the tree branch.

She took a breath. "Jacob." She turned his name into a soft plea. Her voice was shaking. "Please. Please . Let's just walk together. You must be exhausted. You must know how I've missed you. Every moment of every day."

"Yes," he said bitterly. "Clearly you've been profoundly grieving my absence."

She jerked as though he'd slapped her. "I'm not the one who left!"

Her anguish echoed in the churchyard.

Too late she fully realized how much his absence had truly cost her.

His breath left him in an audible rush and he staggered back a step.

She'd just thrown into his face something she'd sworn to herself she'd never do.

She felt gutted with remorse and...

... free .

She'd needed to say it aloud. He'd needed to hear it.

Spiky misery circulated in her gut. Terror parched her mouth. They were careening toward something terrible and momentous, and she could not seem to stop it.

Jacob was white with fury. His eyes were like bruises.

“Jacob...” her voice was parched with fear. “Why were you gone so?—”

“Because I almost died,” he said flatly.

She froze in horror.

And in that moment shocking epiphany set in: He had just delivered that hideous news as remorselessly as any fencer landing a death blow, even though he surely knew how it would devastate her.

He’d wanted that badly to hurt her.

Or to win.

He did love to win.

Just like Isaiah Redmond.

She had never fully realized how dangerous this quality could be in another person.

All of these realizations were both disorienting and stark.

There were a lot of things she might have said then, tender things, beseeching things, and all would have been true: I love you so, Jacob . You were my last thought at night, every night, the first in the morning, and most of the thoughts in between.

And there were the things she didn’t dare ask now: Did you think of me at all while you were gone? Would my name have been your very last word? My face the last image you saw before you drew your last breath? Do you love me, or is your pride merely wounded?

Instead, she straightened to her full height, and said slowly and clearly, “Well. I hope your journey was worth it.”

His eyes flared in shock.

For a long moment they stood locked in silent, seething enmity.

At last, he gave a short, bitter laugh. “If Redmond is what you want, I won't stand in your way, Isolde.”

He spun on his heel, stalked over to his horse, and threw himself up into the saddle.

In an eye-blink, nothing remained of his presence but the echo of hoofbeats.

Chapter Nine

Jacob was distantly aware he was in the woods surrounding Eversea House when he at last pulled his mare to a halt.

He slid from the saddle, staggered, then dropped to his knees and retched as if he'd been poisoned.

He swiped his hand across the back of his mouth, then sank down onto the long grass and rolled over on his back.

His eyes burned from the breakneck gallop into the wind. For a blessed moment he was captive to physical sensation only: his breath moving in and out in ragged gusts. The blood ringing in his ears. His heart like a fist thrown against his ribcage over and over and over.

The smell of grass and earth after weeks at sea was like oxygen and he gulped it desperately in.

Finally, he wrapped his arms around his body, and for a long, long time, he remained as still as a dignitary lying in state while inside him, ugly, jagged emotions collided like flotsam on a boiling sea.

And to think he'd believed he'd come home a man.

He was neither man nor boy. He was something worse: he was a knave.

So what if he had fought pirates and survived illness and witnessed death? It seemed he had learned nothing of importance. It was all for naught if it meant losing Isolde.

Pure hate surged and bubbled up from the morass of things he felt. Was it for Redmond? Certainly.

For Isolde?

No. Never, never, never.

Mostly he hated himself . For the absurd hubris of leaving such a woman behind for any amount of time. What the bloody hell had he been thinking?

And yet: Had he really asked too much of her? Was waiting for someone you love ever too much?

Did she simply fall out of love with him, and Redmond was there to swoop in?

A fresh wave of sick horror coursed through him at this notion.

If this were true, why then would her face go incandescent with joy when she'd seen him standing by the willow?

And she'd recoiled as if he'd slapped her when he'd told her he nearly died.

And as he sifted ruthlessly through the murk of his emotions, he encountered the worst of his suspicions.

In his heart of hearts, he was certain whatever lay between Isolde and Isaiah was not frivolous.

It was real feeling.

This realization sank through him like a long, slow machete slice.

If he could have blamed Redmond for trifling with her in order to best him, maybe he could have borne it.

He was glad now that he hadn't heard the content of the conversation.

Because he'd seen how their bodies canted toward each other when they spoke.

He'd witnessed Isaiah Redmond's softly enthralled expression.

He'd seemed so at peace in his skin, so illuminated and animated by some spirit he'd never publicly shown, it had been like looking at a different man entirely.

A man Jacob might have actually liked.

And this made it so much worse.

Jacob was a betting man only when he was fairly certain of a win.

And he would wager Redmond was in love with Isolde.

The realization made his gorge rise again.

Was she in love with Redmond? Had she merely been lying to Jacob to placate him?

To what end?

Jacob pressed his palms against his eyes and moaned.

He stayed like that until the sweat chilled on his body and something tickled his cheek.

His sticky eyelids fluttered open. Two huge brown eyes were staring into his.

He lifted a hand to touch the soft nose of his concerned mare. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "It's all right. It's all right."

It wasn't.

Ironically, the one resource he could call upon he hadn't learned in the West Indies or at Cambridge. He'd been born with it: courage.

He would need it tonight.

Because he would be going to the assembly to see if he could discover the truth.

On a clear day, from a certain room at the very top of the Redmond house, one could see a shining sliver of ocean, glints of the Ouse as it meandered through the undulating green of the Sussex Hills, and here and there, portions of the roads that wound through town.

And if Isaiah angled his head just so, he could also see the roof of Miss Marietta Endicott's Academy.

He'd driven the curricule dutifully home without saying good-bye to Isolde, but his neck still felt stiff from the effort not to turn around to look at her.

It had felt churlish to simply abandon her without a word.

Inwardly, resentment, even anger, still simmered at the way his sister had essentially

collected him.

He hadn't said a word to Diana on their journey home. All the questions he wanted to ask her—how did you know? What are your suspicions?—would simply have incriminated him.

What are you doing, Isaiah? He still didn't know.

He'd gone straight up to this room because afforded him a God-like view over the tops of the trees flanking the rose garden, and the road alongside them.

Any minute he might catch a glimpse of the carriage carrying Fanchette and her parents.

He could feel his pulse in his throat.

A few moments ago, he'd seen nearly a dozen women dressed in spring frocks promenading alongside each other toward the rose garden, trailed by footmen bearing hampers.

His sister was at the head of the parade, gesticulating and chatting the way she did when she was excited or happy about something.

Despite their earlier conversation, he was pleased she was having a nice time.

Miss Maria Sylvaine was strolling—not galloping—alongside Lady Fennimore's daughter. But both were craning their heads as though searching for someone. Then she stopped and turned back toward the house, wringing her hands.

Why wasn't Isolde with them? His heart was beating sickeningly now.

Where was she? Was she coming?

Then a flash of white near the road made his breath snag. Was it her?

It was! He recognized the way she moved the way he'd recognize a bird by the way it flew. Isolde had just slipped through the trees edging the road, heading for the path he'd shown her into the rose garden.

He pressed his fingertips to the windowpane.

Why on earth was she alone? And late?

He lost her for a moment to the shadows thrown by the trees; he found her again her by the gleam of her bonnet ribbons.

At least she emerged fully in the light, on the path at the far end of the garden.

Suddenly she stopped abruptly and stood frozen.

And then dropped her face into her hands.

She remained that way, as still as one of the statues in the garden.

His heart lurched. Something was terribly wrong.

His muscles tensed in preparation to bolt to her.

“Pretty girl.”

He jerked violently.

Christ. He hadn't even heard his father's approach.

“Then again, everyone is pretty at that age,” his father continued jovially. “Bloody hell, son, I was pretty at that age. Look at the trees out there, Isaiah.”

Isaiah remained rigid, staring at his father in shock.

“Look ,” his father commanded sharply.

Isaiah managed to dutifully turn his head toward the window.

Isolde had disappeared from view.

He was relieved. As if both he and she were safer if she was no longer visible to her father.

God help him, what expression had he been wearing when he was watching her?

Had his father seen it?

How long had his father been watching him?

Isaiah nearly flinched when his father's hand fell weightily on his shoulder.

“All those leaves on the trees. So pretty.

And new. And the same . Indistinguishable from each other in their prettiness.

Like most young girls. And most young girls, if they're lucky, will age into comfortable, rather squashy, motherly women, all nearly indistinguishable from each other.

We love those kinds of women! They are the bedrock—nay, the featherbeds!

—of England! They help make our greatness possible.

But that kind of 'pretty' is ephemeral and common, Isaiah.”

Common. The word thrummed with pitying scorn.

He gave Isaiah's shoulder a squeeze, then dropped his voice into the confiding, impassioned hush of a man imparting state secrets.

“Now....the value of real beauty is power.

A beautiful wife—a wealthy, exquisitely well-bred, coveted woman, that once-in-a-generation type, the kind your mother was—confers more power to an already powerful man.

There is no circumstance a man can't conquer with a woman like that at his side.

And the envy and admiration of other men—envy and admiration are yet more tools, don't you see, that a clever man can use in business—to persuade, coerce, to beguile.

Imagine how you'll look walking into any ballroom with a woman like that by your side. All the eyes...on you. Wanting to be you.”

