

DO NOT DUPLICATE

MISS
WILTON'S
Waltz

PROPER ROMANCE

JOSI S. KILPACK



FOR REVIEW ONLY

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Prologue

As a vicar's daughter, Lenora knew that doing the right thing was not always easy, in fact it was rarely so. It was *right* that Evan Glenside had broken his engagement to Lenora after realizing he'd fallen in love with her sister Cassie. It was *right* that Lenora had stood up to her parents after they had forbidden Cassie and Evan from seeing each other. It was *right* that tomorrow morning Cassie and Evan would marry in Father's church and begin their lives together. There was comfort in having been an essential part of so much rightness, but it was *not* easy.

All her life, Lenora had been known in Leagrave as the shy Wilton girl. The daughter of the vicar who struggled to maintain eye contact, who kept to herself, and whose only friends were her five sisters. Lenora was used to that, but the number of consoling looks sent in her direction since the broken

engagement and the whispered gossip made it impossible for her to stay here.

“Poor girl,” the neighbors were surely saying in piteous tones. “Such a strange little thing.”

And Lenora just kept playing the pianoforte, providing background music to everyone’s life while hiding behind her instrument.

The guests were slowly leaving the informal gathering on the eve of the wedding, and Lenora kept her eyes on the music as her fingers moved over the keys with tender exactness. There were still a few people in the room—mostly extended family who had come for the wedding—when Mother put her hand on Lenora’s shoulder, her way of saying that Lenora could stop after this piece.

Once she’d finished, Lenora attempted to slide out of the room before anyone drew her into conversation. More often than not, when people addressed her, she would stare at the floor, fidget like a child, and make everyone uncomfortable.

Two more days, she told herself, and her stomach filled with butterflies—some fluttering due to nerves, but some due to excitement and relief.

Lenora was nearly out of the drawing room when Cassie took her arm. She’d thought her younger sister was still making sparkling conversation with their guests. Sometimes Lenora felt like Cassie had received Lenora’s portion of social graces, as though such abilities were slices of cake. “Two for Cassie and—I’m sorry, Lenora, there’s none left for you.” But then maybe Lenora got Cassie’s musical portion. She didn’t mind too

DO NOT DUPLICATE
MISS WILTON'S WALTZ

much because, given the choice, Lenora preferred music and her own company. And yet, that was changing too. At least it had been in Bath, where she'd escaped for a little while. Then she'd come back home to Leagrave and picked up the role she'd always played—the shy prodigy.

“Walk with me in the yard?” Cassie whispered.

Lenora wished she could object, but she didn't know when she would come back to Leagrave. This might be the last time she and Cassie talked privately for a long time.

“Please,” Cassie added, apparently sensing Lenora's hesitation.

They left the vicarage by the back entrance and stepped into the quiet yard. The night was cool, and Lenora looked around at the familiar landscape, bathed in silver from the half-moon. She would miss this. She would miss *them*, and yet she was ready. She could feel it in a way she'd never felt before. Her future would be in Bath; her past would remain in Leagrave.

“Are you all right?” Cassie asked amid the sound of night birds and crickets.

The concern in Cassie's voice was sincere, reminding Lenora that although she often felt separate from her family, she *was* a part of them. She took comfort in knowing that she would always be a part of them, even if she was not *with* them. “I am.” Lenora patted her younger sister's hand and gave her a reassuring smile she hoped would help prove her words.

“But you would not tell me if you weren't,” Cassie said, a note of regret in her tone. “In fact, no one would be able to tell because you keep your thoughts so very much to yourself.”

“That I keep my thoughts to myself does not mean I am not all right.” Lenora faced Cassie, gathering her courage in hopes that her sister would hear her sincerity. “I have no regrets of what has happened, and I *truly* want you and Evan to be happy. Please do not let assumptions of my feelings detract you.”

Cassie paused, her face relaxing. “I don’t doubt that you want us to be happy—that is what is so remarkable.”

“It is not so remarkable,” Lenora said, shaking off the compliment. She was not distraught over the broken engagement or that Evan had fallen in love with Cassie. Lenora had not loved him, she’d simply seen him as the solution to the awkwardness of her social position. Being a man’s wife—any man’s wife—would give her a place, allow her parents to breathe a sigh of relief, and secure her future. It was all she’d ever wanted, and Evan’s brief courtship was the closest she’d ever been to attaining that goal. But now that was over, and her goals were different. “This is right, and my knowing it gives me peace.” She hoped Cassie would believe her.

