



# The Brit and the Bridesmaid (Sweet Treat Novellas #1)

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Abby is helping her sister, Caroline, plan her “British” wedding.

Caroline is obsessed with all things British and insists on an authentic wedding, despite living in Oregon.

When they arrive at Sainsbury House reception hall, it has everything Caroline loves, and the host, Matthew Carlton, even has a British accent.

Yet Abby isn’t buying the whole good-looking-British man with impeccable manners thing; she’s determined to expose him as a fake.

But the more Abby gets to know Matthew, the more she realizes how wrong she really is.

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## Page 1

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There was nothing quite as dangerous as a Brit-obsessed romantic planning a dream wedding.

For weeks, Abby Grover had followed her sister, the bride-to-be, from one possible venue to the next.

“It’s not English enough,” Caroline had declared of a ritzy hotel.

“A British lake would have different trees,” she’d said of an upscale country club.

The day they visited a historic-church-turned-reception-hall, Abby thought they’d found the perfect place. It was old and elegant and antique-y. Caroline had seemed almost convinced. She even spoke at length with the event planner. But on the drive home, she crossed the reception hall off her list.

“No one there has an English accent,” Caroline explained quite firmly.

“This is Oregon.”

Unfortunately, logic cannot compete with Anglo-mania. “There will be accents at my wedding. I must have accents.”

My sister is insane. Completely insane.

And so, for the fifth Saturday in a row, Abby and her sister drove to yet another location too swanky for ordinary people. Caroline, however, was aiming far beyond ordinary.

“Sainsbury House was built in 1880,” Caroline told her, scanning the venue’s website on her phone. “It has gardens. I need gardens.”

Abby could appreciate the need for a garden. She loved plants. Loved them. She drove down a narrow lane.

Caroline’s voice jumped an octave. “And there’s a conservatory.”

Apparently conservatories were reason for excitement. Caroline sounded ready to jump out of the car and run the rest of the way.

“You realize,” Abby warned her. “No one there will have a British accent.”

“This will be perfect. I can feel it.”

They pulled into the parking lot. Abby had developed a keen eye for venues.

Plenty of parking. Easy to find. These were points in Sainsbury House’s favor.

Or would have been if Abby were the one choosing.

Of course, there was absolutely no chance of Abby choosing a wedding venue.

She hadn’t been in a relationship in a year, and the guy she’d been with then had proven to be such a complete jerk that she had no plans of ever dating anyone again.

No, the realm of wedding plans was exclusively Caroline’s.

She looked at her sister, wondering what she thought of her first glimpse of the Sainsbury House grounds. Everything would probably depend on how historic and English and fancy the house itself looked, and on how well the staff could pretend to

be British.

Abby got out of the car and stepped onto the cobblestone walkway. The sooner they had their tour and Caroline ran down her list of requirements with the event coordinator, the sooner they could be on their way again.

“Five acres of land.” Caroline was still inhaling every piece of information she could find online. “Five acres.”

“Remind me again why you need five acres for a small, family wedding.”

“Because.”

“That isn’t actually a reason.”

Caroline shook her head, sighing dramatically. In her “I’m quoting something very English” voice, she said, “Why must every day involve a fight with an American?”

“ You are an American.”

Caroline waved that off. “It’s a thing people say.”

Abby eyed her sister more closely. “And these people who say this, they don’t happen to be British people in period dramas on public television, do they?”

Caroline looked the tiniest bit guilty.

Abby had to smile. “I don’t know how Gregory puts up with you.”

Caroline’s entire face lit up at the mention of her fiancé. “He loves me.”

“Of course he does.” For all of Caroline’s flightiness and fantasies, she was quite possibly the most lovable person Abby had ever known.

It was little wonder their great aunt had named Caroline her only heir.

Great Aunt Gertrude hadn’t been a millionaire by any means, but Caroline’s inheritance was paying for her dream wedding.

“Oh, Abby! Look. It’s perfect.”

They’d only just emerged from the thick canopy of trees to a rather amazing view of the house.

Historic. Fancy. Two out of three so far. Abby didn’t know what qualified a place as “looking English.”

She didn’t see a Union Jack flying out front or Audrey Hepburn selling flowers or anything. Still, if Caroline thought the place looked perfect, Abby wasn’t about to argue.

“Fantastic,” Abby said. “Let’s go inside.”

They stepped inside the open front doors and walked, eying their surroundings, to the front of the entry hall.

Polished tables flanked the room, with fresh-cut flowers in porcelain vases.

Old-style paintings hung in gilded frames.

A turning staircase with an intricately carved banister led up and past a wide row of tall windows. Even the ceiling was fancy.

She'd been in upscale places like this. Her last boyfriend was rich, with high-class friends and connections. He felt most comfortable in places where Abby felt too poor to even breathe the air.

"Welcome to Sainsbury House," a man's voice said from just behind them—a man with an English accent.

Caroline squealed. Abby did her best not to roll her eyes and looked back.

Mr. English Accent was young—she'd guess not yet thirty, and handsome—the man had green eyes, for heaven's sake, and a ridiculously amazing smile; his teeth stood as a one-mouth testament against the widely-held belief in universal English dental issues.

"Have you come for a tour, or do you have an appointment?" he asked.

"Both." Caroline even bounced a bit as she answered.

They'd found a place that was old and elegant and where at least one person spoke with a British accent. Abby couldn't be entirely certain Caroline wasn't about to explode with excitement. Or faint—she'd been doing the whole back of the hand pressed daintily to the forehead thing a lot lately.

"You must be Caroline and Abby Grover."

Abby leaned closer to her sister and spoke under her breath. "You gave them my name? This is your tour."

"Don't you love the way he said 'Caroline'?" her sister whispered back. "So elegant."

The Englishman watched them with admirable patience.

“We are the Grover sisters,” Abby told him. “That sounds like a lame band, doesn’t it?”

“The name is lovely, I assure you.”

“I assure you?” Who talks like that?

He looked between them. “Which of you is Caroline, the bride-to-be?”

Abby didn’t wait a single instant. She pointed across herself at her sister. Mr. Elegant’s green eyes lingered on Abby. He smiled the tiniest bit, before his gaze moved to Caroline.

“Congratulations, Ms. Grover,” he said. “If you will follow me this way, we shall take a moment in my office to discuss your needs and wishes for your wedding before going about the estate to see if Sainsbury House can meet those needs.”

Smooth, Brit Boy. Smooth.

Caroline followed almost glassy-eyed. If only the guy realized he’d likely sold her on the location simply by opening his mouth. Caroline would have her English-accented wedding, and Mr. Green-Eyed-Hunk-of-Britishness would get whatever commission came with booking the event.

“My name is Matthew Carlton, by the way,” he said to Caroline.

“Matthew?” She sounded ridiculously happy about that. Apparently Matthew was a good name for her fantasy wedding.

Matthew wasn’t the least bit weirded out by that. He just nodded and held open a door. Abby stepped through behind Caroline. The office wasn’t huge, but it wasn’t

tiny, either. It was almost as nauseatingly elegant as the entry. They sat in two leather armchairs facing the desk, where Matthew sat.

“Tell me, Ms. Grover, what would make your wedding day perfect?” The man was feeding an addiction.

Abby watched as he nodded in agreement with Caroline’s crazy ideas.

He didn’t even seem surprised when she mentioned the hoped of convincing Grandma Grover to wear a bustle.

When Caroline spoke of polished silverware, spotless crystal, starched white aprons on appropriately silent maids, Matthew simply said, “Of course.”

Of course? No one Abby had ever known would think these kinds of demands were normal or expected or not insane.

Matthew took notes, listening closely and asking questions. He was handsome, too good looking, actually, for Abby to stop herself from looking at him again and again. He seemed nice enough, in a snobby sort of way.

For Caroline’s sake, and the sake of Abby’s future weekends, she sincerely hoped Sainsbury House worked out for the wedding. But for her part, Abby'd definitely had enough of all the haughtiness and fake fanciness.

The Grovers weren’t that kind of people. They were simple, down-to-earth, hovering somewhere near the bottom end of the middle of the middle class. People like Matthew Carlton would never understand that.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:09 am*

Matt grabbed a cold bottle of beer from the fridge before stepping through the glass doors onto the balcony of his flat.

His neighbor was out, watering the impressive herb garden he'd cultivated on his own balcony.

Barney had a green thumb, a talent he'd carefully cultivated over his seventy-some-odd years of life.

"Good evening, Barney," he said as he sat in his Adirondack chair. "Your garden is coming along nicely."

Barney's wrinkles clearly showed he'd spent his life happy. "You always speak so proper. Makes me feel like I should be bowing or something."

"You forget, I'm an American citizen now." He raised his bottle as if making a toast. "No more bowing for this bloke."

"Americans don't say 'bloke,'" Barney warned him.

Matt leaned back, settling in for a relaxing evening in the cool spring air. "I thought American citizens had the right to say anything they wanted—that bit was on the test, you know."

Barney pointed at him with his gardening clippers. "You can say anything at all, but you might get beat up for it."

Matt nodded. “We do that in England, as well.”

He enjoyed their chats. Barney had been the one to start them not long after Matt moved in. They spent quite a few evenings talking across the small space that separated their balconies. He was grateful for the friendship.