It was quite a speech, as his father's speeches went. Isaiah wasn't unaffected.

For the first time, he wondered why his father so badly needed him to believe it.

He'd always assumed he was being taught about life by a master. And why would he, for instance, question what his fencing master, or chess teacher, taught him? Why

should he feel anything but gratitude?

“Was?” He said finally.

His father blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“You said the kind mother 'was',” he repeated evenly.

He knew a dark, small satisfaction when his father hesitated a heartbeat, clearly nonplussed.

“Yes. Still is, of course,” he replied smoothly.

“I thought beauty was in the eye of beholder, and so forth.” Isaiah furrowed his brow.

His father's jovial expression devolved to cold incredulity, then to disdain, then to slackly dismissive. As if he'd always known, deep down, that Isaiah was bound to disappoint him.

Isaiah braced against a reflexive clutch of panic. He knew it for the tactic it was, but God help him, it found its mark every time. If nothing else, he had learned from his father how effectively someone's love and admiration could be wielded as a weapon against them.

“Surely you're not implying that you find Miss Fanchette Tarbell something other than beautiful, Isaiah.”

Unease uncoiled like a snake in Isaiah's gut.

Had anyone said something to his father about Isolde Sylvaine?

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:26 am

Surely not his sister?

No. He found that difficult to believe.

His father simply had an uncanny talent for sensing weaknesses, and for any changes in circumstances that might affect him. He was fishing. Surely that was all it was.

“Of course not.” Isaiah smiled slightly. “She's not only extraordinarily lovely, she's an exceptionally fine person. I suppose I am merely in a... philosophical mood.”

“I see. Did I send you to school to become a philosopher?”

“I thought I was sent to school to be sequestered from the tawdry influence of the Pennyroyal Green proletariat.”

“Ha!” His father lit with delight. “Proletariat! Do use that word in company, Isaiah. You'd be amazed how many men of business are frightened of words over three syllables!

Makes 'em squirm. Although it's true that it doesn't pay to mingle overmuch with the Pennyroyal Green proletariat.

They're fine people on the whole and it's of course the finest place in all of England to live outside of London, and it's a joy to have merry girls about when they're young.

I suppose anyone could take notions, even you, in spring.

You've always been such a good son, and I know you'll continue to make me proud.”

He punctuated the last three words with one vigorous back pat each.

Even you. As though he was, of course, exceptional when compared to everyone else who wasn't a Redmond.

It was the strangest sensation. How he'd strived his whole life for his father to view him as exceptional. How he'd always craved his words of approval. He could always count on them to warm him like brandy.

But this time his entire gut had gone cold.

“I can think of no greater honor than to make you proud,” Isaiah told him after a moment.

His father turned to leave, smiling with the satisfaction of hearing precisely what he expected to hear.

Isolde had teetered blindly in place after Jacob thundered off, like a jousting knight who'd sustained a near-killing blow. Her being felt mortally scalded.

Moments later she staggered forward. When she found her footing, she strode faster and faster, as if by doing so she could outpace the feeling she was about to fly into pieces.

She broke into a run, skirts gripped in her hands, heedless of who might see, realizing she was reflexively following Isaiah's secret path.

She stopped abruptly after she plunged through the trees.

What was she doing ? What was she thinking ?

It seemed ridiculous to go to a picnic, of all things, after such an emotional assault. Moreover, she could hardly burst out of the woods into the Redmond rose garden. This path was Isaiah's secret. She would not betray it.

But Maria would worry if she didn't appear at the Redmond house.

And the other ladies would speculate about her whereabouts.

Perhaps they'd talk about her and Isaiah. If Jacob had been in London for all of one day and he'd heard rumors in Smithfield Curtis, in all likelihood all the other ladies present would have heard them, too.

This sent a fresh wash of panic through her.

So she remained frozen, secluded with the wayward roses. For the first time in her life, nowhere in the world seemed safe.

She took a few more indecisive steps into the garden.

And that's when her furious propulsion gave out and her face dropped into her hands.

She couldn't face it. She could go no further.

Presently, the thud of footsteps running toward her made her fling her hands up in front of her in reflexive defense, as if the goal of this day was to deliver one terrible shock after another.

"Isolde."

Her heart skittered in her chest.

What a balm it was to hear Isaiah use her first name, in a voice aching with urgency and warmth. She dropped her arms and turned toward him.

“Isolde.” he confidently, tenderly claimed the intimacy of her name when he saw her expression. “I saw you from an upstairs window...and I... your face...” He took a breath, visibly gathering his composure. “What’s wrong? You're very upset,” he said firmly.

He sounded upset.

“I’m not,” she lied, reflexively.

He snorted.

Something about his disdain for the lie almost made her smile.

“It's nothing...Isaiah. Honestly. I’m sorry to distress you. Please do not worry.”

“Isolde.”

He’d said this so fiercely her eyes widened.

He drew in a breath. “I cannot seem to help it. I...I cannot bear to think you’re unhappy.”

His voice cracked. It sounded like a plea. As if she alone could explain to him why he felt this way.

She knew why.

And it took her breath away.

It was too much. Why was this happening ?

She was just a country girl, not a heroine in A Venetian Romance . Everything was too beautiful and too overwhelming and too confusing and too excruciating.

She was embarrassed when tears finally flooded her eyes and spilled.

“Sweetheart,” he said hoarsely. He reached for her as if he was snatching her back from the edge of a crumbling cliff and pulled her almost roughly against his body.

When his arms folded about her, she settled in; he was warm, hard, solid, and yes, yes ; this was where she wanted to be. She curled her fingers into his waistcoat.

For a moment they merely clung to each other as though they were each other’s only refuge in the world.

And when she tipped her head back it was to discover his head was lowering.

When their lips brushed, sparks all but flew from their bodies.

Lust, unleashed, proved an anarchic force: white-hot and impatient and needful.

Isolde’s limbs trembled with the effort to contain it.

Their kiss deepened, became more searching, more expert, more arousing as they crushed their bodies ever closer.

His mouth was hot and his tongue velvety and clever as it danced with hers.

A bolt of pleasure cleaved her when she felt the jut of his arousal against the crook of her legs, and when she sighed and shifted her hips deliberately against it, Isaiah groaned and slid a hand down to her arse to press her closer still.

This was both too much and not nearly enough, oh, not nearly, and this terrified her.

It was wrong, because he wasn't Jacob, and right, because he wasn't Jacob.

And it was wrong because nothing had ever felt right.

With an extraordinary effort of will, she abruptly turned her head and ended the kiss.

He loosened his arms at once. But she remained in the circle of them. With wonder, she pressed her cheek against the thud of his heart and savored the sway of his breathing.

God help them both.

She had not awakened today expecting cataclysm. There had been no omens or portents.

But she understood too clearly that a girl could forget everything in the arms of a man.

Could know surcease and pleasure.

Right now, she wanted to forget everything. It seemed a bloody pity she could not kiss him until the end of time. Could not lie naked with him, right here in the rose garden.

"Oh God. Dear God." His voice was hoarse. "Isolde, forgive me. I'm so sorry. I

felt—it just—it seemed the only thing to do. I didn't know what else to do. I could not seem to help it.”

“Please don't be sorry,” she whispered. “It was wonderful.”

She looked up at him and his eyes were fierce. He touched her face gently.

How odd to be cleaved precisely into two parts:

One part terrible, terrible grief.

One part radiant, nearly intolerable joy.

Surely Isaiah Redmond of all people was not the kind of man who would ravish a girl if he hadn't intentions to marry her?

“ Isssaaaiiahh !”

Isolde staggered when Isiah all but leaped back from her as if burned.

It was his sister Diana's voice, calling from a distance yet again.

“Isolde,” he said hoarsely. “I swear I never meant to... I do not deserve you or your forgiveness. I hope one day you will understand.”

He walked backward three strides, his eyes burning into her as if seeing her for the last time.

Then to her amazement, he spun about and bolted into the woods.

In seconds he had vanished from view.

Leaving her standing alone, head spinning as if she was drunk.

She touched her lips. They felt stung.

“ISAAAA —Oh! Miss Sylvaine.”

Miss Redmond stopped abruptly, at a distance, as if Isolde were a volcano, or something equally unpredictable and possibly perilous.

If it had been any other two people—if this had been a pantomime, for instance—it might have been funny. Imagine stumbling across a lone woman on the fringe of their property, face scarlet from passionate exertion. Eyes kiss-hazed.

The two young women stared at each. Isolde could still feel the heat of Isaiah’s body on the front of her dress. She wondered if her hair was mussed.

Miss Redmond’s expression at once went carefully bland.

“I thought I heard my brother’s voice. I must have been mistaken.” She said this with slow, masterful neutrality.

Isolde didn’t reply, because she couldn’t yet speak.

At last, she cleared her throat. “I’m so sorry I’m late for the picnic.” Her voice was shockingly hoarse. Kiss scorched.

Neither one of them mentioned that she seemed to have taken an unorthodox route to the rose garden.

“Well. I’m glad you were able to come. We were worried about you.”

“There was just a bit of a mix-up in plans,” Isolde managed. Her voice still sounded creaky.