Cassie cocked her head to the side as she regarded her older sister as though seeing her differently. The idea increased Lenora’s confidence even more. If someone else recognized the changes that had been taking place within Lenora these last months, then the change was not a figment of her imagination. “And what shall you do, now?” Cassie asked. “What will your future hold?”

Lenora looked away, but the temptation to tell Cassie was nearly overpowering. *Two more days*, she told herself. That was when she would tell her parents. But what if she told Cassie

now? Would it be wisdom or folly? Lenora stepped away and crossed her arms over her chest as she looked across the yard.

Cassie allowed the silence for a moment, but she'd never been one to wait very long. "I have sensed that you do not plan to stay in Legrave once the wedding is over."

Lenora looked at her with sharp surprise, then turned back to the trees. The desire to share her plans increased now that Cassie suspected something. "I do not want to detract from the wedding."

When Cassie spoke, her voice was soft. "So you will not stay?"

"Aunt Gwen left me with an open invitation to return to Bath and . . . I am different there."

"You mentioned that when you spoke to Papa."

And yet no one has asked me what I meant by it, Lenora thought, then shook off the criticism. Being one of eight children meant that you were heard when you spoke up and demanded attention. Lenora demanded nothing. But now Cassie was asking, and Lenora was ready to answer.

"I attend Aunt Gwen, and rather than speaking around me, she pulls me in to conversations and forces me to share my opinions. It was overwhelming in the beginning, but in time I realized that I was capable." She turned and met her sister's eyes. "It began with your advice to smile and focus on my breathing, and then, though it was ill-fated, my time with Mr. Glenside forced me to step further out of the circle of my comfort. I thought any progress to be worthless when I left for Bath, but in fact that became a starting point." Lenora was still uncomfortable in a

crowd, but she was getting better at meeting people and being seen as her own person rather than one of the vicar's daughters, and the shy and awkward one at that.

"And so you will seek your future in Bath?" Cassie asked.

"For now," Lenora said, unsure what her long-term plans might be. Four months ago, she would never have imagined *this* change, and it was oddly scintillating to not know where this new journey would take her. Cassie had always been the adventurous one, the sister who took her own path and never allowed herself to be overlooked. Lenora would never be Cassie, but recently she'd found more strength than anyone knew she had and there were times when she imagined that she might discover even more hidden aspects of her character. It was exciting to feel as though she were getting to know herself the same way she was getting to know other people.

Cassie was still waiting for an answer.

"I have no regrets of what has happened, Cassie. I see the place it has taken each of us, but I hear the whispers too. I feel the pity. It will take time for the gossip to settle, I think, and perhaps even longer for Papa to fully agree that this was the right choice." She smiled but then shrugged, belying the seriousness of what she would say next. "Beyond that, I have come to realize that I was raised with one expectation for my future—a husband and children. I never doubted it would happen or that it was the only path for happiness. I am twenty-three years old, and I have had one man cry off from his engagement and marry my younger sister. My prospects are poor."

Cassie winced.

DO NOT DUPLICATE
MISS WILTON'S WALTZ

Lenora put her hand on her sister's arm and smiled sympathetically. "I have *no* regrets, but society will keep its score. For so long I have lived amid panic that if I do not marry, I shall have no joy or purpose at all. I no longer feel that way, Cassie. I have seen another side."

Cassie did not seem to understand. "What side?"

"One of independence, confidence, and comfort in my own company." She'd said it—out loud! Speaking the words confirmed the truth of them to Lenora even more.

Cassie gasped. "You are not spurning marriage?"

"I am no longer *expecting* marriage to define my future. In fact," she paused, then rushed forward, invigorated by sharing confidences, "I have looked into a position as a music teacher at a girl's school in Bath. Aunt Gwen has been helping me. We met with the headmistress just before I left."

Cassie's mouth fell open, but no words came out.

Lenora felt an unexpected deliciousness at having surprised her sister. Lenora never surprised anyone.

Finally, Cassie spoke. "Mama and Papa will not be pleased."

"No, they will not," Lenora said, her smile falling as she considered the very real pain this would cause her parents. "Which is why I will wait until after the wedding to tell them." Her plans were already in motion, however, with the help of Aunt Gwen, who seemed to understand, without Lenora having to explain it, how much she needed a different life. Lenora did not want to hurt anyone by her choices, but she would not sacrifice her happiness either. "I hope to return to Bath by September so I might be situated at the school in time for the new semester."