“How was your day?” Barney asked, snipping expertly at one of his plants.

“Not bad at all. I booked a wedding for late June.”

Barney nodded slowly, his eyes not straying from his task. “A June wedding.”

“I know it’s very cliché, but I have my suspicions that this particular bride is very... particular.”

Matt had learned a thing or two about dealing with dreamers and bridezillas.

He was certain Caroline Grover fell in the dreamer category.

She knew exactly what she wanted on her wedding day, and that she was nearly panicked at the thought that something might go wrong or deviate from her imaginings. He’d worked with that before.

“She had a sister, though, who was...” He couldn’t quite put a word to Abby Grover.

She’d clearly been annoyed. She’d also sent her sister more than a few looks of exasperated affection.

Abby had managed to toss more than a few zingers during their interview and subsequent tour. “She was intriguing.”

“Was she?” Barney was either laughing at him or... No. He was definitely laughing.

Matt grinned back. “Not that anything will come of it. She made her dislike of me very clear. I don’t know what, exactly, I did to put her off me so immediately.”

“Were you wearing that monkey suit of yours?”

Matt chuckled. He knew exactly what Barney was getting at. “I have to wear a suit and tie to work— it’s my uniform. Besides, I don’t think I look so terrible in a suit.”

Barney snipped a rosemary plant. “Not terrible, but it does make you look like a yuppie.”

“A yuppie? Is that an American thing?”

“It means square. You look square.”

“Square?” Matt hadn’t heard of that one, either.

“Stuffy,” Barney tried again.

“Ah.” That was a word he understood. “People will think I’m trying to be posh.”

Barney took a long drink of water from the bottle he always kept nearby while he gardened, all the while giving him a look of confusion.

“When I came to the States, I didn’t expect a language barrier.

” Adjusting to the odd quirks of the American culture had been harder than he’d expected.

Still, he wouldn't want it any other way.

One of things he liked most about living in America was how diverse the place was, how different people could be one to the next.

"Tell me more about this intriguing woman," Barney said. He turned a bit toward Matt, shifting around on the short stool he always sat on while tending his plants. It was nice of the old man to humor him, but Matt had no intention of boring him to death.

"You don't really want to hear about some random person I met."

Barney let his gloved hands rest against his legs. His expression turned thoughtful. "My wife was... intriguing." His smile softened and spread. "Always kept me wondering. I loved that about her." Barney looked across at Matt. "So, yes, I want to hear about this random, intriguing woman you met."

Matt often got the impression that Barney was lonely. He could indulge him in this. "Her name is Abby. She's pretty, but not in a movie-star or super-model way."

"A natural beauty," Barney suggested.

"Exactly." He'd especially liked the hint of freckles across her nose. "And I could tell she was annoyed by the entire wedding planning thing, but she put up with it, not poking fun at her sister for her ridiculous demands."

Barney raised a bushy white eyebrow. "More ridiculous than some of the demands you've told me about?"

There had been some unbelievable brides and mothers- and fathers-of-the-bride over the five years Matt had worked at Sainsbury House. It was always a juggling act to

keep them happy while trying to reacquaint them with reality.

“This bride wants a historic British wedding fresh out of a television drama.” She hadn’t said as much outright, but Matt had quickly gotten the gist.

“I bet she just ate you up then.” Barney chuckled deep in his chest.

Matt grinned. He’d seen her glee when she realized she’d found someone in Oregon with an English accent. Caroline Grover had thrown in more cliché British words and phrases than Matt had heard on his last trip back to London.

“Abby was patient with her sister, which was admirable. But she made some of the funniest comments under her breath.”

“So she has a sense of humor.” Barney nodded his approval.

“And she asked all of the questions her sister should have been asking but was too high in the clouds to think of.”

“So she’s smart on top of it all.” Barney gave him a wizened look. “This one is intriguing.”

“I confess, I’m hoping she handles more of the arrangements than her sister does.”

Barney set his gardening sheers aside and leaned his arms along the balcony railing, facing Matt. “You plan to see her again?”

“If she comes by.”

Barney was obviously unimpressed. “When a woman like that walks into your life, Matt, you don’t casually let her walk back out.”

“I don’t have her contact information.”

Barney wasn’t discouraged by that at all. “You have the sister’s information.”

“It doesn’t work that way. I don’t call up clients to ask out their family members.”

Barney stood up from his stool, waving off Matt’s words like a pesky fly. “You’ll think of something.

Matt did think about it as he sat watching the sunset color the sky. Abby Grover wouldn’t entirely leave his thoughts. He wanted to see her again, if nothing else to discover if she hated him as much as she’d seemed to. And why. And whether he could do anything to change that.

Intriguing didn’t even begin to describe her.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:09 am*

“ I don’t understand why I have to do this.

” Abby held her phone to her ear with one hand and tried to flip through Caroline’s three pages of instructions with the other.

She’d made the drive out to Sainsbury House with a very detailed list of assignments.

Within a few seconds of arriving, Caroline had called to add a couple of things.

“Because I have a fitting today!” Caroline’s frantic tone was clear even with the noise of the city echoing through the phone.

Abby could think of a hundred things she’d rather be doing than spending another Saturday at Sainsbury House. “Why not Mom?”

“She’s coming to the fitting with me. Come on, Abby. You’re maid of honor—you’re supposed to help with this stuff.”

There should be a law against sisters being maids of honor.

“You’re right.” What else could she say? “I’ll let you know how it goes.”

“Thanks. You’re the best.”

“Yes, I am.” She hit the end button and tucked her phone in her pocket. “Yes, I am.”

She stopped at the bottom of the stairs leading up to Sainsbury House’s wraparound

porch.

Wedding planning, especially in a place as high-and-mighty as Sainsbury House, wasn't her kind of thing.

She'd dragged herself away from her garden that morning to run this errand.

She probably still had dirt under her fingernails.

Dirty fingernails and fancy houses don't go together. She knew that well. Dirk the Jerk—her family had given him that name even before Abby realized the kind of guy he was—had lectured her on that so many times.

“At least pretend like you belong here.” That had been one of his favorite lines.

Abby stepped inside the entryway. The place was as overwhelmingly fancy as it had been a week earlier.

It made a person feel judged, like the paintings and crown molding and polished tables were there solely to remind her that she fit better in a tiny apartment in a barely middle-class neighborhood than in a mansion.

“May I help you?” A woman Abby thought she'd seen in passing the last Saturday greeted her near the winding staircase. As near as she'd been able to discover, Matthew was the only person at Sainsbury House who spoke with an accent.

“I am looking for Matthew Carlton.” She was proud of herself for not calling him Brit Boy or Mr. Elegant or any of the other names she'd been using in her mind the past week.

“He is in his office.” The woman motioned toward the same room they'd been shown



to before.

“If I’m interrupting, I can wait.” She wanted to wait. For reasons she refused to think about, she was nervous. Matthew Carlton had shown up a few too many times in her wandering thoughts recently.

The woman peeked past the office door then looked back at Abby. “No one is in the office but Matthew. You are quite welcome to go on inside.”

She threw back her shoulders. No snooty Englishman was going to intimidate her.

She might not fit in with her worn-out jeans and casual top.

The dirt under her fingernails and her complete lack of jewelry probably pegged her as someone not cut out to be a client at Sainsbury House. But she didn’t care. Not at all.

Abby stepped into the office. Matthew looked up from his laptop.

He smiled at her. That smile was part of the reason he’d shown up in her thoughts so often. She couldn’t be blamed for thinking about it, or for her heart fluttering around at seeing it again.

“Ms. Grover.” He stood and came around his desk, indicating the leather armchair nearest his desk. Once she sat, he moved back to the chair he’d occupied before. “What brings you to Sainsbury House?”

“My sister.” Might as well get right to the point.

His mouth pulled in a thought-filled line. “She did not mention that you would be stopping in.”

“Has Caroline been in touch with you?”

That smile returned again. “She emailed me six times yesterday.”

“That’s Caroline.”

“She seems very... particular.” His green eyes sparkled with amusement.

Abby did her fair share of laughing at her sister, but she didn’t like anyone else to. “It’s her wedding day,” Abby said in Caroline’s defense. “She’s entitled to be picky about a few things.”

“Of course.” He gave a short nod. He threaded his fingers through one another. “What may I do for you?”

“What may I do for you?” No one talks like that. If he kept it up, she wouldn’t be able to understand him at all. Sainsbury House, apparently, was the place to go if a person wanted to feel poor and stupid.

“Caroline sent me to ask about a few things.”

“I do not have any appointments for a couple of hours, so we can certainly address those items now.” Matthew Carlton could probably sell the stripes off a skunk with those soft eyes and that heart-melting smile. “What is first on your list?”

Yes. Stick to business. Abby laid her papers on the edge of the desk, smoothing them out. “She wants to know if the fountain in the formal garden will be running the day of her wedding.”

Matthew nodded. “It is only ever turned off in the winter.”

Abby snagged a pen from the pencil cup on his desk and wrote “yes” next to the first item.

“Does the conservatory have a sign that says ‘Conservatory?’”

“Do you mean like a placard?” The question clearly confused him. She could appreciate that—it was a strange question.

