

DO NOT DUPLICATE

THE
VICAR'S
Daughter

PROPER ROMANCE

JOSI S. KILPACK



FOR REVIEW ONLY

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Chapter One

Cassie fidgeted with the skirt of her day dress and said a silent prayer: *Please help me remain calm.* If only “calm” were a virtue of character she possessed without having to appeal to the heavens.

“It’s not fair,” Cassie said with a forced, even tone. There was so much more she wanted to say, but avoiding a tantrum was paramount if she wanted Mama to listen. “I should be seeking my future rather than gathering dust here in the vicarage for another season.”

Mama did not look up from her sewing—a new shirt for Father she wanted done by Sunday’s sermon, even though it would not show beneath his cassock. “It is as it has always been, Cassie. Your father and I did not change our mind for your sisters, nor did your protest sway us last year.”

“But I am twenty years old now.” Cassie’s voice remained even, but she spoke through clenched teeth and her hands were balled into fists at her sides.

“As were Rose and Lenora when it was their turn to enter society.”

“Elizabeth and Mary were seventeen, and Victoria barely eighteen. Yet *none* of my sisters were forced to wait through *three* seasons. You are resigning me to become an old maid, Mama. Surely you can lift this antiquated rule.”

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“It is not antiquated.” Mama continued to weave her needle skillfully through the layers of white linen. “As the family of a vicar, we will apply ourselves to the propriety of our tradition.” She paused in her sewing and looked up at her youngest daughter, locking Cassie with the green-gold eyes several of her children had inherited—Cassie included. “You are not on the shelf, my dear, and a lovely girl like you will have no trouble securing a good match after you debut.”

“It is not *my* match I am worried about.” Cassie heard the tightness in her voice and prayed again for calm. “Only that I have to wait for *her* to make one first. A prospect which seems less and less likely every passing year.”

“You are being unkind to your sister.”

“She controls my destiny!”

Mother lifted her eyebrows and cocked her head. “And now you are being blasphemous. God controls destiny—every soul is counted as the sparrows.” Her expression softened following the reprimand, and she settled her sewing into her lap, a kind of surrender showing in the relaxing of her shoulders. “You *must* have more faith, Cassie, and greater compassion. Lenora will find the right man through the hand of Providence when the time is right—just as your sisters have and just as you will. You’ll see.”

“She will not even *go* into society anymore!” Cassie threw her hands into the air to emphasize the enormity of this fact. Had Lenora not gone to their sister’s home for the afternoon, Cassie would never have spoken so boldly to her mother. Cassie truly did not want to hurt Lenora’s feelings, but Lenora was *not* there and Cassie could no longer restrain the passion of her soul.

Last year Cassie had made a similar argument on a similar afternoon, but she had been nineteen, and it was only the start of Lenora’s second season. Mama had assured Cassie that Lenora would make a match that season and *this* year would be hers. The prophecy proved false, and Cassie

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had since entered the third decade of her life. Her increased age, and the attention of a certain man in town, had spurred her anxieties to the point of confrontation. Cassie was determined to be heard this year, but Mama was giving little consideration. There was only one option left: increased fervor. Whatever calmness Cassie had mustered was cast to the wayside as she allowed the contained passion to flow freely through her veins.

“Sitting at home and playing that insufferable pianoforte day and night will not find Lenora a husband, Mama, and so I am to be relegated to spinsterhood, despite—as you yourself said—my charms that would recommend me so well to the very company she despises. Under the circumstances, I find it unfair that I am not allowed to debut until she is married. She and I could be out at the same time, and my future would not be on hold as it has been these last *three* years while I have waited for her to secure a match she does not seem the least bit eager to pursue!”

Mama put her sewing aside completely and the lines of her face became hard. She'd heard enough. Cassie prepared herself for punishment while wondering if her having been born the daughter of a vicar was a sign that God had a sense of humor. Her independent nature was a trial for her parents, who put great stock in their family being the paradigm of proper manners and virtue. Their determination was an increasing trial for *her*.

“Now you are being cruel.” Mama's voice was as sharp as her gaze. “You will go to your room, transcribe the fifth book of Matthew, and present it to me and your father before dinner. It is the meek and the mild who will inherit, Cassie, not the argumentative and unkind.”

Cassie should have lowered her head in a show of humility, but she was fuming and her head would not bow.

“Mama,” she fairly growled.

“To your bedchamber before I think of another punishment you most certainly deserve! I have listened to all the argument I can stand, and I

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have said all I am going to say. See that you return in time to help set the table.”

Still clenching her teeth, Cassie turned on her heel and stormed up the stairs. When she reached her room, she slammed the door so hard it shook the walls, and the watercolors tacked to the walls trembled. One of the straight pins she used to hold them up fell to the floor, leaving that particular painting askew.