Miss Redmond nodded carefully. “I was just looking for my brother because I wanted to make sure he knew that Miss Fanchette Tarbell arrived.”

That name rang with portent.

This day became stranger and stranger. Imagine, a person who had featured so flatteringly in the London gossip sheets, here at the Redmond’s.

“Is Miss Tarbell a friend of your family?”

Miss Redmond hesitated. “In a manner of speaking,” she finally replied gently. “Why don’t you come and meet her?”

Chapter Ten

I solde contemplated claiming a stomach upset and staying home from the assembly. This was only a fib insofar as literally every single part of her was upset in some way, not just her stomach.

In the end, pride, nerve, and God help her, the fact that she looked wonderful in her pink dress, won out. If Jacob attended, at least she would look pretty while he stood there, hating her.

And Isaiah would see that she wore the pink rose pinned at her waist.

She was without her celandine for the first time since Jacob gave it to her. She'd left it in the drawer of her writing desk.

The Sylvaines arrived at half past seven to find the town hall already brimming with people.

Isolde dazedly beheld the flowers, bunting, and the charming little lanterns in which candles glowed that were scattered about, wondering how different her life would be at this moment if she hadn't giggled too much with Maria in the planning meetings.

Perhaps if her life went wrong from today forward, she could always blame Mrs. Sneath.

Maria and George, who had come home from London in time for the festivities, bolted at once to one of the refreshment tables. Her parents were swept into a

conversation with Lady Fennimore and her husband.

So Isolde ducked into the little retiring room set aside for ladies to pin more securely the pink rose Isaiah had given her a few days ago, and, after the longest, most eventful day of her life, to gather her nerve for the absolutely fraught unknown of the night ahead.

She did not see Jacob when she finally emerged to scan the teeming crowd of beaming neighbors wearing their finest. Or any other Eversea, for that matter.

But she saw Isaiah at once. Mainly because he was standing next to Miss Fanchette Tarbell's vast powdered hair.

At the picnic earlier today, Isolde had learned Miss Tarbell employed two maids specifically to tend to it.

Miss Tarbell's smile had been small and remote when she'd been introduced to Maria and Isolde, but then her flawlessly lovely features probably frequently made strangers stare impolitely.

Perhaps she was hoping to forestall such an eventuality.

Regardless, she'd expended no superfluous charm on the Sylvaines.

Twice during the picnic, a guest had needed to say "Miss Sylvain. Miss Sylvaine? Miss Sylvaine !" to Isolde, because she hadn't heard a word they'd said.

Her head had been clamoring with drama and her senses had remained kiss-stunned.

As it was, she'd needed to ask a footman whether she could hang her apron up in the house, as she'd arrived wearing it.

She'd surreptitiously transferred her celandine from the apron pocket into her bodice.

When she arrived home again, she'd found the shape of it indented faintly against her breast.

It had taken a good deal of effort to avoid Diana Redmond's eyes through the entire event.

But Isolde fancied she could still feel two icy spots left on her soul by the Redmond patriarch's penetrating green gaze. It was if he'd known exactly what she'd just done with his son.

Whereas the elder Mr. Redmond was as warm and familiar to Miss Tarbell as if she was his own daughter.

Isaiah did not appear at the picnic.

"He likely felt he shouldn't intrude when it's just us ladies," Miss Diana Redmond explained to Miss Tarbell, nervously.

A ting of foreboding had penetrated Isolde's distraction. Why would Miss Tarbell in particular be concerned about Isaiah's whereabouts?

The nebulous suspicion hovering on the periphery of her awareness all week was finally solidifying and Isolde's head began to feel perilously light.

"Miss Sylvaine. May I have a private word?"

Isolde whirled about to see Diana Redmond, lovely in stylish green, a rope of pearls gleaming at her throat.

Just like that, Isolde's foreboding amplified from a low hum to a screech.

"Of course, Miss Redmond."

Diana drew her aside to the wall opposite the entrance, took a breath, and spoke in a trembling rush.

"Miss Sylvaine, I wasn't certain whether it would be kind or unkind to tell you. Or whether it was even my place. And then I thought—if I were you, I should like to know." She paused for another breath. "Isaiah intends to propose to Miss Fanchette Tarbell. He has been courting her for months. I know he once intended to announce their engagement tonight. I do not think he has yet proposed, as she has only just arrived. But I don't know for certain."

All feeling flashed away from Isolde's limbs. Her entire being jolted as though the floor had just dropped from beneath her feet.

Diana added hurriedly, "I will deny it if you ever say that I told you. I love my brother and I am loyal to him and I will be loyal to his wife. I don't know why he has behaved as he has.

It's so unlike him. But I don't believe you deserve such treatment. I will never know if I did the right thing by telling you. And I likely will not be able to forgive myself for betraying him."

Diana's eyes were beseeching.

How odd that she seemed to be seeking absolution from someone she'd just devastated.

Oddly, for the first time in a long time, Isolde felt almost brutally sober, which is how

she realized she'd been in a lovely, dangerous haze for days now.

“You did the right thing, Miss Redmond. Thank you.”

Diana nodded shortly and took herself hurriedly away.

Fanchette had blushing taken Isaiah at his word when he'd replied, “splendid, especially now that you're here,” when she'd asked after his health.

Fanchette was stunning even when travel-weary, delighted to see him, and full of talk of her new dresses and the events of their journey.

Their parents circulated about the two of them in fond, hushed, conspiratorial glee, for they considered the conclusion of the next few days foregone.

Isaiah was gently attentive to all, and somehow he said the right things and wore the right expressions and Fanchette gave no sign of noticing that turmoil churned beneath his every word.

He'd walked almost blindly through the woods during the picnic, reverberating from kissing Isolde, excruciatingly aware that a personal Armageddon was fast approaching. His acts of cowardice—kissing her only to run away, then staying away until well after the picnic was over—haunted him.

A swift movement snagged at the corner of his eye: his sister was moving rapidly away from someone.

And that someone was Isolde.

His heart gave a sharp leap. Oh, she was lovely in pink silk. His breath caught when he saw that she wore the rose at her waist.

But her face was stark white.

She froze when her gaze collided with his.

Her eyes were hunted. Questioning.

He wasn't even aware that he'd been moving toward her through the crowd until he stood right before her. He could not seem to help himself.

She remained still as she waited for him to arrive.

He put his back between Isolde and the ballroom, so that she would at least be partially hidden.

“Is it true you're going to propose to Miss Tarbell?” she said without preamble.

He nearly reared back. Bloody fucking hell.

Instantly he was breathing like a trapped animal. As tongue-tied as he'd ever been when he was a boy.

If his silence didn't incriminate him, his expression surely did.

“Oh, God, you are ,” Isolde breathed, recoiling, horrified. “Isaiah, are you—are you engaged ? Have you been en?—”

“No! Dear God, no. I swear to you on my life that I am not!”

“But...” Her confusion was a torment to witness. “You love me .”

Her hands flew to cover her mouth. Her eyes were stricken, as if she was appalled the

words had escaped.

But she slowly lowered them when she saw his expression.

She understood she had the right of it.

He loved her.

Oh God. The stupid miracle of this love momentarily transfixed him. It was as though they'd gone and planted a flower on a battlefield. It didn't have a prayer of surviving its circumstances.

"We love each other ." She said more gently. Still urgently.

His voice shook when he said, "What of it?"

Her eyes flared in shock.

"What possible bearing does that have on our futures, Isolde? Mine was written for me long ago."

The blood drained from her face.

Hurting her was torture.

"But Isaiah...you won't be happy ."

Of all the things to say. It sounded like both a furious accusation and a terrified realization. As if she could see his future, a wasteland without her and without feeling, and the notion destroyed her.

She stepped closer. Her words were low and swift and pleading. “Don't do this. Don't do this to yourself. Don't do it to Miss Tarbell. If you can tell me that you love her...but I don't think you do.”

It was yet another thing of which to be ashamed: he didn't deny it, because it was true.

His voice was quiet and tense, his delivery staccato.

“I am not doing it to anyone. It's my duty and my honor—my privilege—to make the kind of marriage that brings pride and fortune and security to my entire family. I cannot stop what was already underway before I met you without bringing great shame to everyone. This is love, too, Isolde. My place in my family is not something within my control and—Oh God, I can never make you understand.”

Her chin jerked up and her eyes flashed with anger. “Perhaps my comparatively lowly birth has so thickened my wits such that I cannot possibly comprehend why you would consign yourself to a life with...a life without...”

She'd begun with admirable irony. But suddenly she dropped her face into her hands.

He took a frantic step closer her, his hands reaching out for her.

He stopped himself abruptly and forced his arms to his sides.

She lifted her head. “It's a whole lifetime , Isaiah.” Her voice was broken.

Her eyes were brimming now. “Do you know how long that will be? Do you have any idea how that will feel? What that will do to you? Do you comprehend? You cannot measure it out on your gold watch. Even one given to you by your inestimable father.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:26 am

She said that last word with such nearly intolerable contempt that a flame of anger licked through his uncertainty.

“Isolde. I am sorry...if I have led you to believe my intentions were...that I had intentions to...” He struggled to pull a breath.