“I think so. She probably wants to make sure the guests know that there is a conservatory at her wedding. She likes the word.”

Matthew leaned back in his chair, brows drawn. “I honestly cannot remember whether there is a sign or not. Are there any other details we need to go look at? We can check for the placard while walking around the house and grounds.”

Abby scanned her list. “I’m supposed to find out which flowers grow closest to where she’ll be standing for the ceremony. Also, which side of the guest chairs will be in the most shade. And she wants to know if the floor in the ballroom is cherry, oak, or pine.”

“It is oak but stained cherry.”

Abby wrote that down, impressed despite herself that he knew the answer off the top of his head.

She read Caroline’s next question word for word. ““Are the walls in the ballroom aqua or moss?””

“I honestly have not the slightest idea.”

Abby put a star by that, as she had next to the conservatory, flower, and shade

questions. “Does your in-house caterer make tarts?”

“Tell her the catering options are all on our website. Special requests go through the head of catering, but there is a request form on—”

“The website,” Abby finished for him. “That’s not very antiquesy of you. Shouldn’t you be giving that information by telegram or something?”

His smile spread to a grin. A smile like that was a dangerous thing. “We do cater to those looking for a traditional event.”

“If by traditional you mean old and fancy, I agree.”

His expression clearly showed he thought she was offering a compliment. If she’d said snotty instead of fancy like she’d meant to at first, he probably wouldn’t have been as happy about it.

They went through a few more questions. After fifteen minutes, everything left on the list required a walk around the house and grounds.

Matthew took a long coat from the coat rack inside the door of his office, along with an old-fashioned umbrella with a cane-style handle.

That brought Abby’s eyes to the windows.

While they were talking, a steady drizzle had begun.

He held his office door open for her. Dirk had done that when they were out in public. At first she’d liked it, until it became clear he only held the door because not doing it would look uncivilized.

She stepped into the entryway, zipping up her jacket as they walked toward the doors. She tugged the drawstrings on her hood so it pulled tight around her head.

One step short of being beyond the roof of the porch, Matthew popped open the umbrella and held it over both of their heads. He seemed to be making sure it covered her, even if it meant getting a bit wet himself.

It wasn't even a hard rain, just enough to be annoying. She didn't know how to respond to a guy opening doors, or pulling out her chair, or holding an umbrella for her. "You don't have to do that."

"Actually, I do. It is in the employee handbook."

She looked up at him. "Seriously?"

He nodded, completely sincere. "I know you think your sister is very particular about things, but I promise you, she has nothing on the owners of this place."

Matthew suddenly seemed relatable, almost like a normal person. Abby couldn't quite put her finger on what had changed, but something definitely had. "What other rules do you have to follow?"

He looked over his shoulder back toward the house before resuming their walk, leaning in enough to talk to her under the umbrella. "We are supposed to avoid contractions whenever possible."

"Like won't and didn't and that kind of thing?"

"Exactly. The owners insist that using the full two words sounds more sophisticated, though I fully intend to contract words as soon as we are out of earshot of the house."

“You aren’t afraid you’ll get into trouble?” Abby asked.

He gave her a winning smile. “I think you can be trusted to keep my secret.”

He led her around a puddle with the slightest pressure of his hand on her back. Another gentlemanly gesture she thought only existed in movies.

“What other requirements do your bosses have for you?”

“I am to, and I quote, ‘milk my accent for all it’s worth.’” He shot her a look of amusement that brought a smile to her face. “If I ever lost my accent, I’d probably lose this job.”

“Are you in danger of losing your accent?” It seemed pretty firmly in place.

“Last time I visited London, my family all told me I sounded like an American.”

She actually laughed at that. “They don’t talk with many Americans, do they?”

“Clearly not.”

They turned up the cobblestone path that led to the spot where outdoor ceremonies were held. Matthew had told her and Caroline about the elegant canopy they set up when the weather was questionable. It wasn’t set up today.

“So your sister is very much a fan of traditional, old-fashioned things,” Matthew said. “That description doesn’t seem to fit you. What would you choose if this were your event?”

“Are you trying to convince me to buy a wedding package? That’ll be a tough sell; I don’t even have a boyfriend.”

“Really?”

She swore he actually took note of that. Was he flirting with her? If so, he wasn't doing a very good job of it. Maybe Brits were terrible flirts.

“No sales pitch, I promise.” He tucked the hand not holding the umbrella into his coat pocket. “I'm just curious to know if my hunch is correct.”

“What hunch?”

“Sainsbury House is a good fit for your sister, but I have a feeling it would be torture for you.”

She felt her defenses going up. He really didn't think she belonged in an upscale place.

“And what would be a good fit for me?” She could hear that her tone had turned cold but couldn't help it.

He wasn't fazed at all. “If you were the one planning a wedding, I'd guess you would choose something smaller and simpler—a beach or a garden. And there'd only be a few people, those you care about most, not every person you've ever met.”

She had to admit, silently, that he was right about that. He was so right that she didn't know if his insightfulness was impressive or a little spooky. “Okay, Nostradamus, what would my wedding colors be?”

He eyed her closely. His gaze narrowed. She almost laughed at the comical “thinking” face he made. Almost. “You wouldn't have colors. You'd tell your bridesmaids to wear whatever they wanted. And you wouldn't wear a traditional wedding dress, just whatever you felt like.”

She let her surprise show. “That’s creepy.”

He flashed her a flawless smile. “I came pretty close, then?”

They’d reached the spot where the bride and groom and minister would stand during a wedding. Abby eyed the trellis and nearby bushes. Did Caroline expect her to list every flower nearby, or only the closest ones?

“Daffodils,” Matthew said. “Tiger lily. And, I believe those are Dolly Madison lilies.”

Once again she was staring at him. “You know the names of these flowers?” He’d gotten every single one correct so far.

He shrugged a little. “My mum has an extensive flower garden. I probably know more about flowers than almost any person in Oregon.”

Probably not more than I do. She wrote down the flowers he’d mentioned. “Do you think I can get away with just putting ‘roses’ for the rest?”

“I wouldn’t bet on it. Your sister is very detail-oriented.”

“Tell me about it.” She bent over the darkest red roses growing there, taking a deep breath. The amazing scent answered her question. “These are Mr. Lincoln roses.”

“They are. You know a few things about flowers, yourself.”

"Enough to realize the daffodils and lilies won't still be in blume by the end of June."

Between them, they managed to identify nearly every variety of rose growing around the ceremony area.



They likely didn't need to be that extensive, but Abby was enjoying it.

Her family's eyes always glazed over when she talked about gardening and flowers.

Dirk had told her a few times to "shut up about the plants." While she could tell flowers wouldn't have been Matthew's first choice of topics, he was knowledgeable and didn't seem to mind. It was a nice change.

They timed the walk from the parking lot to the front porch, just as Caroline had requested.

They decided that the ballroom walls were closer to aqua than moss, though Abby thought there was at least a little mint in them. The conservatory, they discovered, did have a placard.

The longer Abby was with him, the more Abby liked Matthew. He had a dry sense of humor and wasn't nearly as stuffy as she'd thought at first. She wasn't ready to start throwing herself at him or anything like that. But she liked him.

She liked him quite a lot, actually.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:09 am*

“She can identify roses just by scent, Mum.” Matt pulled his jacket on while talking on the phone.

After a long morning of making arrangements, calming frantic brides, and telling himself the summer rush would be over in only a few more months, he was almost desperate to get away from his desk, if only for the length of a lunch break.

“I very much doubt she only used the scent, Matt. She likely looked at petal patterns and stem anatomy and any number of other things.” Mum knew her flowers; no one would argue that. “But the fact that she could identify them at all is impressive. I like this one.”

“Because she knows roses?”

Mum laughed. “No. Because you’ve mentioned her three times in this one call. If she’s interesting enough to grab your attention, I will happily cheer her on.”

He stepped onto the front porch, grateful for the breeze and fresh air. His office could feel claustrophobic sometimes. “I hate to tell you this, but she doesn’t care for me much. Her obvious dislike didn’t improve much beyond begrudging tolerance when I last saw her.”

“How could she not like you?” Mum always was rather blinded by her loyalty. She never believed anyone could possibly feel anything other than adoration for her children.

“Barney says she probably thinks I’m too posh.” He followed the path leading away

from the house. He enjoyed taking a slow stroll around the grounds during the day.

“Posh? Where does she think you come from, Chelsea?”

His family couldn’t afford to look at the houses in Chelsea, let alone live there.

“You just tell her you’re a regular bloke from Stanmore,” Mum instructed.

“I could tell her that exactly, but it wouldn’t mean anything to her. She doesn’t know London.”

“Then you’ll have to show her.”

He pushed out a breath. “I tried when she was here last, but I could tell I wasn’t making a very good impression.”

The scent of pine hung on the cool breeze. Matt could feel some of his stress slipping away. There was nothing like fresh air and the outdoors to clear his mind.

“Have you called her?” Mum asked. “Maybe if you took her out for coffee or something, she might get to see the real you. Somewhere away from work.”

“I don’t have her number.”

“So call the sister, the one getting married.”

Mum and Barney were both crazy. “I can’t call a client asking for personal information about her family members.”

“Why on earth not?”

“For one thing, it’s unprofessional.”

