



# The Disenchanted Heiress

## (Cousins of Cavendish Square #3)

**Author:** *Iris Lim*

**Category:** Historical

**Description:** A blackmail threat. A fake engagement. A runaway bride. Join the Cousins of Cavendish Square in three clean and sweet Regency romances.

She flees an arranged marriage in quest of her past, but she just might discover her future instead.

Born in faraway Canton yet raised in England, Amelia Fitzwater has always fallen just short of being a true lady, even if she were the niece of an earl. But when her stepmother despises her enough to arrange her in marriage to an upstart tradesman's son, Amelia gathers her things and steals away on a quest for her late mother's Chinese roots.

Jacob Hawthorne is just about to spread his wings when his mercenary father insists on pinning him down in marriage. With his bachelor days dwindling, Jacob uncharacteristically agrees to escort the bewitching, mysterious stranger he finds at the London Docks on one last, grand adventure and chance at a purposeful life.

When dangers and disappointments bind them together in friendship and more, Jacob and Amelia gradually discover that what they're running away from and what they're careening towards might just be the very same thing.

**Total Pages (Source):** 26

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:18 am*

“Amelia Fitzwater!”

Amelia started, her fingers rushing to close around the fragile jewelry box.

Nothing good ever came from Mother screeching her name, and Amelia was not about to allow the woman’s moods to cause her to ruin her most treasured possession in all of the world.

She might have managed to sneak away for the second half of calling hours for today, but her stepmother’s ire kept no hours.

The woman her father married might act the part of the lady in company, but she was a small-minded and self-serving woman in private, and Amelia sighed as she wondered what must have upset her this time around.

Perhaps one of her own daughters needed to borrow something from Amelia, or perhaps her stepsister’s suitor hadn’t arrived as expected.

It could also simply be that Mother merely wished to be angry at something or someone for unfathomable reasons of her own, with that someone invariably ending up being Amelia nine times out of ten.

“Amelia!” The summons repeated itself.

Amelia sighed. Carefully, she tucked away the painted porcelain box into the drawer of her dressing table.

The item might have originally been meant to house jewels more valuable than itself; but to Amelia, the gold-rimmed, fragile white box—with its dainty proportions and painted Chinese ladies—was the true treasure in and of itself.

The box was the last and only thing she had from her real mother—a tangible reminder that Amelia, with her honey skin and almond eyes, with her trim frame and deep brown locks, was different not just because of her appearance, but rather because she had been the only fruit of a love match between an English earl's son and a minor Chinese princess.

Her mother might have died in childbirth, but her legacy lived in Amelia's blood. It was a blood that her stepmother seemed to disdain, but at least she knew Papa loved her for it.

Eager to avoid more creative forms of tongue-lashing, Amelia rushed down the stairs to where Mother and her daughters sat in rigid, angry lines in the parlor.

“Your cousin is here, fashionably late,” Mother informed Amelia with a sneer the moment she stepped foot in the room. “And as I am expecting one more caller, you had best clear the street quickly. I would not have an earl's daughter drawing eyes away from your sisters.”

A light buoyed up within Amelia. She must have counted the days wrong again.

Only two of her cousins could fit Mother's description, and since Lady Jemima Fitzwater was always needed in Princess Charlotte's court, it had to be Lady Dorothea at the door—come to fetch Amelia for their promised round of calls.

Her cousins were all older and graceful and every bit the image of a perfect English lady, not at all similar to Amelia's own more impulsive temperament.

But she knew her cousins loved her, even if she was the less fashionable daughter of the less fashionable third son of the Earl of Aldbury's clan.

She could not assume the same affection from the sneering Mrs. Fitzwater, a woman that she called Mother only for her Papa's sake.

Amelia loved Papa dearly, and there was very little she wouldn't do for him. But she didn't always particularly enjoy meeting all his requests.

"Go!" Mother snapped. "Mr. Ocham is calling on Sarah today, and you better have that cousin of yours and her fancy dresses out of sight posthaste."

"Yes, Mother."

Amelia didn't have to be told another time.

Their townhouse in Upper Wimpole Street might ostensibly be her home, but Mother certainly liked to act as if it wasn't.

And while Papa liked to pretend that any differences between Amelia and her stepsiblings and half-siblings was superficial—just a different shade of skin, or a distant birthplace a continent away—their disparities ran somewhat deeper.

Mother and her children aspired to be perfectly poised, perfectly boring members of the ton .

Amelia, though being of nobler birth, liked life a little more exciting.

What good was there in being the very pattern card of poise and precision when one could dream and soar instead?

Of course, one could argue that her cousins Jem and Thea managed to be both: perfectly ladylike and yet spirited in their own way.

But that was a puzzle to solve for another day.

Today, she enjoyed the view of Thea perched beautifully on her high phaeton, the very picture of elegance in her ruby-colored cloak and turban cap—and the promise of a few hours of freedom that came with her.

Amelia smiled as she rushed to take her side by her cousin, almost missing the groom's hand as he helped her.

Mother might consider Thea's presence a curse or an insult, a frustrating reminder that Amelia shared blood with the earl while her own daughters did not, but Amelia relished the visit wholeheartedly.

Thea urged her horses forward, and soon they were off.

"Are we going to Cavendish Square today?" Amelia asked as they turned the first corner.

London and its sights and sounds swirled around them as Thea drove.

It was kind of her cousin to come fetch her, given the slightly dubious reputation of her address, located as it was on the edge between nobility and the rapidly-rising middle class, much like her own family.

Papa might have grown up in privilege, but his status as a younger son with eccentric artistic tendencies did not exactly make him a society leader—probably much to Mother's despair.

“Someone must visit the dowager countess,” Thea said in that knowledgeable way of hers, so much wiser even if she was only a few years Amelia’s senior. “With Jemima so busy with Princess Charlotte’s affairs, it is our duty to see to it.”

“Is old Lady Aldbury doing well?”

“She sent my father word that she’s suffering from palpitations, and her physician recommends a new treatment—a costly regimen of tinctures and pills. She asked Papa to finance it, but of course, he won’t.”

“Poor Lady Aldbury. She is always ill, isn’t she? I do pity her.”

“Yes, she deserves our pity, but don’t be fooled. Not all illnesses are equally severe. Her ailments are rarely as serious as she makes out.”

“I suppose that’s true, but it’s still horrible, isn’t it?” Amelia shuddered. Their phaeton turned a tricky corner. “I cannot imagine being tethered to one’s bed like that. Papa always likes to say that there is so much more to the world than London, or even England. How horribly boring an existence that must be.”

“No doubt he’s right—but I am content with London.”

“Don’t you wish to visit other countries?”

“Why should I? Here we get to have the best corner of the world to ourselves. That should be more than enough for us, shouldn’t it?”

Amelia wasn’t sure if she entirely agreed.

The existence of a woman trapped at home with her never-ending ailments—imagined or otherwise—sounded terribly sad, even if she did reside in one

of the best cities of the world.

But Amelia also knew that her cousins tended to know better.

They always did manage to be the very model of fashionable, ladylike living. Even Mother couldn't argue.

So Amelia smiled and Amelia nodded. One day, she would chart her own future—a future with adventure and excitement, a future fitting for the legacy her mother had left her. She would simply have to manage another quiet, domestic visit for today.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:18 am*

Amelia detested waiting.

Unfortunately, the price of escaping her house to do calls with Thea usually meant exercising the patience she so sorely lacked.

Calls at the house in Cavendish Square had never been the most fascinating things, especially when the Dowager Countess seemed to think good hospitality entailed long passages of reading and a detailed reckoning of all her latest medical woes rather than tea or cake.

Given what Thea had told her about the old countess's ailments being mostly exaggerated, Amelia felt even less patience than usual today.

But by her side, Thea bore the countess's complaints with remarkable calm, responding to each dramatic declaration with a cool head and kind remarks. It was an impressive display of courtesy, and Amelia could only wonder if the day would ever come for herself to be able to act the same way .

Today was not that day.

Calls at Cavendish Square, even with the endless complaining and reading aloud, were better than sitting at home and enduring Mother's constant remarks—ranging from the petty to the spiteful.

Amelia was genuinely grateful for her dear cousins including her in their rounds.

But it still wasn't the sort of activity to enthuse anyone with any sense of adventure.



Every opportunity to spend time away from Mother, Jane, and Sarah was an exciting prospect, but the thrill only ever lasted the first five minutes of the walk or drive, most of the time.

Amelia glanced at the mantelpiece clock, its cracked glass marring its otherwise elegant appearance, eager for their time with old Lady Aldbury to end so she could talk alone with Thea once more.

Had they truly read to her for that many hours?

Mother's lecture would only grow longer the later Amelia returned.

Then the door swung open, revealing the one cousin Amelia least expected to see.

"Jem!" She jumped up to embrace her cousin, who sweetly welcomed her hug and her kiss.

Amelia smiled brightly as she stepped aside for Thea, who'd now risen as well and reached out for Jem's hands.

Lady Jemima Fitzwater, the eldest and most highly-connected of them all, was a companion to the Princess of Wales herself.

She simply had to have news more exciting than her mother's whining.

Amelia grinned at both her cousins. She might always be different from her stepsisters at home. But at least her cousins, older and titled though they might be, let her feel a semblance of belonging she never could seem to find anywhere else apart from Papa's bouts of reminiscence.

"Jem, dear. Is that you?" The Dowager Countess called out in a weak voice, though

she certainly looked hale and hearty enough. “How peculiar to see you without any notice that you were coming. Is Princess Charlotte gone away on holiday?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Jem answered her mother.

“Curious that she did not take you with her,” responded the old woman from the couch. “I suppose you’ll be wanting your old room for a few days.”

“If it’s not too much trouble.”

“No, no. I’m sure I can manage it.”

For a quick moment, Amelia felt almost like a child amidst adults as her cousins seemed to exchange an unspoken moment of communication.

They must have reached a mutual conclusion quickly, for no sooner had Jem whispered, “I’ll see you downstairs,” than Thea ushered Amelia to the fading drawing room below.

Amelia sighed as she sank into the old couch. Did they have to sit and wait when something exciting was finally happening? Thank goodness Thea rang for plum cake and tea. At least their waiting did not have to be so starving this time around.

It was not until she’d spent a good ten minutes sipping a very sad excuse for a cup of tea that Jem finally reappeared, looking even more frazzled than she did upstairs.

“What’s happened, Jem?” Thea asked, sliding her teacup aside. Amelia looked up, the same question on her tongue. “Has the Princess taken a dislike to you?”

“No, not the Princess.” Jem swallowed visibly. “But I’ve been let go from my post.”

Amelia gasped.

“It was the Prince Regent,” Jem said slowly.

She slipped onto a chair, and Thea, with the ease of a seasoned lady, readily handed their listless cousin a cup of comforting tea.

“He’s furious with Charlotte for breaking off the engagement with William of Orange, and he’s determined that her household is a corrupting influence.

He turned us all out of doors, even Miss Knight. ”

“I think the Princess was right to reject Slender Billy,” said Thea, using the foreign prince’s nickname with impressive familiarity.

“I wouldn’t have trusted the Prince Regent’s promise that she wouldn’t be obliged to live in the Netherlands.

Why would she want to spend any time there at all?

Her life is here, in England, where she’s always lived.

As for her intended’s personal attractions, or lack of them?—”

“And she barely knew him,” Amelia said, shuddering internally at the thought. “I can’t imagine being consigned to marriage with a stranger.”

“The life of a royal, I suppose,” said Jem.

She took a sip of tea and wrinkled her nose.

Amelia had thought the tea mediocre, although she'd questioned her own judgement immediately after.

It was slightly comforting to see that her more experienced cousins seemed to agree.

And then Jem added, "The worst part of it is, rather than go with her Papa, the Princess took to her heels and ran away."

"Ran away?" Amelia gasped. "By herself? That sounds like madness."

Beside her, Thea reacted with similar surprise, although she expressed it in a much more ladylike manner, as usual. Amelia mulled on the thought for a fleeting moment.

The Princess escaped! What a jaw- dropping twist of events that was.

Mother was always pointing to Princess Charlotte as the perfect example of womanly grace.

She'd even attempted, on several occasions, to ingratiate her own daughters with the eldest Fitzwater cousin in an effort to have her progeny meet the Princess, even if Jem never entertained her subtle and not-so-subtle hints.

But what was a princess to do when faced with the prospect of a forced marriage to a total stranger?

Amelia couldn't say she entirely blamed the future queen of England for her daring.

Running away certainly sounded like madness, yet at the same time, Amelia couldn't help but note, "But I suppose it could also be a glorious adventure."

"Young ladies in real life aren't allowed to have adventures," said Thea, her voice

tight. “I believe it’s an unwritten rule.”

“If they do have adventures, they are required to pay for them later,” said Jem.

Amelia shrugged, unable to argue otherwise.

“It’ll be all over the newspapers tomorrow,” said Thea sagely as the cousins reflected on the shocking news. “Nothing Princess Charlotte does evades the press for long.”

Amelia heaved an internal sigh. Any excitement she might have initially felt at Jem’s surprise arrival was being well and truly squished by the morose turn of events.

She sighed, audibly this time, before turning to her fretting cousin.

“What are you going to do with yourself now, Jem? Will you stay here in Cavendish Square?”

The house was technically still Jem’s home, but Amelia couldn’t quite imagine wanting to return under a parent’s roof. The dowager countess wasn’t exactly a nurturing figure, even if Jem didn’t have a judgmental step-parent lurking at every corner.

“It is rather lowering to think of living at home again,” Jem answered slowly.

“Do you remember what we said when we were girls?” Thea asked.

“We said a lot of things,” Jem replied. “I remember we all planned to marry dukes and be fabulously wealthy and eat sweetmeats whenever we wanted.”

“That was a foolish scheme.” Thea wiped her lip clean after a small bite of cake.

“It wouldn’t make us happy, besides being most unlikely.

I wouldn’t choose to marry any of the dukes I’ve met, especially the royal ones.

They are looking to marry a fortune, not bestow one.

And they’re all old and fat and related to Prinny.

No, I wasn’t thinking of marriage. Quite the opposite, in fact. Of how we said we would?—”

A memory sparked.

“Oh!” Amelia smiled. “Are you referring to the plan?”

Thea smiled encouragingly at her and nodded.

Jem took only a moment to remember. “We said we would live together like sisters, here in London.”

“Exactly,” said Thea. “Maybe it’s time to put that plan into action.”

“Three unmarried ladies with only their pin money between them—we can’t exactly let a house in Mayfair. It wouldn’t be proper, or practicable.”

Thea raised her eyebrows. “My dear Jem, do you have to be so annoyingly practical and squash our dreams with a single blow? Where there’s a will?—”

Amelia watched with fascination as her older cousins seemed to seriously consider what had always felt like a moment of childhood play to her.

“Maybe we could all live here in Cavendish Square?” she suggested, eager to offer some sort of contribution. “I’m sure your mother has enough room for all of us if Thea and I share a bedroom. Then you wouldn’t have to be alone, Jem, and Thea and I could escape our homes too.”

“Escape?” asked Jem. “What do you need to escape from, Amy?”

Amelia sighed. She wasn’t keen to leave Papa, but having another home to escape to didn’t sound entirely unappealing. “Well, Mother—that is, my stepmother, she—she likes to say things at times, not very pleasant things, especially when Papa isn’t around to hear them.”

“You poor love.” Jem reached out to press Amelia’s fingers. Her eyes turned the other way. “Surely, nothing so terrible has happened to you, Thea?”

“No,” said Thea, “but life is becoming a trifle uncomfortable at home. Papa seems more determined than ever to see me wed, and I’m afraid he won’t be pleased if I refuse the latest suitor of his choosing.”

Jem shifted back and squared her shoulders, letting go of Amelia’s hand in the process.

Amelia herself sat back, eager to act the part of an adult amidst her illustrious cousins.

“It sounds like I came home just in time,” said Jem. “I don’t know what my mother will say, but I shall ask her if you can both stay in Cavendish Square for at least a fortnight.”

Amelia smiled. It was not for forever. Only marriage was for forever, and she was hardly at the point in her life to have to worry overly much about such a thing yet.

But with Jem's suggestion, at least she might yet have the chance to live away from Mother, Sarah, and Jane for a while.

It wouldn't be quite as exciting as the life of oriental royalty her own mother once led, but it certainly sounded adventurous enough.

Amelia couldn't wait.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:18 am*

The excitement of the visit to Cavendish Square, rendered so much more interesting than usual thanks to Jem's recent turn of fate, kept Amelia in an eager, agitated mood all the way back to Upper Wimpole Street.

Noble lineage or not, Amelia rarely ever had anything noteworthy happening in her life, and she found herself almost swept away by the promise of something changing.

It was not until Thea, in all her usual elegance, had dropped Amelia off at her Papa's doorstep that her heightened emotions finally eased to a more manageable calm.

Amelia smiled. Then she turned around to the door currently being held open by their younger-than-entirely-fashionable butler Mr. Perritt, and she sighed.

Mother never liked it whenever Amelia spent time with her cousins, and her late return could only mean more recriminations. She'd likely missed dinner altogether.

It was almost silly—how petty Mother could be.

It was not as if Amelia had her stepsisters' height or their fashion.

As the niece rather than a daughter of an earl, she didn't carry the titles her cousins did.

And it was not as if most people cared that she brought with her ties to a faraway kingdom, not when they could seek out more immediate links to the British aristocracy by marrying one of her relatives instead.

Amelia huffed as she climbed up the steps and marched into the house.

“You are awaited in the library,” said Perritt, as he assisted her with her coat.

Amelia groaned. She’d expected to be spared until tomorrow, at the least. But Mother seemed intent to begin her interrogation sooner.

“Thank you,” she said hollowly. Perritt nodded and returned to whatever kept him busy before Amelia had the gall to show up.

Mother had no reason whatsoever to spite Amelia—none, perhaps, except for the fact that, after all these years, Papa seemed unswayed from his devotion to Amelia’s late mother, with that love easily spilling over to Amelia herself.

As the third son of a respected peer, Papa’s natural talent for the brush and the pencil had seen him recruited as an illustrator and a representative of the Aldbury clan on the renowned Macartney Embassy twenty-two years ago.

The embassy to China had begun with much fanfare, laden with economic and political ambitions.

But while the visit might have proven mostly unfruitful in the end, as far as the Crown was concerned, there had still been plenty of eyes opened and lessons learned.

And while the other young men who’d ventured into the Orient returned home with silks and teas and porcelain, or even an earldom or two, Papa had returned with her.

Based on the way Papa looked at her most days, Amelia rather thought he didn’t regret it.

Drawing strength from the knowledge that she at least held the heart of one of her

parents, Amelia marched to the library, expecting Mother's ire—and smiled in relief at the sight of her Papa instead.

“Papa!” She rushed forward to embrace him. Papa's smile crinkled under his spectacles before he heartily returned her hug.

“Did you enjoy your call?”

“It was fascinating.”

“Truly?”

“Yes.” Amelia grinned. She longed to tell her Papa everything that she'd learned in Cavendish Square, particularly about the Princess's flight.

But she stayed her tongue, uncertain if Jem would get in trouble if the news spread too fast. “But you have something else to tell me, I think? Perritt said you were waiting for me.”

“Ah, yes.” Papa smiled. He turned back to the large desk near the side of the room.

He reached over for a long, paper-backed canvas and unrolled it carefully, its weighted bottom easing effortlessly over the surface.

Amelia could tell its Chinese origins immediately.

“See—my latest treasure. A beautiful rendering of White Cloud Mountain, mere miles from Canton.”

Amelia's smile grew beside her father's. “That's where I was born.”

“Yes. ”

She leaned forward, admiring the artwork. “Did you visit the mountain often with Mama?”

As usual, Papa’s eyes glistened at the mention of his first wife. “Without a safe place to stay near the mountains, it was not a common practice. But I do remember the view.”

“Is this a faithful rendering?”

“In the Chinese way of things, yes.”

Amelia ran her eyes over the stylistic, elongated brush strokes—sparse yet elegant.

The more popular items in people’s chinoiserie collections might be the ornately decorated ones, rather like the jewelry box she’d inherited, but there was something breathtaking in the softer, minimal restraint of these items Papa liked to acquire.

“Will you display it?” asked Amelia.

Papa took his time answering, his gaze far away. He’d always been the sentimental sort. “Perhaps. But I might have Sir George take a look first. He always had an eye for authenticity.”

Amelia bit her tongue over the fact that her Papa had, once again, purchased something before confirming its authenticity rather than after. Given the row he’d had with Mother just a few weeks ago, it certainly seemed that he had a much shorter memory than Amelia did.

At least Sir George would be a trustworthy source for evaluating something like this.

Papa might have all the passion when it came to the Far East, Amelia's very existence a living piece of evidence to the fact, but Sir George Staunton had the passion and the knowledge.

At least, that's what Amelia had been raised to think, given how often Papa conferred with the man.

She'd never actually spoken to the baronet, and most of English society might not care very much about someone whose title was a mere single generation from creation, but Papa treated the man like a hero.

"It certainly is a lovely painting, regardless of its origin." Amelia drew from her optimism. She fumbled a bit with her sleeves. "One's origins should never be the reason one is valued or not, after all."

Papa met her eye, his gaze all compassion. "They may, in fact, be what makes something, or someone, extra precious."

He closed a hand over hers, and Amelia smiled. "Do you miss her—my mother?"

"Dearly."

A small pang of guilt tugged in her chest. "I suppose I shouldn't ask you that when Mother might hear us anytime."

Papa chuckled before he let go. He sighed. "I am content with my life—and your brothers are a comfort to me."

Amelia shrugged. Her brothers were not all that terrible, but her stepsisters certainly weren't a comfort to anyone, not even to the mother they so resembled.

“You have your mother’s eyes,” Papa said fondly. He made the statement often, but a warm, fuzzy feeling still pooled in Amelia’s chest whenever he did. Even if she had no memories of ever seeing her own mother, at least she carried some sort of legacy from her. “And her voice.”

“I thought Chinese women weren’t expected to speak very much.”

Papa laughed. “No, they were not. But that never stopped your mother.”

“Or me.”

“Or you.”

It was perhaps not the most flattering thing to be reminded of—that one shared one’s parents’ flaws. But Amelia clung to every detail as if they were the highest form of praise.

“Mr. Fitzwater,” Perritt’s voice called out behind them. Father and daughter both turned. “Dinner awaits.”

“Oh!” Amelia cried. She cast a look at the clock before glancing at her father. “Did you delay the meal on my account?”

“Did we?” There was a twinkle in Papa’s eyes. “I had thought it was on account of me being far too busy over a new delivery.”

Amelia smiled. He never explicitly said so, but she knew she was her father’s favorite.

They rolled up Papa’s latest purchase together and left the study arm-in-arm. The plan to stay with Thea and Jem would simply have to be discussed another time. For

now, she would focus on surviving dinner unscathed.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:18 am*

With an agile jump to the left, Jacob Hawthorne narrowly avoided the generous portion of bird droppings from landing on his new hat.

The offending excrement splashed onto the ground next to his boots, onto the pier, as foul as ever, though the noise of its landing was largely overcome by the shouts and sounds of the thriving London docks.

The upper echelons of society might think of the bustle of London as balls and routs and lavish visits to the theater, but here was where the nation truly thrived.

It was not fancy evening dresses that built the empire, after all.

Jacob looked about him, admiring the plentiful wares of the latest shipment with approval.

The British economy might be driven by the ever-changing tastes of the ton, but the sailors who ventured across the unforgiving seas, the workers who diligently transported the latest goods in demand, the craftsmen who drew beauty out of the roughest materials, and the tradesmen who coordinated all of them were the true heart blood of the kingdom.

Jacob might have been raised with a gentlemanly education—all part of his father's keen foresight, and the convenience of having a scholarly clergyman for a neighbor—but he was far too aware of his humble roots to ever turn his back on trade.

The Hawthornes might never ever be considered truly fashionable within Jacob's



lifetime, but they were certainly richer than half the aristocracy could claim to be.

“Master Jacob,” a voice hollered from the end of the pier. Jacob looked up to see the young boy, one of the newer apprentices, running towards him. “Mr. Hawthorne’s askin’ for ye, sir.”

Jacob nodded. Father no doubt wanted a reckoning of the latest arrivals. He would have good news for the old man. It was rare to have so many crates of tea arrive unscathed.

“I will join him shortly.”

“Yes, sir.”

The boy scurried off, and Jacob took another moment to soak in the view of towering masts and sweeping sails, the dramatic heights surrounded by the humming of rough yet hardworking men groaning, joking, singing, and shouting.

He didn’t like trade for its own sake half as much as Father did, but he certainly appreciated the productivity of it all.

He gave some parting instructions to the captain, promised him a hefty bonus, and headed for Father’s main offices.

Given the expanse of the Hawthorne business empire, Father didn’t need to continue keeping his headquarters near such humble—and, not to mention, smelly—parts of town.

But Jacob supposed there would always be a part of Father tied to his sea trade.

He said staying around the docks kept his people honest. Jacob rather thought it was

Father's large, biting presence that did so, but people rarely believed the right things about themselves.

Jacob picked his way through the familiar alleys, nodding to a few acquaintances here and there, before arriving at the large square building looming on the edge between the stench of the docks and the road to the nicer end of London.

Jacob almost smirked at the thought of how the building's location represented his family so well—rooted in trade yet constantly attempting to be noticed by those born to higher places.

At least, Father always did.

"Mr. Hawthorne," the army of secretaries and clerks said as he walked through the maze of desks and chairs and paperwork.

Jacob greeted them back. At three and twenty, he was young enough to feel starkly different from his father, and yet old enough to understand how much their small family owed to the men in this building.

Father gave them a livelihood, but it was their tireless work that continued to line the Hawthornes' pockets.

And Alastor Hawthorne was no easy master.

A flight of dubiously maintained stairs later, Jacob knocked on his father's door.

"Come in!" he boomed.

Jacob slipped inside. Father's office was large, yet packed to the brim with boxes, papers, pens, and all sorts of unfinished business. In fact, if Father were not so large a

man himself, it might have been difficult to spot him amidst the chaos.

“Father. ”

“There you are. I’ve been asking for you all morning.”

“The Fairwind came in today. Only two crates perished. The rest survived.”

“Excellent,” Father said with significantly less enthusiasm than Jacob had anticipated.

“And Captain Moreland?”

“Appeased with an offer of twice the agreed rate.”

“Twice?” Father frowned.

Jacob huffed. Alastor Hawthorne was no saint.

Despite being known amongst his peers for a thriving business that was ostensibly built upon running shops that addressed the clamoring public’s desire for more and more places to publicly consume tea, Father had always wrung most of his vast financial gains from his shortchanging, bribing ways more than from honest service.

“He’s brought in the Fairwind a week earlier than expected, with an almost unprecedented amount of cargo intact,” Jacob argued.

“A bonus is in order, surely, but twice .”

“You told me yourself that you’d driven a hard bargain. His performance warrants the reward.”

Father shook his head, as if Jacob had been the one in the wrong. “Did you think we

earned our fortune due to rewarding people for merely doing what they'd promised?"

"Father, Captain Moreland has a family to feed. With just you and me at home, we hardly need?—"

"Ah, that's where you err." Father leaned back and folded his plump hands on his even plumper body. He grinned. "You are to have your own house, son, and we shall need to tighten up on our funds to finance it properly."