“But if you become an independent woman . . .” Cassie trailed off, as though unsure how to complete her sentence without giving offense.

“I may never marry,” Lenora finished for her. Men sought out young women in drawing rooms not classrooms. “I know that, and I am at peace with it.”

“Are you truly?” Cassie sounded stunned. If her reaction was this strong, how on earth would their parents react?

Lenora took both of Cassie’s hands and smiled. “Truly. I have come to realize that if I cannot be pleased with myself, I cannot be pleased with anyone else. A husband cannot make me whole. I must do that for myself.” Bath had shown her the potential of finding that wholeness, and she would make any sacrifice necessary to be comfortable in her own skin.

“And you think teaching is the answer to finding that wholeness?”

“I do,” Lenora said, then added, “for now.”

Cassie blinked back tears. “I feel responsible for this.”

Lenora smiled. “Then I hope you take pride in that responsibility because I have never been more excited about my future. I get to fill my days with music and make my own way in the world. I want you to be happy for me.” Lenora rarely felt like the older sister, but at that moment, she did.

Cassie paused, and then pulled her shoulders back and lifted her chin. “Then I shall be. I feel that after spending our entire lives together I am only just now beginning to know you.”

Lenora laughed. “I feel the same.” She took Cassie’s arm and turned her back toward the house. “I do hope amid your

wedded bliss that you will find time to write to me so we might become the sisters we ought to have been.”

“I shall write to you every week.”

They walked in silence until they reached the back door of the house, then Cassie turned to face Lenora one last time. “I can never thank you enough for forgiving me and giving me the chance to be with Evan. It would not have happened without you.”

Her gratitude warmed Lenora’s heart. “You can thank me by soaking up every bit of happiness you can.”

Cassie shook her head. “You are too good, Lenora. What else can I do? Surely there is something else.”

Lenora paused a moment. “You can pray for me, Cassie. Pray that I find the same happiness you have found, one way or another.”

“I shall do so every day.”

Lenora gave Cassie’s hand a final squeeze. “Then be happy. It is everything I want for you and Evan both.”

The sisters shared an embrace and went inside.

Because of their houseguests, Lenora and Cassie were sharing Cassie’s room, but Lenora could not sleep. Long after Cassie’s breathing had evened out, Lenora slipped out of bed, into her dressing gown, down the stairs, into the boots she always left by the back door, and outside into the night.

She had started her Night Walks, as she called them, a few years earlier on a night where she felt fit to burst with anxiety after enduring a disastrous social event where she’d done everything wrong, as usual. The soft sound of the stream behind their

home had always soothed her, but that had been the first time she'd gone at night. Once at the stream, she appreciated the increased stillness she found there, and the bindings in her chest loosened until the emotion released itself. She had cried into her hands, mourning everything that was wrong about herself.

She'd returned to the river at least a dozen times since then, always on the heels of something overwhelming, when she needed to express what she could not at home. Tonight, she did not need to cry, she just needed the peace and comfort the river gave her as she prepared to leave Legrave, likely forever.

Two more days, and she would leave the pity behind. Two more days, and she would not be known as the vicar's daughter who must watch her every step. Two more days, and she would be *free*.

Chapter One

Two Years Later

The third button on Mr. Harpshod's waistcoat was of a different design than the other four. Lenora wondered if the man's valet had sewn it on prior to tonight's dinner party without time to find a better match. She imagined Mr. Harpshod putting on this favorite vest—silver filigree upon black silk—realizing the button was missing, and bellowing for help. She imagined him huffing and grubbing and running his fingers through his thinning hair while saying things like “Would you look at the time?” and “I've half a mind to turn you out completely, Justin.” Or David or maybe Bartholomew. Did valets have names such as Bartholomew? Would they be called by their surname? As a vicar in a small hamlet, Lenora's father had never had a valet.

“Don't you agree, Lenora?” Aunt Gwen asked.

“Oh, yes,” Lenora said, an expert at keeping half an ear to conversation while still absorbing the details around her.

“The lemon macarons are my particular favorite,” Aunt Gwen added.

Lenora opened her mouth to share her opinion of the delectable cookies—her personal vice—but Mr. Harpshod spoke before she’d managed to utter a sound.

“Oh, yes, indeed.” Mr. Harpshod went on to say that while Hoopers’ macarons were very good, they were nothing compared to the macarons he’d had from a confectionary in Portsmouth a few summers ago. He had a house in that city, you know. Left to him by his mother’s uncle.