“Then I’ll have to start wishing on my star again.”

He stopped in his tracks. “Don’t do that, Mum.”

She had a metal star hanging in her kitchen that, ever since he was a child, she’d made wishes on any time her kids needed to be guilted into doing something.

“Star on my Wall—” Her typical beginning to any wish.

“—find Matt a way to talk to this girl who knows a lot about roses but who thinks he’s posh. Matt needs a second chance.”

“Mum.”

“Star on my Wall, convince Matt that he can call this girl and still be a stuffy professional like he thinks he needs to be.”

He held back a laugh. “Are you done?”

“For now.”

His mother had always been enjoyably nutty. “I miss you, Mum.”

“I’d tell you to move back home, then, but since you’ve gone and made yourself an official American, I don’t suppose that’s going to happen.”

“You should move here.” He knew what her answer would be; they’d had this conversation before.

“Maybe if you don’t get your act together and find yourself a nice girl, I’ll do that and find one for you myself.”

That was a threat if he’d ever heard one. “No need. I’m certain I’ll—”

The words died. His feet froze. Larry, the Sainsbury House gardener, was talking to someone by the rose garden. It was a young woman in a ratty pair of jeans, and a button-down flannel work shirt, with hair a familiar shade of light brown.

“Matt?” Mum’s voice hardly registered.

He was certain that Abby was talking to Larry. But why was she there?

“Matt?” Mum asked again.

“I... uh, I gotta go.”

“Is everything all right?”

He began walking toward the roses. He lowered his voice. “She’s here. Abby. The girl I’ve been telling you about. She’s here at my work.”

“The star does it again! Go talk to her, dear. Quickly. But call me tomorrow and tell me all about it.”

“Sure. Bye, Mum.”

He walked toward Abby and Larry with no idea what he meant to say. Larry spotted him before he had time to figure it out.

“Hey, Matt.” Larry was the only person at Sainsbury House who didn’t call him

Matthew.

He nodded a greeting, but turned almost immediately to Abby. “Hi. What brings you around?”

She blushed a little. Was she embarrassed or happy to see him? He hoped happy. He really hoped. “I’ve come to save your roses.”

“Save the roses?”

Larry nodded. “She noticed when she was here that we have black rot in a few of the bushes. She brought a special formula to treat it.”

Her cheeks were still red, and she didn’t quite meet Matt’s eyes. What did that mean? A good sign? Bad?

“Abby works at the Northwinds Nursery,” Larry added.

That explained a few things. He was surprised she’d made the drive out just to tend a few rose bushes. Sainsbury House wasn’t really near anything. “You cannot stand to see an innocent plant suffer, is that it?”

Her blush deepened, but her shoulders straightened. “I only thought your gardener would appreciate knowing what we did to save our bushes from this awhile back. Black rot can be stubborn.”

Though he couldn’t be entirely sure, Matt suspected he’d offended her somehow. Maybe this was simply more of her assumption that he was arrogant. Let her see for herself. Mum’s advice echoed in his mind. He could do that.

“What’s the formula?” he asked.

Larry explained it, but in terms Matt wasn't entirely familiar with. He tried to follow but didn't do a very good job. When the chemicals and explanations wrapped up, he simply threw out an, "Ah," and left it at that. "Does it work?"

"Of course it does," Abby insisted. "I wouldn't have driven all this way for something that wouldn't help."

He'd rubbed her wrong again. It was Sainsbury House that did it. He had to act... well, for lack of a better word, posh while he was there. Even when he tried to be himself, he couldn't do it entirely.

"I was about to go get some lunch." Invite her to go. His stomach twisted a little with nervousness. "Would you like to join me?"

She was clearly surprised.

Say yes. Say yes.

"We're going to look at a few more plants," she said after a moment's pause. "So I'm going to be kind of busy."

"Sure." He tried to shrug it off, but the rejection stung.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd really wanted to impress a girl.

He had no idea how Abby Grover had reached that point so quickly, and after talking to her only twice.

But she had. And he was blowing it. "If you two are going to be working through lunch, maybe I could pick you up something and bring it back."

Larry took him up on it right away. “Are you going by the sandwich place on Third?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll take a club with everything and a Coke.”

Matt looked to Abby, hoping she would take him up on the offer.

He could convince himself she had reasons to decline his offer— it was too inconvenient or something— but to not even let him bring her back lunch was harder to explain away.

Maybe he would have to admit to himself she wasn’t interested.

“BLT, no mayo,” Abby said.

So she hadn’t brushed him off. For a minute, he was too surprised to even say anything. He pulled himself together. “Anything to drink?”

“No. I brought some water with me.”

With an eagerness he couldn't entirely explain, Matt made for his car.

He repeated the order in his mind again and again, not wanting to get it wrong.

When he got back, he meant to sit by the two of them while they did their gardening, even if nothing they said made any sense.

He wanted to be there by her, to try to figure out if she disliked him as much as he was afraid she did.



“You’re completely lost on her,” he muttered as he pulled out onto the small road leading away from Sainsbury House. He felt like a fool. He hardly knew Abby Grover, and he was already making a fool of himself over her.

Fool or not, he was back in record time with three sandwiches and a Coke. Larry and Abby were still at the roses, but kneeling by the bushes, pruning.

“Ready for a break?” he asked, holding up the bag.

They both agreed, slipping off to a nearby spigot to wash their hands. Matt sat on a bench. Would Abby sit by him or take her sandwich somewhere else and avoid him entirely? Maybe he should try telling her he was just “a regular bloke from Stanmore.” It couldn’t hurt, right?

He gave Larry his club sandwich. Larry handed him some money.

“Yours wasn’t this much.” Matt started to give some of it back, but Larry shook his head.

“That’s for mine and Abby’s. I talked her into letting me pay for her lunch, since she won’t let me pay her for the work she’s doing.”

If Larry hadn’t been old enough to be Abby’s father, Matt might have been jealous.

She came over. He held out her BLT, fully expecting her to take it and walk away. She sat on the bench beside him. That was promising.

He tried to act casual, eating his sandwich like he couldn’t care less that the woman he’d been thinking about almost constantly for a week and a half was willingly sitting next to him. If she knew, she’d think he was a complete idiot.

Abby and Larry talked about plant fungi and insect treatments.

Matt listened but had nothing to add. He'd reached the end of his lunch break but hadn't said more than a few words to Abby.

He was supposed to call Mum and tell her how things went.

"I watched her eat a sandwich, and I looked stupid while she talked about flowers."

Mum is going to laugh at me.

And she did. A lot.

For his part, Matt didn't think it was very funny.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:09 am*

“Matthew asked about you.”

Abby examined the apples laid out at the produce stand, pretending her sister’s comment hadn’t made her breath catch. “Matthew Carlton?” she asked as though it didn’t matter.

“Who else?”

“I do know more than one person named Matthew.” Actually, she wasn’t sure she did. “What did he have to say?”

“Only that you helped with a fungus or something in the roses and that he thought it was nice of you.”

She felt a stab of disappointment. He hadn’t really asked about her, then. He’d simply mentioned her. Abby and Caroline moved to the next booth at the farmer’s market.

“The bushes had a little black rot,” Abby explained. She bought a small bushel of blackberries from the farmer running the booth.

“Black rot?” Caroline sounded absolutely horrified. “That will be gone before the wedding, won’t it?”

“The roses will be gorgeous. I promise.”

They walked along. Abby usually enjoyed the Sunday farmers’ markets, but Caroline was killing the joy.

“And the flowers for the bouquets—”

Abby jumped in before Caroline could ask the question she’d posed a thousand times in the months since Gregory proposed. “Emily is reliable and talented. You saw her work. I promise you, the bouquets will be amazing.”

“How was your last fitting?” Caroline asked.

Abby moaned. “The dress fits fine; it just looks ridiculous.”

“It’s a perfect reproduction of World War I-era dress. It’s perfect.”

Perfect was not the word Abby would have used. She would much rather spend her days dressed like she was then, in a comfy t-shirt and running shorts, wearing her worn-out running shoes. “That dress makes me look like a history nerd getting ready for Halloween.”

Caroline threaded her arm through Abby’s. “It’ll be beautiful.”

Abby shook her head at her sister’s romanticism. “Gregory must really like you.”

Caroline’s eyes turned dreamy. “He does.”

“Speaking of which.” Abby motioned ahead with her chin. “There he is. It must be noon.”

“Isn’t he the cutest?” Caroline squealed a little.

“Go ahead. I’m going to walk around the market for a while.”

Caroline didn’t need more encouragement; she was off like a bolt of lightning.

Abby watched her go with every bit as much amusement as envy.

Though she'd never been the hopeless romantic her sister was, she did sometimes catch herself daydreaming about finding someone she could be that perfect with and for.

Those daydreams eventually came to an abrupt end.

Dirk the Jerk saw to that. He'd appeared in her life like a hero in a cliché romance novel.

He was the wealthy, suave, dreamy hero who somehow decided to be interested in the plain, poor, awkward heroine.

Except he turned out to be a complete jerk.

She'd been blind about it for a while, but she'd finally realized how he saw her: never quite good enough.

That was a year ago. Quit thinking about it.

She sat on a bench overlooking the sprawling green fields of the park where the farmer's market was held.