"A house—for me?" It was the most unexpected thing. Was this the urgent news that had his father searching him out all morning? "Is our townhouse not grand enough? We only moved in last year."

"Oh, it's decent." Father waved a dismissive hand. "At least until one of the bigger estates sell. But our neighbors to the left are selling, and it would be so much more impressive if we can present a house to the niece of an earl."

Father might be cruel and selfish and avaricious—but he was rarely this confusing.

"An earl?" blurted Jacob. "What do earls have to do with anything?"

"Ah, I see you've missed the point." Father leaned forward, looking practically giddy with excitement. "I've been looking for you all morning."

"As I am aware."

"Because you, my boy, are getting married."

For once, Jacob was stunned into silence.

"Married?" He squeaked, a good half-minute later.

“It has all been arranged. They need a month or two to get the gel’s things in order, during which we may have the banns read. And then you shall be two thousand pounds richer and the nephew of an earl to boot!”

Jacob stared, dumbfounded.

Father had never been the sort to think much of his own faults, of which there were plenty. But Jacob had always thought him at least capable of comprehending the extent of his humble beginnings and dubious virtues .

Apparently, the taint of dishonest gain did not seem to bother Alastor Hawthorne one bit, and the man actually possessed the audacity to aspire towards ties with the nobility. And unfortunately for Jacob, he was his father’s most immediate ticket to entry.

“I knew you couldn’t be so handsome for nothing.” Father grinned.

Jacob flinched. He knew he had his mother’s fair looks.

He’d learned from a young age that there were very few women, old and young alike, who could resist denying him his requests, however impertinent, when made with a wink and a smile.

The other boys who’d studied with Mr. Terrance, his dear clergyman tutor, had seemed to envy him and tease him in turn about his golden locks and blue eyes.

But Father, of course, saw his son’s physical attributes—and any talents he was possessed of—as mercenary assets.

It ought not to be surprising, given that it was the only way Alastor Hawthorne seemed capable of understanding anything in life.

But it was still a little disappointing to see the fact proven repeatedly.

“I am not a gentleman. They wouldn’t want that,” said Jacob. “Noblemen are famously snobbish about such things.”

“Ha. Money is enough of a motivation for most folks, I tell you.” Father chortled, his laughter deep and harsh, like most things he did. “And have you not been afforded every advantage of education? They’d be a fool to turn down a specimen like you for a few quibbles of birth.”

Jacob winced. There were few things more dehumanizing than being described as a specimen by your last living parent.

“You say she brings two thousand to the marriage,” Jacob said, using logic to curb his rising panic. “What need would she have for the Hawthorne fortune?”

“That’s where you young folks are always naive.” Father shook his head. “Two thousand may sound significant to your captain and his ilk, but nobles always need more blunt to keep up appearances.”

“Surely, you are not paying them for her hand in marriage.”

“Not directly. But there will always be a demand for wealthy relations.”

Father scoffed. It was always a trifle bit confusing whether Father revered or disdained the ton .

“The niece of an earl, you say.” Jacob tried to imagine a placid, pretty debutante at his dinner table. He winced. She’d probably look down her nose at him her whole life. “I don’t think I would do one much good as a husband.”

He didn't think he'd do much good at being a husband at all, seeing as he hadn't been planning on becoming one in the near future.

He'd expected to marry, eventually, perhaps when approaching thirty.

He'd even expected, perhaps subconsciously, to having a slightly limited selection of potential brides given his background.

He most certainly had never expected being sold off like an ox at the prime age of three and twenty.

"Not just a niece of an earl." Father's eyes practically glistened. "Her father's man of business could not say so, at least officially, for you know how hush-hush all these political things are—but I have it on good authority that she bears royal blood."

"Royal blood? Well then, it keeps getting better, doesn't it?"

"Jacob snapped. Father had always been a shrewd businessman.

Had the chance to marry off his son for some dubious connection to an earldom doused all his good sense?

This had to be a fraudulent offer. "Did the Prince Regent suddenly decide that he wants an illegitimate daughter to be tied to a tradesman in tea?"

"Mind your tongue," Father barked.

"What? I speak only the truth." Jacob leaned over the chair in front of him.

He hadn't even had the chance to sit down before Father had decided to upend his life.

“What sort of royalty would want to marry off their daughter to an unknown man, with blatant ties to trade, merely to establish access to our tainted fortune? Next thing you know, this supposed man of business would be offering to arrange a match with Princess Charlotte herself.”

“Do you think me mad?” Father growled.

Jacob shrugged, since he rather did.

“We’re not speaking of British royalty, per se,” Father said in a slightly more reasonable tone. “The lady is a child of a foreign princess—and it’s all therefore a matter of greater sensitivity. Although I wouldn’t turn down the chance to propose to any daughter of the prince, given the chance.”

Jacob grimaced. Thank goodness the Prince Regent and his mistress didn’t have any daughters. His father just might think it a decent match.

“Let me think about it,” said Jacob.

“There is nothing to think about.”

His eyes snapped up. “You are serious? You want me to marry this woman, sight unseen, and live the rest of my life tied to someone who might well be deformed, odious, or insane?”

“She is none of those things. ”

“How would you know?”

“Her father’s man assures me that she is every bit eligible.”



Jacob laughed harshly. “Of course he says that.”

“You do not believe me?”

“You are blinded by delusions of grandeur.”

“And you are blinded by the hubris of youth.” Father shoved himself to his feet, his presence large and looming.

“I have sacrificed endlessly for our family—never resting, never stopping in my tireless work for the Hawthorne name. And you, with your high-born looks and your gentleman’s education—did you think to merely take up all the privileges and do nothing in return? ”

Jacob scowled.

“I am not sending you to the wilds of the New World or expecting you to row the galleons yourself,” Father ranted on.

“I have shielded you from the harshest realities of our trade. I have allowed you to manage the cleanest, easiest, most straightforward tasks in our business. And now, I arrange for you a future that improves you in every way in the eyes of society, and you act as if I am asking you to swallow a horse.”

“I am willing to work,” Jacob argued. “But marriage?—”

“Is the least you can do! Have I raised you like a gentleman for nothing?”

Wordlessly, they seethed at one another.

Father spoke first. He always spoke first. “I give you two months to live as you

please—sow your wild oats, if you must, but leave me no bastards to feed. Revel with your friends and muse upon your future. And when the two months are done, I expect you at the altar to do your duty.”

Jacob fumed quietly. There was too much happening, too quickly. He hardly knew what to think—although he knew with a sinking certainty in his stomach that Father would never be otherwise persuaded.

“As you wish,” he growled. Then he marched out, slamming the door behind him.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:18 am*

A melia stared at the note in her hand. The stationery was familiar, as was the handwriting, but the contents weren't exactly what she had been looking forward to hearing from her dear cousin.

My Dearest Amy,

Forgive me for being the bearer of bad tidings.

My mother's ailments make it impossible for me to host you and Thea at Cavendish Square at present.

I shall be fully engaged for the next fortnight in sorting out her affairs, so our plan must be postponed.

I will write again when I am able, but in the meantime, you must get on as best you can at home.

With affection,

Jem

It was a little disappointing to have one's dreams dashed so soon after having just formed them, but the hope of being able to leave Mother's endless nagging behind had always been a trifle too good to be true.

For some reason she could not fathom, Papa, after a passionate romance on the other side of the world, had decided to spend the rest of his life tethered to a petty,

mercurial English widow who only ever saw opportunities for her own advancement rather than what was truly good for her husband's household.

If Jem or Thea were here, they might explain to Amelia that such practical marriages were common—that Papa likely needed someone experienced to keep his home while he whiled away his days in reminiscence and fantasies.

But people who said that were often the people who did not have to live through the consequences of such practicality.

Amelia sighed as she tucked her cousin's note away.

It was never fun to face the realities of life.

Why did people's happiness have to be limited by geography or money or class?

It would all be so much easier if young ladies were allowed to be as frivolous or serious or different as they could be, and if reputations and money didn't matter as much as they did.

Her eyes caught on her mother's jewelry box as she turned, and she eased herself onto the wooden stool to study it.

The soft lines were not as free as the ones on Papa's painting yesterday—a painting that he was determined to have evaluated by his fellow embassy friends as soon as he could contrive it to be—but they were just as delicate and precise.

The painted women on the porcelain sported elaborate hairstyles that would impress even the most highly-trained lady's maid, their black tresses twisted elegantly with pearls and jewels.

Amelia's own hair was not quite as dark, more chestnut than ebony, but it did flow straight and heavy, traits that could only have come from her mother, what with Papa's wispy light hair being almost an exact opposite.

The dinner gong sounded, and Amelia reluctantly tucked away the box once more.

Had her mother been as dainty and refined as the ladies painted on the box, or had she been free-spirited and excitable, a true muse for Papa's artistic tendencies?

"Amelia!" Mother shrieked.

There were some things that Amelia might simply have to content herself with never knowing.

Dinner proceeded as it always did, with Mother sneering at Amelia's supposedly foreign manners, with her stepsisters sniggering, and with Papa remaining largely unperturbed.

Her two younger half-brothers were still safely in the nursery, tucked away from the comings and goings of adulthood, and Amelia rather envied them half the time.

Mother complained about the rising bills, the neighbor's dog, and the difficulty of securing a proper companion for her daughters. She complained about Amelia's dress, Papa's cravat, and the way a maid had not replied to her immediately that morning.

She complained so much that Amelia stopped listening—and was only roused back to attention when Mother repeated, loudly, "Isn't that right, Martin?"

Papa started at Mother's suggestion, as if it was the first rather than the twentieth time she's solicited his agreement during tonight's dinner alone.

If it weren't so very commonplace an occurrence, Amelia might have laughed.

As things were, she exerted her effort into not rolling her eyes too far instead.

Papa might be thoughtful when it came to Amelia, or all things remotely tied to the Far East he loved, but he really was rather absent-minded when it came to everything else.

Amelia hid a sigh as she glanced at Mother across the table. Papa might be the one the church and society recognized as the head of the family, but Mother ran the household for all intents and purposes.

And if Amelia needed anything—be it permission for a drive, a proper new traveling dress, or the concession to live away from home—it would be Mother she had to convince.

In fact, one could consider the fact that she thought to ask Papa at all to be a bit of a joke.

It was not as if Papa ever contradicted her.

But then Mother said, "It is high time we do so. She will be on the shelf before we know it if we do not take matters properly in hand."

"Not quite," answered Papa, "but it is to be considered."

"Considered?" Mother snorted. "Don't tell me you are changing your mind now, Martin. The solicitor has already drafted the settlements according to your specifications."

Amelia's breath caught. Was this talk of marriage—and if it was, whose?

“We have time to think on it still,” said Papa.

“We most certainly do not! Do you think such an opportunity comes around often? If I were any more selfish, I would have arranged a match for my own Jane or Sarah instead.”

“Papa,” Amelia said quietly.

“I understand you have exerted great effort,” said her father, ignoring her.

“Papa,” beseeched Amelia, a new urgency rising against her chest.

“Tell her, Martin. Just tell her the truth.”

“It can wait.”

“It cannot wait.”

“Mrs. Fitzwater, my dear, we?—”

“Tell me what?” Amelia blurted. Mother smirked, Jane and Sarah sniggered, and Papa looked at Amelia with a resigned, almost apologetic, look.

“Your mother and I—” Papa spoke slowly, his reluctance making the uncertainty in Amelia’s stomach churn even harder. “That is, we have arranged a match for you.”

Mother cleared her throat.

“You shall marry in two months’ time,” he said.

“Marry!” Amelia gaped, dumbstruck. “But who?”

“It is all perfectly arranged and nothing you need to worry your empty little head about.” Mother sniffed. She so often sniffed more than she spoke. “Your father has deemed him suitable, and so it shall be. The banns shall be called quite as soon as the settlement is signed.”

“You wish me to marry a perfect stranger? A man I have never ever even met?” Amelia felt her chest constricting, her breaths growing shorter by the second as the very nightmare she had believed impossible in her own life unfolded right before her eyes. “But Papa—surely, you would not?—”

But Papa averted his gaze, his usually fond smile tucked behind a hardened visage.

“Papa,” Amelia pleaded.

“Your mother is right,” he said, softly yet firmly. “It is high time you marry.”

“Am I such a burden to you, Papa?” The tears came unbidden. Amelia fought her hardest to swallow them. “There are other ways to relieve you of my care. You have always called me your treasure.”

“And you are,” he answered in clipped tones. “But I cannot keep you with me forever. And since a suitable offer has been made?—”

“To a very rich man’s son too,” Mother added grandly, as if she were the very heart of charity. She sniffed, her nose scrunching up like a wrinkled handkerchief. Her daughters snickered after her. “Many would envy you for marrying into such wealth, given your utter lack of dowry.”

“My dowry—” Amelia caught her breath. She’d always heard of people discussing dowries—bandying numbers about in ballrooms as if they were badges of honor. She’d never given much thought to her own, secure in the belief that her father would



surely never let her starve.

It seemed as if that belief had been rather ill-placed .

And while it was true that marriage was hardly akin to destitution, particularly marriage to a supposedly wealthy heir, the feeling of being disposed of in such a perfunctory manner was an entirely disheartening sensation.

“Could I not find other arrangements, Papa?” Amelia pleaded. “Thea and Jem said yesterday morning that?—”

“Do you think they can secure your future as much as a father or a husband can?” Mother scoffed. “I had always thought you ungrateful, but this is beyond the pale.”

“It is not that I am refusing to marry altogether.” Amelia reined in her runaway emotions as best she possibly could—which was not very well at all. “But to be forcibly betrothed to a total stranger?—”

“Do you happen to know anyone better?” Mother’s high-handed tone oozed of self-importance. “You have not exactly been the jewel of the Season, my dear.”

Amelia’s eyes stung. Her lips trembled. She liked to think herself moderately pretty and reasonably amiable, but she couldn’t exactly boast a long line of suitors either. “But how can one be certain of one’s happiness when one’s entire life is to be entrusted to a man entirely unknown?”

“We know everything that is important. Don’t we, Martin?”

Papa grunted softly, a pitiful way of concurring.

Mother continued, “You could hardly expect to ever do better than a tradesman’s

son.”

“A tradesman’s—” Amelia felt the quivering down to her bones.

She had never been the sort to concern herself overly much with titles and such superficial things.

She’d never even begrudged her cousins their titles as ladies, even as her own stepsisters liked to lament over the fact.

But to pawn her off to a tradesman’s child, especially when Mother was involved, could only be construed as an act of insult.

She turned to her father one last time. “Papa, surely, there are other ways to?—”

“It has all been decided.” Papa frowned. His jaw was set, his tone as resigned as it was resolute. “I shall sign the papers as soon as they are readied.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:18 am*

And Amelia fled the room before she could drown the silverware in her tears. There were very few things she wouldn't do for her dear Papa. It seemed that the family had finally found one of them.

It took a long night of tossing and turning before Amelia decided that something had to be done concerning this ridiculous scheme of Mother's.

While there was no doubt that the current Mrs. Fitzwater would have signed away her guardianship at the slightest provocation, it was unlike Papa to be so cavalier about it.

Raised without a proper English mother, Amelia might not be considered anything close to a diamond amidst polite society, but she was respectable—and it made little sense to dispose of her to the first tradesman's son to offer.

What did her parents even know of this prospective bridegroom?

Their family might not be close to being as wealthy as her titled relatives, but they hardly needed to barter her away for funds.

Papa had always talked about Amelia carrying on her mother's legacy.

And what could that legacy be if not money?

Freshly determined to take control of her fate, Amelia tapped softly at the library door. This was certainly not an encounter she wanted Mother privy to.

"Come in!" came Papa's familiar voice.

Amelia smiled as she slipped inside, wholly unsurprised to see her father bent over yet another pamphlet by Sir George Staunton and his friends. The baronet was determined to establish some sort of Asiatic society, and Papa had always loved being swept up at the idea of it all.

“Papa,” she called out, softer than usual.

He looked up, and a sad sort of shadow shifted over his face, visible despite his spectacles, before he removed them from his face. “Amelia, darling.”

She stepped closer. “I wish to talk to you, Papa.”

He sighed, an unusual gesture when it came to Amelia. But he set aside his spectacles and nodded at her. “Of course.”

“Must I truly marry this tradesman’s son?”

He did not look particularly pleased to be asked so bluntly, but he showed no surprise. Amelia never did have much of the gift of artifice.

“It is best for everyone involved,” Papa said gruffly.

“But why?” Amelia rushed forward until she stood right before his desk. “I am only nineteen, hardly a spinster, and I don’t require so much upkeep, surely.”

“No, you do not. Not beyond the usual.”

“I know I haven’t managed to make much of an impression on the marriage mart these last two Seasons, but if I had known you wished for me to be wed sooner, I could always make the effort.”

“An admirable thought, Amy.”

“But not a good one?” She was fast losing the collected calm she’d garnered this morning.

“Please, Papa. My dowry is decent, isn’t it?

You’ve always talked of my mother’s legacy.

I do not know if money from China counts much by the way of things, but it must be worth something .

And if it is money the household needs, then you can use that money. There is no need to sell me.”

“I would never sell my child.” Papa sounded gravely offended, and Amelia regretted her words instantly.

“Well, not sell, perhaps.” She sighed. “But don’t barter me away, at least.”

“That has never been and will never be my intention.” Papa spoke with so much conviction that Amelia felt almost guilty for her ever having suggested it.

“Then we can find another way then? I don’t know how the law works in these things, but I can sign anything I need to to give you my dowry. You can use that, and we shan’t have to marry me off to get money.”

“It’s not that.”

“Then what is?” Amelia pleaded. “You cannot think it necessary for me to marry so young.”

Papa cleared his throat, clearly uncomfortable with the confrontation. It was no doubt the very trait that allowed Mother to always have her way around the house. “If a good candidate presents himself, then there is no reason to decline.”

“They probably only want me because they think the niece of an earl comes with boundless wealth!”

“Is that so very bad?”

“Well, to be thought of as only that—” Amelia felt her eyes sting. “Can we not tell people something else then? I know I am not nearly ladylike enough or proper enough or—or even English enough for some people, but to be robbed of my choice this way is unbearable.”

“It is best if?—”

“Can I not just sign my dowry over to you, Papa?”

“You cannot?—”

“Why can’t?—”

“Because there is no dowry, Amelia.”

She stared at Papa, his words making little sense to her. The ticking of the clock echoed loudly in her ears.

“No dowry?” she whispered hollowly. “But my mother?—”

“Whatever it was she brought to the marriage is not something of monetary value in the eyes of the ton.”

Amelia let the idea settle. “And Grandpa Aldbury?—”

“That was not much, not at all when one chips away at it over the years.”

Amelia’s chest tightened slowly, choking away the confidence she’d had all these years over who she was. Who was she now? What was she apart from the novelty of being a foreign-born distant relation of an earl? Her mother was a princess! That had to count for something, didn’t it?

“We wish you no harm, my Amy,” Papa said softly, his voice blurred against the humming in her ears.

“But I possess no illusions when it comes to our own standing in society. If a good enough match presents itself, then it is best that we take the opportunity while we can. It could be arranged for you to meet the fellow, if you must, but I do not see how it might change the outcome very much.”

Every protest Amelia had died on her tongue, crushed by the weight of her recent revelations.

“I need to go,” she said .

Papa did not challenge her.

It was the slightest of comforts—barely any, truly—that Mother did not overly protest when Amelia refrained from joining for dinner. It was unlikely that there had been no protest at all, but Amelia was at least not around to hear it.

Instead, she spent the whole afternoon and evening alternating between moping in her bed, fuming at her dressing table, and fretting in front of the fire that looked as sad and troubled as she felt.

Every so often, she'd think of sending a note to Thea or Jem.

But Jem had sounded distracted enough in her message yesterday morning, and Thea was not always home even if Amelia could contrive a way to call on her.

As she didn't drive her own high-perch phaeton like her cousin, or have any sort of carriage at her beck and call at all, a physical visit was not easily contrived.

And any missive would surely be intercepted by Mother before it could get out the door.

There truly seemed to be little recourse at all.

Amelia huffed as she fell back against the ratty, old chair relegated her.

All these years, she'd tried her best to act the part of a lady. She'd tried to please her prickly stepmother and emulate her perfectly poised titled cousins.

But what good had it all done?

She was different. She'd always been.

And Papa's words this morning, both spoken and unspoken, clearly communicated that fact. Her mother might be a foreign princess. She might even be a queen of a distant land herself. But it all still wouldn't matter.

Mother still wanted to be rid of her, in any dignified way she could manage. And Papa?—

Amelia swallowed, her eyes pricking. She had thought herself safe—safe in Papa's love, safe in her home, safe in the potential provision of her cousins.



Now it seemed as if all her plans, best-laid or otherwise, were falling apart one by one—and there was nothing to stem the rapid unraveling of her future apart from removing herself from her house altogether.

Amelia caught her breath, her heart roaring in her ears.

She licked her lips. Was this what had driven Princess Charlotte to flee her royal apartments?

If the future queen of England herself had no other means of thwarting an unwanted marriage apart from running away, then Amelia's prospects looked very grim indeed.

A glimmer of porcelain caught the corner of her eye.

Amelia glanced at the jewelry box on her dressing table, the gold trim untarnished after all these years.

Her breath quickened as she inched over.

She picked up the box, inspecting the hand-painted ladies on the pristine white surface with a lump in her throat.

This was her mother's. This was her true mother's legacy.

Had her mother lived—or, perhaps, if her parents had chosen to continue staying on in China—Amelia herself might have been raised to be one of these painted women, genteel and accomplished in all the Asian arts.

Papa liked to speak of so many things he and his travel companions had witnessed—delicate paintings, exotic instruments, elaborate embroidery, and the fascinating foreign tongue of the Mandarin court.

Papa had even invited a few of those friends over once, when Amelia had been a mere child, and all the lords and gentlemen had seemed entranced by her mixed features even then.

Amelia steeled herself with a deep, stabilizing breath. If this family did not want her, then she would simply have to find one who did.

She closed her fingers around her mother's jewelry box, her mind already cataloguing the coins and clothes she would have to bring along. If England held no proper home for her, then she would simply have to head for China.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:18 am*

The clamor of the laboring man's teahouse surrounded him in a discordant cacophony of orders, complaints, and a ribald joke or two.

Jacob watched the crowd from his table near the wall, alert and observant as always without actually involving himself.

Growing up alongside his father's fast-expanding network of storehouses and teahouses, Jacob had never been shy of things and people to observe.

There was always something interesting, something worth latching his curious mind onto—whether it was the tall tale of a traveling sailor or two, a shrewd client or supplier bargaining for better terms, or a new and more efficient way of doing inventory or steeping tea or serving customers hungry for more and more of the Asian-rooted beverage.

It was fascinating how one drink could go from being newly introduced to English soil less than two hundred years ago to becoming a quintessential part of being English .

Members of the aristocracy might turn up their noses at people who did not originate from the same tiers of society as they did, but that disdain did not seem to apply to other foreign things.

Mr. Terrance, Jacob's pious and soft-spoken clergyman tutor, liked to mention how people from all sorts of backgrounds were all made in God's image, equally suitable to becoming His children.

Jacob liked to believe himself an equal, in mind and in body, to men born to more privileged positions.

But he was also fairly certain those men did not think so.

“Here ye go, sir.”

A serving boy plopped Jacob’s tea onto his table, a good ten minutes after he’d ordered it.

Jacob took in the sight of the scrawny young creature—more boy than man.

Such delays would not have been tolerated at any of the Hawthornes’ establishments, but the entire point of patronizing this unsavory location near the docks was to do the opposite of what his father wanted.

“Thank you,” said Jacob, unable to hide his trained pronunciation even in a scant few words.

The boy shrugged and scuttled away. Jacob stared at the tea, which really looked nigh undrinkable, and shoved it aside with a sigh.

I give you two months to live as you please—sow your wild oats, if you must. Revel with your friends and muse upon your future. And when the two months are done, I expect you at the altar to do your duty.

His father’s words swirled in his mind. What was two months of freedom compared to a lifetime of bondage?

Jacob had never been the sort to have any wild oats to sow.

Being mentored by Mr. Terrance had surely seen to that.

And if even a small part of him had ever been tempted to stray from the straight and narrow, a few front-row seats to the turmoil of sailors with too many bastards to feed or too many enemies to hide from had been enough to keep him steady.

In fact, compared to most men his age, Jacob might even be considered boring.

It was a sobering realization—that his life had been so devoid of adventure that Father found the best use for him to be a bargaining chip for his ever-continuous social ascent.

A large man passed by his table, hands on his hips. Jacob looked up at the unremarkable features marred further by an ugly snarl. “Are ye havin’ anythin’, guv’nor?”

The question was supposed to be a hospitable one, although it was rather very inhospitably put.

“I have my tea, thank you,” said Jacob.

“Then drink it and have on with it,” the man who could only be the owner of the dubious establishment barked. “Can’t keep a table for ye all day. We ain’t high society over here.”

Jacob wanted to laugh at the irony of being equated to high society, even if his light coloring did sort of stand out. But a quick glance at the growing line near the door indicated that the owner had good reason to want his customers not to linger.

“I’ll try not to dawdle.” Jacob dropped sixpence on the table, to the glint of the owner’s eye. “Not that this tea is worth dawdling for.”

“I beg yer pardon.” The temporary contentment dissipated immediately. “This tea ain’t nothin’ but the very best, from China itself, sir. Nothin’ short of the emperor’s own brew for ye.”

Jacob’s jaw twitched. Being raised the son of Alastor Hawthorne had few benefits and plenty of shortcomings, but the ability to spot a liar at his first word was one of its advantages.

“I suppose we can agree to disagree,” Jacob responded.

“Look ‘ere, sir. I dunno who ye think ye are, but?—”

Sounds of shouting and a harsh whistle or two floated in from the teahouse’s open door.

A few men jeered as more people flocked to watch the latest altercation.

Jacob eyed the growing gathering with a wary eye.

There were reasons the London docks were considered a largely unsavory area of town, even if it did drive the economy of the entire kingdom.

“Off with ye,” growled the owner.

Jacob acknowledged him with a brief nod before leaving his table, tea entirely untouched.

By most counts, Jacob could be considered an observant man, as keen an observer of the times as any son of a shrewd businessman could be expected to be. But he was not a busybody, and he knew better than to get himself embroiled in altercations that could have him losing money or limbs or both.

Resolved to stay sober and out of the way of bodily harm, he shifted along the edge of the crowd.

It was difficult, given how the entire doorway to the teahouse was blocked with curious onlookers, but Jacob managed to slide behind a couple of smaller boys until he stood under the noontime London sun.

“It cannot possibly cost that much!” a young woman’s voice demanded in the middle of the small crowd. It was a high voice, with a well-educated accent. Jacob frowned at the impossibility of a lady being found anywhere close to where he currently was.

“Ye ain’t gettin’ your bag back if ye don’t pay up, missy.” The mean words were accompanied by an even meaner sounding laugh.

The people around them laughed, and Jacob felt a tug of worry. Whoever this woman was had nothing to do with him, but Mr. Terrance’s constant reminders for Jacob to use his education for good whispered around the edges of his consciousness.

He walked on, away from the crowd.

“This money is meant to help me find my mother,” the woman’s voice said once more, a slight hint of panic now in her tone.

“Then ya shouldn’t ‘ave lost ‘er in the first place, should ya?” The mockery in the man’s voice carried far past the circle around them.

“Mr. Driver, please.”