“With you, I was caught up, for the first time in my life, and I.

.. I am sorrier than I can say if I caused you confusion and hurt.

But I will never be sorry for kissing you.

I daresay you weren't sorry about that, either.”

“ Such a gentleman. Fanchette is a lucky, lucky woman.” She'd tried for bitterness. But her voice was shattered.

“Do you really think there is no cost to me ?”

His words began a hiss, then rose and rose in volume until they cracked with anguish.

He could sense a number of heads swiveling in his direction.

“Isaiah...” Isolde breathed. She took a step toward him, her hand outstretched.

He knew she meant to comfort him. This was who she was. Even as he broke her heart, she meant to comfort him.

He held up a hand to stop her.

He spun on his heel and left her standing alone.

The shock was a toxin; Isolde was blinded by it. Her skin was ice. Her gorge rose hotly. She didn't dare move her body; her very organs felt like razor-edged smithereens.

She stood as motionless as one of those statues in the Redmond rose garden, while the orchestra tuned up and her neighbors in Pennyroyal Green laughed and chattered around her. All of the sounds blended into one dissonant buzz.

But some instinct finally made her turn her head.

She was jolted into full awareness when she met Jacob Eversea's steady blue gaze.

He was leaning against the wall, a good ten feet away. Watching her.

How long had he been there?

She didn't think he could have heard her conversation with Isaiah. Surely, she would have noticed him? But how much had he witnessed? Or guessed at?

All she knew was that she would never forget his expression for the rest of her life, or the way he slowly pushed himself away from the wall.

And followed Isaiah Redmond into the ballroom.

Isaiah felt removed from his body, like a puppet someone else was piloting. His vision was blurred as if he was walking through a lashing storm. His ears buzzed, but he wasn't certain whether it was from murmurs of the crowd or the blood pounding in

his head.

Finally, he stopped short of the refreshment table.

His instinct for self-preservation told him he didn't dare attempt to talk to another human yet.

He knew how to arrange his features and posture to convey pleasant detachment, the battlement behind which he always took refuge. So that's what he did.

Behind his features, a shocking snarl of emotion raged.

He located Fanchette. She was standing near her mother and Lady Fennimore across the room. Her alabaster brow was shadowed. Her famous blue eyes aimed a question at him.

He commanded his lips to curve in a reassuring smile, and they must have obeyed him, because she softened and smiled in return. Half the men and women in the room saw their exchange and sighed with envy and admiration.

He became conscious of a movement at the corner of his eye.

He turned his head and discovered Jacob Eversea moving toward him with the slow intention of a stalking animal.

It was like a scene from a nightmare. He hadn't even known Eversea had returned to Pennyroyal Green.

Instinct urged Isaiah to move away. But he would never give Eversea the satisfaction.

Jacob stopped in front of him. They regarded each other wordlessly.

“How bloody dare you make a fool of her.”

Jacob delivered this flaming gauntlet in a quiet, pleasantly conversational tone.

“I'm sure I don't know what you mean, Eversea,” Isaiah replied stiffly. He offered a small, polite smile for the benefit of anyone watching. His heart was slamming.

Contempt and anger and pain poured from Eversea in such scorching rays Isaiah could feel it on his skin. He was tempted to take a step back.

He would quite frankly rather die than relinquish his ground.

Eversea snorted. “You're not worthy of her, of course.” His expression reflected nothing but bright interest. He, too, apparently knew when to don a social disguise. “But I always suspected you were the rankest of cowards. It's the Redmond way, after all. The snake-in-the-grass way.”

Isaiah's control was already in shreds. Rage rose in him like the flames licking at the ankles of a heretic tied to a stake. It was going to consume him.

“And yet you're the one who left her, Eversea,” he drawled. “Aren't you? What kind of fool does that make you?”

He had the pleasure of seeing Eversea go rigid as the words found their mark.

“I pity you, Redmond,” Eversea finally said quietly. “And do you know why you're pitiable?” Jacob leaned forward and lowered his voice to a near-whisper, and said with a sort of scathing tenderness next to Isaiah's ear, “Because now you will never have her. And I expect I can.”

Isaiah felt his entire being shudder apart.

He made a feral sound and lunged for Eversea's throat with his hands.

Eversea ducked and came up again with a swing, his fist slamming into Isaiah's jaw.

Isaiah went down, hard.

And before he could move, Jacob Eversea was on him, teeth bared, face scarlet, his fist pulled back to smash Isaiah Redmond's face.

Isolde heard the screams. She saw the crowd heave forward as a mass like a wave, then part abruptly.

The last thing she saw before the world went black was Jacob Eversea's face blazing with terrifying intent, four men dragging him by the arms away from Isaiah Redmond's prone body

Chapter Eleven

“The Everseas are animals.” Isaiah's father sounded bored as he clipped his cheroot. “Everyone knows this.”

But his father's hand was trembling.

His father was, in truth, seething.

The Redmonds and their guests had departed the Pennyroyal Green assembly immediately after Isaiah was picked up off the floor.

Fanchette had been whisked away by her parents and Isaiah's mother and sister to one of their sitting rooms, where she was soothed and plied with tea, while Isaiah and his father repaired to his father's office at the top of Redmond house.

Presumably, the Everseas and Sylvaines had left the assembly, too.

One never knew with Everseas.

The whole shameful episode was over in seconds, really.

Isaiah seemed unable to speak. He could still only vaguely feel the outlines of his body, as though shock had scorched him into a rattling husk.

He'd had one cup of ratafia, which was not, unfortunately, enough to blunt the pain.

The place Jacob Eversea's fist had connected with his jaw burned like a brand.

Tomorrow his whole body would feel worse, of a certainty. The bruise would be difficult to disguise.

You will never have her never have her never have her. Eversea's words echoed in his head.

Isaiah's fingers spasmed into a fist and he fought to flatten his hand again against his thigh.

"I think I'll have a little talk with Eversea about his son," his father mused darkly.

"No."

Only when his father's head jerked toward him did Isaiah realize he'd issued the word like a command.

He'd never spoken to his father that way before.

"That is, the matter isn't worth your time or mine." Isaiah took pains to match his father's bored delivery.

"I considered calling him out for his insolence, but decided doing so would impart a sort of gentlemanly sheen to mere..." Isaiah drew in a breath and delivered the last word on a sigh. "...thuggishness."

It was theater.

But it was masterful.

His father stared at him for a good long while.

Then gave a short nod, acquiescing.

His eyebrows dipped as he tucked the cheroot into his mouth again.

Someone had neglected to draw the curtains and he could see his own face reflected, distorted and dark, in the window glass.

Eversea's eyes hadn't been blank and mindless with rage. They'd blazed with a very fixed and personal antipathy. Eversea hadn't attacked him because he'd lost control. He'd been entirely in control of himself.

It was Isaiah who had lost control.

The Everseas and Redmonds might be instinctive enemies.

But what now lay between Jacob and Isiah—and Isolde—was no byproduct of myth.

It was personal.

And it was dangerous.

“Why did he do it? Was it about a girl?”

Isaiah hadn't noticed his father watching him.

Isaiah returned his gaze to him.

So funny to think that his father's eyes were so very like his own. So very like twin hot pokers when the force of his displeasure shone through them.

For the first time, his father's displeasure didn't affect him at all. He was grateful for the numbness, because he could simply observe.

"You needn't concern yourself, father. The matter is between myself and Eversea. And the matter is done."

And thusly Isaiah retrieved his power from his father.

He knew then that he was never going to cede it again. He decided he would, in fact, increase it a thousandfold when he had his own family.

He knew precisely his position and his worth. He understood the cards he held. He would soon be officially engaged to a beautiful, coveted, wealthy woman and the attachment could not be sundered without the sort of grave scandal his father wouldn't now risk.

Furthermore, he had money of his own. Nothing yet like the fortune that would be his when his father cocked up his toes. Oh, but it would be.

Currently, his father needed him more than he needed his father.

And after a fraught moment or two, during which his father's stare cooled not one whit, and during which Isaiah refused to blink or utter another word, his father shrugged.

"As you wish. In the context of the rest of your life, tonight's little altercation with Eversea will be meaningless. A mere..." he inhaled, then leisurely exhaled, a great stream of cheroot smoke. "...flyspeck."

Of course, neither of them would ever forget it.

It would go on the ancient Redmond and Eversea score sheet.

It would join all the old resentments that ceaselessly, invisibly heaved beneath their careful civility like lava beneath the earth's crust. The anecdote of how Jacob Eversea attacked Isaiah Redmond (like a slaving beast!) allegedly unprovoked would be told and re-told between Redmonds—and Everseas (“His smug face needed hitting”)—for centuries.

But only ever in private. Only ever in hushed rooms, and in tones of bored contempt.

And they would only ever have part of the truth.

Because Isaiah would never tell the truth to another soul.

He didn't need to. It didn't need to be spoken aloud. Three people already knew it without it being articulated. And it would remain between him, and Jacob Eversea, and Isolde.

“No one died,” George reported, poking his head into Isolde’s Room. “Believe it or not, everyone was dancing when I left. Jacob and the Redmonds went home. Separately. But that goes without saying.”

Isolde had revived from her faint on the assembly hall floor, ringed by concerned ladies.