The blackberries she'd bought worked well as comfort food.

By the time she'd finished off half of the little basket of berries, Dirk the Jerk had almost completely left her thoughts.

The park was peaceful, one of the things she liked most about coming to the markets.

Children played on a nearby playground. People jogged the running paths.

A disorganized soccer match covered a field to the left.

To the right, people tossed balls back and forth.

It was the greenery, though, that kept her attention. She loved plants. Loved them. The city had done a good job keeping things trimmed back and healthy at the park, but it could do with a few more flowering shrubs.

“Heads up!”

Abby processed the shouted warning just in time to duck out of the way of a flying soccer ball.

One of the soccer guys came hustling over. “Sorry ’bout that.”

She shrugged. “No problem.” She popped another blackberry in her mouth.

“Abby Grover?” a second male voice asked.

She froze, the berry half-chewed in her mouth.

She only knew one person with an English accent.

Sure enough, Matthew Carlton was coming in her direction.

Abby swallowed a little too fast and choked a second on the berry.

A quick swig from her water bottle had her almost composed by the time he reached the bench.

“Playing a little soccer?” she managed to ask.

He gave her a half smile. “ I am playing football. The rest of these clowns are playing soccer.”

His friend, who had retrieved the ball, laughed and slapped him on the shoulder as he passed. “Whatever you call it, we’re still wiping the grass with you.”

Matthew stayed by the bench even after his friend rejoined the game. “Did you come for the market?”

Abby nodded. “Never miss it. Caroline was with me.”

At the look that flitted quickly across his face, she laughed out loud. Apparently Caroline hadn’t calmed down about the wedding arrangements over the couple weeks that had passed since selecting Sainsbury House.

“Don’t worry,” Abby reassured him. “The future Mr. Caroline has taken her to lunch. She won’t stress out on you today.”

He chuckled. “I wouldn’t bet on that. I’ll probably have a half-dozen emails from her waiting for me when I get in to work tomorrow.”

“It’s good of you to put up with her.”

He wiped a trickle of sweat from his forehead. “She’s actually not that bad compared to some brides I’ve had to work with.”

“Wow. I almost feel bad for you.”

Matthew grinned at that. “Almost?”

“Hey, Matt!” someone called from the soccer game. “Either quit flirting over there or bring her over here to play.”

Matthew looked a little embarrassed. There was something very odd about a sophisticated, high-class, Englishman turning even the tiniest bit red. Dirk was never embarrassed by anything. Angry, sometimes, but not ever embarrassed.

“Do you play football?” Matthew asked.

“Football? No.” Abby shook her head. “But I did play soccer in high school.”

“Really?” Matthew looked impressed. Dirk had been a field-hockey kind of guy. They’d never talked about her sports.

“We took state my senior year.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Matt said. “But it sounds impressive.”

Abby made her best superior face. “It means we were good. And I played in the city league after that. Champions three years running.”

He motioned with his head toward the game. “Would you like to come play? Show these chumps how it’s done?”

Her first thought was to turn him down. But why should she? She still liked to play. His friends had invited her first. He was being nice— not the arrogant, stuffy guy from Sainsbury House. “Sure. Why not?”

He walked with her back toward his friends. He walked with her. Dirk would have set his own pace and expected her to match it.



“Hey, boys!” Matthew called out. “We’ve one more.”

She was welcomed heartily. Any concerns she might have had about butting in were quickly put to rest. She was immediately part of the game, treated like one of the guys, though they weren’t nearly as rough with her as they were with each other.

It was great to play again. She’d stopped while Dirk was in her life, and, though she couldn’t say why, hadn’t taken it back up again.

Matthew, she discovered, could smack talk with the best of them.

And he was funny. Hilarious. She’d seen hints of that during their walk around Sainsbury House the day she’d gone there on Caroline’s orders.

But during their lunch among the roses a few days later, he’d been quiet and distant.

She’d assumed he didn’t want to be there, or he wasn’t enjoying her company.

The two of them, who had ended up on the same team, both as forward, trounced the other team. The game wasn’t anything official, just a bunch of people trying to score against a bunch of other people, with little regard for rules.

The players began trickling off as the afternoon wore on. The game finally broke up, with the others declaring that Matthew had brought in a secret weapon, that he’d been planning to bring her in all along.

Abby couldn’t remember the last time she’d grinned so wide.

“We’re good,” Matthew declared, smiling at her.

“ We’re ? I didn’t think you were allowed to use contractions.”

He laughed lightly. "Away from work, I can use them all I want." Matthew dribbled his soccer ball as they walked away from the field. "Speaking of work, thanks again for helping Larry with the roses. He was having trouble clearing up the fungus you two were working on."

She knew how persistent black rot could be. "No problem."

Matthew opened his mouth like he meant to say something, but then stopped.

"What?"

He slowed their pace. "I have a neighbor, an older man, who is an avid gardener. He has an acre's worth of plants on his tiny little balcony."

Abby could easily picture it.

"He has been particularly distraught lately about spots on his tomato plants."

"On the tomatoes or the leaves?"

"I'm not sure." He shrugged. "Do you think... would you be willing to take a look? Give him some advice?"

She hadn't expected this. It was almost as if he valued her expertise. She didn't think the lord of the manor usually talked plants with the gardening staff.

"Do you think your neighbor would welcome the advice?"

He nodded without hesitation. "And you'd like Barney. He's fantastic."

She kept her expression serious. "I prefer unfantastic people, actually."

Matthew smiled at her. Somehow over the course of their soccer match, she'd forgotten how devastating that smile could be. Her heart pounded a bit before she managed to get it under control again.

"If you have a little time now, I'm just up the road a bit," Matthew said. Again, a hint of uncertainty hung in his tone, like he was afraid he might be wearing out his welcome.

"If Barney doesn't mind a dirty, sweaty gardener, I'm game."

Matthew gave her a grateful look and even thanked her for it.

Which Matthew was the real one? The personable, humble, joking Matthew? Or the stuffy, arrogant one? And why was it that men were so hard to figure out?

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:09 am*

Matt knocked on Barney's door, trying to convince himself this was actually happening. Abby Grover, who'd blown him off more times than he could count, and who, until that afternoon on the football pitch, had seemed more or less unapproachable, was with him at his apartment building.

And she was smiling. And talking to him.

The door opened. Barney's thick white eyebrows pulled in a look of curiosity.

"This is Abby Grover," Matt said. "She's something of a plant expert, and I told her about your tomatoes."

To his credit, Barney didn't give any indication the two of them had spent a few evenings talking about Abby. "Did you also tell her that the spots weren't my fault?"

Abby spoke before Matt could. "In my experience, tomato spots are seldom the gardener's fault."

"That's the truth." Barney emphasized the declaration with a quick nod of his head. "If you can save these stubborn plants, you'll be an expert in my book."

Abby's smile was sincere— not the fake, patronizing smile too many people gave the elderly. Everything about her felt that way— honest, real.

They passed through Barney's flat, past furniture he'd probably had for as long as Matt and Abby had been alive.

Matt had only been inside Barney's place a couple times, but it was always neat and tidy.

Barney was that way with his garden as well.

The spots on his plants probably bothered him most because it wasn't up to his standards.

"I put the plants over here that have the problem," Barney said as they reached the balcony. "I didn't want them too close to the others, just in case it's insects."

Abby knelt in front of the plants, looking closely at them. "You were smart to move them. I think it is insects." She carefully turned over one of the leaves, eying the underside. She looked up at Barney. "Do you have a sheet of paper and some kind of magnifying lens?"

Barney nodded eagerly. "I have a lens for reading the morning paper."

"Perfect."

He made his way back inside.

Matt sat on the ground next to her. "What do you need the paper for?"

"I'm going to write the bugs a letter, asking them nicely to leave Barney's plants alone."

She spoke so seriously, without even the smallest twitch to her lips. For just a moment Matt didn't realize she was joking. Then her smile spread. She had a great smile.

“That’s how professionals deal with insects?” He let his amusement and doubt show.

“Insects are very polite. They wouldn’t ever, you know, talk smack at a soccer match or anything like that.”

He chuckled. “You had a few choice things to say as well.”

Her smile grew to a grin. “Mostly because we were far better than the rest of them.”

“We were, weren’t we?” He hadn’t had that much fun playing football in a very long time. “We play almost every Sunday. You should come.”

The smallest show of a blush touched the skin behind her freckles. “Maybe I will.”

I hope so.

“And thanks, again, for doing this for Barney. He doesn’t get out much anymore, and these plants are his life, just about.”

Her gaze went to the sliding door and the living room beyond. “Does he have any family?”

“His wife died a few years ago, and his children all live out of state. He and I sort of adopted each other— I don’t have any family here either.”

She looked back at him again. “That’s really sweet.”

He couldn’t think of anything to say. The softness in her brown eyes made it impossible to think at all.

Barney rejoined them, handing Abby the paper and magnifying lens. She shook a leaf

over the paper then studied the tiny specks that landed on it with the lens. The specks moved.

“Spider mites.” She folded the paper over the bugs, pressing it tightly. “Do any of your other plants seem infested?”

She and Barney spent the next half hour meticulously going through his entire balcony garden. Matt didn’t know enough to offer any insights, but he thought he did a good job following directions and retrieving the things they asked for.