Lenora wasn’t offended by his interruption and maintained a polite expression; she never minded being on the listening side of any conversation. She looked at the mismatched button on Mr. Harpshod’s vest again and imagined another scenario in which he was not as well-heeled as he professed to be and could not afford a new waistcoat, therefore he had to make whatever repairs necessary to continue the farce of his wealth until he could land some windfall investment or procure a rich wife. The house in Portsmouth was decrepit and mortgaged. Perhaps he’d come to Bath in time to be settled for the winter season where he would meet the heiresses on display while they waited for the London Season to resume in the early spring.

Her polite smile did not shift as her mind wandered, and when Mr. and Mrs. Grovesford announced that they had to be on their way, she lifted her eyebrows in the universal expression of “So sorry this lovely evening must come to an end.” And it had been a lovely evening. Aunt Gwen had allowed her to play the pianoforte in the too-warm room during much of the

DO NOT DUPLICATE
MISS WILTON'S WALTZ

drawing room socializing, and when Lenora had finally joined the conversation, the guests had been gracious and witty, and she'd conversed easily.

Even Mr. Harpshod was not objectionable, but there was nothing particularly endearing about him either. His sister—a quiet thing of eighteen years—rose when he did. As did Mr. and Mrs. Shelby, who were speaking with Mr. Johnstone on the other side of the room.

Aunt Gwen loved to entertain on Sunday evenings, and the company was always good, but Lenora was not sad to see the dinner guests leave. Sunday evenings were for Aunt Gwen, but once the house was still and the moon was high, the night was Lenora's. She'd become quite comfortable in Bath, though no one would ever guess just how comfortable. She was very different from the woman she'd been in Leagrave.

“What an enjoyable evening,” Aunt Gwen said once the guests had been shown out. Her terrace house boasted four levels, with a large bay window in the front parlor that overlooked Gay Street. Aunt Gwen nodded to the footman standing near the door, and he left the room. She had a secret fancy for whiskey, but never indulged when she had guests. That she didn't consider Lenora a guest was something Lenora took rather a lot of pride in.

“It *was* an enjoyable evening,” Lenora agreed. “The chocolate custard was especially good. I'm glad you allowed Cook to experiment on a company night.”

“Oh, I am, too,” Aunt Gwen said with a nod. “I shall have Cook put it on regular rotation.”

“An excellent idea.”

The footman returned with a tray holding a single glass of whiskey.

“You are sure you won’t join me?” Aunt Gwen said as she took the glass.

Lenora answered with a laugh; Aunt Gwen made the same offer every evening. “Yes, Auntie, I am sure.” The smell of whiskey was enough to put her off the foul drink; she was not one for liquor.

“I would not tell your father,” Aunt Gwen added conspiratorially, pressing harder than usual.

Lenora shook her head. “You would not have to. He would smell it on my breath when I see him at Christmas in three months’ time.” She winked, and Aunt Gwen laughed. Lenora of Legrave never winked. Lenora of Bath only winked when funning her aunt, but it was yet another change she could credit to the city.

Aunt Gwen took a long swallow and melted against the cushions of the settee with a sigh. “Does that mean you will go to Legrave for Christmas, then? You’ve made up your mind?”

Mother’s invitation had arrived the middle of August—a full fortnight ago and months ahead of necessity. She would be soon following up on why Lenora had not yet answered.

“In all honesty, I would refuse Christmas if I felt I could do so without infuriating my mother.” Lenora hadn’t been to Legrave since Cassie’s wedding.

“I think you mean breaking her heart.”

Lenora wrinkled her nose as though considering Aunt

Gwen's concern. Her parents did not seem particularly *hurt* by her having missed two years' worth of holiday celebrations, just embarrassed that they could not boast that all six of their perfectly traditional daughters were mothering and homemaking the way God intended for women. Spending Christmas at the vicarage would likely include a few sermons on marriage and family and how the roles were key components of God's plan for all women. Lenora did not look forward to that, and yet she *did* look forward to seeing her family, including Cassie and Evan's new daughter.

Aunt Gwen finished her whiskey. "They worry about you, Lenora, that is all."

"I know." Lenora did not want to think on the topic any longer. It was late enough in the evening for her to excuse herself. There was a new moon tonight; her favorite nights were the dark ones.

"And your thoughts on Mr. Harpshod?"