“I ain’t drivin’ ye anywhere unpaid, miss.”

With a resigned sigh, Jacob turned to look—and instantly stood bewitched.

In the middle of the small circle of onlookers, a young woman stood in her quality crimson cloak.

Her slender frame could almost be mistaken for a girl's, although the confidence with which she stood her ground showed her to at least be nearer twenty than twelve.

Entrancing dark brown eyes, their edges tucked ever-so-slightly into delicate, upturned corners, flashed fire at the man opposing her.

The woman's skin shone, smooth and translucent as ivory yet warmed by a golden hue beneath.

A face like that belonged in a museum—not in the middle of a scuffle by the docks.

And while common sense dictated that anyone foolish enough to be in her position likely deserved whatever fate awaited her, Jacob couldn't help deciding otherwise.

The ill-fated traveler and her opportunistic driver exchanged a few more barbs before Jacob stepped into the circle, his tall frame and gentlemanly looks easily parting the crowd for him.

"Ah, there you are," he addressed the woman. She turned and looked at him with shock, then caution, and then a hint of relief. "I was wondering what took you so long."

She looked as if she was grasping for something to say when Jacob turned to her aggressor. "Ah, thank you for taking my dear friend's bag for her." He tossed the man a shilling. "That should be more than enough for your trouble, I'm sure."

The most likely misnamed Mr. Driver handed over her belongings begrudgingly—and Jacob watched his full retreat to his hack before turning to face



the woman. The crowd had dispersed by then, apparently finding little to interest them when it came to a gentleman and a lady deciding to meet.

But the soulful almond eyes gazing back at him were extraordinarily interesting indeed.

The idea of leaving home in search of her mother's family had appeared to be a very sound idea for the first few hours of the day.

Taking advantage of the servants' general lack of interest in her affairs, along with Mother's determination to ignore what she perceived to be her stepdaughter's childish tantrum, Amelia had managed to pack her carpet bag with a few good essentials, all her pin money, and her mother's jewelry box before slipping out the side door unnoticed.

The people out at Upper Wimpole Street at the early hour might not have been entirely considered genteel, but no one had harmed her as she rushed to the nearest corner and hired a hackney cab for the London docks.

And since it had proven so easy to hail down transport, she'd concluded that it had to be equally easy to hail down a ship to take her to China.

Surely, there couldn't be that many complications.

The fact that her hackney driver and his mustachioed face had decided to try to trick her of all her money simply had to be a small matter of bad luck. At least, she kept trying to tell herself as much.

"What were you thinking?" The tall, blond man who had come to her rescue whipped around to face her once Mr. Driver had driven out of sight. He shoved her bag back at her. Amelia looked up as she caught it, disquieted but not entirely cowed.

She lifted her chin. “I was trying to pay for my ride without getting robbed of every penny, in case it wasn’t obvious, sir.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:18 am*

The stranger's lips twitched, though they stopped short of an actual smile. It was almost as if he found her amusing against his will. He crossed his arms, his blue eyes studying her intently.

She stared back, uncertain how exactly to react.

Growing up, she had always been hemmed in by Mother's rules.

And she was certain that speaking to a gentleman she hadn't been introduced to, in the middle of the bustle and stench of the docks, while holding her most precious worldly possessions in a carpet bag against her thighs was breaking every single one of those rules.

Her unlikely savior broke their gaze first. He glanced briefly around both of them. He huffed a sigh. "We should speak elsewhere—somewhere quieter."

A protest bubbled up her throat. It was hardly proper to be going anywhere with a stranger, much less somewhere quieter.

But any protest she had been about to utter was immediately forestalled when he efficiently, though not quite roughly, tugged her by the elbow towards the large square building behind her.

Her feet followed quickly, walking almost twice as many steps as he did due to her shorter stature.

She didn't quite know where exactly they were going, but it was almost as if her

subconscious mind had already decided that she had better odds of safety following the well-dressed young man than almost anybody else she could encounter in this part of town.

Who knew traveling by sea involved coming near such a stench?

She would have immediately expelled any contents of her empty stomach upon arrival if she hadn't been too preoccupied with making sure she managed to keep some of her money intact.

She might not be accustomed to paying for her own transport, but such a short ride could not possibly cost more than a new gown.

"Wait here," the stranger ordered when they reached the building. Amelia wanted to bridle at his instructive tone, but she stayed put for the meantime. It was not as if she had any other better ideas at the moment.

The young man slipped into the building through a side door, and Amelia felt her gut clench.

Surely, there was nothing nefarious afoot?

Anyone who meant her harm wouldn't have announced a fictitious connection between them in front of so many people, would he?

Having people recognize him wouldn't have helped a villain.

Amelia bit her lip. Her eyes darted around her.

She'd tried to dress practically, but even her oldest traveling clothes seemed to draw attention around these parts.

She knew she didn't look like the average English person, even if her accent and manners could be disguised easily.

She could only hope Mother's omniscience didn't reach past the confines of her own townhouse.

An interminable minute later, the blond man reemerged.

"Come in," he said. "No one will disturb us here. You can tell me everything."

She hesitated for a second before following him in, his ominous words seemingly at odds with the innate trustworthiness he seemed to emanate.

The side door they used spilled some light into a narrow but clean corridor.

Noisy conversation indicated some sort of regular business or trade going on down the far end of the long hallway, but Amelia's unlikely companion led her into one of the nearer storerooms instead.

Large crates towered on all sides of her the moment she entered, while the sharp fragrance of tea nearly sent her choking.

She took a brief moment to acclimate herself to the dimmer indoor light, although there were windows, at least, and the room looked more temporarily unoccupied than dangerously neglected.

"Now we can talk," he said, whipping around to face her fully again for the first time since he'd suddenly inserted himself into her confrontation with that highway robber of a hackney driver.

Frank, clear blue eyes studied her, and Amelia felt her heart make an unexpected little

trip.

His gaze was straightforward and honest—gentlemanly, yet not at all patronizing or proud like the younger sons of nobility that she usually came across.

“I’m not going to pretend that it is not absolutely inexplicable—and, not to mention, inexcusable—for a woman like you to be wandering the Docks unaccompanied. What are you doing here?”

The question, as direct as his gaze, forced Amelia onto her toes. She sniffed and squared her shoulders. “I’m not sure what you mean. I am here for the ships. I would think it obvious.”

“No, it is not obvious at all,” he said. He pointed to her carpet bag, clutched tightly between both her hands, before crossing his own arms again. “I take it you are not here to receive any arrivals, given the state of your own belongings.”

“No,” she answered, a trifle annoyed to have him analyzing her—and doing a rather accurate job of it. It was a little unsettling to be seen through so easily.

“And a part of me is almost tempted to assume that you are expecting to be the one departing English soil.”

Amelia shrugged a shoulder. “So what if I am?”

“Why are you at the Docks? Surely, you must know more cargo than passengers pass through this place.”

She did not, in fact, know that—but she was not about to admit her ignorance to this handsome yet know-it-all stranger. She cleared her throat. “It is more efficient.”

A dent appeared on his forehead. Did this man think himself some sort of expert on maritime travel? His fancy clothes hardly made him out to be a sailor—or, at least, what Amelia thought sailors probably looked like .

“You’re not visiting the former colonies then,” he said almost to himself.

“No, I am not.” She was happy to have thwarted his expectations for once. She raised her chin higher. “It is highly improper to make any assumptions about a lady, sir.”

Her comment seemed to take him by surprise, and the man actually nodded. “I apologize. You are right. Please, allow me to introduce myself. Mr. Jacob Hawthorne, at your service. I hope I did not overstep with my assistance earlier today.”

The reminder that she was in his debt was yet another reason to find this entire conversation discomfiting. Amelia made the slightest little curtsy. “Thank you for your help. It is much appreciated.”

“Think nothing of it—although I hope you do not intend to place yourself in similar situations from now on.”

Again, she shrugged. “I never intended to place myself in a confrontation with Mr. Driver, I assure you.”

His lips twitched. “Was he really called Mr. Driver?”

“No—but what else was I to call him?”

This time, Mr. Hawthorne chuckled in truth. “Very well. I suppose that is hardly important now. As you are neither in Liverpool nor in Bristol, which would prove far more logical places to take a ship to the Americas, I can only assume you are seeking passage towards the continent instead.”

“Can you find me a ship?”

He paused. “I suppose that depends on where you are going.”

“China.”

“China!” His eyes widened in alarm.

“Yes. ”

He looked her up and down. “Have you any clue how extraordinary of an endeavor that is?”

Amelia bit her lip. She sniffed ever so slightly before taking on the imperious stance that Mother always liked to do. “Well, I’m sure matters could be arranged.”

“You will meet swindlers and liars at every turn,” he said unapologetically. “The weather and the seasickness fell the strongest of men, not to mention all the other things one catches on board. The misfortunes of the sea are no child’s game.”

“Well, there must be a way—people ship things to and fro so very often these days.”

“Things, yes. People—well, I suppose they transport them too, but not quite as safely or humanely. And never would I call it a recommended course of action unless direly necessary.”

“It cannot possibly be so very difficult.”

“For a gentlewoman, it would be.”

Amelia did not know if the term was a compliment or an insult. She squared her



shoulders, again. “I can engage the services of a maid.”

He leveled a look at her with his entrancing blue eyes.

“One in twenty ships are lost or wrecked every year traveling this very route.

And even if you prove to have the most impressive constitution and have the unbelievably good luck of only encountering the most upstanding shipmen, there may be pirates or spies or other villains lurking at every turn.

I doubt even the most talented servant can be of much assistance in such circumstances.

“So while the audacity of your ambitions might warrant a modicum of admiration, their feasibility proves unaccountably poor—not unless you actually wish to become a pirate’s hostage, a casualty of war, or, perhaps more realistically, fish food.”

Amelia felt herself blanch even as her indignation rose. All this running away business was proving rather harder than she’d like it to be.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:18 am*

China—the thought was ludicrous! And yet the woman in front of him, with a dangerous degree of stubbornness in her dark brown eyes, looked up at him as if he were the one being ridiculous.

What on earth would possess a young woman who was obviously of genteel birth to decide to travel without her family to China, of all places?

“Were you truly expecting to make such a journey on your own?”

A flicker of doubt passed over her delicate features, distracting Jacob more than he’d like to admit. “Why shouldn’t I? I’m sure others have done it before.”

“Do you know where in China you are headed?” He tried to recall what else he knew of the Orient other than its many varieties of tea.

“Canton,” she said confidently.

“And you are expected there?”

This time, the flicker of doubt was accompanied by what looked like unshed tears. Jacob felt his heart clench.

“Forgive me,” he said when she blinked and looked askance. “It is not my place to pry, of course, but a traveler with family expecting her is often treated by officers with greater care. The possibility of some sort of reckoning protects them.”

Instead of reacting to his attempt at comfort, the woman actually sniffed.

Jacob frowned. Who exactly was this exotic woman who'd seemed to appear from thin air?

"Are you from China?" he asked.

"One could say so."

"I did not think that question had any possibility of variance in answer."

"There are many possibilities and subtleties that most Englishmen might not consider, sir." She looked back at him, her backbone returning despite the slightly dewy look that still persisted in her eyes. "You cannot possibly have the measure of me after one single conversation."

Her pluck surprised and impressed him. And when Jacob crossed his arms once more, the action felt more like a hedge to protect his own growing curiosity than a display of any kind of strength.

"In case I haven't made it clear, miss, I wish to help you—and if I inadvertently judge you unfairly in the process, I can only apologize for my own ignorance and reiterate my selfless motives. "

"Why would you help me?"

Her question caught him off-guard. Why indeed would he? Jacob liked to think himself more humane and benevolent than his avaricious father, but even he had never been the sort to take up the causes of strangers.

The fact that he found the woman enchantingly pretty might have a tiny bit to do with his unlikely heroism, but he felt something more stirring underneath.

Jacob sighed. “Perhaps I wish to do something meaningful.”

“Helping me is meaningful?”

“Helping anyone is—isn’t it?” It was his turn to shrug a shoulder.

“My fath—my family—we rarely have occasion to help other people, given the taxing nature of our usual responsibilities. And I have recently become informed of certain upcoming events that would make it even more difficult for me to extend charity to others in the near future. Consider it my way of carving out purpose in an otherwise purposeless existence.”

It was not entirely fair to think this way, given that Father clearly had a purpose for Jacob’s life. It just wasn’t a purpose that Jacob could wholly embrace.

He met the mysterious woman’s eyes, surprised to find compassion rather than suspicion this time around.

“Life can be frightfully unfair at times,” she said, her voice gentler than it had been all morning. “And people who might appear to have a privileged life may not always have any actual control over the very life they lead.”

Her words struck so close to his actual predicament that Jacob felt an overwhelming sense of kinship with her, even if he knew not a single thing about her other than her ludicrous plan to sail to China .

“Is that why you are running away from home?” he found himself saying.

She resisted for only the briefest of moments before relenting. “Perhaps.”

Jacob nodded, suddenly understanding her a little better. “And I suppose suggesting

that we return you to the safety of your family is hardly a helpful suggestion by the way of things?”

He rather thought her eyes glistened with gratitude. “Hardly.”

“Very well.” He huffed. His mind catalogued the plausible paths for the young lady in her particular situation.

He had enough genteel connections to provide her shelter and a modicum of protection, but he wasn’t exactly equipped to deal with runaway daughters on a regular basis.

“While I may be familiar with some people who trade in your desired route often, none of them are people I would like to entrust the reputation of a young woman to. So if you have no objections, I would rather introduce you to someone trustworthy who would know a thing or two about helping young ladies in need of assistance—and perhaps she could advise us about your best way forward. Would that be acceptable?”

The pretty stranger looked ready to object before her shoulders softened. “She will not gossip?”

“No.”

“Or spread rumors.”

“That would hardly be my definition of ‘trustworthy.’”

She seemed to weigh his recommendation before nodding eventually. “Very well.”

“Good.” He tried to hide his sigh of relief. “And seeing that I shall shortly be

introducing you to one of my friends, may I have the honor of knowing your name?"

"Amelia F—" She paused, as if it only dawned upon her then that she was about to give her name to a stranger. Jacob liked to think that she trusted him, but he also felt a slight measure of relief if the girl showed some common sense, given their inauspicious first encounter.

"Miss Amelia then?" He offered.

She huffed. "Water. Miss Water."

"Miss Water?" He ought not to sound so incredulous. It was hardly kind. But it really was rather ridiculous as aliases went.

"Yes, Waters."

"Alright. Waters." Jacob tried to nod himself into accepting the name. Then he gestured towards the door. "Shall we go, Miss Waters?"

She huffed and walked out with such an air of superiority that Jacob wouldn't have wondered if the woman was descended from a queen.

Any expectations Amelia might have had about being able to demand her way into a proper journey to China were being shattered rather quickly under Mr. Hawthorne's discerning eye.

She appreciated the man's help. Who knew, after all, if there were any more Mr. Drivers about, lurking around for opportunities to take advantage of unaccompanied young women?

But it was also rather humiliating to be failing so soon into her adventure, and Amelia

allowed herself some brooding, even if it made her a rather lackluster companion for her unlikely savior.

So preoccupied was she the whole time Mr. Hawthorne was walking her through the maze of the London docks and into a slightly more orderly neighborhood that she was rather surprised to find herself being ushered into a modest, tidy apartment a good half-hour later.

“Come in, Jacob. And what’s this? A lady friend?

” A middle-aged woman, plump and good-natured, smiled at them.

She was attired rather similarly to the place she occupied—modest, clean, and humble.

This might not qualify as an upper-class home, but it was certainly a tidy one. “Do come in, my dear, I shan’t bite.”

Amelia stepped in gingerly behind Mr. Hawthorne.

“Mrs. Wilmark, I’m sorry for not having sent word,” Mr. Hawthorne said with a gallant bow. Once more, the crispness of his accent hinted at a gentlemanly education, even if his association with people as humble as Mrs. Wilmark and his familiarity with the London docks seemed to indicate otherwise.

“Nonsense. You are always welcome. And it has been a good two months since we’ve seen you last.” Mrs. Wilmark smiled at both of them, her manners making Amelia feel instantly at ease.

It was almost funny how she felt more at ease in this unknown woman’s house in an unknown part of London, after an entire minute of having met her, than she did with

her own stepmother in Upper Wimpole Street.

“I see you’ve brought a friend today,” Mrs. Wilmark said with a gentle smile .

“Ah, yes.” Mr. Hawthorne bowed his head again before turning. “Miss Waters, Mrs. Wilmark.”

The women greeted each other, and Mrs. Wilmark wasted no time in ensconcing the three of them in her cozy little receiving space, within view of a dining table.

The frugality of the place was rather staggering in comparison to her usual haunts, although Amelia felt surprisingly unthreatened by the simplicity around her.

“And how can we help you, Miss Waters?” Mrs. Wilmark asked cordially once they had all been served some lukewarm, bland, yet kindly-proffered tea by a female servant who blushed with every glance at Mr. Hawthorne.

“I am—” Amelia sent Mr. Hawthorne a questioning look. He smiled at her encouragingly, the way his features softened almost distracting her entirely. She shook herself internally and cleared her throat. Surely, she was better than the blushing maid. “I was hoping to find passage—to China.”

“China!” It was not at all encouraging, or promising, if everyone responded to her plan that way. At least Mrs. Wilmark softened faster than her friend did. “But why ever so, my dear?”

Amelia bit her lip. Her eyes darted between the two people before her. They made her feel safe, like Mother never did. But how much could she truly trust two strangers?

Then again, how much of a choice did she have otherwise? She was already in Mrs. Wilmark’s house.



“Mrs. Wilmark is my tutor’s sister, a clergyman’s daughter herself,” Mr. Hawthorne said in an assuring manner. “You can trust her discretion, as you can mine.”

Amelia let herself study him a moment more before nodding. She chose her words more carefully than she usually did. “There have been—certain events at home recently—that require me to find safe haven elsewhere.”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:18 am*

Mrs. Wilmark nodded compassionately, so Amelia continued. “And given that I have no other family on English soil, at least none currently available to lend me any sort of help, I thought it would be best to find my family abroad instead.”

A frown replaced the matron’s earlier look.

She reached out a hand as if to take Amelia’s before withdrawing.

Nurturing a child seemed like second nature to her, while it had always appeared to be more of a unpleasant duty to Mother.

Even Amelia’s two younger brothers were never cooed over, merely managed.

“Your predicament is concerning, of course,” said Mrs. Wilmark, frown still in place, “and while the way you think is entirely understandable, it may not necessarily be the wisest course of action.”

“But where else?—”

“Is there no one else whose assistance you can seek without leaving Town? London is the capital of the entire kingdom and wholly filled with resources.”

It was Amelia’s turn to frown. She could have turned to her cousins, she supposed, but with their plan to live together having gone the way of yesterday’s tea, it was not exactly a promising course to pursue.

Besides, her noble relatives would be the first people Mother suspected once

Amelia's absence was noticed.

"I have no one else to help me," Amelia blurted.

She regretted the admission almost instantly, given Mrs. Wilmark's concerned look.

She chanced a glance at Mr. Hawthorne, whose expression at least carried more understanding than pity.

Amelia swallowed. She could only hope that the information she was about to divulge wouldn't become her undoing.

"I was born in China, although brought to England before I could remember any of it. And while my relatives here have always been nice enough, there was always something different about me. And it is not that I am ungrateful for my upbringing. But I doubt anyone in my family could ever truly understand my predicament."

"And so you wish to uncover your origins—to piece together who you are."

"Yes." It was impressive, truly, how readily the kind woman could express the very things Amelia had always felt yet never quite knew how to say. "I—I have other reasons to avoid home at the moment, but all of that could just as easily be resolved if I were to find my mother's family."

"And you know of their address in China?" It was Mr. Hawthorne's turn to ask.

Amelia hung her head. "Only the name of a city."

The three of them sat in silence for a moment. Tears pricked at her eyes, but Amelia tried her best to blink them away. How silly she must look to Jem and Thea now! But she couldn't risk returning, not when Papa could not be expected to oppose Mother's

marital maneuvers.

“It may seem a silly notion,” said Amelia, her guard lowering by the second. “But I rather thought that if I could find my mother’s family—that perhaps they could explain so many things to me. And then maybe even if I were different, then I at least might have a reason to be.”

She lifted her eyes to find Mr. Hawthorne’s knowing blue ones meet hers.

A moment passed, a moment of kinship that didn’t need to be explained.

Somehow, Amelia knew, that the man seated beside her knew her better than her own family ever did.

It was inexplicable and perhaps in some part the result of a poor night’s sleep, but it felt entirely real to her then and there.

And as if proving that he felt it too, Mr. Hawthorne touched her gently on the arm and said, “Then we will find that person for you—whether he or she lives near or far.”

Gratitude welled within her.

“Although I do selfishly hope,” he added, “that whoever we come up with at least has a London address.”

She smiled for the first time in days.

“She’s a pretty little thing, isn’t she?”

Jacob didn’t bother suppressing the small half-grin that crept onto his face at Mrs.

Wilmark's comment.

It hadn't taken long for Miss Waters—if that was indeed her name, although Jacob was fairly sure it wasn't—to soften under Mrs. Wilmark's motherly attentions.

The girl had likely been exhausted, and probably hungry, given how eagerly and gratefully she'd accepted Mrs. Wilmark's cakes, and how quickly she'd dozed off in the chair by the fire soon after.

Jacob might not know much about the mysterious Miss Waters, but he remembered being in her shoes once—of looking forward to his lessons with Mr. Terrance if only to be the recipient of a modicum of motherly love from Mrs. Wilmark as she kept house for her brother.

And once more, that overwhelming sense of kinship that had bonded them in the old storeroom washed over Jacob.

One didn't have to know someone for more than two hours to know that a kindred spirit resided within.

"She is," Jacob answered Mrs. Wilmark in a low voice, trying his best to avoid disturbing Miss Waters.

"And where did you happen to find such an exotic little creature?"

Jacob chuckled. It didn't matter that Mrs. Wilmark did not have any of her children in her home nowadays.

The woman still managed to be perfectly gentle and perfectly concerned and perfectly prying all at once.

Years of having her husband and sons away at sea meant that Jacob, and a handful of Mr. Terrance's other students, had the benefit of receiving most of her care over the years.

Other young people might bristle at such interference from their elders, but Jacob rather relished it.

God knew his father never cared enough to wonder about his son's friends, habits, or interests—never asked a single question about anything other than Jacob's ability to be an asset to the ever-growing Hawthorne empire.

"I found her by the docks," Jacob answered quietly, his eyes still trained on Miss Waters' curled-up form. "Standing her ground against a greedy hackney driver."

"Did she, now?" Mrs. Wilmark smiled. "I suppose one discovers jewels in the most unexpected places."

"Your mind makes quite a jump, ma'am. I agreed that Miss Waters is pretty—that is hardly the same as discovering a diamond."

Mrs. Wilmark chuckled and shook her head. "I've never seen your head turned this way, Jacob, and I've known you since you were shorter than this table."

Jacob glanced down at the well-loved tea table. "I was never this short."

"We all were, at one point or another."

"I am almost certain I was much taller."

"Certainly acted like it—precocious child that you were."

The indulgent way she said it had Jacob smiling. "I was always your favorite, wasn't I? Among your brother's pupils."

"Don't tell the others that."

"Do they still visit you?"

"Not once they no longer need his tutelage."

"So I remain the undisputed favorite." Jacob grinned.

"Of course, you rascal."

They shared another round of soft, familial laughter. Mrs. Wilmark moved to pack away the few dishes they'd used.

"No, no!" Miss Waters cried out. Jacob turned quickly, eager to rush to her aid, only to see her curling more into herself in the Wilmarks' chair, whimpering with her eyes still shut. "No, Papa, you can't mean that."

Jacob's heart clenched. He didn't know what drove Miss Waters away from her home. But whatever it was, he was growing increasingly determined to protect her from it.

A few seconds later, the creases eased away from her brow, and Miss Waters resumed her even breathing. Jacob frowned, not as quick to move on from her distress as she herself seemed able to be.

"You will help her then," said Mrs. Wilmark behind him.

Jacob sighed. "As much as I can. I don't think it advisable for her to attempt a trip to

China, not with all the detours such a trip requires, and the rough company it inevitably comes with.”

“I can lend her a maid. Betsy is always eager to join an adventure or two.”

“Betsy—” Jacob recalled the maid who’d served them earlier. “She’ll be chasing after sailors sooner than she’ll be of any help to Miss Waters.”

Mrs. Wilmark laughed. It was nice to hear her laugh—comforting, assuring. “I suppose you’re not wrong, although she is the one I am most able to spare. I need the others’ strength and talents in the kitchen.”

“Mr. Terrance is the most well-fed bachelor in all of London. It is no wonder your husband looks forward so eagerly to his days on shore.”

Mrs. Wilmark laughed again, a glint of sentimentality in her gaze. “You always knew how to give compliments, my boy.”

Jacob grinned. “It helps to make friends.”

“Like you did with Miss Waters?”

Jacob’s eyes drifted back to the delicate face pressed against the Wilmarks’ upholstery, porcelain features framed by the folds of Miss Waters’ crimson cloak.

Somehow, whatever it was he felt for her—the instant protectiveness and enchantment—seemed to extend beyond friendship, but he was not about to admit such a foolish thing to Mrs. Wilmark.

He was already unduly sentimental for a man born to a tyrant like Alastor Hawthorne.



“Can I leave her in your care?” Jacob asked.

“I’ll spend the day asking around, although I doubt the feasibility of establishing contact with people in China when one hardly has a name to go by.

Waters is hardly an oriental name, and she didn’t seem as if she knew anything about Canton, not even a proper address. ”

“One feels ties to one’s birthplace.”

“Yes, but sentiments do not determine reality—and one cannot always realistically examine those sentiments without a knowledgeable person to shed some light on the way.”

“And you cannot help her secure a journey otherwise?”

“I have other—obligations keeping me here.” Jacob frowned. He didn’t particularly want to go to China, but he very much disliked how this marriage was already tying him down before it had even happened. “But I’ll help her in whatever way I can, within the confines of London.”

Mrs. Wilmark nodded. She sent another soft, motherly look at their unexpected new friend. “I hope, for both your sakes, that it can all be unraveled more easily than that.”

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:18 am*

“S taunton!” Amelia woke up with a start.

Somehow, whatever she had struggled to remember fully awake, she’d managed to recall in the midst of her restless sleeping.

Sir George Staunton—that was the name Papa liked to talk about.

That was the person who’d visited their house, his eyes bright and curious at the sight of a young Amelia, like a naturalist being presented with a particularly exotic sample.

If she could find Sir George, then she just might be able to?—

Amelia blinked at her unfamiliar surroundings. She was certainly not in Upper Wimpole Street, and not at any of the Fitzwater family’s other residences either. In fact, the small, simple quarters in front of her seemed to hover between the genteel and servile.

She breathed in, trying hard to stay calm, as her mind scrambled. She’d needed to run, to escape Mother’s machinations. She had taken her most prized possessions along with her, hired a hackney, and?—

She looked around her. How had she gone from her hackney to wherever this was?

“Oh, good, you’re awake,” a woman’s voice said.

Amelia turned towards the plump, cheerful woman emerging from what looked like a small kitchen tucked at the back of the apartment. One look at her hostess’s sweet

smile shifted all her memories back in place.

“Mrs. Wilmark.” Amelia’s shoulders eased. “Did I fall asleep? I—you must think I have the most horrible manners.”