After checking the last of Barney’s plants, Abby broke the bad news. “The mites probably arrived on one of your plants, but there are signs of them on all of them now.”

Barney dropped onto his stool, looking frustrated and tired. “Am I going to lose the whole garden?”

Abby immediately and emphatically shook her head. “We got this, Barney. We totally got this.”

“You can save the plants?”

“I won’t give up on them if you don’t,” Abby promised.

A look of relief crossed Barney’s face. That garden really did mean everything to him.

The plants were almost like family. Somehow, after only knowing him for a few moments, Abby had figured that out.

She smiled at the old man. If Matt hadn’t been half gone on her already, that single

moment would have done it.

“I have something at home that will help a lot with the mites.” Abby stood, wiping soil and bits of crumpled leaves from her hands. “Let me run back to my place and shower—I’ve spent the afternoon showing a bunch of boys how to play soccer—and I’ll be back in, say, an hour. Does that work?”

Barney took one of her hands in both of his. “This is very kind of you, Abby.”

“I have loved plants since I was six years old,” she said. “I would never let a garden as beautiful as this one get eaten by mites. Not ever.”

“Will you let me treat you to dinner when you get back? You and Matt both?”

She glanced Matt’s direction. He could see the question in her eyes, so he nodded. Turning Barney down would hurt his feelings.

“That is a deal,” Abby said.

Matt walked her to the door. “I’ll see you in an hour, then, I guess.”

She shrugged. “I guess.”

He watched her disappear down the corridor. Barney came and stood next to him.

“Did you know that I met my wife at a nursery?” Barney said. “She loved to garden. Loved it. I’d never grown a plant in all my life.”

“Then why were you at a nursery?”

“I was buying a potted plant for my mother for Mother’s Day.” Barney’s expression



grew wistful.

“Francis convinced me to buy a fuchsia instead of an iris. And over the next forty years, she taught me everything she knew about plants.”

Matt set a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “I wish I could have known your wife. She sounds remarkable.”

“She was.” Barney looked up at him, an earnestness in his expression. “When a man meets a remarkable woman, he doesn’t let her slip away.”

Matt knew what Barney was getting at. “Abby’s pretty great, isn’t she?”

Barney nodded. “Hold on to that one.”

“I’ll do my best.” But would his best be enough?

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:09 am*

Over the next weeks, Abby saw Matt— she discovered he preferred to be called Matt instead of Matthew—more often than she saw her own sister.

An evening here or there, plus Saturdays, belonged to wedding preparations, but the rest of her evenings and Sundays were spent with Barney and Matt.

She didn't think she was necessarily a lonely person, but having those two to spend her time with filled a hole in her life she hadn't realized was there.

She learned all about Barney's late wife, how they'd met and fallen in love over plants. He taught her a few things about caring for fuchsia, his wife's favorite flower. Fuchsias hung in baskets all along his roofline.

They saved the tomatoes from mites, trimmed back some overgrown rosemary, and, using Abby's own formula rose food, had his Sunflare roses blooming to perfection.

And while she enjoyed every minute of that, and came to adore Barney like a wonderful mixture of grandfather and friend, Matt somehow managed to be an even better part of those evenings and Sundays together.

She found out he talked with his mom a couple of times a week, not in a mamma's boy kind of way, but simply because they liked each other and got along. More impressive even than that, he wasn't embarrassed or ashamed of being close to his family. Abby liked that. A lot.

Matt wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty and help with the gardening.

Though he didn't have Barney's experience or Abby's expertise, he knew his way around soil and plants and gardening tools, and he was a quick learner.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so at home with two people.

Even her own family grew quickly tired of her obsession with flora.

For dinner the Sunday night exactly one month since Abby had begun frequenting Matt and Barney's apartment building, she and Matt introduced Barney to Indian food.

Much to the dear man's surprise, he liked it.

After a leisurely, casual meal, Barney made his way back to his own apartment, tired from a day of gardening.

"I have a feeling he'll be sending me out for coconut korma on a regular basis now." Matt smiled as he dropped to the sofa. "I would, of course, have to reward myself with a little dhansak for my troubles."

"Of course." Abby pulled her feet onto the couch next to her. "And if I was here, what you bring for me?"

He didn't even hesitate. "Channa masala."

Abby was impressed, but not surprised. Matt noticed little things like that. "What if we were having Thai food?"

"Chicken Pad Thai."

Not bad. "What do I like on my hamburgers?" she asked.

He shook his head. “Nice try, Abby, but you don’t eat hamburgers. No red meat for you.”

Not bad at all. Her eyes darted to the entry table near the door, where her keys sat by her phone.

“What is on my key ring?”

He turned his head toward the door. Abby moved quickly, scooting over so she knelt right next to him and covered his eyes with her hand. “No peeking. We’ll see just how observant you really are, Matthew Carlton. What is on my key ring?”

“Your keys.”

“Very funny.”

He flashed her his brilliant smile. Even with her hand lamely covering his eyes, that smile was dazzling. She thought she’d become immune to it over the past weeks. Apparently not.

Completely unaware of how distracting the lower half of his face really was, Matt answered her trivia question with her hands still covering his eyes. “You have on your key ring a brass-colored bauble in the shape of the state of Oregon.”

That was absolutely correct. She dropped her hand away. “How did you know that?”

His deep green eyes met hers. “Why are you always surprised that I notice things about you?”

“Because you notice everything.” She wasn’t creeped out or worried—Matt was a nice guy, a good guy in a way she’d long ago decided didn’t exist anymore. “It’s like

you're..."

"Paying attention?" he finished for her. His smile tipped with amusement. "That surprises you?"

When she really thought about it, the attention he paid her was surprising. She couldn't remember the last time someone had really noticed her. Dirk had only ever taken note of what she wore or did or said when she fell short of his expectations.

"Most people don't notice the girl with dirt under her nails," she said. "I work an unimportant job at a hole-in-the-wall nursery." She was embarrassing herself, pointing out her shortcomings and yet could seem to stop the list from pouring out of her. "Why would anyone pay attention to—"

"Abby." He set a hand gently on the side of her face.

Her heart jumped to her throat, pounding and pulsing.

Heat poured into her cheeks. Matt had never touched her like that before.

They'd brushed hands or arms a few times while working in Barney's garden.

They'd high-fived after scoring a goal during Sunday afternoon soccer matches.

But he hadn't ever touched her that way, deliberately and affectionately.

He said her name again, but slower and softer. He cupped her face in his hand, his thumb slowly brushing along her cheek.

Abby tried to hide the way his touch upended her. If he had any idea how quickly and fully she was falling for him, he would have all the ammunition he needed to break

her heart. She wasn't ready to feel that kind of vulnerability again.

"If you keep doing that, I'll think you're about to kiss me." She tried to keep her tone light and joking. She could tell she didn't entirely succeed.

"Maybe I am about to kiss you."

Her heart flipped over. Every ounce of air slid out of her lungs. She couldn't look away. Matt moved closer. She met him halfway. The space that separated them jumped and crackled with energy. Anticipation tiptoed over Abby's skin.

I don't know if I'm ready for this. Her mind warned her not to get in any deeper, but her heart pounded too loudly. She wanted Matt to kiss her, she'd wanted it for weeks, though she'd never admitted it to herself.

Why wasn't he moving? Was he waiting? Had he changed his mind already? Abby lowered her eyes. If he was about to reject her before they even had anything between them, she didn't want to have to see it on his face.

"I probably should go," she whispered quickly.

But he didn't drop his hand from her face. "Please don't."

She met his gaze again. "But you—"

"—promised my dad years ago to never kiss a girl without giving her ample opportunity to tell me to take myself off."

He was waiting for her? "I didn't tell you to take off."

His gaze dropped to her lips. "I noticed."

Matt closed the gap, his mouth brushing over hers. Abby set her palms against his chest. All thoughts of past heartache and disappointment and vulnerability fled from her mind. There was nothing in that moment but him and that kiss. Warmth spread through her like a slow-burning fire.

He held her close, earnest but gentle, as he deepened the kiss.

Abby simply melted against him. She hadn't expected this to happen.

After Dirk, she'd promised herself that it wouldn't ever happen again.

But Matt had found his way past the barriers.

Being held by him this way, feeling the warmth of him there beside her, Abby realized she was beginning to fall in love with him. More than just beginning to, in fact.

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Abby hadn't seen Matt since their kiss in his living room two days earlier. She'd missed him, but she didn't want to seem desperate. When an order came through at the nursery for Sainsbury House, Abby jumped at the opportunity to make the delivery.

She didn't find Larry in the gardener's shed.

She decided to slip inside the house and say hi to Matt.

Abby was glad she'd worn her favorite pair of work jeans instead of the ratty ones she'd had on the last time she'd come to Sainsbury House.

Her blue t-shirt was in decent shape too.

She'd spent the day at the counter and not among the plants, so she was still clean.

Not a bad day to drop in on the guy who'd somehow managed to lay claim to her heart.

Abby smoothed her hair as she stepped onto the porch and into the entryway.

She hadn't been to Matt's office many times, but she remembered exactly where it was.

His voice floated out his open office door.