While the rest of the Pennyroyal Green citizenry milled about like ants from a kicked anthill, she was smuggled out of the hall and installed in Lady Fennimore’s carriage (she’d volunteered it), then taken home, along with Maria and her parents.

Whereupon she been had been tucked into bed and forced to drink a tisane.

George had lingered at the assembly to collect, as he'd dryly put it to his parents, "intelligence," and had made his own way home.

Physically, she felt more or less fine.

Inwardly, numbness currently blunted the pain of a destroyed heart.

"I expect it was a bit of silly competition that got out of hand," she told her parents vaguely. "You know how boys can be. I didn't know I would be alarmed into a swoon. How embarrassing. I'm so sorry to ruin everyone's evening."

She refused to expound, no matter how sternly or woefully they stared at her. And as she was unharmed physically, they finally consented to stop fussing and left her alone with Maria, who sat companionably by her bed.

When Isolde suddenly shivered as she pictured Jacob hovering over Isaiah's prone body, Maria leaned over and tucked her shawl around her.

Isolde couldn't suppress an unworthy satisfaction that Jacob had gone mad and attacked Isaiah, though she couldn't know exactly what had motivated him. But she would wager it was for the same reason he'd raced to rescue his nephew from toppling from a fence.

And she still didn't think he'd overheard her conversation with Isaiah. But he had seen her expression when Isaiah had walked away from her. And she was fairly certain this had told him enough.

She remained horrified and embarrassed that he'd witnessed both her perfidy and her pain.

"Isolde...did you know Jacob had returned?" Maria ventured.

After a moment, Isolde nodded.

“Do you think Jacob is jealous of Mr. Redmond because of you?” Maria whispered it.

“I think he could be.”

Maria peered intently at her. Clearly contemplating whether to ask another question.

Isolde cleared her throat. “Maria, have you heard any gossip about me lately about...?”

Maria shook her head. “But I don’t think anyone would say anything to me directly, anyway.” She paused, then whispered. “Have you done anything worth gossiping about? Is that why you were late to the picnic?”

It was a bold and astute question.

And Isolde didn’t answer, which was answer enough.

“Maria...what if I’m a pariah now because an Eversea and a Redmond came to blows? Am I going to be a burden to my relatives?” This scared her badly.

“I’m not certain no one will marry you,” Maria suggested carefully. “There are men living on other continents, for instance.”

Isolde couldn’t help but give a little shout of bleak laughter. “Must you be prosaic when my life is a melodrama?”

“I’m sorry! It’s just that I hate to see you so distressed.”

“You are very sweet, and I’m so sorry you were forced to miss the dancing. The

decorations were beautiful.”

“There will be other Pennyroyal Green assemblies, but none will be as memorable as this one, mark my words.”

Maria gave her a noisy forehead kiss and went off to bed.

By the time Isaiah left his father, everyone else currently residing beneath the Redmond roof seem to have gone up to their rooms. The house was almost desolately quiet.

But perhaps it merely felt that way because his soul was ringing as though it had been battered with a mallet.

The clock showed half past ten.

He settled his body gingerly at his writing desk. He rested his head on his hands and breathed in and out. Raggedly. Slowly.

And then he pressed his fists against his forehead and squeezed his eyes closed and, by sheer force of will, filled his mind with the image of the stunning woman who was expecting a proposal from him.

If he married Fanchette, they would be one of the most envied couples in England.

And any man would feel honored and privileged to make love to Fanchette. Surely it would be no hardship.

Did she love him?

How could she? She didn't know him. She did not... see him. She could not see him.

She wasn't made that way. Perhaps this was his fault. Perhaps they weren't made that way for each other.

But did this even matter? Was being in love even necessary for a brilliant marriage? Perhaps it was even an impediment? Love could devastate and transport. He knew that now. And the potential for devastation seemed a threat to a peaceful life. He loathed the loss of control.

But what bloody cruel... travesty ...of fate was it that he now knew the difference between loving and not loving? Like breathing and not breathing.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:26 am

He had told Isolde the truth before he kissed her: he found the idea of her distress unbearable.

And yet he was the one who had just caused her grievous pain.

He conjured the feel of her body molded to his, and the hot, sweet taste of her mouth.

Hunger and yearning swept through him. He could not forget. He would never forget.

He placed a badly shaking hand on his chest as if he could still feel the press of Isolde's head there.

And into that place spilled a cold terror of what life would be like if he never knew that feeling again.

His palms were sweating now.

Blindly, he fumbled for a half sheet of foolscap as if it was a rope thrown to a drowning man. He stared down at it. His breath was a roar in his ears. He reached for the quill. The plume trembled in his hand as he wrote.

My Dearest Isolde,

I have perhaps been too careful the whole of my life; I confess I've not much experience with being a fool, nor with being wrong. But tonight, I have been egregiously both. Nor have I much experience with being humble. Now, with these paltry words, I humbly beg your forgiveness. I only hope against hope that my

clumsiness and inadvertent cruelty have not killed completely your feelings for me. I've no experience with love either, you see.

For it's true that I love you.

If you can imagine spending all of the minutes of your life with me, meet me at midnight tonight at the oak trees where first we spoke.

I think this is best, as the arrival of a harnessed carriage might wake your household.

Pack a valise and bring a lamp. We will go at once to Gretna Green, where we will wed.

As you know, I have money of my own. Furthermore, as I am my father's only heir, he cannot and will not disown me.

I am certain he will come to love you as I do, and it will be my honor to live out all of the minutes of my life with you.

I will live to make you happy, Isolde.

I regret the dishonor to Miss Tarbell but I know she will find a worthy and appropriate match.

No matter what you decide, I fear you have my heart, now and always.

Your servant,

I.R.

He was in fact certain of none of these things except that he loved her.

He did not know how to parse the origins of this love. It seemed to him that it had always existed and had merely been waiting for the two of them to claim it, the way that the land now called Pennyroyal Green had existed for eons before any humans settled and named it.

The force of his conviction, his willingness to win at any cost, would make the rest of what he'd written manifest, surely.

He could not stop to think of any of the "hows"; he could not now afford to consider what Fanchette might feel, let alone his father.

It seemed to him that he was saving his own life, so all other considerations were necessarily secondary.

When he had what he wanted and needed—Isolde—he would deal with the consequences, one by one.

He re-read the message. It struck him as stilted and formal. He was maddened that he could not seem to translate the true contents of his heart into words.

But Isolde knew his heart. She had felt it thudding against her cheek, after he'd kissed her.

He folded and sealed it with a press of his ring.

The last of the assembly-goers would be home by eleven, at the latest, he was certain.

Suddenly it seemed like kismet that she had told him that a red-headed boy named Dougal slept next to the Sylvaine's kitchen fire, for he knew precisely what to tell a footman to do.

Isolde heard her own shallow, swift breathing as if another person sat next to her on the bed.

In her hands she held a letter; a sleepy and confused but thrilled Dougal had brought it to her door moments ago.

It was just past eleven; she hadn't slept at all; her entire family had gone to sleep hours ago.

With a trembling finger she traced the "R" pressed into the red wax seal.

Finally, she gathered the courage to break it.

She tenderly smoothed out the letter in her lap.

The words slowly filled her like sunlight.

She breathed out very slowly. Then closed her eyes and basked in the glory of knowing that she was loved.

She pictured herself running to Isaiah in the dark, a valise thumping against her thigh.

Throwing herself into his arms, her lips meeting his lips.

Making love with him again and again in a Scottish inn, their bodies passionately entwined.

Returning triumphantly, scandalously, to Pennyroyal Green as Mrs. Isolde Redmond, chasing giggling green-eyed children in that beautiful rose garden at the Redmond house, waking next to him every morning.

For those few minutes, she allowed herself to live an entire lifetime with him.

And then she pictured Isaiah alone in the dark near the trees, his fragile, complicated heart filled with hope, and her eyes welled with tears.

“Oh, Isaiah,” she whispered.

She wept for how brave he’d been to bare his heart.

And for the mad fairy tale he’d written.

Because she knew it was impossible. The Redmonds would forever see her as evidence of Isaiah’s perfidy.

Isaiah would surely grow to resent and despise her for tempting him to betray his father.

Her family would always be made to feel inferior.

His own family would suffer grave social consequences if he jilted the daughter of the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Isolde knew in her bones that she and Isaiah would never know peace together.

Why, then, did it feel like blasphemy to deny the pull of what felt like her destiny? She loved him.

Not only that: she knew definitively now that she could not ever, ever bring herself to hurt or shame Jacob. Because she loved him, too, whether or not he’d stopped wanting her.

And while defending her was Jacob's very nature, Isaiah was struggling to transform his own nature. To shake off the shackles of his history and forge something new...for her.

This seemed to her the very definition of courage.

But she didn't think he would have ever dared done this in the daylight. Which is why he wanted to run away in the dark.

The arbitrary cruelty of fate bludgeoned her airless.

What earthly reason could there be for her to love and be loved by two men when none of them would have what they wanted?

Once the tears started, her heart seemed an endless geyser of grief and love. She stifled her sobs in her pillow.