“There are times in life when manners become secondary.” The clergyman’s sister had such a motherly way about everything she said that Amelia rather expected her to cluck like a mother hen at any moment. “I hope you’ve rested well.”

“Did I sleep for very long?” Amelia tried unsuccessfully to stifle a lingering yawn. She’d barely slept last night, having spent most of it trying to pack as discreetly as possible for her trip to China—a trip that was edging farther and farther away from reality the more she dwelt upon it.

Mr. Hawthorne might have been a little brutal in his heartless dissection of her dream, but what he said had made sense, however much Amelia might wish it otherwise.

She might have been foolhardy enough to think forcing her way to China on her own was an entirely reasonable endeavor in the heights of her agitation, but a good sleep had brought with it a rested, cleared mind.

And Amelia was forced to acknowledge that it was nigh impossible for her to successfully take such a trip without risk, especially without the name of the Aldbury clan to lend her consequence .

The niece of the Earl of Aldbury might still be treated as a proper passenger. There was no such guarantee for poor Miss Waters of unknown origins and mysterious, Asian features.

“You slept a good three hours, perhaps,” Mrs. Wilmark replied casually. “I should have known to offer you a cot.”

“Three hours!” Amelia shot up from her chair, almost tripping on her half-numb leg.

“Oh, that is so terribly rude. I should not have—but I don’t know where I—” Amelia felt her lips quiver.

She cast her eyes about for the man who’d brought her here in the first place.

“Is Mr. Hawthorne about? Perhaps he can help me secure a room at an inn.”

“You can stay here with us. My brother and I have room to spare, what with my husband and sons away more than they are on land.” Mrs. Wilmark walked over.

The woman was not particularly tall by English standards, but she still stood taller than Amelia’s slight frame.

She clasped Amelia’s hands, a gesture so kind and so foreign that Amelia struggled not to weep.

“Whatever it is that is driving you from home need not make you lose a roof over your head entirely. I never have enough people to fuss over and would be glad to take you in. My brother would not oppose.”

“I cannot possibly impose,” Amelia protested out of habit, even if her heart rather liked being sheltered by Mrs. Wilmark—just like it had liked following after Mr. Hawthorne earlier today.

It was almost as if these two perfect strangers lent her a greater sense of belonging than her own stepmother ever did.

“Just a day or two, until you find your feet, my dear.” Mrs. Wilmark smiled. “I know ours are but humble quarters, but?—”

“Oh, your home is wonderful,” Amelia answered quickly. She pressed back on the woman’s hands with a smile of her own. “Thank you ever so much.”

“I’m sure, with a mind like yours, we can have things sorted out quickly.”

It was odd to have someone show any sort of confidence in her.

For all of her nineteen years, Amelia had never experienced such a thing.

Mother had always disliked her. Her cousins, however kind, often designated her the role of a child.

And while Papa had always brimmed with affection, he’d never been one for confidence in her abilities.

“Thank you,” said Amelia sincerely. She tried to reconsider all the tumultuous thoughts that had swirled in her mind after her earlier conversation with Mrs. Wilmark and Mr. Hawthorne.

They’d mentioned something about London, about finding someone.

Was that what she had been thinking about when she’d nodded off from sheer exhaustion?

She remembered a name. There was someone who— “Oh yes!”

“I am pleased to know you are so glad to see me,” said a young man’s voice.

“Oh.” Amelia and Mrs. Wilmark turned at the same time towards the new arrival.

Mr. Hawthorne, looking even handsomer than he had this morning, stood just past the

landing.

He appeared slightly disheveled, as if he had spent the day running about, although he still carried himself with that charming, reassuring air of a gentleman.

He smiled genially, if a little tiredly, before bowing his head. “I trust you rested well, Miss Waters.”

Amelia wanted to blush. Had she truly fallen asleep right in the presence of two brand-new acquaintances—with one being a man, no less? It certainly appeared as if she had .

She cleared her throat. “I did. Thank you.”

“And you look much the better for it,” he said, without a hint of flattery. And then his frown, that same frown from their conversation in the storeroom earlier, returned. “I only wish that I’d returned with good news.”

“You left to seek answers—for me?” Amelia blurted, astonished. Even Papa, for all his tenderness, would never have bestirred himself for Amelia’s sake. That a stranger would do so was utterly baffling. “Are there any ships leaving for China?”

“There may be some.” He seemed hesitant to answer. “Although none directly, given the strict regulations over Cantonese trade—and most certainly none I would trust with genteel passengers.”

Amelia felt another part of her heart deflate.

“I apologize for not having better news to offer, Miss Waters.”

“Oh, it is hardly your fault.” Amelia tried to stifle a sniff. “And perhaps—perhaps my

answers need not be found as far away as China, you know? There is a chance, perhaps, of someone I can consult here, although I hardly know where to find him.”

“You know someone here, in London?” Mr. Hawthorne stepped forward, sounding keen.

Amelia wondered at his eagerness. Did he think her his responsibility and was eager to be rid of her?

Given how her own family wished to marry her away to some grasping tradesman sight unseen, she wouldn’t be surprised if Mr. Hawthorne was similarly inclined.

“Sir George Staunton—my father’s associate.” Amelia set aside her feelings to answer. It was not as if her new friends owed her anything. “They visited China together the year I was born, and he travels often between England and the Far East, to my knowledge.”

“And it is your goal to travel with him? Is that wise?”

“If not to travel with him—at least to ask him—certain questions.” Amelia bit her lip.

Something held her back from telling Mr. Hawthorne and Mrs. Wilmark that she didn’t even know who her own mother was—perhaps a fear of losing their good opinion.

But she needed answers, and Sir George might just be the best person to ask without undertaking a trip all the way to China.

“Would contacting your father’s associate not put you at risk?” asked Mr. Hawthorne, his concern surprising her.

“Oh, no, not at all. It is not as if they meet very often. I’ve only met him once before.”

“And yet you believe he can help you.”

“He is the closest person I can think of, yes.”

Mr. Hawthorne nodded slowly, as if absorbing whatever she’d just told him. “Very well. Do you have his address?”

“Oh, no, I do not know a thing about him except his name.”

“That is—inconvenient.”

“But, surely, there aren’t that many Stauntons around?”

“It is hardly a rare name, Miss Waters.”

“But a baronet?”

Amelia couldn’t quite understand why Mr. Hawthorne suddenly looked stunned while Mrs. Wilmark chuckled.

“You always were fated to know the nobility, son,” said Mrs. Wilmark good-naturedly, her playful tone a far cry from the innuendos of the ambitious matchmaking Amelia was used to encountering at the edges of society events .

“I suppose,” Mr. Hawthorne said slowly after a long pause, “a title does narrow things down a little bit.”

Amelia regarded him hopefully.



His blue eyes softened. “I’ll see what I can do.”

It took three days, when all was said and done, to locate an address for Sir George Staunton.

Under no other circumstances might Jacob have crossed paths with the man, but a strategic questioning or two of the Hawthornes’ more lofty customers had finally pointed him on the right path after the first two disheartening days.

He hadn’t even noticed how frustrated he’d been until the third day, when he’d finally had good news to bring to Miss Waters. Given how she’d smiled at him, tea tray in hand, when he’d made his daily afternoon call, he rather thought she’d welcomed the news, along with the bearer of it.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:18 am*

“I don’t think I’ve been to this part of town before,” said Miss Waters as their hackney cab pulled up to the neat row of townhouses.

Jacob pulled himself back from his thoughts to look up towards her.

He tried to put on his most encouraging smile.

Given that it was Betsy, Mrs. Wilmark’s housemaid, who swooned instead of the woman seated next to her, Jacob rather thought his chosen way of comforting rather ineffective, and he quickly dropped back to a more neutral expression.

“I confirmed the address with another source yesterday afternoon,” he assured her. “Sir George was last known to be visiting his friends Mr. and Mrs. Thornton.”

“And this is their house.” Miss Waters peeked outside. Her hands trembled in her gloves. Jacob felt an odd stirring to reach for them.

He squelched the stirring. “Yes.”

His initial attraction towards Miss Waters, something he’d filed away as a passing appreciation for her unconventional features, had somehow managed to linger in the last few days.

He’d never been the sort to get his head turned easily by a pretty face.

His life had always revolved around learning and working and doing his share to manage the Hawthorne enterprise.

Even the times he'd interacted with women, charming them with a smile or a wink or two, he'd always been more the recipient of interest than the giver of it.

But after three days spent tracking down the elusive Sir George Staunton, wondering at the baronet's possible connection with Miss Amelia Waters, and looking forward to seeing Miss Amelia Waters herself after he'd done his sleuthing each day, Jacob was fast finding himself more permanently attached to the brown-eyed, dark-haired runaway—whoever she truly was.

There were very few things more compelling than seeing her soften under Mrs. Wilmark's motherly touch, her face lighting up in a beautiful smile.

And there was something entrancing about seeing her genteel manners lending a soft little touch as she began to offer more help around the house.

In short, Jacob liked her.

And it was a very inconvenient situation for a supposedly engaged man to be in.

Jacob cleared his throat, and his mind, as he descended the hackney cab first. He turned to assist Miss Waters down, enjoying the fleeting touch of her hands a trifle more than was strictly appropriate .

But it was the look in her eyes that caught his attention.

Frowning, Jacob leaned closer. Betsy shuffled behind them, appearing rather disproportionately disappointed that Jacob hadn't helped her down as solicitously as he had Miss Waters.

"Is something wrong? I can assure you it is Sir George Staunton's last known residence.

It appears that the man comes and goes so much that he does not keep permanent lodgings in London,” Jacob said under his voice.

The clean streets were a far cry from the chaos of the London docks, but this conversation somehow felt more exposed than the last one they’d conducted in public.

“And the Thorntons may not be titled, but I have been told that they have plenty of connected friends, the famous Lord Rodworth among them.”

“But what if Sir George—” Miss Waters frowned. Jacob watched a long, low breath escape between her pink lips. “Never mind me. It is a silly thought.”

He pressed her hand. “I would not think it so if you find yourself with misgivings.”

“Sir George was always my father’s friend. I have never had a formal acquaintance with the man himself.”

“And would that be a hindrance to his helping you?”

She seemed to consider. “I suppose not.”

“We all begin as strangers at some point, do we not?”

This time, she met his eyes with a smile. “I suppose we do.”

“And then we become acquaintances.”

“Or friends.”

“Yes.”

Her eyes lit up prettily.

Jacob cleared his throat, let go of her hand, and offered his arm more formally. “Then shall we?”

Miss Waters nodded, before slipping her arm around Jacob’s.

It was not, by any means, much different from what he would do for any other lady—but it did make Jacob feel a strange mixture of pride and giddiness.

At least, with Miss Waters, he played the role of a gallant gentleman, rather than a pawn in a marriage contract.

Father had just written this morning, his note still fresh in Jacob’s pocket, reminding him of his dwindling days of freedom.

Every stroke oozed with command and condescension, going so far as to boast of future connections to this lord or another, to anticipate visits to this manor or that abbey or various other country estates.

It was shameless ambition, plain and simple.

And while Jacob might have preferred to rise through society gradually, through education and diplomacy, his father clearly had no such scruples.

Alastor Hawthorne had never been a patient man.

And this time, instead of a delinquent client, it was his own son on the clock.

Jacob swallowed as they walked up the Thornton steps together, determined to set aside his other worries for the day.

If Sir George did indeed have the answers Miss Waters sought about her family, then she would no longer need to stay with Mrs. Wilmark, and Jacob himself would no longer need to be responsible for her well-being.

Somehow, the thought brought less satisfaction than it ought to.

“Sir.” A well-dressed, relatively young, yet by no means haughty, butler answered the door.

“Mr. Jacob Hawthorne to see Sir George Staunton.” Jacob handed over his card. His name might not amount to much amongst gentry, but money had its way of buying some respect, upon occasion. “In the company of Miss Amelia Waters.”

The woman beside him inhaled sharply under her breath at the name he offered, confirming Jacob’s suspicions that she went by a different name in reality. But there was nothing for it until they met Sir George himself.

The butler studied the card, as butlers were wont to do, while Miss Waters’ fingers tightened on Jacob’s arm. He reached over and lay a reassuring hand over hers, the fabric of their gloves caught against each other.

The butler looked down. “I’m afraid Sir George Staunton is not in residence.”

Jacob frowned as Miss Waters trembled. He hadn’t expected to be received with open arms, but he’d hardly expected to be brushed off entirely without the master of the house even seeing his name.

His sources had mentioned that the Thorntons were not high in the instep, despite close friendships with a viscount or two. His sources must have been wrong.

“I understand that our call is not expected,” Jacob said, his words as crisp as Mr.

Terrance had drilled them to be. “However, Miss Waters is a family friend of Sir George; and seeing that she needs his help over a personal matter, it would hardly be appropriate to turn away a gentlewoman.”

“I’m afraid there is nothing I can do about it, Mr. Hawthorne,” said the butler. “Sir George Staunton is not in residence.”

Miss Waters lowered her face. The last thing Jacob wanted was to have her crying in the middle of a whole street of curious London residents .

“Perhaps Mr. Thornton?—”

“Larson, what is it?” A woman’s voice floated over from the corridor behind the butler. Jacob watched with bated breath as a middle-aged, pleasant-faced woman walked into view. “Do we have visitors? You can stop puffing your chest so much. It is unseemly.”

The butler stepped to the side to address his mistress. “A Mr. Hawthorne and Miss Waters to see Sir George Staunton, ma’am.”

“Oh dear,” the woman—Mrs. Thornton, Jacob assumed—said with a sigh. “I’m afraid you have just missed him.”

“He was here then?” Jacob found himself asking, relieved to know his sources hadn’t been entirely wrong.

“He stayed with us, yes.” Mrs. Thornton eyed the two of them, her eyes lingering slightly longer on Miss Waters, who returned the gaze briefly before lowering her face once more. “But he’s been gone these three days.”

Disappointment dropped like a rock in Jacob’s stomach. “I see.”

“I didn’t know he was expecting visitors.”

“Miss Waters has—personal matters to consult with him.”

A hint of suspicion crept into Mrs. Thornton’s voice this time. “Is that so?”

“That is—not that she is—” Jacob stuttered over the realization of what he might have sounded like, parading a young woman around and knocking on doors looking for a baronet.

“Sir George is an associate of my father’s,” Miss Waters said this time, her eyes and voice clear. Whatever had distracted her all day must have finally been set aside. “They travelled together on the Macartney Embassy.”

Mrs. Thornton softened slightly. “I see.”

“There are a few pressing matters that I wish to consult Sir George about, and if he can spare a moment of his time?—”

“Even if he can, there is little I can do about it.” Mrs. Thornton smiled gently at Miss Waters. There was something about her that seemed to evoke tenderness easily—from matronly women, and from Jacob, alike. “I’m afraid his mother’s poor health called him to the country three days ago.”

Miss Waters let loose what sounded like a sigh of relief. “Not to China then?”

“Oh, no—although Lord knows he undertakes the journey far more often than is necessary.” Mrs. Thornton chuckled. “Sir George was called to his mother’s this time. I do hope the poor dear is not in a bad way.”

“Oh,” said Jacob and Miss Waters together.



“I do have his solicitor’s address, I believe. Perhaps you can ask about him there?”

It was not much of a lead, but it was perhaps better than nothing.

“And that’s all they said?” Mrs. Wilmark asked, her eyes full of gentle concern, as Amelia sipped her tea.

It was remarkably good tea for such a humble household, better than the tea back home and certainly much better than what had been served last week in Cavendish Square, but the quality of her beverage was hardly Amelia’s greatest concern at the moment.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:18 am*

Amelia sighed. “‘The country’ is not much to go by, is it?” She thought of her mother’s jewelry box, the paintings on the cold porcelain feeling more distant with every day she spent chasing down their futile promise. “I almost wonder if I should give it all up.”

“Well, our Jacob found your Sir George readily enough in London. I should think him fully capable of sleuthing out his whereabouts elsewhere.” Mrs. Wilmark smiled. The pride she took in Mr. Hawthorne was heartwarming. It was a pride that Amelia wished to see bestowed on herself eventually.

How odd, truly, that the niece of an earl, raised in relative privilege all her life, should yearn for the approval of a humble clergyman’s sister.

Amelia smiled. She’d tried to make herself useful these last few days—observing how Mrs. Wilmark ran her tidy little home and offering her assistance with a tea tray here or some organizing there, all while the other two maids worked and chattered alongside them.

That her quest to find her royal relatives had led instead to Amelia socializing with the help was most ironic—although in an almost amusing way.

She still detested waiting, but hearty company did render the waiting remarkably more bearable.

“We don’t even know where exactly Sir George is,” Amelia said before another sip of the impressive tea. Did Mrs. Wilmark have friends in high places who gifted her tea? “I hope Ja—Mr. Hawthorne won’t have a difficult time.”

Mrs. Wilmark didn't remark on her slip of the tongue, at least not with words.

Mr. Hawthorne had wasted no time committing himself to finding Sir George's trail after depositing Amelia and Betsy back at Mrs. Wilmark's after their futile call at the Thorntons'.

Surely, there was nothing irregular about Amelia wondering over his progress. He was truly being helpful.

He was also kind and distractingly handsome—but that was all beside the point.

"That boy is more responsible than is good for him, sometimes," Mrs. Wilmark said with a mother's pride, "but I suppose that is hardly something to complain about."

"No, it isn't." Amelia inhaled the scent of the tea, steeped to perfection as it was. "The world would do good to have more Jacob Hawthornes."

Mrs. Wilmark chuckled. "I'll have to agree about that." She sent a fond look towards the apartment's entrance, as if Mr. Hawthorne had just left. "My brother and I always said that he would make an excellent husband."

Amelia narrowly avoided burning her tongue. "Is he—is Mr. Hawthorne engaged?"

"Not to my knowledge, although many a pretty young lady has tried to catch his eye."

"I—I suppose they would."

Mrs. Wilmark sent a knowing look Amelia's way, and Amelia was suddenly very thankful she had more tea to sip.

"A good man is hard to find these days," Mrs. Wilmark said gently as Amelia tried to

distract herself by fiddling with the tea things. “They always are. And Mr. Hawthorne is most decidedly a good man.”

“I am glad—that is, for his sake.”

“Not for yours?”

“I—” Amelia looked up briefly. She might not be much talented in the art of subtlety, but she certainly had a good amount of self-respect. “I don’t see why it has much to do with me, even if I concur.”

“He is rather devoted to your cause. ”

“You said yourself that he is a responsible man.”

“He is.”

“And I’m sure that is all there is to it.” Amelia’s own words stung her, particularly because she believed them to be entirely true. She had never been anyone’s priority. There was no reason she suddenly would be now. “He is being kind.”

“Well, that he is.”

A rap on the door saved Amelia from having to fend off more of Mrs. Wilmark’s insinuations, although having the door open to reveal a slightly disheveled Jacob Hawthorne did her distraction little good.

“Good afternoon.” He smiled at Amelia first.

“Good afternoon.” She turned askance, uncharacteristically shy. Somehow, between failed journeys and being a recipient of unexpected kindnesses, she’d misplaced a

good chunk of her usual confidence.

Mrs. Wilmark cleared her throat, as if she were masking a chuckle. “And how goes your search?”

“Ah, yes.” Mr. Hawthorne straightened and smiled at the dear matron. “Sir George’s solicitor was—most loquacious.”

This time, both women chuckled a bit.

“Did he talk your ear off like you do us?” Mrs. Wilmark laughed.

“I do not talk people’s ears off.”

“Well, some might disagree.”

“He spoke of a hundred different things.” Mr. Hawthorne ran a hand through his golden hair. “I’m not sure all were particularly helpful. If not for his clerk constantly reminding him to answer my questions, he might still be talking now. ”

“Does he know where Sir George is?” Amelia asked, anxious to know the answer to her primary question.

“Ah, yes.” Mr. Hawthorne smiled again, his features youthful and bright. “He’s given me the family’s address—where his correspondence is forwarded.”

“Oh!”

“Yes.” He stepped forward until he stood right in front of Amelia. “It is not in London, I’m afraid, but in Milford House, in Salisbury.”

“Salisbury—” Amelia tried to recall her lessons. “That is in Wiltshire, is it not?”

“Yes.”

“But a journey like that—it can take days.”

“A day and a half, perhaps, not at all impossible.”

Amelia nodded, her mind churning. She still had almost all her money, thanks to Mr. Hawthorne’s intervention and Mrs. Wilmark’s hospitality. If she could hire a proper carriage and rent horses and—how exactly did one manage to plan a trip to another county?

“Would either of you happen to know where I can rent a carriage?” Amelia asked, only to have two sets of surprised, blinking eyes staring at her.

“I—I would suggest the stagecoach, Miss Waters,” said Mr. Hawthorne gently.

“Oh, yes—that—that would be helpful, I suppose.”

“I hope you do not need to pass through Hounslow Heath?” asked Mrs. Wilmark.

“Hounslow Heath?” Amelia repeated while Mr. Hawthorne frowned. He frowned rather often for a man so young, a habit that lent a shade of maturity to his otherwise boyish features.

“It might be a dangerous journey,” he said lowly.

“Oh.” Amelia braced herself for another tirade about why the idea would be as inappropriate as her former attempt to sail for China.

“But if we act carefully and do not draw unnecessary attention, it might be done readily enough.”

“Oh.”

“You must take Betsy with you,” said Mrs. Wilmark.

Mr. Hawthorne winced, almost playfully. “Is there no one else you can spare? Or perhaps we don’t even need a chaperone.”

“You know I need the rest of them. And you two can hardly pass for brother and sister.”

“Alas,” said Mr. Hawthorne, grinning.

“You said we .” Amelia leaned forward on the table. Both her companions turned towards her, but she only had eyes for Mr. Hawthorne. “You said we must act carefully. Does that mean that you will help me? You’ll go with me all the way to Salisbury?”

For a moment, he looked almost shy. “I had intended—that is—if you will let me.”

“Yes.” Amelia smiled. Relief rushed through her limbs. “That would be wonderful.”

Mr. Hawthorne smiled back, the consummate gentleman. Amelia barely even noticed Mrs. Wilmark’s chuckle.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:18 am*

Why Jacob ever thought himself a capable escort for Miss Waters to a place he himself had never visited was not something he could reasonably explain.

He liked to think himself a capable and adaptable sort of fellow, but years of being trained in handling accounts and managing people could only go so far in terms of protecting a young lady from highwaymen.

Miss Waters herself, along with a bright-eyed Betsy, might not have understood the risks when they'd weaved their way through Hounslow Heath, or when fellow stagecoach passengers of the more unsavory sort looked at the pair of them appraisingly, but Jacob did.

And he breathed a keen sigh of relief once they were past the notorious grounds for highwaymen.

They stopped for a change of horses, as well as passengers, after that.

And after another ten, uneventful minutes devoid of attacks or assaults, Jacob finally allowed himself to breathe easy.

He had not been raised to be much of an adventurer, but he was still committed to do his best in protecting the two women currently under his care.

It was an added blessing if his commitment didn't have to be put to the actual test.

"Are you all right?" Miss Waters' voice piped up. Jacob met her eyes.



Her frame, usually slender, looked even smaller than usual when tucked beside Betsy's plump form and two other women traveling along with them. At least Jacob, while having to sit facing the rear, only had to share his bench with one other portly gentleman traveler.

"I am well." Jacob offered a smile. He liked the answering one she flashed back at him—even if it did come along with another flirtatious wink from Betsy. That maid would be the death of him. "Do I not look well? I assure you I took extra care with my cravat this morning."

Miss Waters laughed, and Jacob wished there were no other strangers with them in the carriage.

Such a sweet smile belonged in the drawing room, not on a public trip to an unknown city, for a vague and uncertain purpose.

But whatever it was that this Sir George Staunton represented seemed to be important to Miss Waters, and Jacob was hardly one to argue against a young person having a mind of her own.

His own life would be so much easier if Father realized that little fact.

"You look well, if you must know," said Miss Waters, "although perhaps a little—pensive."

She was growing more perceptive by the day.

Jacob sighed. "Only a bit of fatigue from the road."

"Hear, hear," said the older gentleman beside Jacob. "One would think with all the tolls collected that they would keep the roads in better order."

“Hm,” Jacob hummed.

“It shan’t take more than a day to reach Salisbury, should it?” asked Miss Waters.

“We can rest and lodge for an evening, if you’d like.”

It was a kind offer, considering how urgently Jacob knew she wished to consult this baronet of hers.

And Jacob should wish to conclude the trip quickly, if only to effectively conclude his responsibility towards her.

But, somehow, the thought of spending a bit more time with Miss Waters was not entirely unappealing.

“Do you wish to take another day?” he asked her instead.

The two other women—poor gentlefolk, by the look of their clothing—cast curious glances towards them.

There was always a risk in conversing in a public conveyance.

“Sir—Mil—” He considered how wise it was to reveal their destination given their lack of privacy.

None of their fellow passengers might appear particularly dangerous, but years in trade had taught him to use caution whenever possible.

It was a principle he’d followed faithfully—until encountering Amelia Waters.

“Your relative’s home is not quite so far as to necessitate it.”

“I know.” She looked down. Only then did Jacob notice her fingers shaking. Was she more nervous than he was, after all?

If they were traveling in a private coach, without the need to jostle with others or to succumb to the whims of a convenient if imperfect assortment of schedules, then he might suggest they take their time—to find decent lodgings and remain rested and alert.

But given that they barely had the luxury of a private conversation, Jacob wasn’t particularly keen on extending their journey unnecessarily. If anything were to happen to Miss Waters—he would be the most responsible party. And the thought of failing in that role troubled him.

“Perhaps we can make a stop, just for a meal,” he offered gently. Miss Waters looked back at him gratefully. “A quick refreshment should help us all as we?—”

A sudden hard lurch was followed by a loud, splintering sound.

A collection of female voices screamed so loudly that it very nearly drowned out the noises coming from the teetering carriage.

Within seconds, the stage coach had dipped entirely to its side, even as the horses continued to haul it forward.

“Oh!” Miss Waters clutched the edge of the carriage door.

She looked frightened, yet not wholly lost to hysterics the way the other three women were.

Jacob braced his limbs against the carriage walls instinctively, as if making sure the sides did not cave in towards them.

To his right, the older gentleman did the same.

Their turned vehicle dragged on. The bumpy road felt even more uneven than usual as it grumbled underneath them.

Prayers and wails abounded. Was this how they died—as an assortment of strangers traveling away from London for one purpose or another?

It felt like a climactic yet anticlimactic way to meet one's demise all at the same time.

A dozen erratic heartbeats later, their broken conveyance finally screeched to a stop, causing a few heads to bump, against the roof and against each other.

But they were alive. That was what mattered .

The sounds of neighing and clicking horseshoes faded away. Someone must finally have cut the horses loose.

Jacob took a moment to catch his breath and whisper a prayer of thanks.

Life-threatening moments had their way of drawing a man's every last drop of piety up to the surface.

His father might well believe in the power of his wealth, but Jacob knew better than to think everything in life happened entirely by chance or human will alone.

He looked up, although it was perhaps more strictly sideways given the way the carriage tilted.

Dark almond eyes sparkled at him, brightened by adventure.

Miss Waters' rose lips glistened, slightly parted as she panted.

If not for the need to keep himself balanced in their lopsided carriage, he would already have tugged her into his arms.