“It is not fair!” she said to the windows of her bedchamber. Her fingers itched to pick up a brush and easel and transpose her feelings on paper—harsh lines and raging colors. But if Cassie didn’t present the Bible chapter by dinner, there would be an added penalty. Mama might even forbid Cassie from attending dinner at the Mortons’ tomorrow night. The Wiltons always dined with a family of the parish on Thursday evenings. Cassie knew she had already put her invitation at risk by addressing her mother so vigorously. The swirling storm began to ebb, yet part of her wanted it to remain. There was a certain comfort in raging against injustice.

“It is still not fair.”

Cassie crossed to her writing desk and removed the well-worn Bible from the bottom shelf. Every Wilton child received an individual Bible at the age of twelve—the same age Jesus was when He addressed the scholars in Jerusalem. Cassie had made a cover for hers out of a scrap of royal blue silk and embroidered an elaborate cross and her name on it in silver thread. Usually the bright color cheered her, but today it may as well have been the drab black leather cover beneath the embellishment for all the joy it gave her. The book of scripture was well used; today was not the first time she had been required to transcribe chapter and verse. She lifted the front cover and turned the thin pages toward the first Gospel of the New Testament.

The Wilton girls—all *six* of them—were raised with the understanding that having one daughter out in society at a time would ensure full

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attention on each during her debut, allow the family to better bear the expenses of turning out a daughter properly, and keep the sisters from being competitive with one another during any given season. Such consideration was sensible for a modest family with so many daughters. Reasonable. Cassie would even say that as far as general policy went, the rule was *fair*. But if ever there was a reason to make an exception, it was *Lenora*.

Lenora had been out since Rose had married two and a half years ago. Though lovely, talented, and well-bred, Lenora had never enjoyed society events and often declined invitations. While Cassie ached to wear beautiful dresses and attend garden parties and soirees, Lenora worked herself into such a fit of nerves every time she was forced to accept an invitation that she would end up with a headache or stomach pain, which usually necessitated an early return from the party. Six weeks ago, she had vomited just after stepping down from the carriage at the Carters' ball. She had been brought straight home, but a significant number of guests had seen her disgraceful act. She had not attended a single event since.

Cassie was sympathetic toward Lenora's anxious nature and hopeful that the hand of Providence Mama had cited would bring a kindred spirit, albeit male, into her life. But when? After three years, the passing of her twentieth birthday, and Mr. Ronald Bunderson's increased attention, Cassie's patience had run out.

Last week in town, Mr. Bunderson had asked Cassie if she would be going to the Dyers' ball. There was usually one ball a month in Legrave or Luton during the season, and anyone of marriageable situation and genteel birth received an invitation. Cassie, however, had to tell him that she would not be attending. All the way home, she'd fantasized of what it would be like if she *were* going.

Why did she have to be the youngest of six daughters? Why did all five of her older sisters have to acquiesce to her parents' rules? Why could

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she have not been born a boy? Her brother Christopher was one year older than she was, and Harold two years younger, yet *they* were not dependent on Lenora for their destinies. *They* could attend school and see the world and seek their own futures. It was not fair.

Cassie reached chapter five of Matthew's Gospel. Some years ago, she'd decorated the page with a vine of ivy that wrapped around the edges of the text. The artistry did not bring her any joy today. What did margin drawings matter when yet another season would pass her by? The walls of the vicarage became smaller by the month, it seemed.

Dancing.

Mr. Bunderson.

Gowns.

To be the one invited.

To be seen as a woman in her own right, not just the vicar's youngest girl.

Cassie wanted to flirt and sip lemonade and dance with Mr. Bunderson. She was ready to become a woman of the world and secure her future.

But instead of batting her eyelashes and sharing coy glances with handsome men, she was in her room, writing about the poor in spirit who would inherit the earth. She didn't care about inheriting the earth. She only wanted a pair of dancing shoes, inherited or otherwise. Did that make her so very wicked?

Chapter Two

The night of the Dyers' ball marched closer. Cassie did not bring up the topic or even remain in the room when the conversation turned in that direction. She was being treated unfairly and made sure her parents knew her displeasure by adopting a pouting disposition whenever in their company.

To distract herself from her continued irritation, Cassie settled into a routine. Spring weather in Bedfordshire was moderate but unreliable at best, so when it rained, she painted watercolors of the vibrant landscape awakening with the season or worked on the green ruffle along the hem of her striped day dress in hopes the extra splash of color would brighten her mood. When the skies were clear, she rode the old mare, helped with the needs of the parish, did her chores around the vicarage, visited her two sisters who lived in the village, or tended to her nieces and nephews.

Twenty years old and life had not changed a drop since she'd stopped her formal schooling at the age of thirteen. How had the stagnation of her circumstance not driven her completely mad before now? A young woman's priority in life was to secure a match, and although Cassie had learned every household skill and proper manner required for such a pursuit, she was shut up in the vicarage waiting for Lenora to clear a path.

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For her part, Lenora kept to herself as she always had and played her pianoforte as she always did. The only times Lenora left the house were to visit one of their sisters' homes for an afternoon. Once a week, she taught pianoforte to Victoria's ten-year-old daughter.