The air was so cold and clean it hurt to pull it into his lungs. The gleam of the watch in his palm echoed the perfect circle of the moon above. Isaiah stamped his feet to ward off the chill.

Midnight was ten minutes away.

Suddenly he jerked backward, heart in his throat. Holy Mother of—the tree was on fire!

No. Christ.

It was lamplight. His hands were shaking, sending the beam of the lantern he was clutching dancing so fitfully over the leaves it looked like flames.

He was almost delirious from excruciatingly heightened awareness. He felt simultaneously like a madman and saner than he'd ever been.

He willed Isolde to emerge from the dark, pitching his senses for the sound of her footfall. For the huff of her breath. For the glow of her lamp.

He would take her into his arms. He would soothe her, and whisper, "Everything will be all right, forever. Thank you for coming. I love you."

He imagined the sweet heat of her mouth when he kissed her again. The soft shape of her tucked into his side in the dark of the carriage as they hurtled through the dark toward Scotland. Toward forever.

By this time tomorrow, he would have made love to her in a coaching inn.

Desire lanced him so violently his breath seized and every muscle tensed.

The uproar when he was discovered missing would be nothing compared to the uproar when he returned from Scotland with a wife. It seemed not to matter. Inside his turmoil was a core of calm certainty, within which pulsed a tiny, dark exultation.

Jacob Eversea would have to live with knowing that Isolde would be sharing a bed with Isaiah Redmond for the rest of her life.

One of the horses whickered what sounded like a soft question: why are we here ?

What would it do if he whickered back? He half-smiled.

Absently, he rested a soothing hand on its neck.

"Soon," he promised it. "She'll be here soon."

He knew his message had been delivered to Isolde, because the footman—who went on horseback—told him he'd given it to the red-headed kitchen boy, and he'd waited at the kitchen door for the boy to return for the half crown Isaiah had donated to the cause.

Isaiah had deliberately withheld the color of Dougal's hair so he could test the footman's honesty when he returned for his shilling reward.

And so Isaiah waited. His bruised face stung in the cold.

The minutes bore on.

And on.

He postponed looking for as long as he could. But when he next glanced at his watch, it was a quarter past midnight.

And just like that, his beloved watch became his enemy. Because with every second it ticked off, the truth sank into him like the chill night air.

Until it supplanted hope entirely.

Until he knew definitively.

She wasn't coming.

For a few blessed moments, he felt nothing. Erased. Empty as if he'd never existed. Beyond panic, or terror, or anger or hope.

Slowly, into the emptiness, like smoke, seeped a bracing fury.

How. Bloody. Dare she.

Who the bloody hell did she think she was, to cast aside his heart? To shun this opportunity to be a Redmond ? The little nobody of a girl who had made him whinny . Who had nearly caused him to bring shame upon his family, to defy his father, to shirk his duty? She had made him ridiculous .

He suddenly had a vision of how pathetic he must look standing there: Look at that fool who had written a love letter throwing away his future, only to be rejected by a silly girl!

He was as choked with rage as if he was trapped in a burning room.

He fumbled in the pocket of his coat and found the small knife he always carried with him. He viciously tugged his hand free of his glove and touched the blade to his fingertip until blood beaded.

And then he whirled and with a grunt plunged the point of his knife into the tree as if it was his own heart. As if in so doing he could excise it from his body, and with it, all pain, all grief, all hope, all love, anything at all that meant Isolde.

He dragged the knife down, down, gouging a deep, straight line.

Heaving with ragged breaths, he stared at it.

It looked like an “I”.

He traced it with his bleeding finger.

And then he knew what to do.

One after another, he deliberately, deeply scarred the tree with six letters.

I-S-O-L-D-E.

High enough up on the trunk, deep enough into the branches, small enough so that it would be disguised from the road. So that likely no one would ever see it, apart from a squirrel or two.

But for the rest of his life, every time he walked by these trees, he would be reminded of this shame, this folly, this narrow escape.

He stood back. Sweat glued his hair to his forehead; his harsh, swift breathing seemed deafening in the dark.

He absently rubbed at his chest. As if he could feel those letters permanently carved into his heart. A secret mutilation.

He took himself home.

Isaiah awoke on top of his bed a few hours later.

The maids had not yet been in build up the fires, and silvery dawn light was pushing through the gap in his drawn curtains.

He was fully clothed, down to his boots.

His eyelashes were sticky and his cheeks felt rough from salt.

He had wept like an exhausted child when the blessed, numbing fury, a temporary defense, eventually proved no match for the enormity of his grief.

For the slashing pain and disbelief of loss.

He wasn't quite sure whether he'd wept from relief or devastation or some shameful combination thereof. Either way, his heart was broken.

And he wasn't going to bloody weep ever again.

He lay still for a long time, familiarizing himself with the heaviness of his body in this new world. This was the version of himself he would need to live with for the rest of his life.

It seemed his decision about what to do next had been made for him.

Chapter Twelve

Jacob's father and mother sat alongside each other on a gold brocade settee, wearing matching frowns. Jacob sat in a chair across from them, nursing a cup of coffee.

His parents had returned from Hampshire early yesterday evening, ecstatic to find their beloved son home and eager to hear all about his trip. They had decided to rest instead of attending the assembly.

And yet, somehow, magically, they'd heard all about the uproar with Isaiah Redmond before Jacob was even out of bed this morning.

Jacob's head ached. He'd scarcely slept five hours in the past several days.

"I heard you were astride Redmond. As though he was a horse you were trying break." This was his father.

There was a silence.

"Only briefly," Jacob finally allowed, shortly.

A fleeting coldly amused satisfaction glinted in his father's eyes.

"But Jacob...you've never been the..." His mother closed her eyes and issued the word with a shiver. "... brutish sort."

Jacob dragged in, then released, a long, long breath.

In truth, he'd been pulled off Redmond before he could land another blow.

He had cause to be glad of that now.

Because he thought he would destroy anyone who put that devastated expression on Isolde Sylvaine's face.

When the crowd of men who'd dragged him away from Redmond finally released his arms, the only Sylvaine he saw was George. And that was because George had been among those holding him back.

George had insisted on seeing Jacob all the way back to the Eversea house. They did not speak, because Jacob wouldn't. Devil of a way to learn you're back in town, Eversea, was how George bid him good night.

"How did it start?" Jacob's father asked almost absently.

"Redmond lunged for me. I defended myself."

"He lunged?" His mother's hand flew to her throat.

"Perhaps my reflexes were a bit too wound up after my journey. I fought pirates." He'd left this part out of their reunion conversation yesterday. He hoped to distract them.

"Sweet Christ," his very proper mother muttered faintly after a moment.

Jacob couldn't suppress a swift grin.

"I was—I am—proud of the way you conducted yourself in the West Indies, Jacob," his father mused.

Jacob had told his father yesterday about how he'd handled the plantation shares, and his father had gratifyingly approved.

“And you've never been a hothead. Which is why I'm struggling to understand this little altercation.

Why did you do it?” his father's voice was almost congenial.

Perhaps even a little mischievously conspiratorial. “Was it about a girl?”

Jacob wasn't fooled. He knew all the strategies his father used to get men to lower their guards. To get men to like him, to confide in him, to trust him. It was such an enveloping, warm pleasure to be liked by an Eversea, after all.

He knew he had made use of the same strategies at times. He'd learned from the best.

He was not in the habit of lying to his parents, though certainly they were not, and had never been, the recipient of all of his confidences.

No doubt his parents already suspected the reason. His father in particular had his ways of learning things. And besides, what else could cause a man to lose his mind, if not a woman?

But he didn't think he would ever shake the habit of protecting Isolde, whether or not she'd betrayed him. He didn't know what that made him, or what that meant. It was merely true.

“I'm afraid it must remain a matter between myself and Redmond,” he said calmly. “And while I deeply regret embarrassing you, rest assured he deserved it.”

Four parental eyebrows flew up.

“If I may be excused?” Jacob concluded politely.

But he had already risen from his seat, and they let him go.

Isaiah finally rose, got into fresh clothing and splashed water on his face. The house was still very quiet when he found his way downstairs. Only servants were stirring. Breakfast smells wafted up from the kitchen.

He was surprised to discover Fanchette alone in the morning room, sitting on one of the settees near the fire, a pot of tea resting on the little table next to her. She wasn't doing a thing but gazing out the window. Her complexion was luminous in the rosy morning light.

He knew a sudden, knee-weakening surge of gratitude for her uncomplicated, incurious nature, and a rush of tenderness born of pity. For she would likely never know, never even suspect, that he hopelessly loved another woman.

The pity was all entwined with guilt. He knew this guilt would bind him to Fanchette forever, if he married her.

But he understood then that she was the answer to everything.

Perhaps she always had been. For how blessed he would be to ease into this life of ease and luxury and graciousness as it were a warm bath.

Only a madman would forsake that kind of opportunity, regardless of whether it was carved out by family and duty and ambition.

Her head turned swiftly toward him as he entered the room, but she didn't rise. He moved over to her slowly, and gingerly sat down on the settee across from her. His body felt exactly as if he'd been slammed to the floor and punched in the face the

night before.

She seemed shy and uncertain for the first time since he'd met her. Her eyes were faintly lavender beneath. As if perhaps she hadn't slept well, either.