Lenora looked up in surprise, took in the slightly shamed look on her aunt's face, and reviewed the evening in the space of a blink. Mr. Harpshod was a single man invited to a dinner party with exactly one unmarried woman, who was not his sister, present. Lenora had noted his buttons and his thinning hair and yet entirely missed that he was . . . eligible. "Aunt Gwen!"

Aunt Gwen avoided Lenora's eyes as she beckoned the footman to fetch her empty glass.

"You of all people?" Lenora continued, frowning. "And him of all men?" She struck a thoughtful pose and put a finger and thumb to her chin for effect. "I would suggest a chiseled jawline,

enchancing eyes, and perhaps broad shoulders next time. Yes, definitely shoulders.” She couldn’t actually remember Mr. Harpshod’s shoulders, which meant they must not have been anything remarkable.

Aunt Gwen narrowed her eyes, joining in the spirit of playfulness. “I had no idea you had such physical expectations.”

“I have *no* expectations,” Lenora clarified with a laugh. “But if you are playing matchmaker, at least make it a game worth playing on my part.” Lucky for her, there were very few men of such description in Bath, which had transitioned thirty years ago from a resort of fashion, pedigree, and wealth to a lovely town of cures, comfort, and a decidedly gray-haired population. Few people kept their own carriages, and those who did not walk everywhere were carried to and fro on sedan chairs, like royalty.

“What a shameless thing for a vicar’s daughter to say,” Aunt Gwen said, but her smile was encouraging.

“Well, as I’ve said before, I am different in—”

“—Bath, I know,” Aunt Gwen finished. “You *should* go home for Christmas and let your family see what a saucy girl you’ve turned into.”

“If that is not the pot and the kettle, I don’t know what is, Auntie.” Lenora was afraid that when she returned to Leagrave, she would retreat behind the piano, move quietly from one task to another, and spend the majority of her time listening to conversation swirl around her while entertaining her sisters’ children. That’s what spinster sisters were for, after all, and she suspected her sisters all felt a bit put out that she did not travel from one household to another to help each time someone was

DO NOT DUPLICATE
MISS WILTON'S WALTZ

ill or had a new baby. "I enjoy my independence in Bath, that is all, and that is what I shall tell them. The *sauce* will not come with me."

Lenora glanced at the clock—quarter after ten. She stood and crossed the room to give her aunt a kiss on the cheek.

"So, no to Mr. Harpshod?" Aunt Gwen asked as Lenora pulled back.

"No to Mr. Harpshod." Lenora put her hands on her hips. "I must say I'm surprised that you of all people would do such a thing."

Aunt Gwen's marriage as a young woman had not been a love match and had produced no children. When her husband died unexpectedly, Aunt Gwen invested her inheritance and purchased a terrace house, living a gentlewoman's life without needing to marry again. Aunt Gwen had never goaded Lenora regarding marriage, which Lenora assumed meant that Aunt Gwen approved of Lenora's choosing against the institution she herself had not found overly enjoyable. The footman arrived with an additional glass of whiskey. Good. Aunt Gwen would be asleep by eleven.

Once the footman had left, Lenora spoke again. "Who put you up to it—my mother?"

Aunt Gwen shifted, looking everywhere but at her niece.

"My father?"

"Victoria," Aunt Gwen finally said, placing the blame squarely on the most meddling of Lenora's older sisters. "She wrote to me and asked that I please help you find a husband,

that your parents and sisters are distressed. I thought I would create this one event so I could tell her I'd done as she asked."

"Because I can never be happy without a husband?"

Aunt Gwen looked at the floor. Contrition did not suit her.

Lenora sighed and sat down next to Aunt Gwen on the plum-colored settee. "I am not angry with you."

Aunt Gwen met her eye, repentant and oddly insecure. "Are you sure?"

"I could never be angry with you after all you've done for me, but . . . do not do this." She held her aunt's gaze to be sure that she was understood. Lenora's stomach tightened at giving her aunt an order, but she had spent the last two years teaching obstinate fifteen-year-old girls to play *Für Elise*. She could stand up to her aunt. "If I have to look out for prospects when I stay with you, I'll stay at the school on the weekends. I cannot make room for considering marriage again. I wasted twenty-three years of my life on that plan. Let me have the freedom to pursue my own course. Please." Lenora was impressed with how steady her voice was and how practiced the words felt despite never having articulated them before.

"Very well, but living alone becomes lonely over time. I have friends and I enjoy my independence, but the evenings are long, and I have no children to comfort me as I grow older. I wonder if I was too determined in not attempting to find love when I had the chance."

"I will remember that you told me as much," Lenora said obediently, but her decision had been made two years ago. "Good night."