Jacob swallowed. He'd found her intriguing from the start. Now, he was finding her attractive. And that was certainly something an engaged man had no business doing.

The door above them opened, nearly jolting Jacob off his precarious perch both slightly above and across Miss Waters.

"Carriage wheel broke," barked the driver. "Ye alright in there?"

They all murmured a mixed chorus of assurances and complaints.

"Let's get ye out of there."

Carefully, Jacob extricated himself immediately after his gentlemanly neighbor.

And, working hand in hand with the driver, they led out the remaining occupants one by one—each of them shocked, shaken, and a bit disheveled.

Everyone looked the worse for wear, except Amelia, who seemed somehow more awake and energized than she had been this morning .

Jacob smiled. There were more and more things to like about her with every passing hour.

"Can you fix it?"

Jacob turned just as the other gentleman questioned the driver.

The driver shrugged. “Not with the tools I have with me.”

Jacob glanced over at the carriage, one of its wheels ripped clean off its side. He swallowed. The fact that no one was hurt beyond a bruise or two was certainly providential.

“We can’t possibly all wait here the whole day,” the gentleman insisted, addressing their driver.

“No, sir.”

“And what do you expect us to do?”

“There’s an inn down the road. That way, a good hour’s walk.” The driver flicked his thumb westward. “Should ‘ave enough room for the lot of you.”

“A whole hour?” one of the female travelers wailed.

“What sort of inn?” the other one asked, frowning.

“We’ll be fine. We can walk it,” said Amelia. Jacob turned to find her beside him, eyes sparkling up towards him. “It cannot be worse than a ship to China.”

And, somehow, despite it all, she’d managed to make him chuckle.

“Quite a hero, ain’t he?” Betsy heaved a deep, dreamy sigh as she brushed Amelia’s hair that night.

The room they were meant to share at the inn wasn’t large by any measure, but Amelia was thankful that they at least had a room.

Mr. Hawthorne's tight quarters next door—practically a mattress shoved into a closet—could hardly be called one.

“Master Jacob always had that hero's look about him. ”

“He was very kind, yes,” Amelia agreed absent-mindedly. In her hands, she stroked her mother's jewelry box. It felt small between her fingers—delicate, almost fragile. It was a fitting representation of her tenuous grasp on her past, she supposed. “I am glad he is escorting us.”

“Impossible to travel without him,” Betsy declared with confidence as she lowered the brush. “You need anything else, miss?”

“Nothing else, thank you.” Amelia smiled at the maid. The short, plump figure and large round eyes made Betsy look almost childlike for the most part, even if Amelia knew the girl couldn't be much younger than she. “Do you need to sleep?”

“Always, miss.” Betsy chuckled.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:18 am*

Amelia pressed the girl's hands. The odds that governed the chances of birth—or, perhaps, Providence, for His own mysterious reasons—had made Betsy born into a life of service and Amelia the long-lost child of a princess.

There was nothing they could do to alter their destinies, but they could choose to at least be kind to one another.

“Then go rest. I—I need to think.”

“You gentlefolk are funny, Miss Waters. One need not always think so very much.”

Amelia laughed. “I suppose.”

“Is that yours?”

“What is?”

Betsy pointed at the porcelain box in Amelia's hands. Amelia struggled for a moment between hiding it and showing it. She chose the latter.

“It was my mother's.” Amelia smiled as she lifted the painted box—high enough to show the maid yet tight enough between her fingers to avoid dropping it. “It's the only thing I have of hers.”

“Is that a picture of her?” Betsy eyed the painted woman with even larger eyes than usual.



“I don’t think so—surely, a princess would be served by other ladies rather than conversing with them like this.”

“Your mum’s a princess?” Betsy’s mouth dropped open.

Amelia cursed her carelessness. She hadn’t even told Jacob!

“Well, that is—” She quickly tucked the box back into her padded reticule. “I like to imagine that she was.”

“But she’s Chinese then?”

Amelia hesitated. Despite how comfortable she’d become in Mr. Hawthorne’s and Mrs. Wilmark’s company, she hadn’t exactly confided her origins to them. Somehow, it felt wrong to tell Betsy more than she told the others.

“I think she might be,” she said eventually. “I don’t exactly look entirely English, do I?”

“No, miss. You look right special, you do,” Betsy answered eagerly. “I’ve seen Master Jacob staring more than once.”

Now Amelia hedged for an entirely different reason. “I’m sure he doesn’t.”

“Oh, he does, miss. Mrs. Wilmark said so herself.”

“They are just being kind.”

“My mama said staring wasn’t very kind.”

Now Amelia had to laugh. “No, I suppose it isn’t.”

The sound of loud, bawdy laughter floated up from the main taproom.

Amelia's nerves tightened. The inn had appeared moderately respectable when they'd first arrived—at least, as far as Amelia could tell.

But as the hours passed, a more boisterous crowd had seemed to gather downstairs.

Jacob—Mr. Hawthorne, that was—had insisted that they dine privately in her small sitting room.

She was understanding the wisdom of the expense and gesture now.

For a brief moment, Amelia let herself relive the memories of their private dinner.

With Betsy downstairs for most of its duration, the meal had felt unexpectedly intimate.

They were friends now, she'd like to think.

They'd become unexpected friends ever since he'd chased away her greedy hackney driver.

But, somehow, in the midst of sharing a simple meal of unimpressive traveling fare, they'd almost felt like family.

Amelia blinked. She missed Papa. She missed her cousins.

And she was infinitely relieved that she had Jacob Hawthorne with her—even if she might not get to keep him after everything was done.

A loud shout, followed by more raucous laughter, made Amelia jump. She eyed the

door, the worn bolt looking rather pathetically small.

She swallowed.

“We’ll be all right here, won’t we, miss?” Betsy’s voice shook.

Amelia bit her lip. “I hope so.”

A loud knock cut through the room. Both maid and mistress startled. Amelia eyed the door again. Was that where the sound had originated? Who would be knocking this late at night ?

“Are you awake?” A familiar voice floated through the walls.

Amelia turned. Only then did she spot the second door in the room—one to the side that didn’t face the main hallway.

“Jacob?” She walked over towards the door. She thought to correct her address for a moment, but it seemed hardly a priority at present. She unbolted the even smaller bolt and slid the door open. “Is something wrong? Why would you?—”

Anything she’d been about to ask stopped short on her lips at the sight of Jacob Hawthorne in his shirt—no coat, no waistcoat, no cravat. Her eyes rested, rather naturally, at the chest that presented itself right in front of her before she craned her neck upwards to his face.

Whatever embarrassment—and, frankly, curiosity—she’d felt at his informal attire seemed to be mirrored right back at her twofold.

She stepped back, realizing only then that she was already in her nightdress and wrapper, her hair unbound and brushed.

“Is—” She licked her lips. “Is something the matter?”

He blinked a few more times before coming to.

“Ah, yes,” he said, almost stuttering, “there was, uhm, there—I heard some noises—and banging. There was banging—of other doors.”

“No one banged on our door,” said Amelia quietly.

“Ah, right, yes, good, that—that is good.” He let out a harsh, hollow chuckle. He seemed to struggle with some unknown thought for a moment before squaring his shoulders and meeting her eyes. “I should have thought that you might have retired already at this time. My apologies. ”

“Oh, only Betsy was sleepy.” Amelia smiled. “But, yes, we were about to rest. Is everything well? Is it unsafe here?”

Jacob’s eyes flicked to the door. “If no one has been disturbing you, then perhaps I was just unnecessarily worried. It’s just that, I have been thinking—” He looked back at her. “Perhaps we should hire our own post-chaise tomorrow. It would be better than being at the mercy of the stagecoach.”

“Yes, please,” she agreed readily, leaning forward in her eagerness. “It would be much better.”

He nodded, looking pleased with her concurrence. “I’ll, uhm—I’ll head back to sleep.”

“Certainly.”

“I should have—” He chuckled sheepishly. “I should have used the other door.”

“Why is there a door between our chambers?”

“This was the dressing room for your room.” His sheepish look continued. It flattered his boyish good looks. “I asked for it because there were limited lodgings—and it would allow me to be nearby.”

“And yet it is a bedroom?”

“It is a—” A flush crept up his neck. “Sometimes, they rent it out as a suite, apparently.”

“But to whom?” Why would anyone need a second door in their room?

“To couples—to married couples.” Jacob chuckled. “I didn’t think it quite possible to persuade them that we were brother and sister given the disparity in our coloring.”

Had Jacob Hawthorne allowed the innkeeper to think they were a traveling married couple? The very thought had Amelia both blushing and feeling a small, unexpected thrill .

She scolded herself for the latter instantly, of course. She was fleeing an arranged marriage with a man—not trying to run into the arms of another. Besides, it was only a temporary disguise for their safety. She couldn’t quite blame the man for that.

“Thank you,” she found herself saying, “for arranging everything.”

“It is nothing at all.”

“Goodnight, Mr. Hawthorne.” She looked up, smiling.

He smiled back. “Goodnight, Amelia.”

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:18 am*

It cost them a pretty penny to hire their own post-chaise, a transaction that Jacob surprisingly insisted upon paying for, claiming some sort of chivalric code that Amelia was too tight a bundle of nerves to comprehend.

But what had felt like an extravagance at first now felt like a treasured privilege, especially as they pulled up the drive at Milford House.

At least she had the privacy to feel every emotion currently churning in her stomach.

The generous facade of the large house emerged fully into view. This was the place where Sir George Staunton had been born. Today, this would also be the place where the mystery of her own origins would be revealed.

The man might merely be a baronet, with possible distant ties to an earl. But Amelia herself was the niece of an earl and the heiress to a princess's legacy. She had no reason to fret.

At least, she liked to tell herself so .

"Are you ready?" Jacob asked gently as their conveyance slowed and then settled to a stop.

Amelia eyed him tentatively, drawing strength from the kindness in those entrancing blue eyes. He'd called her Amelia last night, hadn't he? Surely, it was not overstepping the mark for her to think of him as Jacob.

She tried to smile. "I suppose I must be."

“That is a far cry from the confident woman I saw at the docks.”

Amelia chuckled. “Perhaps I have learned a thing or two since then.”

He smiled gently. For a moment, she almost thought he would reach for the hand she’d rested on the bench between them. But he pulled back before touching her, turning instead to open the door.

Perhaps, it was for the best.

She’d miss him, but there was no reason for them not to part ways after this.

She had a past to discover—a new life to chart out. He had to go back to whatever his life had been before their little adventure. From what Amelia could tell, Jacob did not seem to particularly like that life, but she had no just cause to deprive him of it either.

“Come,” he said gently as he handed her down the lowered steps. “I’m sure they shan’t bite.”

Amelia laughed and squeezed his hand. “Have you ever met a member of the English aristocracy? Some of them can bite better with their words than dogs can with their mouths.”

“As someone who has been bitten by angry puppies—twice—I beg to differ. ”

“Well, as someone who is related to—” Amelia stopped short as Jacob met her gaze, a knowing, challenging glint in his.

He knew she’d been hiding most of her identity from him.

And yet, he’d helped her. As someone who’d spent almost all of her life surrounded

by people who believed friendships were only ever worth pursuing when there was money or influence to be had, Jacob's goodness was incredibly refreshing—and humbling.

Behind them, Betsy tried to climb down the carriage steps, groaning loudly, as if needing to make it clear that Jacob hadn't helped her .

Both Jacob and Amelia chuckled.

Amelia glanced behind her. "Are you quite well?"

"Well enough, miss," Betsy answered dutifully, her foot an inch away from the ground. She cast a lovelorn glance Jacob's way. "Would be nice to have had some help."

The fact that Jacob didn't clamor to flatter the girl—for Betsy was pretty, in her own way—was a testament to his good character. There were many masters who would think little of toying with a maid, especially one so eager for his attentions.

"I should have helped," the driver said, jumping down from his seat, looking almost as lovesick as Betsy herself. The maid seemed to hesitate briefly before reaching out her hand to receive due assistance for the last step.

Amelia had to turn towards the house again to hide her chuckle, and Jacob seemed to do exactly the same.

They walked forward together until Jacob approached the door.

"Mr. Jacob Hawthorne," he presented himself with affable confidence to the sober-mannered butler, his bearing and speech every bit the gentleman, "here with Miss Amelia Wa?—"



“Fitzwater.”

Jacob stopped and looked down at her, a small glint of betrayal in his eyes.

Amelia swallowed. She hadn’t wanted to lie to him, but it had felt a necessity for self-preservation at the time.

She turned her face towards the butler, who now regarded them with open curiosity in place of his earlier detachment.

“Miss Amelia Fitzwater, of London,” she said as evenly as she could.

The butler bowed slightly, his formality restored. “Sir, madam.”

“We are here to see Sir George Staunton, whom we were informed had left London a few days ago,” Jacob said, resuming control.

“I see,” said the butler, even more impassively. Did butlers receive training in maintaining stoicism? It was perhaps the sort of training Amelia needed, given that she felt herself ready to vomit up her heart at any moment. “And shall Sir George recognize this acquaintance?”

“He is a friend of my father’s,” Amelia said, “Mr. Martin Fitzwater.”

She figured it was better to leave off the honorable title. Jacob had received enough surprises for the day.

“Very good, miss.” The butler bowed again. “But Sir George is not at home.”

Her heart dropped. “No?”

“Perhaps,” said Jacob, his muscles tensing under her arm, “ it would be best for Sir George himself to make such judgment.”

“As you wish, sir,” said the servant, unperturbed, “but I fear a letter shall take a few days to reach him up north, and the reply would take equally long to return.”

“He is truly not here then?” Amelia narrowly avoided wailing. Was she to traipse all over England without getting any answers at all?

“Her ladyship is in residence, if you wish to verify the matter with her.”

“Her ladyship?” Amelia hadn’t realized Sir George was married.

“You are at the residence of the Earl of Morchester.” The butler looked outright offended now.

“Right, of course,” Amelia answered quickly.

She didn’t remember ever having met this particular earl, but there was a slightly higher chance now that they might receive more direction than they had at the Thorntons’.

Please tell her ladyship that Mr. Jacob Hawthorne and Miss Fitzwater, the niece of—Lord Aldbury, are here to call. ”

If the newly-named relation surprised Jacob at all, he was kind enough not to show it.

“Very good, miss,” the butler said at last. “Allow me a moment.”

Jacob watched, eyes and mind sharp, as the thin, severe Countess of Morchester arranged the silks of her dress. They had all been introduced and seated for a good

two minutes by now, but neither Jacob nor Miss Waters dared to breathe a word before their unhappy hostess did.

Miss Waters—the mere thought of the name had Jacob clenching his jaw. He'd always known it was a pseudonym. It was why he'd always thought of her as Miss Amelia in his mind. Somehow, he'd known that part of her name to be truly hers, at least.

But she was apparently not Miss Waters, running away from some unnamed genteel family who didn't welcome her. If Jacob remembered correctly—and he very nearly always remembered correctly—she'd introduced herself as Amelia Fitzwater, the niece of Lord Aldbury.

There were many types of lords in England—none of whom Jacob was particularly eager to meet.

Searching for one elusive baronet was proving difficult enough.

But all his life, he'd thought of the nobility as more archetypes than people, a different species that breathed a different air and inhabited a different habitat than regular men.

Father had always aspired to rise among the ranks and ingratiate himself with the upper crust. Jacob had always thought the idea vanity of vanities.

But now he was seated in the house of an earl, in the company of a woman he'd come to think of as a friend, who was herself related to some sort of lofty nobleman.

The idea that these people who monopolized English wealth and thought themselves to be better than others were real human beings with real problems was a rather challenging idea.

“You’re Aldbury’s niece, you say?” The Countess of Morchester finally spoke, her voice as spindly as her person.

Amelia nodded. “Yes, my lady.”

“Are you Madelaine’s girl then?”

“No, ma’am, that would be my cousin Thea.”

The countess raised a fine brow.

Amelia cleared her throat. “Lady Dorothea Fitzwater.”

“Lady—” The countess frowned, her features pinched. “Ah, yes, Henry inherited.”

Amelia’s fingers twitched. To Jacob, it was clear that she was nervous. Whether or not it was just as apparent to the countess, the latter did not seem to particularly care.

“Yes, Lady Morchester,” Amelia said with a barely level voice.

The countess sent an assessing eye up and down in response. Amelia shrank back slightly. Jacob wished he could reach over in support.

He himself might be the son of an upstart tradesman, his name barely worth the card it was printed on in the eyes of people who called themselves lords and ladies.

But if Amelia had been born the niece of a nobleman—and he had no reason to doubt she indeed was—then, surely, she deserved better treatment than this.

“You do not take after your father then—if he looks anything like his brothers,” said Lady Morchester.

“I do not think, my lady,” Jacob said, unable to keep quiet any longer, “that Miss Wa—Miss Fitzwater’s appearances have anything to do with our errand today.”

Lady Morchester sent an even more disdainful look Jacob’s way. “And you are?—”

“Jacob Hawthorne, at your service.” He leaned his head forward in the semblance of a bow, even though he knew they’d already been introduced earlier.

“Miss Amelia is here on an errand to consult Sir George Staunton. And if your ladyship would be so kind as to extend your help, we would perhaps be able to?—”

“And who is Sir George to you, young man?”

“He is—” Jacob paused to rein in his rising ire. “He is in possession of information that is valuable to Miss Amelia.”

“And is that true, Miss Fitzwater? If that is indeed who you are?” The countess swung her gaze back at Amelia. “Sir George might not be the master of this estate, but his whereabouts are not something we bandy about to any riffraff who asks.”

Jacob rose quickly. “I beg your pardon, ma’am.”

“Our apologies.” Amelia rushed to her feet beside him. She clung to his arm. “I—I had not realized that we were intruding upon another earl’s residence. We were under the misapprehension that Sir George was residing here?—”

“His mail is being forwarded to this address,” Jacob said.

“What George does with his mail is his business.” Lady Morchester sniffed.

“My apologies, Lady Morchester,” said Amelia. “Please, forgive us for disturbing

you.”

Then she took Jacob by the hand and tugged him all the way out of the house.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:18 am*

The young maid at the Brown Hare Inn stacked their used dishes on a tray.

Then she sent one surreptitious, admiring glance Jacob's way before sliding out the door of their private parlor.

Amelia sighed. She'd always enjoyed dinners with Jacob.

Betsy usually dined below stairs, eager to feast her eyes on the plethora of men—often returning to Amelia afterwards with detailed descriptions of the people she'd observed, before declaring Jacob handsomer than this or that servant boy who'd flirted with her.

But tonight, Amelia was quiet, as was Jacob. It was almost as if the revelation of her identity, however partial, had taken with it the camaraderie they'd previously established.

Amelia toyed with the edge of the worn wooden table. She couldn't blame the man, could she? He'd set aside all his concerns—whatever life required of him—to help her on a quest she herself could barely define. And she, in turn, had repaid him with lies.

Across from her, Jacob wiped his mouth with a serviette, folded the fabric before laying it aside, and shoved himself away from the table.

She could feel his eyes on her even without meeting them.

"It is late," he said.

It was not late. It was, in fact, distinctly early. For they'd arrived numbly from Milford House and called for dinner without realizing the hour of the day. Only Betsy had said anything during the ride, her chatter drowning out the tension between the two people she was supposedly chaperoning.

The sun was nowhere near the horizon, and they'd already eaten every dish the humble inn could manage to send their way.

When Amelia said nothing to Jacob's comment, he stood and paced towards the door.

"Wait," she called out.

He stopped, obliging as ever.

She drew a deep breath for courage. Then she looked up.

He didn't look angry, at least not as much as he had when Lady Morchester was hurling barbed insults their way. But he did look cautious, and a little weary.

Amelia made sure not to cry.

"I'm sorry," she said.

He didn't move, though he had to have heard her.

"Shall you sit? I—" Amelia swallowed and attempted a weak smile. "I think I owe you a story."

He didn't answer, but his eyes softened before he turned his body back towards the room rather than the door.



He stepped forward. Yet instead of circling the table and retaking his earlier seat, he strode directly towards Amelia, shoved his hands in his pockets, and leaned back against the table.

The edges of her skirt brushed the side of his boots, and she arched her neck high to meet his gaze.

“I’m sorry,” she said again.

He shrugged. “Whatever for?”

“Whatever for? I—” It was Amelia’s turn to rise. It eased her neck to be ever-so-slightly closer to him in height, and it allowed her to put slightly more distance between them. She couldn’t afford to be distracted. “I have hidden my identity from you.”

“As I was well aware you had.”

“You were?”

A small smile tugged at his lips. “You have not exactly been very subtle, my dear.”

She tried to ignore the endearment. “But I have hidden my connections to the nobility—something which you apparently dislike.”

This time, his pause felt longer, more thoughtful. “I do not despise or dislike the nobility for its own sake—although today’s experience has certainly done little to improve my opinion of its members.”

“Lady Morchester was not very kind, I’ll admit.”

“Not very kind?” Jacob scoffed. “She insulted us—insulted you—at every turn.”

Amelia sighed. “We appeared unannounced at her house, seeking a guest who was not there. I suppose she had the right to be wary.”

“Wariness does not justify incivility.”

“Perhaps not.” Amelia sniffed.

She hadn’t enjoyed their conversation with Lady Morchester. But she was even more concerned with the fact that they had essentially run up against a brick wall, and compromised her identity in the process.

If Lady Morchester was inclined to gossip—although Amelia hoped not given the countess’s general unawareness about the state of the Aldbury title—then it would not take long for news of her whereabouts to reach London.

And Mother might send a Bow Street Runner after Amelia, marriage settlement in hand, right to the Brown Hare’s door.

“If that is the life you’ve left behind, Amelia,” Jacob said quietly, his deep voice permeating every corner of the private parlor, “then there is no wonder you ran away.”

Her eyes darted up. “You are not angry with me then?”

“I am angry, yes.” He straightened. “But I have no reason to be angry with you.”

Her heart skipped. She ordered it to behave. “I have concealed my identity from you. I have upended your life for a lie. And now, if we cannot find Sir George?—”

“Do you wish to find him?”

“Do I? Of course I do.”

“Then we will.” He stepped forward, his shoulders towering over hers, yet without making her feel the least bit trapped.

“If you can be patient and give me a few more days, then I can track down wherever his mother might be—or wherever his more important correspondences were being forwarded. As long as we have the funds, it should not prove difficult to hire more means of transport. ”

“Jacob.”

“I am aware that you might be in a bit of a hurry—and I do not need to be told the full circumstances of what exactly you are attempting to escape. But as a gentleman, as a friend, it is my duty?—”

“You have no duty towards me.” Amelia choked on a laugh as a stray tear escaped. “I wish I could say I had some sort of claim, but I do not, and everything you do?—”

“Everything I do, I do because I want to.” He closed the space between them and reached for her hand. He pressed her fingers, ungloved, against his chest. “And I want to help you. I want to aid you.”

“Why?”

“Because—“ He seemed to struggle to speak, although he was usually eloquent enough.

And then his gaze dropped to her lips, his own parting slightly. Amelia stopped

breathing. Every inch of her wished him to remove the distance between them—but could she allow him to when he barely knew who she was, when she herself barely knew who she was?

“Jacob,” she whispered, her voice heady to her own ears. But what could she really say? Slowly, he seemed to edge closer—as if an invisible string tightened between them. She’d set out to find her family, determined that her past was the key to her being. But what if?—

“Miss Amelia!” The door behind him burst open, and they quickly jumped apart. Amelia struggled to regain her breath. Betsy grinned, looking entirely unaware of what she had potentially interrupted. “Miss Amelia, we’ve found him. We’ve found your Sir George.”

And both Amelia and Jacob watched her with wonder.

“Matlock?” Jacob ruminated on the word. The groom from Milford House nodded eagerly, no doubt urged on by the adoring way Betsy clasped his hand and gazed up at his face. The boy was handsome enough, Jacob supposed, in an innocent, childlike sort of way. “That’s all the way into Derbyshire.”

“Yessir,” he answered with gusto, his lanky limbs and budding frame folded awkwardly into their private parlor. “Heard his valet say so himself, sir.”

“Derbyshire is up north,” Amelia whispered, her first words since Betsy’s interruption. The news the maid brought had been welcome, though her timing imperfect. “It does align with what the butler said.”

Jacob shook his head. Distracting himself with thoughts of what might have happened if Betsy and her newest object of affection had not interrupted them was the last thing he ought to be doing.

“And you are certain of this?” he questioned the groom.

“Yessir, wouldn’t have told Betsy here if I weren’t, sir.”

“Isn’t he so very helpful?” Betsy cooed. Given the briefness of their call at Milford House, Betsy’s ability to pick up a new romantic interest was remarkably efficient, if a little unsettling. “I knew it couldn’t all end so badly for us, miss.”

“Thank you,” Amelia said. Jacob smiled at her sincerity. She turned to face him, eyes hopeful, and momentarily chased away all his thoughts about the elusive Sir George. “Is it possible to follow him so far?”

Jacob very nearly said that he would go to the ends of the earth for her, if it came to it. Even China no longer sounded as outrageous as it did a week ago.

Instead he swallowed. “It is manageable. Nothing more than two or three days’ worth of traveling.”

“We might be able to find him then?”

“Yes, if this next direction proves true—although we might have to ask a few strategic questions once in Matlock.”

“I ain’t lying to you, sir,” Betsy’s new sweetheart rushed to assure them. “I won’t get Betsy here in trouble, I won’t.”

“That is admirable,” Jacob said. “I suppose I can make arrangements by the morning. Given our previous experience, I am hesitant to rely on the stagecoach. We would be much more efficient if we?—”

“I know where to get you help, sir. That is, if you wish, sir.”

Betsy swooned anew at the offer, and Jacob paused to consider the advantages of not having to see to the traveling arrangements himself.

“That would be helpful, yes. Thank you.” He reached for some coins in his pocket, but Amelia was faster in producing a crown and dropping it into the grateful young man’s hand.

Who was she, in actuality? Neglected by her family, born to a complicated past, and yet distinctly a gentlewoman and in possession of a veritable little fortune in her bottomless reticule—Amelia Fitzwater was a mystery.

A thought at the back of his mind reminded him of a little thing called Debrett’s Peerage.

Mr. Terrance had always talked about the book with a mixture of interest and amusement, alluding to how the fortunes of men were often consolidated into a few lines on a page documenting their chances of birth.

If Amelia was indeed the niece of an earl, would she be listed in the book?

And if he successfully unraveled the realities of her identity, would the revelation prove her allure to be merely a sense of curiosity—or would it solidify her even more in his heart?

“I’ll see to it right away, miss,” said the groom to Amelia, before he and Betsy pranced out the room, talking loudly all the way. The maid was as indiscreet as they came, but Jacob could hardly blame her when her lack of discretion served them so suitably tonight.

And once the door slammed close, it was just Jacob and Amelia, alone once more.

He waited to turn towards her, his heartbeat unsteady. She met his eyes gradually yet openly, as entrancing as she'd always been. More than ever, Jacob rued the supposed engagement looming over his head.

If he absconded with Amelia to Scotland tonight—would Father truly be able to do anything about it?

“Thank you,” she said, her gratefulness sending a splash of guilt over his selfish thoughts. “I am sorry for the inconvenience.”

“Again, there is no need to apologize.”

“But to go all the way to Matlock?—”

“If I’m not mistaken, milady, you were once prepared to go all the way to China.”

That comment sent her chuckling, and Jacob rued and relished the fact in equal measure.