This ripple in her usually unwavering confidence sent a fresh wave of tenderness and self-recrimination through him.

"Isaiah, you look exhausted." To his relief, her tone was all sympathy and no recrimination. "Oh, dear. Your poor face!"

His lips quirked into a rueful half smile. "What can I say? They can be animals, the Everseas."

She studied him. "I'm not sure I understand why he hit you."

They regarded each other for an odd tick of silence. Her eyes were clear, but he thought he detected, for perhaps the first time ever, a hint of searching in them.

He lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "I think he hit me because he was drunk, he is an Eversea, I'm a Redmond, and he envied me my exquisite guest, as did every man present."

This made her smile. Her posture visibly eased.

He leaned forward confidingly, his voice gentle. "And I'm so terribly, terribly sorry you had to witness it. I so hoped it would be a special evening for...for us. And I'd so hoped to do this better. But I find I cannot bear to wait any longer. I..." He drew in a breath. "Fanchette."

He'd said her name so abruptly she blinked, startled.

“Fanchette,” he continued, more softly. “I... I cannot imagine my life without you.”

To his horror, his voice broke.

What the bloody hell was the matter with him?

Her hand covered her heart. “Isaiah,” she breathed. Clearly stunned.

He reached gently for her other hand and clasped it. “And I would be so honored if you would be my wife. Will you marry me?”

Her eyes were now limpid with emotion. She cupped his bruised face with her other cool, smooth hand. “Oh, Isaiah.” Her voice trembled. “Yes. Thank you. I would of course be honored to be your wife.”

She softly kissed his wounded jaw. He touched the petal-soft curve of her cheek. And then he turned his face and his lips touched hers, slowly, delicately, then more assertively. Yes, he could do this, he thought with relief.

Their children would be beautiful. Their life would be peaceful and grand, significant and influential, precisely the way he’d always planned.

He was not good, he’d told Isolde.

But he was loyal.

He would give Fanchette his loyalty until the day he died.

His heart felt quieter than it had in weeks, because it knew it was in no real danger from this woman. It was as safe from hurt as all those townspeople buried in the churchyard.

“We are going to be very happy,” he promised her.

Fanchette tipped her head against her new fiancé’s shoulder; he had moved across to sit next to her, and they kissed a few more times; it was very pleasant.

She listened to him talk about his investment group as though it was a fine song: the melody entranced her but the lyrics were unimportant.

She loved hearing his absolute conviction in his ability to grow wealth.

She loved the abrupt little silences that fell when they entered a room together, because they were such a stunning pair; the admiration and envy intoxicated her.

She was going to marry the handsomest, cleverest, finest young man in all of England.

His family was already one of the richest, and he would likely be richer still and as powerful as her father one day.

She adored what all of this implied about her.

“Love will come, if you marry the right man,” her mother had assured her in the midst of her blushingly circumspect explanation of wifely duties a few weeks ago. “And...well, children can be a blessing.”

Fanchette was confident she had the right man. And Isaiah was so well-made—all the young ladies she knew were so envious of her!—she actually looked forward to whatever took place in the marriage bed.

His surprisingly sentimental proposal a few minutes ago—that little break in his voice!

— made her suspect he might perhaps be even just a little fonder of her than she was of him.

This suited her, and made her feel even more tender toward him.

And she knew that the pressures of being clever and ambitious could make even calm, level-headed men emotional sometimes—hadn't she heard her father rant about some masculine business or another on occasion? Such men needed even-tempered wives.

Last night at the assembly, when she'd briefly lost sight of Isaiah in the crowd, her gaze had momentarily snagged on the girl she'd met at the picnic yesterday—Miss Isolde Sylvaine.

She'd looked pale and wild-eyed, thoroughly distraught.

The sight had pricked Fanchette like an unexpected thorn on a rose, and the image had returned to her a few more times since.

She felt sympathy, but also a peculiar fear and distaste.

Fanchette had mostly been spared witnessing raw emotional suffering in her lifetime.

It seemed to her a thing that ought to take place in private, not at an assembly.

The nonsense with Mr. Eversea had occurred after that. Thank God Isaiah was so steady! He had endured it with grace.

She gazed happily about as Isaiah talked, deciding how she would redecorate this grand pile of a home when she and Isaiah inherited it.

Isaiah had been affianced for a few hours when he passed his sister Diana in the hallway on the way to his bedroom.

He blocked her path. She looked up at him, startled.

“Were you the one who told her?” he said shortly.

Diana blanched at once. “I’m not sure what you?—”

Isaiah repeated slowly, evenly, “Were you the person who told Miss Sylvaine I was planning to become engaged to Fanchette?”

Diana’s voice evaporated in the face of his cold, green gaze.

Her frightened, pleading silence was his answer.

His head went back, then came down in a nod. “You are dead to me.”

He continued on to his room.

Chapter Thirteen

Out of sheer, stubborn bravado, Jacob accompanied his parents to church that Sunday, the day after the assembly.

Neither the Sylvaines nor Redmonds were present.

Then again, the crowd in the pews was sparser and less alert than usual, probably thanks to all the ratafia imbibed the night before.

Jacob intercepted a few curious glances, one wink, and one eyebrow wag.

All in all, it wasn't too different from the usual Sunday.

Mostly, his neighbors seemed pleased enough to see him back in Pennyroyal Green, and greeted him politely after the service.

Most importantly, no banns were read in church that day.

Until he heard that Redmond was officially engaged to Miss Tarbell—this eventuality was the assumption of everyone in Pennyroyal Green, he'd learned from his parents—the possibility remained that Redmond might find a spine and abscond with Isolde.

But Jacob needed time to sort himself out.

He still wasn't sure how he felt about Isolde, or what he wanted.

And as Monday became Tuesday became Wednesday, his days remained restless and his nights tense and sleepless.

The emotional tumult of the past few days— the pride and anger and shock—continued to sift down like the smoke from a battle.

At last, it cleared enough for him to see a miserably uncomfortable truth: he'd been grossly unfair to Isolde—he'd been an ass —because his biggest fear was losing her.

Not only that, but the notion that Isolde might truly care for a man like Redmond implied she contained complexities Jacob hadn't anticipated.

The possibility that she might, in fact, be a world to be discovered spoke to his questing spirit.

To his surprise, a new sort of restless yearning and tenderness, a fresh fascination, stirred within him.

He had taken her love for granted. He did not feel he had ever really needed to win her. And the notion of fighting for her filled him with determination, too. He had already fought because of her.

It was time to learn the truth, no matter whether it crushed him.

It struck Isolde as surreal and almost outrageous that mundane daily life would march on as usual in the aftermath of devastation.

Apart from Sunday, that was, when she awoke looking exactly like someone who had sobbed themselves to sleep the night before.

Her kind and worried family did not press her for details, but they stayed home from

church out of solidarity.

They ate ginger cake and played Whist, among other things.

She picked at the first and lost badly at the second but she was discovering her bravado was more muscular than she'd anticipated.

Besides, she would need to save some emotional resources for possible new levels of anguish: the official announcement of Isaiah's engagement, for instance, or, horror or horror's, Jacob's, eventually, to someone else.

Or the announcement that they had fought a duel and were both dead. The possibilities seemed endless.

George went back to London and Lincoln's Inn, and her father's tutoring pupils appeared at the house, and she discovered the poppies had the nerve to burst into bloom as usual, laying their yearly red carpet up the hill to Miss Marietta Endicott's Academy.

In the spirit of someone unraveling their knitting until they found the mistake, Isolde finally ventured out on Friday to the folly, the place where it all began.

Maria had gone with their mother to a meeting of the Lady's Society, and bless them, they didn't press when Isolde begged off, claiming a headache.

The day was perversely beautiful; the breeze a caress, only a few lamblike clouds frisking in the blue sky.

She leaned against the railing on the folly landing and closed her eyes, an ache in her chest as she recalled Jacob's absurd performances on this very stage.

When she opened them again, she saw a man watching her from the road.

Her heart launched like a bird.

She sternly called it to heel. She didn't yet know why he was here. She was just unutterably glad to see him.

"Do you remember how I used to think Romeo was an idiot?" Jacob called from his safe distance. He appeared to be on foot.

"He was, rather," she agreed.

"So have I been."

"You will get no argument from me." She said it dryly, however.

This seemed to encourage him. "May I..." He gestured at the folly stairs.

She acquiesced with an ironic flourish of her arms.

He approached, slowly. He scaled two of the steps. Then paused.

They regarded each other. Her pounding heart made the blood ring in her ears.

He reached into his coat, and emerged with something. He settled it delicately on the railing.

It was an exquisitely carved little box, upon which stood a tiny woman all clothed in frilly white.

Her heart squeezed when she saw that Jacob's hands were shaking as he wound it.

Suddenly, the little dancer was pirouetting to a Bach Minuet.

“ Ohhh ,” she sighed. Enraptured.

They watched the little dancer go around and around.

“I commissioned this for you from a craftsman in Barbados,” he told her softly.

Isolde slowly turned to him in wary amazement.

“I asked him if he could arrange for her to belch every third turn, but he told me it would cost two hundred more pounds.”