DO NOT DUPLICATE
MISS WILTON'S WALTZ

Lenora placed a second kiss on her aunt's soft cheek before making her way to the bedchamber Aunt Gwen had given her when she'd arrived in Bath the first time. The school term was starting tomorrow, so Lenora would move back to live in the staff apartments during the week. Her trunk was half-packed; she'd finish in the morning.

Lenora's stomach fluttered with nerves until she thought of the river waiting for her in the dark night. She rang for the maid who would help her out of her dress and take down her hair. At the school, Lenora wore plain dresses that she could manage on her own and pulled her hair back in a simple knot at the base of her head. But Aunt Gwen required full evening dress that necessitated assistance. It was like living two lives in Bath—three, if she counted who she became for the river.

"Thank you, Dorothea," Lenora said when she was in her dressing gown and her long blonde hair hung down her back. She gathered the tresses and began plaiting them as though it was her final task before bed.

"G'night, miss," Dorothea said before closing the door behind her.

Lenora completed her plait, but then used half a dozen pins to secure it in a flat spiral on the back of her head. She crossed the room and locked the bedroom door before going to her wardrobe and removing the hatbox from the back corner. Inside were a pair of men's trousers, a linen shirt, a knit cap, and a long, but thin, black coat. Perfect for roaming the streets of Bath and looking to any casual bystander like she was a young man walking off his worries. She wore her own sensible boots.

She'd promised herself she would not resurrect her Night Walks in Bath, and for the first ten months or so she had contented herself with walking during daylight. But Aunt Gwen often accompanied her, and once Lenora began serving as the pianist at the Pump Rooms every other Saturday, she met so many people that it seemed she was continually stopped for conversation during her walks. Her meditation of the river had become lost in the society of this city of pedestrians. And so, she'd developed a plan.

Chapter Two

The early September night was crisp as Lenora made her way toward her favorite spot on the River Avon. There were men on the street, but she'd expected that and did not lift her head as she casually crossed to one side of the street or the other to avoid them. She pulled her cap down to cover any bit of exposed hair, shoved her hands deeper into her coat pockets, and kept her chin against her chest. She turned the corner at Walcot, glancing around the darker street without slowing her pace.

A hundred yards later, she ducked between two shops, stepped behind a pile of crates, and climbed over the waist-high brick wall into which was set a sagging wrought-iron gate, chained shut. Once over the wall, she stepped over the crumbled top step, and then walked lightly down the remaining stone steps that led to the exposed section of shoreline she thought of as her sanctuary.

This little spot was some distance north of Pultney Bridge—the side that did not boast the lovely architecture and façade—and no one came there at night. It was a utilitarian area, free of benches or footpaths, but with a large walnut tree and a small wooden dock with a winch to assist in drawing water, though there was no bucket. The rope was brittle and frayed, attesting to its disuse. Lenora liked to think that no one knew of this place anymore but herself, and the fact that she'd never met another person here made it an easy enough fantasy to believe.

She'd thought about telling Cassie about her river walks in one of her monthly letters to her sister. She was fairly confident Cassie would laugh over it and even approve of Lenora's secret independence. As young girls, their differing temperaments had not been well-matched, leading to frustration on Cassie's part and insecurity on Lenora's. Maybe as they got older, they were becoming more similar: Lenora more outgoing, though quietly, and Cassie more mild now that she had a family that needed her attention. Or perhaps living apart helped them to better appreciate the other, and, in Lenora's case, emulate her younger sister. Often when her anxiety began climbing up her chest like a spider, she would think of what Cassie would do and be able to face a particularly overwhelming situation.

Lenora brushed the surface of the short stone wall beneath the walnut tree with the sleeve of her coat before she sat and pulled her knees to her chest. She watched the dim light weave through the city buildings and reflect off the black water of the river. She let out a breath. Her classes would start tomorrow, and the inevitable energy of her new students would leave her

DO NOT DUPLICATE
MISS WILTON'S WALTZ

exhausted that first week. The advanced courses were delightful as they were made up of girls who were proficient and eager to perfect their skills. It was the Introduction to Music class that made Lenora's anxieties rise.

Mrs. Henry required all new students to take music in one form or another. If they already played an instrument or sang, they took an advanced performance class. If they did not, it was Lenora's responsibility to teach them notes and composers well enough that they could at least follow a conversation on the topic. Unfortunately, Lenora had found that if a girl had no musical basis by the time she came to school, she had little interest in the topic.