Could he possibly endure another few days traveling in close quarters with this mysterious woman?

It would be exquisite torture to do so while fighting against having his heart attached, and yet the thought of abandoning her now was even more excruciating .

“We shall have quite a distance to cover tomorrow,” he said, his voice sounding huskier than he'd anticipated. “We both need to rest.”

She nodded, her lashes glistening. “Goodnight, Jacob.”

He contented himself with a brush of a kiss to her cheek, pulling away before he

could do more. “Goodnight, Amelia.”



*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:18 am*

Onwards to Matlock—Jacob forced himself to focus on the scenery unfolding outside the carriage window.

It had been two days since his momentary lapse of judgment at the Brown Hare Inn, two days since his relief over not having to part with Amelia over unfinished business had him presuming intimacies he had no way of justifying.

It was bad enough that they addressed each other by their Christian names. To add more kissing and touching, even the most innocent kind, was tantamount to scandal.

And chafe as Jacob might against his father's insatiable desire to prove themselves genteel, he had good enough sense to know that scandals rarely did anyone any good.

Perhaps the occasional exception might land a woman in a marriage more preferable than she might have aspired to otherwise, but one could hardly go through life counting on exceptions.

“Such a gent, he was.” Betsy's voice rumbled on in the close quarters of their post-chaise, most likely gushing about her latest object of infatuation.

It was a relief to have her attentions finally diverted when Jacob was busy sorting out his own complicated feelings.

But it was also a little awkward to have the maid being the only person chattering away.

Jacob had been determined to maintain a proper distance, both in heart and body, the

last two days. And his coldness must have affected Amelia as well, for she'd hardly spoken anything to him since he'd started to withdraw.

The distance hurt.

He'd grown accustomed to her unique mix of innocence and pluck—the warmth that always seemed to overflow out her tapered, lively, entrancing eyes.

Every other minute, his gaze would catch upon something or someone he'd like to share a comment or a chuckle over.

Every meal, he found himself wondering if she liked the food or not.

But he'd kept to himself over all of it.

What other choice did he have? His father's note yesterday morning had been annoying, but also sobering.

Reports tell me that you have taken that sorry hide of yours traipsing all over England.

I have no complaints, as long as my men can still find you.

But do temper your exploits. It would not do to have news going all the way to Thorncombe.

I refuse to have arranged this match for nothing.

Your weeks of freedom dwindle. Spend them circumspectly.

Jacob sighed, his mind warring between the weight of the note in his coat pocket and

the draw of the woman seated across him. At least Father had the good sense to finally admit that he was expecting Jacob to essentially surrender his freedom for the sake of this forced marriage.

An unexpected hole in the road sent a jolt through the carriage. The driver hollered his apologies, while Jacob's eyes instinctively sought Amelia's. She kept his gaze a full five seconds before turning away. The carriage rolled on pleasantly, while Betsy chattered away.

The maid had always been a flimsy excuse of a chaperone. But Jacob had to begrudgingly admit that she was a useful enough one to at least keep him in check.

Gradually, the scenery outside their hired conveyance morphed, in both flora and topography, from the vibrance of the South to the cooler colors of the North.

Soon, they would find the elusive Sir George.

Soon, they would glean whatever it was that Amelia needed to learn from the baron.

And once they did, Jacob's duties would be over.

He swallowed away the lump in his throat.

Trading away his little adventure with Amelia for lifelong imprisonment with some nobleman's kin was the last thing he wanted to do—but he was also not foolish enough to think that he would be allowed to keep Amelia in his life once whatever it was she was searching for was finally found.

She was on a quest, for herself, and he was merely the diverting companion sent to help her along the way.

“And he said he’d be devastated not to ever see me again.” Betsy prattled on. Was this still about the same fellow she’d met at the last inn? Or was this someone else? It was hard to keep account of her ever-revolving objects of affection. “In fact, he asked if we were going?— ”

Their carriage careened abruptly. Jacob, remembering the last accident they’d had, reached quickly for Amelia.

She folded herself into his arms without the least reluctance.

He held her closer as Betsy screamed. Horses neighed in protest as the wheels groaned against the road, their whole conveyance screeching to an unexpected stop.

There was no toppling or swaying this time.

But there was noise, the type of noise that only humans could make. And a loud, gruff voice shouted, “Stand and deliver!”

Jacob frowned sternly, practically locking Amelia against his chest with his arms as the highwaymen approached the carriage door.

He couldn’t see particularly well from the angle of his seat, but he could glimpse at least three different men of varying sizes.

Trained for trade rather than fisticuffs, Jacob was well-aware of his own limitations if the situation were to dwindle into violence.

But he had a shuddering Amelia in his arms and a crying Betsy to their side.

Scholar or not, he would do his best to be the protector they needed.

With a harsh tug, the leader of the small gang threw the door open. His other hand waved a pistol towards them. Jacob couldn't tell if it was loaded or not—but one did not particularly like to guess at these things at close range.

“I don't want trouble,” said the criminal, rather ironically. “Just give me yer treasure and go. ”

Betsy wailed even louder. Jacob sent her a quelling look that finally lowered half her volume. Then he turned back to their attacker.

“I will give you all the coins on my person. Just don't frighten the ladies,” he spoke firmly.

The highwayman shrugged, as if Jacob's act of bravery meant nothing to him. “If ye have what we want.”

Slowly, Jacob slid Amelia to the side, still keeping an arm around her, and reached for his pocket with his other hand.

He extricated a pouch of coins—the smaller one he carried—and tossed it to the robber.

He silently thanked his father for the habit of making sure they always divided their coins into several pouches when traveling while the highwayman examined his spoils.

He nodded at the small bounty in his hand, earning grunts of approval from his two compatriots—who were occupied with guarding the driver.

The leader shoved the coins in his pocket and looked back up, pistol in hand. “This ain't the treasure box.”

Betsy whimpered loudly again, before Jacob shushed her.

“We don’t carry a treasure box,” said Jacob.

“You don’t—but the lady does.” The pistol waved at Amelia. Jacob tugged her even closer against his side.

“I am no pirate,” said Jacob, “I don’t carry boxes of treasure with me. And neither does my wife.”

The falsehood slipped easily off his tongue, for lack of a better plan.

To his surprise, the highwayman laughed. “I know ye ain’t married, at least not until Scotland, if that’s where yer headed.”

Jacob felt Amelia’s hands tighten around his waist .

“But we only want the treasure,” the robber went on. “Hand it over and we go.”

“Again, there is no treasure,” Jacob answered, bewildered. They were nowhere near the shore. What was the criminal about?

“The treasure box,” the man repeated like a madman. “Betsy said the young miss can’t stop looking at it. Must be worth a fortune.”

Jacob’s gaze whirled around to Betsy, who had well and truly crumbled into a sobbing mess by now.

Had she betrayed them in some way? He could not think the simple-minded maid could have gotten mixed up with a gang of ruffians.

But, upon consideration, it would not at all be surprising if she'd been tricked to believe a handsome face or two.

Once more, Jacob turned to explain that there was no treasure box, but then Amelia spoke.

“There is nothing in the box,” she said softly, pushing herself up from where she'd lain against Jacob earlier. She looked the highwayman directly in the eye. “Truly, there is nothing.”

“Betsy said?—”

“I said nothing!” Betsy wailed. “Miss Amelia likes the box, but there's not anything in it, I swear!”

Jacob watched the cogs in the robber's mind turning.

“Ye were certain of the box,” he insisted.

“Here.” Amelia sat up and divested herself of her earrings and two bracelets. She shoved it all at the highwayman. “That is everything of value I own. Mr. Jacob has given you the rest. Truly, there is nothing.”

In the distance, sounds of well-trained horses grew louder. The highwayman seemed to consider his bounty before glancing at his companions.

Then, in a minor miracle, they decided to abscond into the nearby woods.

Jacob and Amelia fell into a relieved embrace.

Then his eyes darted towards the blubbering maid. Betsy—and perhaps Amelia—had

a bit of explaining to do.

Amelia brooded, her own throat dry, as Jacob crossed his arms in the chair beside hers, both of them facing a sobbing, trembling Betsy.

They hadn't had to travel far to reach the next inn, and their terrified driver had been more than eager to ensure their quick arrival.

Arrangements had then been efficiently made for their rooms and private parlor.

And now, it was time for a reckoning.

Amelia felt her own eyes prick with threatening tears as Betsy blubbered on. She'd never admired the maid, but she'd grown used to her, perhaps even marginally fond of her. And Betsy had been rather instrumental in figuring out that Sir George had gone on to Matlock.

One couldn't exactly appreciate the woman's loose lips one moment and then blame her for them the next.

"Explain yourself," Jacob said, his tone somber.

"I didn't mean to," Betsy cried. "I didn't know he was a highwayman, sir, I didn't, I swear."

It was an honest answer, Amelia could tell, even if a rather useless one.



*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:18 am*

“You’ve endangered your mistress, and you’ve caused us a good loss of funds at the same time. We were extremely fortunate to have escaped without any harm to our persons.”

“I know, Master Jacob, I know.” Betsy wailed even louder. “Thank the Lord we got off when we did.”

“Of course,” Jacob said, unmoved. “But one could hardly expect God to get us out of scrapes we create out of our own foolishness.”

“He was just curious, sir, he was. Asked where we were goin’ and all.”

“And that did not sound the least bit suspicious to you?”

“He was askin’ in a friendly sort of way. Never said he was plannin’ any harm.”

Even Amelia had to groan at that.

Jacob remained wholly unimpressed, “Betsy, you must understand?”

“I believe her.” Amelia laid a hand on his arm. Jacob turned his face towards her, concern and frustration all over his features. “She was likely deceived by a seasoned charmer.”

“That’s right, Miss Amelia. He was a charmer, he was,” Betsy eagerly agreed.

“That does not give you leave to describe our private business with just anyone, of

course.” Amelia turned to the maid herself. “But I understand that you are a victim as much as we are.”

“Right, miss. That’s exactly right, miss.” Betsy started a fresh round of tears, and Amelia felt Jacob soften under her fingers. The maid had been extremely foolish, but one didn’t choose to be born foolish, or remain so most of the time.

“I understand that you did not realize the dangers,” Amelia said quietly .

“No, miss. That’s just it, miss.”

“But even so,” Jacob said, gentler yet not quite forgiving, “you have no right to make up things that are untrue.”

“I never said a word that was untrue, Master Jacob.”

“Not a word? What was all that nonsense about the treasure box then?”

Amelia tensed as Betsy blabbered, “It’s the jewelry box, Master Jacob. That special one Miss Amelia always holds.”

“Jewelry box? I was not aware that there was any jewelry involved in this escapade.”

“So says Miss Amelia, sir, but the box itself is so pretty.”

“A box—” Jacob turned an inquiring eye towards Amelia. She very nearly pulled back altogether. “You have precious jewelry on your person?”

“I—do not,” Amelia said helplessly.

“Then Betsy?—”

“But I do have a jewelry box—my mother’s.” Amelia tried to keep her voice steady. “It is—unique.”

Amelia could almost feel Jacob’s guard rising, the openness between them that had so thoroughly surrounded them at the highwayman’s attack slipping back to the coldness of the last two days. She wanted to weep.

“Jacob, please, I can explain.”

“Betsy, I believe we’ve said enough. Please go send for our supper.” He kept his gaze steady on Amelia.

“Yes, sir, Master Jacob.”

Sniffs and scuffling followed Betsy out the door. The door swung shut. Then it was Amelia’s turn to talk.

It would have been easier if he’d crossed his arms and demanded answers from her like he’d done to Betsy. But long after Betsy had vacated the parlor, Jacob only sat and brooded, then paced and brooded, waiting for Amelia’s resolve to crumble.

A quarter hour later, Amelia relented. “I suppose you have questions.”

Jacob paused by the window, his eyes unseeing as he faced the darkness beyond the crooked panes. “I have.”

“I suppose I owe it to you to answer them.”

It took him several heartbeats to answer. “I would appreciate answers—though I refuse to demand them.”

Tears fell. “Why must you be so very good , Jacob?”

He angled slightly towards her, a smirk on his lips. “I have been accused of many things in that tone over the years—but being ‘good’ has got to be a first.”

His friendliness calmed her, and Amelia ventured a small smile for the first time since the highwaymen had accosted them. She breathed in deeply and set her trembling hands on her lap.

“Roughly twenty years ago, my father, the youngest son of the Earl of Aldbury at the time, joined the Macartney Embassy to China under the leadership of Sir George Leonard Staunton.” She’d known bits and pieces about her history all her life.

This would be the first time she verbally recounted them.

“He was the first baronet, and we are trying to find his son, Sir George Staunton, who became a dear friend of my father during their journey.”

“Ah,” said Jacob.

“Together with craftsmen, statesmen, doctors, artists, and naval officers, they visited China and were even granted the opportunity to meet with Emperor Chien-lung himself.”

“That is a rare occurrence.”

“So I am told—or, at least, have gathered.”

They shared an understanding smile before Amelia sallied on. “The embassy exchanged many gifts with the government they visited, including valuable trinkets and artwork. And while the rest of the delegation returned that year, my father

stayed.”

“For your mother.”

“He had fallen in love with a minor princess and married her. I was born the following year in Canton, although my mother didn’t survive long past my birth.”

“My condolences.”

“Thank you.” Amelia sniffed. She swatted at a stray tear and braved on with her story. “My father returned to England, with me, and married a widow soon after.”

Jacob nodded. The story felt complete ending there. She’d always thought it did. Only recently had she realized that a simple summary of her past did nothing to safeguard her future.

“And yet you are here,” he said simply, by way of prompting her.

Amelia sniffed. “And yet I am here.”

“Has your stepmother—treated you ill?”

Amelia’s hands instinctively sought the cool surface of her mother’s jewelry box, but she kept them tethered to her lap for the meantime. “She favored her own children, which is not at all unusual or unexpected—but Papa loved me enough to ease the snub, on most days. ”

Jacob paused again, the weight of his quietness thick around them.

“But then one day, it wasn’t enough any longer,” she said softly, her heart twisting at the memories—of Papa’s resigned sigh at the dinner table, of his humbling revelation

that she had no dowry at all, and of the painful realization that even the one man who'd always loved her thought her prospects to be as bleak as Mother did.

Jacob nodded by the window, compassionate and strong. Oh, how dear he'd grown to her!

"Did something happen?" he asked, matching her tone in gentleness.

Amelia drew and released a long, slow breath. "They'd promised me away in marriage—to a man I'd never met."

He frowned. "They were forcing you to marry?"

"Yes, to some tradesman's son who was apparently willing to give away a fortune for the sake of some tenuous tie to a nobleman's family.

I don't think they even know me by name!

"Amelia scoffed before she sniffed. "For years, my stepmother tolerated me. She likely thought this the culmination of her forbearance—that she can reap the financial benefits of betrothing me to a stranger who might as well be a madman or a wart-covered frog."

"Not all men are brutes."

"Perhaps not—but one would not like to be legally bound to someone else for life before knowing if he is or not."

"No."

"It is why I need to find Sir George."

Jacob seemed to snap at the name, as if he'd forgotten the purpose of their quest. Then his frown deepened. "You need the baronet to save you from marriage?"

"Yes."

"By marrying you?"

"What? No, of course not!" Amelia very nearly laughed. "The man is nearer to my father's age than mine. But he is the only person I know who might have known my mother—my real mother, who birthed me in China and given me her inheritance."

Slowly, she slipped her hand into her coat pocket and drew out the porcelain jewelry box. The varnish glistened in the firelight. She opened its hinged top as delicately as she could.

"I do not have much of hers," she whispered softly, almost reverently, "but Betsy has seen me admiring this every evening. It was my mother's—a proof of her noble heritage—a reminder that I am not only the Earl of Aldbury's niece, but the daughter of an oriental princess as well."

Jacob walked over slowly, his eyes fixed on the painted box she'd lifted towards him. He took it gently from her, observing it with the keen eye of a seasoned merchant. Perhaps not all tradesmen were bad. At least, this one wasn't.

He seemed to be deep in thought when he returned it.

"Your mother was a princess?" He asked—his voice neither awed nor skeptical. There was an evenness to his voice that Amelia appreciated.

"Yes, although perhaps only Sir George would know the particulars, as he was the one present in court along with my father."

“That is why you seek him.”

“Yes, so I can know?— ”

“To escape an unwanted arranged marriage,” he continued, looking almost dazed.

Amelia paused, a little puzzled herself. “Yes.”

An almost bitter-sounding laugh escaped him. He shoved his hands in his pocket and strode over to the window once more. “Did you know the name of this man you were supposed to marry?”

“Mother never said—only that he was rich, and I assumed that was all she cared about.”

“Did she say what line of trade?”

“I did not ask.”

“Has your father met him?”

“Perhaps only his man of business. But why would—Jacob,” she tried to meet his eye, “does it matter very much to you whom exactly I’m escaping?”

You must know that I do not begrudge the match because it was with a tradesman’s son—at least, I no longer do.

You have shown me a hundred times over that a man’s birth means little in comparison to his character.

But, surely, you are not so backwards as to think that I ought to return to my father’s



house just because he thinks I ought to be married off to a stranger? ”

His face twitched, his expression unreadable. It was a far cry from the open-mannered friend she’d grown used to seeing every day.

But then, a moment later, he looked back at her and smiled.

It was a small smile, by most measures, but it sent a wave of relief crashing over her.

“I do not think you must marry a stranger,” he said.

“Thank you. ”

He nodded, that small smile still tugging at his lips. “Thank you—for trusting me.”

Her eyes misted.

Then Jacob stepped even closer. Amelia stood. Gallant as ever, he reached for her hands, which she yielded. “I promise you shall not trust in vain.”

“How can you?—”

“Rest.” He squeezed her hands before letting them go. He pulled a step back, formal yet not entirely withdrawing from her, small smile still in place. “I promise it shall all be better in the morning.”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:18 am*

The next morning brought a low, persistent drizzle that was hardly harsh enough to deter their mission yet dreary enough to cast a dull pallor over the last leg of their journey. Jacob's hand twitched as he looked out the carriage window.

Amelia's revelations last night had been life-altering—both when it came to knowing her as a person and to recognizing the sheer, divine coincidence of their circumstances.

He'd sent an express to Father immediately after taking his leave of her last night, asking for further details on his supposed betrothed.

He sneaked a sideways glance at Amelia, who sat pensively on the carriage bench, her eyes and fingers restless.

Father's reply might take at least another day to arrive, but somehow, Jacob already knew the answer in his heart.

"You do know it will all be well," he said gently, as the post-chaise crested another small rise in the terrain.

They'd gained the final details of Sir George Staunton's current address from the innkeeper's boy this morning, and the baronet's cousin's estate was apparently much closer than they'd anticipated.

They wouldn't need to visit another inn for another evening. Today, they would finally arrive.

“I don’t know how you can be so certain.” Amelia sighed.

Betsy looked ready to say something or other, but one look from Jacob quelled her promptly. The plucky maid, still in her employer’s black books after her grievous errors in judgment, pulled back obediently.

He turned back towards Amelia. “I am certain because, no matter the answers you find today, they will not change the fact that you are one of the bravest, most compelling young women I’ve ever had the honor of knowing, and I am sure that you will take whatever knowledge you gain and make the best of the entire situation.”

“If Sir George does not remember me?—”

“Then you can remind him of who you are.”

“If he cannot tell me anything of my past?—”

“Then it has little bearing on your future.”

She met his eye, her gaze a mixture of gratefulness and uncertainty. “And if he corroborates that everything is indeed as I thought it was?”

Ignoring Betsy altogether, Jacob brushed his hand against hers before resting his palm over her fingers. “Then you are worth every bit as much as a person as you always have been.”

She turned her hand over to hold his.

And Jacob smiled.

Amelia’s heart thudded like a low, persistent drum as the butler, a more amicable one

this time, escorted them into the modest country manor.

The place was nowhere nearly as grand as Milford House, or her own uncle's seat in Thorncombe Abbey, but it felt airy and comfortable—a country gentleman's home.

If Jacob's sources were to be believed, Sir George didn't currently own any home, and the place was merely borrowed from one of his distant relatives.

She supposed even a minor title didn't bring guarantees of material comfort with it.

It was a sobering thought, that—considering she was here today to ask the man how to trace her mother's royal bloodline and inheritance.

“And what card shall I give the baronet, ma'am?”

” The butler inquired after seating them in the modest parlor, his tone impassive.

Amelia glanced at the bulging, middle-aged servant.

He might be less hostile than Lady Morchester's man, but his leveled brow indicated he was just as well-trained in turning down unwanted visitors if needed.

Perhaps she'd merely been misled by his portly frame and thinning hair.

Perhaps there was no such thing as a kindly butler, after all.

“Mr. Jacob Hawthorne, at your service.” Jacob dutifully produced his card, while Amelia continued to rue the absence of hers.

“Ah,” said the butler, doing little to suppress how unimpressed he was. “And Miss?—”

“Miss Amelia Fitzwater, niece of the Earl of Aldbury.”

Amelia shot Jacob a small, thankful smile. He acknowledged it with a quick nod.

“The Earl of Aldbury?” The butler’s brows rose ever higher. His gaze ran the length of Amelia’s short frame. “To my knowledge, the earl’s family is mostly English , ma’am.”

Jacob shot to his feet. “Are you daring to suggest that Miss Fitzwater is not?—”

“Jacob, let him be.” Amelia pressed a hand to his arm.

He turned towards her, eyes concerned. She tried to look reassuring.

Then she let go to procure the jewelry box from her reticule.

She handed it to the butler. “My father is The Honorable Martin Fitzwater, the youngest brother of the earl. His acquaintance with Sir George is of a personal nature, and I know the baronet will recognize his name for certain. If you must, please present this to Sir George, and I assure you he will know who I am.”

She watched nervously as the butler lifted her most prized possession between his well-fed fingers. He looked tempted to scrutinize the porcelain box before years of training led him to hold it reverently between his palms instead.

“I shall inform Sir George forthwith.” He bowed slightly.

Amelia acknowledged him with a slight nod before he slipped out the door.

Usually, being left alone with Jacob brought with it a sense of relief—as if she were safe, as if she could finally breathe without worrying about what Mother thought, or

what the servants might gossip about, or whether or not the hackney driver was trying to rob her.

Today, her nerves were strung so tightly that she found herself barely able to string together a single coherent thought.

A warm hand landed on her shoulder. She shifted slightly towards him, a small compensation in place of actually burrowing into Jacob's arms .

"Remember what I said in the carriage," he whispered.

"Remembering and believing are two rather different things."

"They do not need to be."

"It is easy to speak so when the trajectory of your entire life is not at stake."

His hand tightened on her shoulder. She looked up to meet his eye.

His gaze was stormier today—almost as if the surge of emotion she felt had affected him as well. It was almost as if the clear blue sky had a layer of clouds swirling amidst it, teasing the possibility of rain without actually letting the waterworks loose.

"Whatever concerns you—will always concern me," he said softly.

"Jacob—"

"I mean it." The urgency in his voice only seemed to render it more tender. "Whatever this visit culminates in—whatever this friend or baron or master says—I have no intention whatsoever to stop being a part of your life just because we have finally located him."

“Oh, Jacob.” Her heart swelled. Her hands found his. “I’ve said before that you are kind, but you are so much more than?—”

“By Jove!” A brown-haired man who looked a few years past his thirtieth year exclaimed as he rushed into the parlor. His eyes fixed themselves onto Amelia. “You look just like your mother.”

Jacob watched, his own heartbeat erratic, as the energized baronet guided Amelia by the elbows away from Jacob and onto the worn, ornate settee.

Amelia’s eyes sought Jacob’s, and he immediately followed to stand beside her.

Her trembling hand found his just as the baronet pulled up a neighboring chair and sat down directly across from Amelia.

“The eyes, the nose—” Sir George spoke eagerly, his eyes darting all over Amelia as if cataloging a scientific specimen. “I’d seen you as a girl, but the resemblance now is truly remarkable.”

Amelia squeezed Jacob’s hand, her face steady. “You knew my mother then?”

“Of course! How could I not have? And even if I might have forgotten about Martin’s paramour, one look at you would have brought back every recollection.”

“I resemble her then—my mother?” It pained Jacob to hear the crack in her voice—to feel the uncertainty and relief entwining in her words. How did one feel having to conduct such a life-altering interview? “I had hoped that you knew her—that perhaps you recognized the jewelry box.”

“Oh, this. Right.” Sir George handed back the treasured heirloom as if it were a common household item. “It is nigh identical with my mother’s.”

“Lady Staunton has one too?” Amelia marveled audibly. “Did she also visit the Manchurian court?”

“Oh, no, no—none of that.” Sir George laughed as if the idea were ludicrous. Perhaps it was. “There were more than a few of them at the time, among other things—although most of the men decided to bring the carved fans back in place of the heavier porcelain. ”

“Carved fans?—”

“Ah, yes.” Sir George jumped to his feet. “The collection I travel with is hardly as impressive as the one I leave in my London offices, but I suppose it would be a pleasure to see you juxtaposed with the items. Come along.”

He ushered Amelia forward, with Jacob trailing behind, until they passed through a small door in the corner.

The entryway was humble, corresponding to the compact study they entered together—but what set the sight apart was how every single surface, horizontal or vertical, was entirely covered in chinoiserie.

Jacob felt as well as heard Amelia’s gasp.

“There, don’t you look just like a doll amongst it all,” Sir George said with the giddy enthusiasm of a child as he placed her in the exact center of all the carved, painted, and handcrafted artifacts.

His gaze held an almost paternal glint as he watched Amelia take in the various paintings, vases, cabinets, and scrolls.

A few long lengths of flat fabric displayed elaborate calligraphy of intricate Chinese



writing, penned from top to bottom.

Delicately painted porcelain, similar to Amelia's box, lined the length of the desk—teapots and saucers and drinking contraptions that looked too small to be bowls yet too handleless to be proper teacups.

A bronze mirror sat to the side, its handle and sides ornately carved.

"I must say Martin brought home the best legacy of them all."

It heartened Jacob to watch Amelia smile. "But you did know my mother."

"Of course."

"She existed."

"You silly girl, of course she did! "

"And what—what was her name?" Amelia looked with so much hope towards Sir George that Jacob almost felt equally invested. Surely, the name had to have some sort of deep meaning, or perhaps a poetic one.

Sir George frowned, seemingly taken off-guard by the question. "Her name? Well, now, I don't think I remember. Although my secretary must. It might take a few days to get word to him in London and back, but he just might recall it."

"Your secretary?" Jacob and Amelia repeated at the same time.

"Ah, yes, perhaps it is surprising. But the servant boy my father brought with us—who must be your uncle, now that I think about it—has been so successful at understanding the English way of things as much as imparting the Chinese language

that I thought to give him some sort of position amongst my staff.”

“Why would—” Amelia tilted her head slightly. “Why would your servant—be my uncle?”

Sir George met her eyes, looking genuinely surprised. “My servant—did your father never tell you?”

A few weighted seconds passed.

“Tell me what?”

“About your mother?—”

“She was a Chinese princess—albeit a minor one. They met at the Chinese court, and Papa stayed behind when the embassy left because he’d married her. They remained another year, until my mother died in childbed after bearing me. Then Papa returned to England.”

Jacob expected appreciation for, or at least acknowledgment of, Amelia’s burst of information. Yet instead of expressing either, Sir George took a deep breath in and frowned. Jacob puzzled as the man sighed. “Oh, you poor dear. Is that what your father told you?”