That accent had turned her off when she first met him.

He'd seemed stuffy and arrogant. Now she loved the sound of it, loved the way her name sounded like poetry when he said it.

"We can, of course, accommodate you in that," he was saying to someone inside. "At Sainsbury House we pride ourselves on making our clients' experiences as close to perfect as we can possibly manage."

Abby leaned against the wall beside the door, listening.

"And you can guarantee the staff will remain out of sight and unobtrusive throughout the night?" Whoever was in there with them seemed adamant on that point. "We don't want the help getting in the way."

The ones doing all the work have to stay out of sight. Some people were so arrogant.



“I will make note of that,” Matt answered.

She leaned around the doorframe, not stepping fully into the threshold.

Matt sat at his desk, wearing a suit and tie, hair perfect like a model in a magazine.

A couple sat across the desk from him—pearls, cufflinks, polished shoes, snotty expressions.

Abby knew in a glance that they were exactly the sort of people Dirk had tried to make her fit in with, the ones who always sighed in dismissive annoyance at her appearance and her clumsiness and her plainness.

She must have made some kind of noise. All three people looked toward her.

The same familiar discomfort she’d known every minute she’d spent with Dirk in public came rushing back.

When it was just the two of them, things were fine.

Not great, but fine. But as soon as someone else was around, she wasn’t good enough.

Matt was up and out of his chair in an instant, moving to where she stood. “Abby. What you are you doing here?”

He didn’t seem at all happy to see her. “Larry ordered some plants and things from the nursery,” she said. “I’m delivering them.”

Her eyes darted to the couple. They were watching her, their faces pulled in expressions of disapproval.

Matt slipped a hand under her elbow, moving her toward his office door with obvious determination. “Larry is probably in the shed. You should look for him there.”

“I was just there,” Abby said. “He was gone, so I came to see you.”

Matt glanced back at his office before returning his gaze to her. “He may have returned by now.”

“Maybe.”

Matt was still lightly pushing her back toward the entryway. He didn’t want her going in his office?

“I’m interrupting, aren’t I? I can just wait out here”

He shook his head no. He doesn’t even want me to wait?

He lowered his voice. “This is a very particular client. They can be very picky about things.”

“About things or about people?” The question slid unbidden from her lips.

“Both,” he said. “They have very particular... standards.”

She didn’t like that word choice at all.

“Let me put it this way—they are not the sort of people to know what a gardening shed is, let alone go inside one.”

There was no mistaking that. She didn’t belong here among his important, highbrow clients.

She couldn't have been more out of place in her jeans and t-shirt, the smell of potting soil clinging to her the way the aroma of money hung off the couple seated by Matt's desk.

He didn't want them to see him with the "garden shed girl."

Dirk's words echoed in her mind, but in Matt's voice: Everyone has their level.

Once again, she'd given her heart over to a guy who looked down on her.

He was ashamed to be seen with her in front of his snobby clients.

Abby wasn't about to go through that again.

If he was embarrassed by her, hiding her away from the fancy, important people in his life, then so be it.

But she wouldn't hang around, enduring the humiliation of it all.

She nodded then turned and walked away. If she kept her shoulders and head up, he might not realize her heart was breaking.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:09 am*

Abby wasn't answering her phone. She came by to help Barney in his garden, but only when Matt was at work. She didn't come to the market on Sundays or join him and his friends for their weekly football matches. He hadn't seen her or talked to her in two weeks.

What had he done wrong? He'd talked through it with Barney and Mum and even his sisters, but no one had any idea what had happened. Mum finally told him, in a tone that brooked no argument, that if he couldn't ask Abby why she'd suddenly decided to toss him off, he needed to ask Abby's sister.

Caroline and her fiancé were scheduled to meet with him that week to finalize all the wedding details. He intended to get the business part of it all taken care of quickly so he could ask her what he'd done to make her sister run off.

Caroline's intended, Gregory, wasn't at all like Matt had imagined him. Where she was fussy and, honestly, a little high strung, Gregory was laid back. Looking at him, no one would guess he was only a few days from getting married.

They quickly wrapped up the wedding checklist. Matt closed the lid on his laptop and looked at Caroline, hoping she could see the earnest sincerity in his expression. "May I ask a nonbusiness question?"

She and Gregory exchanged quick, knowing glances. "About Abby?" She sounded very sure about the topic.

Matt nodded. "I don't know what I did, but I can tell she's mad at me, or doesn't like me anymore." He had broken the "no contractions" rule three times in one sentence, a

clear sign Abby's defection was getting to him. "I can't get her to return my calls. I don't know what happened."

"Oh, I can tell you what happened," Caroline said. "Dirk the Jerk is what happened."

Though she spoke with conviction, the explanation didn't help at all. Matt looked to Gregory, hoping for a guy-friendly translation.

"Up until about a year ago," Gregory said. "Abby was dating this guy named Dirk. He was a total plague."

"Then why was she dating him?" Another question came to mind immediately. "And what does that have to do with me?" He wasn't a jerk, a bully, or a plague. He didn't think so, at least.

"Abby didn't see him the way we all did," Caroline explained. "Not at first, anyway. When it was just the two of them, or around our family, he was okay. He treated her decent. But around his friends and family, or the public in general, she was never good enough."

Matt didn't like that sound of that at all.

"Dirk comes from money, if you know what I mean. His family's very connected and rich and fancy.

" Caroline was growing noticeably angrier as she spoke.

"All dressed up like them, Abby looks like a million bucks. Dirk approved of her, kind of, when she was like that, but he looked down on who she really is. She wasn't supposed to tell anyone where she worked or where she grew up.

For the most part, she wasn't supposed to talk at all when they were out together, just smile and look pretty. ”

“I actually heard him tell her to shut up once,” Gregory said. “I almost belted the guy.”

A simmering anger began in the pit of Matt's stomach. How dare anyone treat Abby that way.

“She finally admitted that Dirk was, in fact, a complete jerk and found the guts to dump him,” Caroline said. “But that kind of thing leaves scars. She still wonders if she's good enough, if she's too poor or ordinary or plain.”

“How could she even think that?” It didn't make sense at all. “Abby is amazing.”

Caroline smiled. “We think so too.”

“So why did you toss her out the other day?” Gregory asked.

“I never tossed her out.” What was he talking about?

They both looked instantly confused. Obviously Matt was missing something.

“She came by here,” Caroline said. “And, apparently, you were pretty insistent she make herself scarce.”

“What?” That was ridiculous. He remembered her visit.

The Carlises were there, working out details of some stuffy dinner party they wanted to hold, and he'd been doing his best not tell them how idiotic they were.

The owners of Sainsbury House valued the Carlisles' business and connections and had been quite clear that he was not to do anything to jeopardize that.

He'd managed to hold his tongue throughout the meeting, but not without effort.

"She said you kept trying to keep her out of sight of your clients," Gregory added.

"Actually that part's true." He spoke the realization as he had it.

"The Carlisles are cold and cruel. They have no qualms about insulting or belittling people they think are beneath them. I couldn't guarantee they would be civil to her.

"He had, in fact, been very much afraid they would be terrible to her.

"There was no way on earth I was going to let her be mistreated. The only way to avoid that was to keep her from having to interact with them."

Both Caroline and Gregory looked surprised, and maybe even a little relieved.

"Then it wasn't that you were embarrassed to be seen with her in front of important people?" Caroline asked.

"The Carlisles are not important people, At least, not to me. And certainly not as important as Abby."

Caroline leaned a little closer to his desk, lowering her voice. "Does she know that?"

Does she? "Considering how quickly she decided I was ashamed of her, I'd guess she doesn't."

"Show her," Caroline added.

Show her. He meant to. He simply had to figure out how.

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Caroline's wedding was everything any hopeless romantic could wish for. The bridesmaids all wore their 1910s-inspired dresses and only complained about them when the bride wasn't nearby.

The men looked, to coin Caroline's phrase, "quite dapper" in their fancy suits and slicked-back hair.

The venue was perfect. The weather was perfect. Everything was nauseatingly perfect.

Abby was in a bad mood but couldn't seem to shake it.

She was happy for her sister; she really was.

But watching Matt—she couldn't bring herself to think of him as Matthew, wanting to remember the version of him she liked best—hover on the edges of every moment of that day only drove the knife of disappointment deeper into her heart.

She did her best to look the other way when he came in her line of vision.

As the event coordinator, he was everywhere.

He was also too busy to talk to her. For that, she was grateful.

She sat at the wedding party's table through the unending dinner, pretending to enjoy the food and faking a smile. She didn't hear half of what was said during the toasts. She raised her glass when everyone else did, laughed when the guests laughed. But



her heart wasn't in any of it.

You'll kick yourself for this later, wishing you'd pulled yourself together for Caroline's wedding. But all of the well-meaning pep talks in the world didn't seem capable of pulling her out of her funk.

If Matt hadn't seemed so great, so close to exactly what she was looking for in a man, she wouldn't have been so disappointed.

He was kind and thoughtful. He got along with his mother, which she thought was a good sign.

He wasn't obsessive about plants like she was, but he liked gardening with her and Barney.

He didn't blow off her passion for flowers and plants and gardens the way so many people did. He'd seemed so... so right.