Lenora had taken to teaching far easier than anyone had expected—including herself. When she'd revealed her plans following Cassie's wedding, her parents had told her she would not last a full term. But with music as the subject, and small classes respecting her knowledge, Lenora had found her place. The first term had been fraught with anxiety and stammered lessons, but in time she'd learned to lose herself in the instruction, gained respect of the other teachers, and exceeded all expectations.

Now seasoned and confident, she looked forward to seeing her favorite students again and was excited to try something new with her beginning students. She had prepared a one-handed ditty they could learn to play as proof that everyone had some musical ability. Lenora hoped the activity would work better than her opening lectures of the past had, but it was a risk, and risks always made her nervous. Well, except for her walks to the river at night wearing men's clothing. She hugged her knees

tighter and began mentally composing a letter of confession to Cassie—wouldn't she be shocked!

When Lenora smelled pipe smoke in the air, her body and mind froze. All the lightness and calm she'd been basking in was sucked away, leaving cold dread in its place.

She was not alone.

In all the months she'd been coming here, Lenora had never encountered another person. She swallowed, her mouth dry as she tried not to imagine what would happen if someone discovered she was *not* a young man walking through his worries.

The smoke was coming from the right—on the other side of the wall from the stairs which were her only escape. She stuffed her rising fear away; she had no time for it and must keep her thoughts clear. Carefully, Lenora lowered her knees from her chest and put her feet on the ground beside the wall, grateful that summer had not yet given way to fallen autumn leaves that could crunch beneath her boots. She stood slowly, wondering how she had ever found this subterfuge exciting. The prospect of being caught wiped away all sense of freedom she'd come to take for granted. She took a step toward the stairs. And another.

“You there.”

She ran, her thin black coat billowing out behind her like a cape and her heart nearly beating out of her chest. Her foot was on the bottom step when her coat was caught from behind. She swallowed the scream that shot up her throat, aware even in her panic that her voice would give away her secret. Even her *ability* to scream was quickly quashed, however, when she hit the ground, every bit of air pushed out of her lungs, leaving

her gasping. She had never thought to bind her chest when she went out at night, never expected anyone to get close enough to notice. She could see nothing through the darkness surrounding her except the pinpricks of light popping in her peripheral vision.

The severity of her situation weighed on her as she realized how vulnerable she was, how badly this could end. She tried to think of what Cassie would do, but panic overwhelmed the clarity she so desperately needed.

The man leaned down, grabbed her collar, and lifted her to her feet. She pulled free, but the man stood between her and the stairs. She rounded her shoulders forward to hide her chest and reached up to pull her cap down over her forehead. Her hand touched hair; the cap was gone.

“I didn’t mean to pull you off your feet. What are you doing here so late?” the voice asked her, low and gruff.

She’d only heard one voice, which meant he was alone. Not that she felt much relief. She finally took a full breath, then lowered her voice to answer. “Walkin’.” She must have lost the cap when he pulled her to the ground. Had she truly been *pulled to the ground*? Had he noticed the plait pinned at the back of her head? This was bad. Very, very bad.

She stepped away from him, glancing at the stairs that she now had a clear path to; they were only four or five feet away. Could she make another run and be successful this time? He took a large step to the side, matching her positioning and blocking her view of the stairs. He folded his arms over his chest, making him even more imposing. She did not look up.

“On the river at midnight? What’s your name?”

“Christopher,” she grumbled, giving her brother’s name as though she had planned it, as though she had done anything like this in her life.

“Do your parents know you are out? How old are you?”

She tried to step around him. “Gotta get home.”

The man stepped to block her a second time. Lenora couldn’t lower her chin any further without exposing the plait pinned at the back of her head. She still hoped the dark night would conceal her. The man took her chin in one hand and raised her face toward his.

She saw longish dark hair free of a hat, dark eyes, and a square jaw peppered with a day’s growth of beard. The cut of his coat testified that he was gentry, but his class only gave her mild relief. He might not be as prone to hurting or robbing her as some ruffian might, but he could ruin her reputation if he realized who she was. She could see the question in his eyes; he knew something was not right. Her instinct to get away took hold. She’d watched her brothers squabble in the yard for years—one could learn a great deal through observation.

She only had one chance. Fast and sure, she leaned into him rather than pulling back, throwing him off balance just enough to allow her to bring her knee up and then jab the heel of her boot onto the top of his foot as hard as she could. At the same time, she pushed both hands against his shoulders. He hadn’t been expecting the attack and crumpled to the side.