“Well, he—yes, I suppose, in bits in pieces, over the years.”

“Ah.”

“Is it not true?”

“Well.”

“Well what?”

“ Almost everything you said is true,” Sir George answered. Jacob hardly dared to hope. “But your late mother, she—she was not a princess—only the maidservant to one. And I don’t know if your parents ever married.”

Jacob was exceedingly glad that he was within reach of Amelia when she stumbled.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:18 am*

“Y our late mother, she—she was not a princess—only the maidservant to one. And I don’t know if your parents ever married.”

The world froze, Sir George’s words a blur of noises cutting through a murky haze.

Amelia blinked. Not a princess—maidservant—never married —the words tumbled around her like the disembodied voices of a fevered dream.

Her chest tightened, almost like the one time she’d tried to jump into the lake near Thorncombe Abbey as a child.

Her nursemaid had tugged her out then. There was no nursemaid now.

In fact, there was no one at all—no long-lost royal mother, no benevolent father, no secret inheritance from an unnamed benefactor waiting to deliver her from a marriage to a stranger.

She was no one—a servant’s child.

An illegitimate servant’s child, if Sir George surmised correctly.

“Amelia. ”

Another voice cut through the blur. This one was slightly higher, though still a man’s. It felt familiar, yet not.

“Amelia.”

The voice grew more urgent. Was it Papa's?

No—Papa was never urgent. Even when Amelia had nearly drowned, even when Mother was about to sell her to the highest bidder—Papa had always sounded resigned at best. And Papa knew what Amelia did not.

He'd said there was no inheritance, hadn't he?

She had no dowry, not because Papa had frittered it away, but because a maidservant could never have provided one.

"Amelia!" The voice came with a touch this time—warm, comforting—promising deliverance and refuge. It brushed her elbow first. Amelia turned and held on, realizing eventually, as the haze lifted, that she was clinging onto Jacob's arm.

Jacob—dear, dear Jacob—who took on her case when he had no reason to—was her sole constant now.

"Jacob," she whispered.

"Yes." He breathed what sounded like a deep sigh of relief. His grip remained secure, though not forceful. If they had been alone, she was fairly sure he would have embraced her—and she would have readily embraced him back.

"Your father had always been taken with your mother," Sir George went on, as if his casual revelation had merely been the correction of a footnote, not one that tilted Amelia's entire world on its axis. "Since the first time he laid eyes on her, really."

"You were there?" Amelia angled towards him slightly, her hands anchored around Jacob's arm.

“Oh, yes, she was—” Sir George’s eyes lit up, as if delighted to impart the news to her. “I suppose you were always too young to know. My father, the late first baronet, brought along my Chinese manservant to assist me in mastering the Mandarin tongue.”

“Right,” she answered vaguely.

“Your mother was my manservant’s sister.”

Once more, imaginary waters threatened to overwhelm her. Jacob tugged her gently, tethering her to reality.

Amelia nodded slowly, swallowing. “But the jewelry box—it was my mother’s. Papa had said that— was it my mother’s?”

Her voice cracked. Sir George’s did not.

“It could have been a parting gift from her former employer, though not particularly likely given her short tenure. And if it weren’t—well, I suppose it wasn’t uncommon for a maidservant to pilfer a piece of memorabilia or two.

They would hardly be missed in a large enough household. ”

Amelia barely avoided fainting altogether.

They relocated back to the parlor, and Sir George continued jabbering about his trip as a twelve-year-old boy with the Macartney Embassy—of the splendor and intrigue of the Chinese court, along with the unique perspectives of its ruler.

It was clear that the Orient fascinated the man like nothing did, and it was no surprise that the baronet had neither wife nor child, given how all-consuming his passion for

Asiatic-European relations was.

But Amelia heard little.

She sat in her corner of the clearly well-loved chaise longue, one hand trembling on her teacup and the other in Jacob's.

Servants came in with varied updates about and questions from the elder Lady Staunton throughout the hour, and they received readily dispensed instructions from Sir George before the baronet resumed his apparently endless supply of facts about the Far East.

On a different day, Amelia might have drunk in the information, hungrily feasting on anything she could glean about her mother's heritage.

But she was rather preoccupied with other thoughts for the moment.

Somehow, in the span of one afternoon, she'd managed to turn from the child of a princess—bearer of a foreign, noble legacy—to the dubiously legitimate daughter of a servant, heiress to nothing.

Her mother might have been a thief, to put it kindly.

"Lord Macartney refused to kowtow , of course." Sir George went on about the man who'd led their Chinese expedition.

"There was a big fuss made about it. And some said a death sentence was being bandied about for anyone who'd dared to teach a foreigner the Chinese tongue.

I would never have learned myself, if my father hadn't brought my secretary along. "

“My mother’s brother,” Amelia whispered. A small part of her had hoped that saying the words out loud might reveal just how ludicrous the entire idea was. Instead, the pronouncement felt more hopelessly final than ever.

“Indeed,” Sir George went on, without need to catch a breath.

“It was interesting, really, how taken your father was. Some of the men sought liaisons in the nearby brothels, I believe, though my father tried not to mention it much in front of me. Yet Fitzwater had been quite determined to be devoted to one servant alone.”

“That is—some comfort,” Amelia acknowledged hollowly. It was a comfort that she was not the product of some nobleman’s visit to a house of ill repute, but it was a small comfort at best when she’d been raised to believe herself the child of a loving union of aristocratic equals.

“Yes, quite the—” Sir George stopped abruptly. His eyes landed on Amelia, then on Jacob, seemingly noticing him for the first time all morning. He tilted his head. “Miss Fitzwater—where is your father?”

A new kind of dread knotted in Amelia’s stomach. She squeezed Jacob’s hand. It took effort to keep her voice level. “He is in London.”

“Right. And your stepmother? Or your uncle, at least, the earl?”

“All in London, to my knowledge.”

A frown settled on Sir George’s brow. “And you are here, by yourself, in the company of?—”

“Jacob Hawthorne, at your service.” Jacob rose, releasing her hand in the process,



and gave a formal nod.

“Right.” Sir George’s eyes turned assessing. “Hawthorne, of Hawthorne Enterprises? And Hawthorne’s at?—”

“Yes, sir.”

The baronet nodded slowly, as if thinking. He glanced at Amelia once more. “We are quite a way away from London. I find it slightly difficult to comprehend why a gentleman’s daughter would be here, by herself, escorted by a stranger.”

“I am no stranger,” said Jacob, with all the gallantry she’d come to admire from him .

“I have no right to question the circumstances of your acquaintance, of course.” Sir George spoke now in the measured tones of a seasoned statesman, the impassioned version of him seemingly temporarily tucked away.

“But I owe it to my friend to make sure that his daughter, however far from home, is being provided for with every propriety.”

“I have a maid,” Amelia said. Both men looked at her as if the explanation hardly sufficed. “We have not been traveling alone.”

“I suppose that is something,” said Sir George. “But I still consider it my duty to provide shelter for you tonight, Miss Fitzwater—and perhaps to escort you back to London.”

Amelia’s lingering hopes of ever escaping Mother’s plans shriveled away.

“I see,” she said quietly. “I—I suppose I can understand that.”

“And if there has been any coercion or secrecy involved in your removal from your home—Mr. Hawthorne here?—”

“Oh no! Jacob did not kidnap me!” Amelia felt utterly appalled by the suggestion. “I left—I thought—Mr. Hawthorne is merely helping me.”

“I fail to see how an unrelated young man has any business helping the niece of a peer of the realm gallivant about the English countryside.”

“We are not—unrelated.” Amelia felt the hollowness of her lie even as she made it.

“Oh?”

“No, we are not,” Jacob answered in her place, loyal to the end. But then, to her complete amazement, he added, “For I am Miss Fitzwater’s betrothed.”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:18 am*

It was a ridiculous fabrication—and yet one Jacob seemed inexplicably determined to maintain.

For the rest of the day, every attempt Amelia made to correct Jacob's presumed betrothal, whether in the presence of Sir George and his relatives or not, was immediately met with more solicitous behavior from her friend—until Sir George, and perhaps a small part of Amelia, had no choice except to believe him.

Throughout the afternoon, Jacob acted the part of a loyal future husband arranging for their removal to Sir George's residence.

He even planned their imminent return to London with all the concern and involvement one might expect of a real fiancé.

Sir George had insisted, in no uncertain terms, that it was highly inappropriate for them—betrothed though they might be—to travel together so loosely chaperoned.

And the baronet ordered that they be escorted back to her father within the next two days, with a veritable entourage and himself in tow.

A single day ago, Amelia would have wept and raged at being forcefully returned to the parents who had so heartlessly arranged her future for her.

But the shock of Sir George's revelations, in addition to the way Jacob's fabricated betrothal threw her further off-kilter, had Amelia protesting little, if at all, to the plan.

Where else was she to go?

She was no one—not a princess, not a lady, and potentially the offspring of a petty household thief. She had no grounds whatsoever to deny Sir George’s authority—or, her father’s.

It was a sobering and humiliating thought.

Scatter-brained though he might appear while talking about his beloved Orient, Sir George was remarkably efficient when it came to logistical arrangements, and their entourage was assembled a mere two days after Jacob began his persistent act as her besotted betrothed.

It infuriated Amelia that they were never alone to discuss their odd situation.

Unlike the intimacy of their journey from London, their return to the capital was now being carried out in style, with servants both of their party and from the various well-kept inns giving them not a moment’s reprieve.

Even now, as their well-sprung carriage rolled along on the equally well-maintained road for the second day in a row, they were entirely at Sir George’s mercy, nodding in acknowledgement at his ceaseless effusions about the fascinating kingdom of China.

One day, the man might find other comrades who shared his enthusiasm for the Far East. Today, Jacob, Amelia, and a half-awake Betsy would simply have to suffer the role of forbearing audience.

As someone who had rather little forbearance in general, Amelia found it a particularly trying role to play.

“Ah, the Silver Arms!” Sir George finally exclaimed about something in their immediate vicinity, when their carriage pulled up to what was to be their final stop

before London.

The trip had been efficient—too efficient, for Amelia's sake.

"I have always enjoyed their pies here. Shall I have a servant procure some for us?" the baronet suggested generously.

Jacob kindly offered to complete the errand, committed as he seemed to be to the role of gentlemanly betrothed, and Amelia sighed in frustration as the only person in the carriage she wanted to talk to slipped outside.

How was one to pretend to be betrothed to a man one actually admired if said man was not there?

"Oh, I forgot the broth! They have a most excellent broth at the Silver Arms," Sir George exclaimed. "Nothing like the Chinese broths, mind you, but Mr. Hawthorne ought to be informed."

And with his mind likely still ruminating over the complexities of Chinese cuisine, Sir George tumbled out of the carriage, leaving Amelia and Betsy alone.

Amelia exhaled, long and slow. Unlike the earlier heights of the North, the last few miles had begun to look familiar—if not in location, at least in flora and topography. They were headed for London, and she would be well and truly trapped once they arrived .

"Ought I to relieve myself, miss, you think?" Betsy asked.

"By all means." Amelia removed her skirts from the way.

The maid shuffled out.

And, at last, Amelia was alone—alone and filled with more confusing thoughts than she had ever thought possible.

The last two weeks of her life had been the grandest adventure she'd ever had, even without leaving English soil. As a child, she'd dreamt of such adventures. She'd dreamt of discovering treasure or uncovering secrets—of meeting handsome princes and perhaps encountering a dragon or two.

Real-life adventures were decidedly more ordinary, and perhaps infinitely more depressing.

Real-life adventures did not end with an overlooked stepdaughter finding herself the heiress of a hidden kingdom.

Real-life adventures did not have handsome princes falling for a servant's child.

Amelia let loose a helpless chuckle when she realized that even Jacob—dear, inexplicable Jacob—was now far above her station.

He might claim to have been raised in trade, but at least his mother didn't steal from royalty.

The carriage door opened, and Amelia steeled herself for more lectures about the unique cultural qualities of the hidden Orient. Yet it was not the baronet's face, but Jacob's, that greeted her.

“Oh,” she whispered.

Jacob smiled. It was not a bright smile, by any means. But it was a kind smile, a reassuring smile. It was a smile Amelia wished she could bottle up and keep in her heart for the inevitable storms ahead.

“They were out of pies,” Jacob said. He pulled himself inside and settled across from her. His long legs folded gracefully enough, but his knees still brushed against her travel garments. “Poor Sir George is still explaining to the innkeeper’s wife why such a disappointment cannot be borne.”

For the first time in days, Amelia laughed. “I pity her—although I thank her for granting me reprieve from the illustrious man’s company.”

“Tired of him already?”

“Quite. I don’t know why I thought it a good idea to search so diligently for him across half the country.”

They traded quiet laughs before falling silent.

Amelia studied her hands. She’d never hesitated to ask a question before, inquisitive as she’d always been.

But now that the person she most wished to talk to sat alone with her, the words suddenly refused to come.

Once bitten, twice shy—she supposed. She’d hardly enjoyed receiving her latest set of answers in Sir George’s study.

Would she find Jacob’s answers equally life-altering, or equally disappointing?

“Are you well?” he asked softly.

Amelia looked up, moved by the genuine touch of concern in his gaze. “Well enough, all things considered.”

“I understand Sir George’s revelations could not have been welcome.”

Amelia bit her lip. “No, they were not.”

“But perhaps if you explain things to your father?—”

“And ask him why he allowed me to believe a lie all my life?” Amelia sniffed. “One could argue that he did it out of kindness, but I worry if it was only out of a sense of escapism for himself.”

“Surely, the situation cannot be so entirely dour.”

“Or it could be.” Amelia stifled a sob. Once she returned to London, Mother would declare Amelia to be the hoyden she’d always believed her to be. They would force her into marriage with the unknown tradesman’s son, and she would never again see her family, her cousins, or Jacob.

“Amelia—”

“Why did you claim to be my betrothed?”

Jacob started. Amelia swallowed. She had nothing to lose in asking her question now.

“I—please forgive my presumption,” he said.

“It’s not the presumption that’s the problem. It’s—it’s—” The problem was her own unruly emotions—emotions that told her she would much rather elope with him to Scotland right now than to return humiliated to her family. But the man hadn’t offered.

“Amelia, believe me, I said it for both our benefits.”



“I can’t see how.”

“There are certain things that I need to confirm, after which I can tell you all. But for now, I am waiting?—”

“Waited too long, have you?” Sir George’s voice burst in along with his person. He shoved a wrapped, warm pastry into each of their hands just as Betsy scrambled in behind him. “I should have known better than to send you in, Mr. Hawthorne. They only save the pies for me.”

Around them, activity resumed for the last leg of their journey.

Sir George bit into his pie and hummed in satisfaction. “The Chinese might have their tea and their broths—but nothing beats a good English pie.”

And as they journeyed on with more of the baronet’s generous opinions, Amelia found it difficult to remember why she’d ever thought she’d wanted to meet the man.

The carriage rolled up to the familiar sight of Upper Wimpole Street late in the afternoon, the overcast London sky striking Amelia as an apt representation of her heavy heart.

Betsy had long fallen asleep, lulled away to her dreams by the moving carriage.

Sir George Staunton, likewise, had appeared much more subdued after having his fill of pie, and now he took one glance at the Fitzwater residence, grunted in recognition, and muttered to Jacob, “You’ll see her down, won’t you? ”

“Of course,” Jacob answered immediately. He unfolded his long limbs and preceded Amelia down onto the pavement. It was perhaps for the best—given that Sir George believed them betrothed when Papa did not.

With a sigh, Amelia accepted Jacob's hand and stepped down after him. With all propriety and gallantry, he escorted her forward until they stood at the small half flight of steps to the door. Amelia looked up.

It was a place she had intended never to see again after her quarrel with her father.

But a small slice of her heart still tugged fondly at the familiar sight of the worn front door.

One knock, and Mr. Perritt would appear, ready to escort her either to Papa's study, to her own bedchamber, or to another scolding from Mother.

None of those things were particularly pleasant, but after a futile chase across half of England, those things still represented home .

Jacob cleared his throat beside her. Amelia blinked, anxious not to cry, and turned to face him.

"Are you truly well?" he asked softly. His persistent concern was at once heartening and heartbreaking.

Was she well? No—she was the farthest thing from well. She was confused and disappointed and heartsick and wanted nothing more than to cling onto his arm and never let go.

But Jacob had already done so much for her—above and beyond what she had any right to ask of him. It was high time she let him return to his own life.

Amelia sniffed. "Well enough."

"Your father—will not be cruel, I think?"

That question, while no doubt sincerely meant, sent Amelia into a slight chuckle. Papa could be many things—oblivious, childish, obsessive—but never cruel.

“No, I don’t think so.” She tried to smile in an assuring manner, moved as she was by the concern in Jacob’s eyes.

Was it possible for her to keep him? If she had to marry a tradesman’s son anyway, could Papa be persuaded to let her find her own tradesman’s son to make a match?

“He might chide me for having worried him, which I think is wholly deserved—but he’ll never seek to hurt me. ”

“I am glad.”

“Right.”

They stood where they were, facing each other on the busy London pavement, neither having much to say in such a public setting, yet also neither willing to take the final few steps to bid the other goodbye.

“Will you hurry?” Sir George called from the carriage. “The pies cool as you speak. ”

They both chuckled hollowly at the interruption and acknowledged the baronet with a nod.

Amelia could feel her heart aching when she lifted her eyes once more, unable to stem the tears this time around. “Thank you, Jacob—thank you for everything you’ve done.”

His eyes looked equally misted. He took her gloved hand and pressed it between his. “There is never any need to thank me for only doing what I already wanted to do.”

“But just because you wish to do something does not mean it took no effort or sacrifice. I will always remember you, Jacob, and think upon our little adventure with incomparable fondness.”

“Don’t—” Jacob sniffed. “You speak as if we shall never see each other again.”

“But will we?” Amelia sobbed. “I don’t even know where I’ll be in a matter of days. I could be locked in a tower or committed to Bedlam or married and sent off to far-flung Northumberland.”

“Or chained in a dungeon? Or on a galley on the way to China?”

It was difficult not to chuckle when he spoke that way—one brow lifted and all. “Jacob, I don’t think I could honestly believe?—”

“I’ll find you, wherever you are,” he said solemnly, though still with his usual twinkle of the eye. “I’ll see Betsy to Mrs. Wilmark and Sir George to his club, and then I will hunt down the most honest hackney in London and trail you wherever you go.”

“Oh, Jacob.” She laughed, even through her tears. “Must you make it all a joke? ”

“Never.” He smiled. In a swift motion, he leaned down and kissed her cheek before pulling back. “Not when it comes to you.”

Sir George hollered another reminder from his seat, and they parted more certainly this time. And one, two, three steps later—Jacob handed Amelia back to the life she’d once deserted.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:18 am*

It felt odd to wake up to a scene that belonged to a life she had once worked so hard to leave behind.

In a small miracle, Mr. Perritt had been gracious enough to let her slip away directly to her room last night.

She didn't know if the surly butler had informed his mistress sooner or later of Amelia's return, but he had to have waited at least past Mother's bedtime, for no summons of any kind had appeared until this morning.

Now, Amelia rose as she'd always done, endured a new maid's fumbling morning assistance as she'd often been consigned to, and marched down the corridor with a knot of dread in her stomach, fingers clutching Mother's simple note.

It barely counted as a note, truly. A note required far more finesse than the ominous words "See me. Front parlor." But it all rather felt like royal summons from the Tower of London to the palace, a journey that invariably ended with one's head under the executioner's blade .

The Amelia of a mere few weeks ago would either have tried to avoid such a confrontation or run towards it in the very heights of indignation.

Now, she felt older, wiser, and a little too tired from her adventures to do either.

Mother would have her tirade. Amelia would bear it.

And then she could roll her eyes and ponder her fate in solitude later.

She doubted anyone would want to talk to her much after recent events.

One flight of stairs and nearly a dozen steps on the intricate, well-worn carpet later, Amelia stood at the open parlor door.

Mother, Sarah, and Jane sat scattered around the room, each preoccupied with a fashion plate or two.

The two boys could be seen running outside just past the window.

It was not a particularly warm domestic scene, but it was a domestic scene, however dull.

And Amelia felt her place as an outsider more than ever.

She cleared her throat quietly and stepped forward. “Mother.”

Eyes snapped up, looking initially surprised, then judgmental. Amelia swallowed.

“Well, well, the prodigal daughter returns, does she?” Mother scoffed. She laid aside her fashion plates, no doubt ready to deliver a harsh scolding. “And here I thought we’d managed to be rid of you without having to pay a dowry.”

Knowing that Mother knew full well there was no dowry to be had only made the insult sting worse.

Amelia drew a deep breath and expelled it slowly. She could manage a half-sincere apology if she had to. “It was not my intention to?— ”

“Amy!” Papa’s voice, and then his entire self, materialized behind her in the corridor. And Amelia turned around just in time to feel her only living parent’s anxious arms

close in tightly around her. “Thank God you’ve returned! I have worried so—and I thought that I?—”

Whatever else Papa meant to say was swallowed away by his sobs, and Amelia felt her own tears falling at the realization of the grief she had to have caused her father. If her heart already ached at Jacob’s absence a mere day later—how much more must her disappearance have distressed Papa?

“I’m sorry.” Amelia sniffed. She pulled back slightly. Papa ran his eyes all over her face before embracing her once more. “I—I was so anxious to escape—that is, I thought that if I found my mother’s?—”

“Hush, enough.” Papa pulled away a few inches and turned to his wife. “Amy and I will talk in my study.” His face hardened when Mother moved as if to disagree. “And we shall not be disturbed.”

Amelia barely had time to thank her father before he whisked her away to the room across the hall.

Immediately, the smell of Papa’s books and innumerable trinkets enveloped her.

Papa did not have half the organization of Sir George, and his collection lay strewn in disarray all over the study.

But the very room itself, chaos and all, reminded her so much of the refuge that Papa had represented all her life that Amelia had to try very hard not to cry.

Papa shut the door behind them.

“My dearest child,” he huffed, his voice thick with emotion, before hugging her once more.

And Amelia let herself be hugged. With her father's tears, and some of her own, she let the sorrows and uncertainties of the past weeks wash away. Whatever happened, whoever she was, whatever she lost—she would never doubt again her place in her father's affections.

It was perhaps a good five minutes before he released her. Amelia waited as Papa looked fondly once more at her face before he walked around his table to his usual spot. Amelia sank into a chair.

She steeled herself. "I'm—I'm sorry, Papa."

Her father looked ready to cry again before he curbed the impulse. Instead, he sat back like a tired man and nodded. "As you should be."

Amelia sniffed. "I was afraid that if I stayed, that I would be?—"

"Let's not talk of that any longer." Papa sighed. Had they called off her betrothal? Amelia's heart nearly soared with hope. If they had broken the agreement, then there was a chance that she might have a say in her future after all. Then perhaps if she could get a note to Jacob, she?—

"You are back, safe. That is all that matters," Papa said conclusively, pulling Amelia's thoughts back to the reason she'd fled her home in the first place.

"We have tried making every excuse for your absence. Most people did not think much of it—although your cousins' inquiries were harder to ignore.

Thank goodness they've been distracted." Amelia frowned slightly, but Papa went on.

"The solicitors have been harder to put off, insisting as they have been to have me sign all the papers."



“Papers regarding—me?”

“Yes, what else? Marriage settlements and all that stuff. ”

“You—you haven’t signed anything then?” Amelia leaned forward, her heart erratic.

“Am I still free?”

“Are you—” Papa looked up. A pained look passed over his face, followed by an understanding one. “Darling, you were never a prisoner.”

Amelia bit her lip. “I suppose not.”

“Was that why you ran away?” Papa’s voice was quieter now, less hurried. The initial impact of her return had begun to ease. “Sir George mentioned something about wishing to know your roots.”

Sir George—of course he’d talked to Papa. Just because the baronet had been too distracted and tired yesterday didn’t mean he ignored Papa altogether.

Amelia sat back with a sigh. “What did he tell you?”

“Too little.” A compassionate note in Papa’s words had her looking up.

“He sent me a note, nothing more, mentioning your safe return. Then he said that he was glad he didn’t have to be in the business of regularly enlightening young ladies as they search for their roots, for it was a rather tiring affair. ”

Amelia had to agree about the tiring part.

She sighed once more. “Sir George told me about my mother.”

Papa stilled. Then a small, slight frown marred his brow. “You always knew you were part Chinese.”

“But not part servant, part thief—and in no part a princess.”

The pained look on Papa’s face told her everything she needed to know.

Amelia sniffed, barely managing to keep her tears in check, before she threw herself fully back against the worn, embroidered chair. “Why did you ever allow me to believe it?”

“In my heart, she was always a princess.”

“It’s a nice sentiment.”

“A sincere one.”

“But not much good by way of rendering your child eligible—or even legitimate.”

She sneaked a glance at Papa at the end of her sentence. He remained where he sat, unmoved, but there was a trifle more edge to his frown.

Amelia breathed deep. “Were you ever married?”

Unlike the hasty, breathless revelations that came from Sir George’s ramblings, Papa’s answer came slow and deliberate. “In the Chinese way of things.”

“I don’t understand.”

“There was a ceremony.” Papa’s eyes glazed over as his voice drifted. “We would bow to each other, and to our parents, if they were present. We would drink tea, in a

particular way.”

“And that made you married?” It sounded incredibly simple—too simple.

“It only mattered to us that we considered ourselves so.”

“But in the eyes of the law?”

This time, it was Papa who couldn’t meet her eye.

Amelia groaned. It was no wonder Papa agreed to pawn her off to the first person who seriously offered. Only a tradesman’s family desperate for a remote tie to nobility would overlook her dubious legitimacy.

“Oh, Papa.” Amelia sighed. “Why did you never tell me?”

This time, his eyes looked tender. “I only hoped that you would always be able to see yourself the way I saw you. ”

Amelia’s heart tugged. “And what’s that?”

Papa smiled. “As nothing less than a princess.”

Having experienced the upheavals of adventure, Amelia found the resumption of normal activities an odd mix of comfort and disquiet.

Her arrival on a Friday, and her subsequent conversation with her father on Saturday, left the day after to attending church, sitting soberly in the parlor at home, and watching the family mount a valiant attempt not to breathe a word about Amelia’s recent defection.

It had to be Papa's doing, for Amelia doubted Mother could have stayed her tongue otherwise. As blessings went, it was a relatively small one—but Amelia appreciated her father's intervention, nonetheless.

Perhaps, there was some hope from escaping an unwanted future, if Papa could stand his ground.

"Are we going to the Grand Jubilee tomorrow?" Sarah, the older of Amelia's stepsisters, asked with a wistful look out the window.

"If your father would but spare the time, we would," Mother barked, her eyes never straying from her sampler.

Amelia sighed. Her cousins would no doubt be involved in the centennial celebration at all the royal parks tomorrow, being ladies and daughters of earls and all.

But while Amelia had started sifting through her correspondence from her weeks away, she found herself still somewhat reluctant to respond.

It was almost as if penning a reply to Jem or Thea would truly acknowledge that her adventures had all concluded—with no dowry, no lineage, and no husband in sight.

Her mind turned, as it had often turned since her homecoming, to a particular set of knowing blue eyes and a particularly roguish smile. Amelia sighed.

Jacob had acted with so much confidence about their eventual reunion that, for a moment, she had allowed herself to be persuaded.

As far as Amelia's private hopes were concerned, he would come for her.