Maybe you're blowing the whole thing out of proportion. Maybe you should have answered when he called.

She clapped mechanically as Caroline and Gregory began their first dance, but her mind was miles away.

Matt was likely in the kitchen checking on the staff or outside overseeing the pavilion takedown.

What she wouldn't have given to have been on Barney's balcony instead, letting the sweet old man cheer her up once more.

Despite her heavy heart, Abby could almost smile thinking of Barney and his stories.

She'd never heard anyone talk with as much love and adoration as he did about his late wife.

Maybe that was what had made her idealize Matt so much.

She'd started thinking of him as her Barney, a man who loved her, quirks and all.

The dancing became more general. With fewer eyes focused on the front table, Abby finally felt like she could escape for a moment.

She skirted around the room, making her way to the open double doors.

The entry hall beyond wasn't exactly empty, but it felt far less suffocating.

She needed someplace quiet, somewhere she could be alone even if for a moment.

"Abby!"

She spun at the sound of her name spoken in an achingly familiar British accent. "Hey, Matt." Her voice wasn't entirely steady.

He stood outside the closed door of his office, looking earth-shatteringly handsome in a dark suit. She'd tried to avoid noticing that all day. But those green eyes. They got to her every time.

"I thought you would be... coordinating... something." The pounding of her heart in her throat made words difficult to come by.

"Actually, I've been waiting for you."

He was waiting for her? Why? That didn't make sense, not when he had clients and

important things to see to. Hadn't he made her place on his totem pole painfully clear?

“I don't understand.”

“There hasn't been a chance to talk to you all day, and I didn't want to risk causing a scene during your sister's wedding,” he said. “But I can't let the entire night get away without seeing you. So I've been waiting here, hoping you'd step out.”

The few guests wandering the entryway gave her and Matt curious glances. Abby could feel her face heat with the attention.

“Can we talk in here?” Matt asked, motioning toward his office. “I'll only take a minute, I promise.”

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She was halfway to his door before the realization hit her that if she really thought he was a complete jerk, she wouldn't have agreed to talk with him without so much as a hesitation.

Besides, he was being her Matt again, not stuffy Matthew.

She could at least find out what made the difference, where the change came from.

She stepped inside, pushing from her mind the memory of the snooty couple who'd sat there the last time she'd been at Sainsbury House.

Nothing much had changed in his office. Her eyes settled on a potted plant at the corner of Matt's desk.

It hadn't been there before. And she knew exactly what variety it was.

"A fuchsia," she said, gently running her fingers along the petals of one flower. The same plant Barney gave Francis every year for their anniversary, for her birthdays, as an "I love you" and an "I'm sorry" and everything in between.

"It's a Swingtime Fuchsia," Matt said. "The variety you like best."

This was her Matt, remembering every little thing.

"I brought it for you," he said. "Though I haven't figured out how to give it to you yet."

“For me?” She looked up, her heart already beginning to hope. It would shatter if this didn’t turn out well. She cautiously asked, “Why?”

She had never in her life seen a man beg, but the look on Matt’s face in that moment came very close.

“I miss you, Abby. I miss sitting on the balcony with you. I spend all day Sunday at the farmer’s market watching for you.

Every time my phone rings, I hope it’s going to be you calling.

” He’d moved to her side but didn’t touch her.

His eyes studied her face, the pleading in them not lessening at all.

“I want a chance to try again. A chance to make things right between us.”

A bubble of hope began deep inside. Abby tried to push it down, not ready to open herself up to the possibility of being hurt again.

Matt slowly, deliberately took her hand, clearly expecting her to pull away. She didn’t. She couldn’t. His touch filled an empty part of her. She’d missed him too. She’d needed him nearby.

“I was something of an idiot about things,” Matt said, holding her gaze with his.

“When you were here before, I wasn’t trying to hide you away.

I wasn’t embarrassed to have you here or ashamed of you.

Nothing like that.” His words took on an earnest edge she couldn’t doubt was sincere.

“The people who were here are quite possibly the biggest snobs on the face of the earth. And they are often cruel. I have no choice but to interact with them— it’s one of the more unpleasant parts of my job— but I didn’t want you to have to.

I was afraid they would be unkind. I didn’t want you enduring that.

And if they’d been cruel to you, I couldn’t have held my tongue. I was trying to avoid all that.”

“Really?” She wanted to believe him. She wanted to badly.

“Honestly and truly.” He took her other hand. “I should have been clearer about that. I should have explained and let you decide what you wanted to do.”

“I would have been very out of place with fancy and sophisticated people.”

He lightly laughed. “My mum keeps saying I need to tell you that I’m just a regular bloke from Stanmore.”

Abby had no idea what that meant, but he said it so earnestly, she knew it was significant.

“I’ve never been rich and probably never will be. I’m just an average guy who’s, honestly, kind of surprised you let me spend as much time with you as you did.”

A ridiculously handsome, well-spoken, successful guy surprised that she liked being with him?

“All we ever did was trim plants and play soccer.” She could hardly believe he’d cherished those moments.

He shrugged a single shoulder. "I grew up pruning plants and playing football. I like it. I enjoy it. And I like and enjoy you."

That was something Dirk had never once said to her. Not ever. She'd always felt like she had to prove to him that she was worth his time.

"You brought me a fuchsia."

He nodded uncertainly. "I kept thinking of Barney's stories and how Francis would always forgive him if he gave her a fuchsia. I hoped it would work the same magic for me."

"You want to be my Barney, is that it?" She couldn't say exactly why the question thickened her voice with tears. She wasn't generally a crier.

"I want to try," Matt said. "I would very much like to have that chance."

"And I would very much like a Barney of my own." She wanted a Matt of her own. Her Matt. He brushed his thumb along her cheek just as he had that evening in his apartment. She smiled up at him, a smile that for the first time in a long time came straight from her heart.

The strains of distant music could be heard through the closed door. "Dance with me?" she asked.

He didn't hesitate, didn't debate for the length of single breath. Matt took her hand in his and settled his arm around her waist. He pulled her up and close to him. She could feel the warmth of his breath rustling her hair.

Abby closed her eyes and leaned in to him. Being with Dirk had always meant constant attention to her posture, to her appearance, to how other people might judge

her. But that moment, in Matt's arms, she didn't worry about any of those things.

He swayed with her to the music. "Does this mean I get a second chance?"

"Honestly, you never really lost your first chance. I was working on convincing myself to call you."

He pulled back the smallest bit. Abby looked up at him.

"You were going to call me?" he asked, an eager hopefulness in his tone and eyes.

Abby nodded. "I missed you too. I was embarrassed and a little hurt, but I guess I never completely believed you were a jerk."

His grin grew on the instant. "That's not exactly a gushing compliment, but, honestly, it's one of the best I've ever received."

She pulled her hand from his and wrapped her arms around his neck, holding tightly to him. His arms tucked around her as well.

He pressed a kiss to her temple then whispered in her ear. "Can we start again?"

"No." She almost laughed at the look of surprised worry on his face. "I don't want to start over," she quickly explained. "I want to go back to being happy together and figuring each other out. Back to where we were before things fell apart."

He raised an eyebrow. "You realize 'where we were' was making out on my couch."

She felt a blush creeping up her neck. "Would you settle for being my date for the rest of the wedding?"



“For now,” he said.

He kissed her forehead, then the tip of her nose. They’d stopped dancing and simply stood in each other’s arms. Matt pressed a sweet kiss to her lips. She loved that he was so often tender and gentle, but in that moment, she wanted him to kiss her like he really meant it.

She shifted her hands to the back of his neck and returned his kiss with fervor. Matt didn’t need any more encouragement than that. He kissed her deeply and passionately there in his office against a background of wedding music and the now-cherished aroma of fuchsia.

Caroline had been right all along.

In the end, her wedding day turned out absolutely perfect.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:09 am*

Abby walked through Heathrow Airport, holding Matt's hand. It was more than a matter of liking to hold hands with him; Heathrow was overwhelming.

"When do I get to the part where being in England makes me fall in love with England?" she asked. "Caroline swore that's what would happen."

"It will definitely not happen in the airport," he said with a laugh.

"But by the time I get to Stansbury? I hear it is the crown-jewel of London."

That made him laugh even harder. How had she ever thought he was a snob?

"I predict," he said, "that you will decide England is a brilliant place within five minutes of being at Mum's house. She'll convince you."

Abby smiled over at him. "I already love your mum."

They'd talked on the phone dozens of times since Caroline's wedding. They were meeting in person at last. She might have been nervous if not for the fact that Matt's mom was really, really great.

"I think I'm most excited about meeting her Star on the Wall." Abby pressed her lips together to stop herself from bursting out laughing.

"I'll have you know, that star is the only reason you are here right now."

"Is it?"

He slipped his hand away from hers and wrapped his arm around her instead. "Months ago I told Mum about a bridesmaid who'd visited Sainsbury House with her brit-obsessed sister and had been entirely unimpressed with me. Mum wished on her star that I would find a way of making a good impression."

"You did eventually." Abby leaned a little against him as she continued walking past gates and tourists and shops.

"That is the magic of the Star on the Wall."

"It wasn't the star, Matt."

"I know it wasn't the accent."

She pressed a quick kiss to his lips. "It was you. Everything about you."