Lenora took the stairs three at a time, mentally chanting *Don’t trip, don’t trip, don’t trip!* If she fell, he would be waiting

DO NOT DUPLICATE
MISS WILTON'S WALTZ

for her at the bottom of the stairs and the life she'd built here would be destroyed. She could feel her plait pull loose from the pins, bouncing on her back as she ran. She didn't dare look over her shoulder, didn't dare risk losing her focus.

She jumped over the crumbling top step, then leaped onto the top of the wall, but lost her balance and fell on the other side. She scrambled to her feet, hearing pounding on the steps behind her and a voice though the words were lost in the pulsing heartbeat sounding in her ears. She skirted the crates and ran through the alleyway. She had never run so hard in her life and was unsure how long she could sustain it. Her lungs were bursting, struggling to draw a full breath.

To Milsom Street—turn right, she told herself. She heard a voice curse behind her. She rounded the corner on Milsom Street and nearly collided with a group of men. She spun around one of them, whipping him with her plait in the process.

“A chit!” he called.

She put her head down as hot tears rose to her eyes. She had never been so terrified in her life, and the terror kept her moving forward. She heard footsteps behind her and headed into a park, through trees, around the pond. There was a fence along the back, surely there was a gate somewhere close . . . there—

She darted through it, and then ducked behind the next shop she passed. She collapsed in the shadows, a hand over her mouth to try to hide the sound of sucking for breath. Her hands shook, and her brain felt like mush. What had she done? She pulled further into the shadows, listening for footsteps but unable to hear anything over the pounding pulse in her ears.

He didn't catch me, she tried to reassure herself. But what if he had? She imagined being pulled to her feet, being identified and—what? Taken to the constable? Forced to beg for release? It seemed more likely that she would die on the spot, her heart giving out completely.

How could she have ever felt safe playing such a stupid game? She was twenty-six years old, respectable, well-bred. She was a teacher for heaven's sake, and the daughter of a vicar raised to always choose the proper course in any situation. If she *were* caught, it was nothing less than what she deserved.

She didn't know how long she crouched in the corner like a child—half an hour, perhaps longer. No one passed her hiding place, but it still took several minutes before she could gather enough courage to stand. She had to get back to Aunt Gwen's house before the panic she felt exploded out of her chest and left her to bleed to death in this alley.

She tucked her plait into the back of the coat and turned up the collar to conceal it as best she could. She headed toward the street, pausing between each tentative step to listen closely. She was on the north end of Milsom Street. If she could reach Quiet Street, she could cut across to Queen Square, then follow it up to Gay Street. Ten minutes. Fifteen at most, and then she would be safe in her room.

She reached the edge of the shadows; she heard nothing other than the expected night sounds. She took a step, cautious and ready to run if anyone confronted her. No one was there. She took another step into the darkness, looked both ways, and headed for the nearest corner.

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She walked as fast as she could without running, afraid it would make her too conspicuous or that she'd collapse in the street from the exertion or that her plait would come loose again. When she heard the laughter of a group of men coming the other direction, she entered an alley and went around a row of shops. Her heart nearly stopped when a cat leaped across her path.

Soon enough she was on Gay Street—Aunt Gwen's house in view—and she felt as though she could finally draw a full breath. She went through the gate and took hold of the metal trellis with shaky hands, all the time half-expecting the pipe-smoking man to step out of the shadows.

Had she truly gotten away from him? Was he terribly hurt? She closed her eyes, stunned that she had acted so quickly, disgusted with herself for having possibly hurt him, and yet a tiny bit impressed that she'd gotten away. She—Lenora Wilton, who had hid behind a pianoforte most of her life—had bested a grown man. She shook her head, refusing to take any pride in the actions of the night.

She slid through the bedroom window and closed it quietly behind her. Only then did she allow her knees to give out. She huddled on the floor and cried with fear and relief. *You're safe*, she told herself. But she didn't *feel* safe. She felt vulnerable and foolish. Tomorrow was the first day of the new term. She would take her trunk back to Mrs. Henry's Female Institute on Chilton Road in the morning and stand before the young women she was charged to serve as an example for. There was the parents' tea tomorrow afternoon. Would she still be shaking when she

had to make polite conversation with the parents who were responsible for her salary and believed she lived a life above reproach? What would they say if they knew? How would she get through it?

She wrapped her arms around herself and closed her eyes, trying to calm herself and ironically wishing the river were there to help her.