He would find her. He might even court her or propose an elopement far away from

dubious family ties and pitiful arranged marriages.

It was a pity he'd never actually asked.

"I do not think it an entirely outlandish idea," Papa responded from the corner.

He lowered his spectacles, along with the Chinese cup he had been inspecting.

It was rare to have Papa choose to sit with everyone on a Sunday afternoon, so much so that Amelia supposed his preoccupation had to be pardoned.

"There are a few remarkable sights to be seen, I understand."

"We may go then, Papa?" Sarah sounded as hopeful as all her other siblings looked—all except Amelia.

"I believe a new bridge and pagoda, fashioned after the Chinese style, are to be found at St. James's Park."

A collective groan rose from the party present, the entire family united in exasperation over Papa's obsessions.

Once upon a time, Amelia might have disdained them for spiting her heritage.

Yet having witnessed the heights of Sir George Staunton's attachment to the Orient had rendered her more forgiving instead.

She would always care about the mysteries of China. Servant or princess, her mother's blood would flow in her always.

But she supposed it was unfair to expect everyone else to share her passion.

No one would willingly take upon the burden of caring so much for something so unrelated to them—no one, perhaps, except one Jacob Hawthorne.

Amelia stifled another sigh that threatened to escape her.

As if being arranged in marriage to a stranger was not horrible enough, now she was mooning over another man whom she might likely never see again.

“Amy will join us, won’t she?” Papa’s voice cut through Amelia’s personal ruminations.

“Join you—where?” Amelia looked up, puzzled.

“For the unveiling of Papa’s precious pagoda,” Sarah spat out, no little sarcasm in her young voice. “Of course he wants you to go—foreign princess and all.”

Amelia swallowed. Given her former delusions of grandeur, she supposed she deserved Sarah’s insults.

“I do not think I am quite ready to venture out yet,” Amelia answered quietly. She tried to smile, truly tried. “Although the rest of you can surely go enjoy it.”

“And enjoy it we shall!” cried Sarah.

“You do not wish to go?” Papa sounded concerned. “There will be fireworks, I think—and plenty of familiar faces. Staunton shall no doubt be present.”

Amelia nearly shuddered at the mention. She had nothing against the baronet, but she had had more than enough of his company for a good while. Besides, she could not risk distracting him from his Asiatic preoccupations, lest he suddenly remember and mention Amelia’s supposed betrothed to Papa.

She attempted another smile. “I think I would much rather rest.”

Papa nodded without responding this time, although the worried creases around his eyes remained.

Mother prattled on about all the fun and faces they would encounter tomorrow, her sons and daughters caught up in her fancies. And by herself, as always, Amelia sighed. Reality would come for her soon enough. She had no plans to invite it to strike sooner than it must.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:18 am*

A loud banging on the front door began almost the precise moment the clock struck nine the following morning.

Amelia startled. Her fingers stilled over her beloved jewelry box.

Could that be Jacob? She suppressed the irrational hope as soon as it threatened to bubble.

Whatever he'd said upon their parting had to be mere platitudes.

He'd always been kind that way. She couldn't possibly take politeness as promise—no matter how much she wanted to.

Outside her bedroom, rushed footsteps trailed up and down the hall, accompanied by barked summonses of this servant or another. Her maid was nowhere in sight, no doubt preoccupied with preparing her sisters for the Grand Jubilee.

Amelia slipped her jewelry box onto the dressing table with a sigh. For someone who'd spent most of her life lamenting her differences with the rest of her family, she felt oddly content to be staying home today.

Adventure, for all its thrills, came with its share of heartaches. And she would appreciate the opportunity to nurse her heartaches in peace today while everybody else flitted about.

A scratch on the door preceded a chambermaid popping her head in.



“Miss Fitzwater,” she squeaked, looking as timid as she was frazzled. “You’ve been asked to join your father.”

“Me?” Amelia turned. She glanced down at her rumpled night clothes. “I am hardly presentable.”

“Oh.” The maid looked immediately flustered. It rather reminded Amelia of her own awkwardness during her first day at Mrs. Wilmark’s house. Her heart tightened with fond recollections. Whether or not Jacob ever visited, she had to call on Mrs. Wilmark sometime herself. “But Mr. Fitzwater said?—”

“Can you help me dress?” Amelia stood up and procured one of her dresses herself. It was, perhaps, slightly too fine for a morning at home, but all her other dresses were still being laundered. “And I can do my own hair.”

“Very well, miss.”

With minimal instructions, and plenty of tricks Amelia had learned from Betsy, they managed to render her into something somewhat presentable. The maid scurried off to help the more demanding members of the house, and Amelia marched herself downstairs.

“I fear I cannot make such a promise.” Papa’s voice floated down the hallway even before Amelia reached his study door. “My daughter’s opinion must be consulted.”

“Surely, you cannot mean to renege on our agreement now?” a loud, angry voice responded.

Amelia trembled without even having seen whoever Papa’s guest was.

Between the gruff voice and Amelia’s unexpected summons, this could not be Papa’s

usual scholarly conversations about China with his gentlemen friends.

Her hand paused on the handle of the closed study door.

Papa's voice responded firmly to his companion. "I understand that we have made a prior agreement. But Mr. Hawthorne, you must understand?—"

Hawthorne—the name jumped at Amelia. And without thinking her actions through, she flung the door open and rushed inside, her eyes darting all over Papa's study for a glance of Jacob.

But instead of her tall, blond friend and his wry smile, she came face to face with a towering, large man with expensive clothes, an angry set of the jaw, and a clearly unimpressed expression.

Her breath caught.

She swallowed and diverted her eyes to her father. "Papa, you called for me?"

"This is the chit then?" said the stranger.

Papa frowned, looking far angrier than she'd ever thought him capable of. "I would warn you against disrespecting my daughter, Mr. Hawthorne."

There was that name again. Amelia was tempted to study old Mr. Hawthorne for a moment, looking for a resemblance to her dear Jacob where there might well be none. Surely, there had to be plenty of people named Hawthorne.

She pushed away any fanciful thoughts.

"I do not see why I should respect her if you refuse to respect me," the large man

growled, turning back to Papa.

“An agreement is an agreement, sir—and by honor of your word, you have established an alliance of our families in marriage. I refuse to be tossed aside as if the betrothal were a mere inconvenience. The settlement must be signed. I have no need for her measly dowry, if that is what is causing delay. But I demand an acknowledgment that our arrangement stands.”

“I am not refusing it altogether.” Papa pressed forward on his desk.

Air rushed out of her lungs. So this was what the meeting was about.

For all of Papa’s entreaties for the family to welcome her back, the arranged marriage still stood.

And now, she had nothing left to bargain with her family—no legacy, no dowry, no nothing.

Mother hadn’t been wrong about Amelia having to accept the match as a good one, when her very legitimacy lay in doubt.

Amelia sniffed.

“So set a date then,” barked old Mr. Hawthorne—how odd to think of the man by those terms. “When shall the wedding be? Why are the banns not being read?”

Amelia’s eyes darted up to the imposing man that glared at her father. Surely, he couldn’t be the groom—could he? Bile crept up her throat, making her both ruing and rejoicing that she hadn’t broken her morning fast just yet.

The man was older than her father! Certainly, she could never, ever want?—

“Again, my daughter’s opinion shall be consulted.” Papa stood firm, for once in his life. He turned to Amelia and gestured her forward. She inched towards him, heart drumming like a death march.

“Papa.”

“Amelia, dear, Mr. Hawthorne here wishes to consult us about the betrothal we had arranged before you—that we had arranged earlier.”

“I understand.” Her words trembled, as did her hands.

“While we believe the match to be a preferable one, I would like to ensure that you are amenable to the connection. I would not want to impose such a permanent arrangement upon you if you are not in agreement.”

She stole a glance at the large man huffing and puffing across the room. The roughness of his face and his manners terrified her. It was impossible.

She lowered her head once more. “Papa, I do not think I can accept.”

Papa’s shoulders lowered, though he hid his disappointment otherwise. “I understand your hesitation. But perhaps if we take time to get to know the Hawthornes, we can?—”

“She cannot refuse!” Large, angry Mr. Hawthorne loomed forward. Here was a man who had to be accustomed to always getting his way. Could Papa not see the danger of that? “Do you think yourself in a more powerful position than I? Mr. Fitzwater, as the mere brother of an earl?—”

“I do not consider myself the better of any man, sir.” Papa returned his glare.

“And yet your actions beg to differ. A prideful bunch of hypocrites, you noblemen are.” He flung an agitated hand towards Amelia without so much as a look her way.

“Who even knows if your daughter is even truly the spawn of a foreign princess? Did you think such rumors could fool me? I’ve been talking to your servants, Mr. Fitzwater, and I know that your daughter has not been home these past two weeks.

If word were to get out of her escapade, who would even have her? ”

The study door, already open, flung wide against the wall with a bang . All three people turned abruptly to the figure of a tall, blond man standing at the entryway.

Amelia lost all ability to breathe.

“ I will have her,” said Jacob, as he marched in with the easy grace he always seemed to so effortlessly possess. He looked the two older men in the eye before smiling at Amelia. “That is, if she will have me.”

Three Days Earlier

It had taken all of two minutes without Amelia for Jacob to confirm, once and for all, that he wanted to spend his life with no one else other than the dubiously-legitimate, spirited, almond-eyed lady.

From the moment he returned to Sir George’s carriage, her very absence gnawed at him, creating a gaping hole in his heart that none other could fill.

The view of a drowsy Sir George dutifully ordering his carriage to drive Jacob to the Hawthorne residence after his club was not a particularly romantic one for such a sentimental epiphany, but one often did not get to choose when such pivotal moments happened in one’s life.

In fact, if life had been all about his choices, Jacob might never have chosen to court an earl's niece, to agree to a betrothal his father had arranged, or to keep company with a baronet.

But Providence had other plans, he supposed—plans that had aligned both the path demanded of him by the Hawthorne legacy and the path he'd chosen by helping the intriguing stranger fighting with her hackney driver and accompanying her all the way to Matlock.

Jacob's lips twitched into an involuntary smile as the Staunton carriage deposited him at his father's front door.

The last thing he'd expected after Father's two-month ultimatum would be to voluntarily end the period in half the time.

But there were things to discuss and details to confirm before he could approach Amelia again—properly, this time, as a suitor would.

What Jacob hadn't taken into consideration, apparently, was how business had taken his father out of town and how inconvenient arriving home on a Friday was if one wanted to investigate and confirm the identity of one's betrothed while everyone else in London fussed over church and Monday's Grand Jubilee.

Betsy had to be returned to Mrs. Wilmark's.

Payments had to be made for correspondence received.

Even his bedroom had to be properly dusted by surprised servants wholly unprepared for their young master's unexpected return.

Then, at last, Monday came. Jacob picked out his best morning suit and took extra

care with his toilette.

He'd never been a vain man, but it was not every day that a young man proposed to his betrothed.

In fact, most people did said proposing before acquiring said betrothed.

But his and Amelia's acquaintance had proven so convoluted in its order of events that Jacob supposed there was no use fussing over such a minor detail.

He sailed down the stairs, ready to take leave of Father—whom he'd not managed to see at all except in passing upon the man's return last night—before heading to Upper Wimpole Street to see Amelia.

But business apparently never stopped for Alastor Hawthorne, for Jacob was promptly informed by the servants that his impatient parent, who had probably taken less time than Jacob in curating his attire, had already left the house to confront old Mr. Fitzwater himself.

Off flew Jacob on his horse, little care given to the state of his curated attire. He might never have been a particularly keen horseman, but he certainly valued having been equipped with the skill now.

Thankfully, his brief ride concluded readily, with the butler recognizing him as the man who'd delivered Miss Amelia home and thus not a stranger.

Judging from the way Father had been hollering upon Jacob's arrival, and the shocked look on everybody's faces when he declared himself upon entry, his timing could not have been better.

There would not likely be the sweet, tender, private reunion he'd envisioned

endlessly the past few days, but at least he'd stopped his father from insulting Amelia any further.

"I will have her," Jacob declared readily, marching into Mr. Fitzwater's study as he did. Jacob nodded at both the older men present before turning to the woman he'd been longing for every waking moment the past three days. He smiled. "That is, if she will have me."

His beloved Amelia stared at him, mouth agape, looking like a deer caught by surprise by a speeding carriage.

She was beautiful, as always. But she looked decidedly unimpressed.

"Ja—Jacob?" Her eyes looked almost trance-like.

"I beg your pardon," said her father, forcing Jacob to meet his eye. "I fear I am at a disadvantage in my own home. "

"Ah, of course." Jacob straightened. He flashed an apologetic smile and a bow. "Mr. Jacob Hawthorne, at your service, Mr. Fitzwater."

"Hawthorne."

"My son," said Father, his voice somewhat prideful and confused at the exact same time. "Good of you to join us, Jacob."

"Yes, Father."

"You're Jacob," said Amelia.

He looked at her again. "I am."



“But you—and Mr. Hawthorne—” Her eyes darted between father and son, no doubt cataloguing any similarities she might find. Jacob had taken after his mother in looks, for the most part, but he did have Father’s height—and perhaps a mannerism or two. “You are—that is?—”

Amelia huffed. Then she whirled around to face her father.

“May I have a word with Mr. Hawthorne?”

“Mr. Hawthorne?” Mr. Fitzwater looked to Father.

“Not that Mr. Hawthorne.” Amelia planted her hands on her hips. Jacob smiled as she flung her hand his way. “That Mr. Hawthorne.”

“Mr. Hawthorne—ah, yes, of course.” Mr. Fitzwater looked thoroughly confused, not that Jacob could blame him. “That is, I suppose, if you want to?—”

“It is perfectly natural for a betrothed couple to spend time in private conversation,” declared Father.

“We are not betrothed .” Amelia groaned.

“See here, young lady,” spoke Father, “there has already been an agreement that you and?—”

“I shall not force my daughter’s hand,” said Mr. Fitzwater .

“It is a matter of honor! If you do not?—”

“My daughter’s happiness is more important to me than?—”

“My son is a fine catch! Any number of young women in society?—”

“My daughter shall only marry if she wishes?—”

“You and your wife have agreed that she would marry?—”

“She will not?—”

“I never said I wouldn’t marry him!” Amelia shouted, finally quelling the quarreling fathers. Hope rose in Jacob’s chest as the room around them stilled. Then Amelia huffed. “But I never said I would either.”

Jacob watched, with bated breath, as both fathers seemed to consider her words.

“Now, if you would excuse us,” said Amelia, neck held high, every inch a princess, “may I have a word with Mr. Hawthorne in the back garden?”

After what felt like an excruciating long pause, Mr. Fitzwater said, “Very well.”

Amelia nodded, turned around, cast a commanding glance at Jacob, and promptly marched out the study door.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:18 am*

Her heart thundered in her ears as she marched out the back door, Jacob at her heels.

Over the past three days of missing and reminiscing over their misadventures, and of coming to terms with her own dubious birthright, Amelia had almost forgotten completely about the arranged marriage that had spurred her to run away in the first place.

To be reminded of the circumstances, and then to have her two worlds collide the way that they did immediately after, was beyond anything she could have possibly expected.

And yet, somehow, someone else did not appear quite as surprised as he ought to be.

Amelia waited until they reached the very edge of their pathetic excuse of a city garden before whirling around.

“How long have you known?” She crossed her arms, determined not to be distracted by his boyish good looks, his carefree manners, or his piercing blue eyes. She managed to keep her frown stern, mostly.

Jacob had the good sense to look slightly abashed, at least. He shoved a hand in his pocket, his smile wry. “A while—although I didn’t manage to confirm it until our return.”

“Is that why you helped me?”

“What?”

“This—this betrothal .” Amelia swallowed. The word was at once exciting and unsettling to utter. “Was it why you kept helping me? Did my father send you?”

“What? No! Of course not!” He walked closer. Amelia glared at him, and he stopped mid-pace. “I—I swear I had no clue of your identity, not at the Docks, not at Mrs. Wilmark’s.”

She raised a questioning brow.

“Not until Milford House, at least—and even then, only an inkling,” he said.

“Why didn’t you tell me anything?”

“I only suspected, Amelia.” He ran his free hand over his hair, messing up his valet’s hard work, and rendering himself even more attractive.

It was entirely unfair. How was she supposed to stay angry when he huffed that way, with his face slightly flushed?

“It felt far too coincidental—almost too good to be true.”

“So you decided to tell me nothing?”

“I couldn’t raise hopes that might only prove untrue.”

“You think you didn’t raise any hopes?” Amelia scoffed. His charged gaze met hers. She sniffed and suppressed her sentimental urges. “Jacob, I didn’t know if I would ever see you again.”

“And yet you have. ”

“ You knew that.” She marched closer, arching her neck upwards to keep her eyes on his. “I didn’t.”

“I—I’m sorry.”

She sniffed before she swallowed. “I suppose that’s something.”

“Amelia.” He lifted his hands slowly towards hers, as if waiting for her approval.

She paused a moment before letting him close his fingers around her own.

After days of feeling entirely unmoored, his touch grounded her—anchoring her to the possibility of a happy future that had felt entirely out of reach just weeks ago.

“I admit the thought felt overwhelming to me at first—to think that the match my father had insisted on foisting upon me could be one I longed for myself. And yet, as the days passed, I found myself comforted, even eager, that my suspicions be true. And when I received confirmation upon our return, I felt only the most overwhelming rush of relief.”

“Relief?” She bit her lip. A small smile tugged at her lips. “I would hardly call that a romantic sentiment.”

“Relief, my darling Amelia,” he said, as he lifted her hands and kissed them, his own lips smiling, “because I would not have to fight my father to dissolve what he’d been so determined to arrange.

Relief—because the woman I wanted was the same one my father had arranged for me to marry.

Relief—and joy—because I wouldn’t be forced to choose between obligation and

love.”

“Love?” The word felt thrilling on her lips, and to her heart.

“Yes, love.” He kissed her hands again, slowly this time.

She felt the warmth skittering from her fingertips up to her elbows, up to her shoulders, and down her spine.

His gaze pinned her in place with the weight of his adoration.

“Because somehow, between hackney drivers and highwaymen, between fending off snobby countesses and bachelor baronets, I have wholly, irrevocably fallen in love with you.”

Her throat felt tight, even as her heart soared. She cleared her throat with effort. “Even if I’m nothing more than the daughter of a thief?”

“In my eyes, Amelia,” he whispered as he pressed his forehead to hers, “you are and have always been a princess.”

She hardly knew who moved first. Most likely, both of them did. She only knew that, from the moment their lips finally found each other, that she was well and truly home.

“Marry me, Amelia,” he whispered as he trailed kisses along her cheek and against her brow, his hands tugging her in by the waist. She folded readily into his arms. “Marry me—and let me share your adventures for the rest of our lives.”

She laughed against his ear, her feet dangling beneath her as she clung onto his shoulders. Only he could make her soar. “Very well, if you insist.”

It was his turn to laugh. “As a matter of fact, I do.”

She kissed him again, a thousand hopes for a happy future bursting within her.

“I love you, Jacob,” she whispered, her joy overflowing.

“And I love you.”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:18 am*

Jacob had dreamed of plenty of things in his life—family, success, and purpose, among others.

Today, as he watched his handpicked workers unveil the Hawthorne sign above the new tea shop, on Strand itself, no less, his chest almost grew two whole sizes.

Father remained a key character in the running of the Hawthorne Enterprise empire.

But, somehow, between Jacob's marriage and one episode of near apoplexy, Alastor Hawthorne had begun to cede more control to his capable son.

As a result, Hawthorne's had prospered in the past few years not just in terms of pure financial gain, but in the form of an improved reputation as well.

No longer was the tea dull and watered-down; no longer did underpaid workers grumble about their day.

Now, Hawthorne's new location sparkled across the street from the famous Twinings itself, undaunted by the competition and optimistic of a bright future for all London tea houses.

“All you're missing is a proper queue of black hair down the back.

” His wife sidled up next to him, enchanting eyes alight.

Five years of marriage, and two pregnancies, had softened her, in both nature and physique.



And while his other colleagues often teased him for being overly attached to his exotic wife, Jacob truly believed there was no one more perfect than his darling Amelia.

He chuckled at her comment before pressing a kiss to her brow. “Do you think it suits me?”

She leaned back slightly to examine the hint of a Manchurian collar he’d had his tailor add to his waistcoat.

Somehow, after a season of grieving the lost legacy that she’d never had, Amelia had decided to embrace her heritage in full instead.

And now, everything in Hawthorne’s bore the gentlest touch of chinoiserie—from the teacups to the decor to the attire of the young new master.

It had utterly delighted Jacob’s father-in-law, and earned them a valuable patron in Sir George.

“I think everything suits you.” Amelia smiled before propping herself up for an impulsive kiss. He indulged her, given their relative privacy to the side of the counter. And soon enough, he was indulging himself instead.

“Papa! Papa!” A set of pudgy feet approached with footsteps as loud as his voice. The elder of their twin boys appeared, his usual pout in fine form. “Gavin pushed me!”

“Harvey pushed me first!” Gavin arrived right after, slighter of frame yet equally fierce, a tiny Amelia in male form. “And Annie tripped because of it.”

“Annie!” Amelia cried, quickly rushing off to find their one-year-old daughter, a brown-eyed beauty destined to break hearts one day.

How a sweet-natured child could have been born of his and Amelia's excitable natures was a mystery, but there was no denying the origin of her bewitching, almond-shaped eyes.

Jacob crouched down to look his sons in the eye. "Gavin, Harvey—I take it both of you have been doing more pushing than you should have?"

Grim faces and guilty eyes abounded.

"Now," said Jacob, "do you know how many brothers and sisters I have?"

"None," said Gavin.

"And you always wanted one," said Harvey.

"Yes, more than one." Jacob smiled. "And is it a good thing to have a brother?"

"Very good," both boys recited from memory, begrudgingly.

Jacob grinned. "And if God gives us a brother, or a sister, what does that mean we have to be?"

"A good brother." Again, came the answer in unison.

"Does a good brother push or shove?"

"No."

"Does a good brother apologize when he hurts someone else?"

The twins glanced each other's way for a good two seconds, and then they embraced.

Jacob stood up, unfolding his long limbs. One day, those boys might tower over him. But he was happy to do all the towering over his growing brood for now.

“Did she fall?” Amelia rushed towards the back room for her daughter, relieved to find the babe smiling cherubically, in the arms of Amelia’s own cousin. “Oh, Jem, you’ve arrived! Where is the nursemaid?”

“I can never stay away from this darling.” Her dear cousin, smile almost as bright as on her wedding day, beamed at little Annie.

Behind her, Jem’s little boy, not much older than Annie himself, toddled in, arrayed in his handsome morning suit.

Lady or otherwise, a mother was a mother first. Amelia smiled and stooped down to greet little Dorian.

“Rebekah!” Outside the open door, quarrel forgotten, Harvey and Gavin ran for their favorite female cousin. The ladies inside laughed.

“If those two ever gain a modicum of Rebekah’s decorum, I would be ever so grateful.” Amelia grinned as she stood up once more. “Where is Graham?”

“He shall arrive shortly. He is meeting with a new client today.”

“Another titled client, I presume?”

Jem beamed with pride. “Only a viscount.”

“Only a viscount?” Amelia laughed. Childhood dreams and female fancies were one thing—living them out was far more challenging and far more rewarding than one could ever imagine. “Oh, Jem, what a joy it is to revel in our husbands’ achievements.”

“Indeed it is.” Jem smiled warmly.

The commotion outside the back room grew, and Amelia, after assuring herself that Annie was indeed unharmed and as angelic as ever, stepped back out into the fray.

The number of guests, as well as the number of reporters, seemed to have doubled during the course of their short *tete-a-tete*.

A quick survey of the main room reassured her that everything was in order for the day—with servers at the ready and all the china sparkling.

To the left of the entrance, on the largest blank wall of the tea house, sat a large painting of four Chinese ladies, a faithful replica of the image on Amelia’s beloved jewelry box.

It had taken some time for her to readjust to the idea of embracing her mother’s heritage.

But she was ever so glad that she now did.

“Mr. and Mrs. Martin Fitzwater,” the butler announced, his formal manners making Amelia laugh for their having decided to bring him along.

She’d thought it wise to bring along almost all their household servants to help with what one hoped would be a busy day for Hawthorne’s and for the family at large, but she hadn’t expected him to start announcing their guests.

She rushed over to greet her parents. There would never be any warm affection on her part for Mother, but the years had taught her to stop begrudging the older woman’s former desire to see Amelia settled.

If parenting came with its challenges, then surely step-parenting could only be more

difficult, not less.

“Mr. Pope and Lady Dorothea Pope,” came the next announcement.

“Thea!” Amelia flew to her cousin’s side, glad to see her happy as ever on her husband’s arm, her wide girth a visible reminder of an impending new arrival. Three-year-old Arthur held tight to his mother’s hand, the spitting image of his father, with a patterned waistcoat as bold as his.

“Still running about, Amy?” Thea scolded with a twinkle in her eye. “I thought you would’ve grown out of that by now.”

Amelia laughed. She had grown up plenty, but she would forever be the youngest and most exuberant amongst their little trio of cousins, and she wouldn’t have it any other way.

“Thank you for joining us today.” She smiled. “I’d worried you might not have been able to, given your condition.”

“All is well.” Thea’s returning smile was as dear as ever. Arthur tugged at his mother’s hand, his eyes already straying to his second cousins. Thea reminded the child to take his bow before permitting him to go play with the rest.

“Is my wife being a good hostess?” Jacob appeared behind Amelia then, a warm hand on the small of her back.

Amelia smiled back at her husband. “I am never a bad hostess.”

“Oh? I seem to recall the one time that you thought you’d called for tea and yet?—”

Amelia shoved him playfully on the side, earning her the smile she loved so much from him. “I will acknowledge that I am sometimes a distracted hostess, but never a

bad one!”

Their party chuckled together, conversing blithely and politely, their circle widening naturally when Graham and Jem came to join them.

The children squealed in the background, their energy heightened by each other’s presence.

The nursemaids chased after their wards, and Amelia figured the servants would need an extra half-day after this entire ordeal.

“The Earl and Countess of Aldbury!” Their over-eager butler announced, and all the guests and journalists shuffled eagerly for a glimpse of such honorable guests.

Thea, Jem, and their husbands turned to pay their respects, and Amelia lingered slightly as she waited for the earl to inch his way successfully into the crowd.

She felt Jacob’s kiss on the side of her brow. “You do have a thing or two for connections, my dear.”

Amelia laughed. “The only reason you married me, wasn’t it?”

“Not at all, there was also the dowry.”

“And the ties to royalty, I’ve heard.”

“Oh, yes, highly important.”

“Especially for a man trading tea.”

“Practically non-negotiable.”

“Of course.”

They grinned at each other, warmth and joy and love pulsing between them. He leaned closer, taking full advantage of the momentary privacy before they had to take their turn greeting the earl.

“I would have taken you, my darling Amelia, rich or poor, princess or pauper,” he whispered softly.

Amelia smiled, her heart bursting. “And I would have gladly married you, highwaymen or otherwise.”

“I think Betsy made you so jealous you found me irresistible.”

Amelia laughed. “Of course, no wonder you had Mrs. Wilmark send her along.”

“I’m nothing if not strategic.”

“And charming. ”

“And handsome. Don’t forget handsome.”

She smiled as she pecked him on the cheek. “All that and so much more.”