She stifled a shout of laughter.

His face lit briefly.

But they were both still tense and cautious.

He cleared his throat. When he spoke, his voice was a little shaky.

“My ship was delayed, Isolde, because a fever leveled everyone on it. Two men died. I nearly did. Everseas are hard to kill, however, you’ll be gratified to hear.

And while I was so weak, all I could think, when I could think, was that I never told you that I always take a short, sharp breath whenever you walk into a room.

Every time your beauty is a fresh shock to me. ”

She stared at him, stunned speechless.

He nodded, as if he was relieved to have finally said that.

“At the assembly...I found I was not prepared to withstand the pain of witnessing your pain. Obviously, I handled it badly. If I embarrassed or frightened you, I am here to apologize, and beg your forgiveness. And to tell you I understand why that poor wretched bastard Romeo wanted to die. Because watching you suffer made me want to die. Simply put, I would die for you.”

“Oh, Jacob.” Her eyes had begun to burn with tears, and she fought them. Not yet, she told herself sternly. Not bloody yet. Neither one of them had earned their redemption yet.

For a moment, nothing but a breeze ruffling the leaves on the trees disturbed the silence.

“Isolde, I shouldn’t have left for the West Indies the way I did.” His voice was taut with pain. “Without?—”

She shook her head roughly. “I knew why you did. I understood you needed to go. I wanted you to be able go. I knew I would miss you. And I knew that missing you would be difficult. I thought it might be romantic.” She paused.

“I was wrong about the last,” she added dryly. “And I underestimated how difficult.”

He quirked the corner of his mouth. But his eyes did not commit to the smile.

“The thing was, Isolde... no matter how you feel about me now, I want you know that you were in everything. I saw you everywhere. You were my first thought in the morning and my last at night. I wanted to see the world. I still do. And I don’t suppose that will ever change.

But I didn't fully realize that I saw the world through you. As though you're a part of me. ”

“Oh, Jacob...” she breathed. It was everything she'd wanted to hear from him.

“Eight months is a long time. I promise I haven't changed, unless it's to become more myself.” He paused. “Have...you changed?” He asked this delicately.

She reached into her apron pocket.

Almost ceremoniously, she opened her palm and showed the celandine to him.

“I carry it with me everywhere, because I always want to be able to touch something you've touched.”

He released in a gust a relieved breath he had clearly been holding, then nodded.

There was another pause.

“If you care for...for...him, Isolde...” he began carefully, his voice thick. He took a breath for courage. “I am truly sorry if you're hurting now. I will leave you alone, if you want me to go.”

His courage and vulnerability stunned her.

He was essentially baring his neck for the chopping block and handing the axe to her.

She wanted to be brave. She wanted to be honest. But like Jacob, like Isaiah, she would do anything to protect the people she loved, and she did not have skill with swords or fists.

So she lied.

“It was not what it may have looked like to you or to anyone else, Jacob.”

And with this lie, which was not completely a lie, she attempted to protect two men she loved from each other. She thought the truth would endanger both of them.

Jacob’s expression was searching and somber, unreadable.

There was nothing of judgment in it. But she wasn’t convinced he believed her.

He seemed older, in a thrilling, interesting way.

In truth, they both had changed; each knew their own hearts a little better.

They were sadder and wiser. And this might be one of the scariest conversations either of them would ever have.

“I love you,” he said quietly. “I promise you that this love has not for one moment wavered since I first met you. I have spent every moment of every day since last I saw you trying to imagine a future where yours isn’t the first face I see every morning, where my destiny isn’t to safeguard your happiness. I cannot. I am... entirely at your mercy.”

She exhaled in a rush as joy spangled her with goosebumps.

“So I should like to know...if my selfishness...and recklessness...have altered your feelings for me. I beg of you be to be brutally honest. I will not drink poison, like Romeo,” he promised hurriedly. “I might leave the country and never come back.”

For a moment Isolde merely breathed in the sweet Pennyroyal Green air. She knew

she would remember the scent of this morning for the rest of her life.

“Jacob...” she swallowed. “I think...you were how I came to truly understand the meaning of the word.”

“Which word?” he asked so warily she almost laughed. “Please don’t say ‘bastard.’”

“Love. It is the only word that can possibly describe what I feel when you're near me.”

Light flared in his face. “Which is...” he coaxed softly.

He scaled another step.

“As if everything is better. And brighter.” She spoke in scarcely above a whisper. “And bigger. And... right . Somehow the world makes much more sense when you're near and when you were gone...there was never a single moment where I stopped loving you.”

His eyes were shining. He drew a trembling thumb across her cheek, collecting one of the tears that had spilled from her eyes.

“Zold,” he said softly, “I want to marry you. If you need more time...”

“I want to be your wife,” she said at once.

They beamed at each other, a little in awe of their accord.

“Well, then.” The beautiful face of the beloved man before her was ablaze with happiness. “Let me do this properly, before I speak to your father. Isolde Sylvaine, will you do me the honor of being my wife?”

“Oh, God. Yes, please, Jacob.”

She flung herself into his arms and he lifted her up and twirled her about until the breeze sent her dress sailing, like the music box dancer.

And then, at long last, he kissed her.

The kiss was knee-buckling. Tender, then passionate and claiming, the way she'd always known Jacob would kiss. She fit against him as if she was made just for him, and could feel the restrained desire humming in his hard body. Thrillingly, all for her.

“I will love you so well, Isolde the whole of your life,” he whispered.

And as Jacob held his fiancée in his arms, he thought, I will love you so well that you will struggle to remember his name. He will be invisible to you, even if he's one pew over in church. With my body, my heart, with every particle of my being, I will make you forget you ever knew Isaiah Redmond.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:26 am

“ A ll this hair was such a lovely surprise,” Isolde murmured.

Her husband’s laugh rumbled against her cheek. His chest was currently her pillow.

She had learned that her hands were magic wands. Dark hair curled across his hard pectorals; a ferny trail of it—which she was following now, with a finger—led down, and down, to the little dark fluff of it nestling his cock, which was stirring again.

They had been married for a few months, and still Isolde felt continually inebriated by the gorgeous textures of Jacob, and of all the ways she could make his body respond to her touch, and the way the very sight of her made his eyes go dark with desire.

The shocking prowess of Jacob’s lovemaking called to mind the first time she’d seen him fencing.

Surely not even Everseas were born knowing how to do those things with his hands and tongue and various other parts.

How to make her cry out in pleasure and beg for more, that sort of thing.

She also doubted they could be learned from a book.

She didn’t for a moment question that he was faithful to her, body and soul.

She was grateful they had yet another language to express their love for each other.

She didn't need the mystery of his sensual education revealed.

For she had her own secrets.

From the bed where she now lay naked and entwined with her spouse, she could see her ormolu jewelry box.

Safely hidden in its false bottom was a letter smudged with her tears and Isaiah's fingerprints.

In rare moments she felt a brief, cruel pierce of homesickness for a life she would never lead and a man she could never have, not even as a friend.

And her darkest secret was that however much she loved and desired her husband, the fierce passion of her first kiss echoed in her; now and again, she restlessly yearned.

And she could not entirely vanquish her jealousy of the woman Isaiah married.

She was not proud of any of this; being ashamed changed nothing.

But it did remind her to appreciate her already extraordinary blessings.

Perhaps a secret or two was what gave texture and dimension to love and marriage.

She had accepted that one small part of her heart must remain forever hidden, the way one side of the moon would forever be unknown even to those who looked up at it every night.

The first weeks of Isaiah and Fanchette's marriage were as warm and pleasant as a balmy trip to Spain, such was the joy and back-slapping approval that greeted the news among the Redmond and Tarbell social circles.

They were showered with gifts and feted with receptions and dinners in London.

Isaiah was introduced to dozens of influential people, in politics, with titles.

He endeavored at once to impress them, and did.

His parents decided to remain in London with Diana most of the time so Isaiah and Fanchette could have the Redmond manor in Pennyroyal Green to themselves.

Fanchette's trembling nerves on their wedding night aroused Isaiah's protectiveness, and the initial awkward mechanics of lovemaking evolved into a certain affectionate ease, even passion.

His obvious pleasure in her body excited her; he murmured to her that she was beautiful as his palms glided reverently over her velvety skin.

Like opera and expensive furniture, sex was serendipitously another thing they both enjoyed, which he liked to think boded well for their future.

But sex was a double-edged sword for Isaiah: there was bliss in forgetting but grave danger in the dissolve of defenses.

Because sometimes during that moment of release, that brief, total loss of control, feelings he ruthlessly kept barricaded escaped.

And for a few moments he would lie still in the dark, pinned breathless by grief and disbelief, lonelier than he'd ever felt.

For those few moments, every cell of his body howled confusion and betrayal, knowing its longing for another woman would never be sated.

He had all the ingredients for a happy life. A triumphant life. All of this seemed

evidence that he had done the right thing. Inherent in duty was safety, security and prosperity. No doubt this would eventually prove to be the wisest way to love.

But nearly every clear day, just before half past four, he found himself making his way to the room at the top of Redmond House.

And there he would watch the sun paint a gold stripe along the roof edge of Miss Marietta Endicott's Academy.

~End~