Lenora spent the most time with Rose. They were only a year apart in age and shared a similar temperament—shy, soft-spoken, and pious. Rose had married Wayne Capenshaw—a yeoman farmer—two and a half years ago and was increasing with her first child. Lenora visited Rose nearly every day under the guise of helping her with household tasks.

On the afternoon of the Dyers' ball, Lenora was home, playing Beethoven's *Pathétique Sonata*. Cassie felt the heavy tones could only make Lenora's anxiety worse. The mournful music certainly did nothing to improve Cassie's mood. If only Lenora would play Mozart instead, surely the livelier notes would improve her mood rather than darken it.

Around five o'clock, Mama came into the parlor, dressed and ready for the ball. She wore a silvery purple gown with a silver turban sporting two ostrich feathers that floated lazily in the air when she moved her head. Though still pouting and sulking, Cassie could still appreciate her mother's striking presentation—but was careful not to say so. "Young is awaiting you in your bedchamber, Lenora," Mama said. "We shall need to be on our way by six."

Lenora looked slightly pale as she rose obediently from the piano bench and took heavy steps toward the stairs as though she were walking to her execution. Cassie shook her head in irritation and focused on the sketch she was doing of the window and curtains. It was too cold for her to find distraction out of doors. Her long and miserable walk that morning had proven that too well; Cassie was still trying to get warm.

She thought about the evening ahead of her, and it soured her all the more. There would be something simple for dinner at the vicarage—soup or something equally bland since it was only Cassie in need of the meal.

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Cassie would eat alone, and then sketch or sew or read in the drawing room alone. Maybe she would work on the handbag that matched the new ruffle on her dress, only she'd been working on the embroidery for a week now and her enthusiasm was waning.

In earlier years, Cassie had often spent such evenings playing games with her brothers, but they were both away at school. All of her friends in the village—every one of them—would be at the ball. It was tempting to resurrect the argument from two weeks ago now that she and Mama were alone in the parlor, but it would be useless. The acceptance of the invitation had been for three, and Mama was unrelenting once her mind was made up. Papa said that Cassie and Mama were often at odds with one another because they were of similar temperament, but Cassie did not see it. She would never be so unbending as her mother. Never.

Cassie looked from her sketchpad to Mama, who had settled on the other side of the fireplace. She had picked up a piece of knitting while she waited for Lenora and Father to get ready. Scarves and gloves were still a welcome item in the spring, and Mama filled one of her duties as the vicar's wife well by keeping members of the parish in constant supply.

Mama was a handsome woman. She had borne ten children, eight of whom had survived infancy. Her thick brown hair was peppered with gray, but it added distinction to her features, and her eyes were as clear and snapping green as they had ever been. She was nearly fifty years old, and had worked harder than most women of the class into which she'd been born, but continued to look regal and aristocratic. Especially when she was dressed for an event such as this one.

Cassie sometimes wondered if Mama regretted marrying a clergyman, which had lowered her station—Mama's father had been a landholder of some distinction—but Cassie felt guilty as soon as the thought entered her head. Her parents had fallen in love, and nothing else had mattered.

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Ever. Perhaps Cassie could be as blessed . . . if she was ever given the chance to enter society.

Mr. Bunderson would be at the Dyers' ball. He would dance all night, but not with her.

"You *could* help your sister," Mama said.

"Young can get Lenora ready well enough." Cassie had never helped Lenora before, and it felt too cruel to consider helping her sister prepare for an evening Cassie was forbidden from enjoying.

Cassie returned to her sketchpad, wishing it was six o'clock already so she might be alone after all. Her own company was preferable to the tension she felt in her parents' presence of late. If the fireplace in her room were larger she would spend more time shut away from everyone.

"I didn't mean help Lenora prepare for the evening," Mama clarified, settling her knitting in her lap. "At least not in regard to hair and dress. What I meant is that you have the confidence she lacks. I have been thinking of the discussion we had regarding tonight's ball and have wondered if you could encourage Lenora to hold herself in such a way that will keep her discomfort from taking over, especially as this is the first event she will be attending after the Carters' ball and her embarrassment there. That you have been keeping your distance from her has not gone unnoticed by any of us."

Cassie keenly felt the accusation of her mother's comment, but reminded herself that she did not deserve *all* the blame. She and Lenora had never been close. Then again, they had never been *this* distant.

"Or," Cassie ventured, "you could let me debut so that I might serve as her companion at these events. I would be far more helpful to her if I could advise in a moment of need."

Mama let out a breath and returned to her knitting without saying another word.

Cassie returned her smug attention to the sketch where she began to add the feather-soft lines of the sheer curtains that fell in graceful folds

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beside the diamond-paned windows. The unique architecture of the vicarage—built nearly a hundred years ago and meticulously cared for ever since—presented endless scenes worthy of sketching.

After a few moments of self-satisfaction regarding her clever comment, Cassie's hand began to slow as her thoughts began down a different road, one unexplored amid her fits of frustration.

Could I help Lenora?

She rested her pencil in her lap and stared unseeingly at the unfinished drawing before her. Cassie was comfortable around strangers and felt buoyed up by crowds. Lenora, on the other hand, preferred small parties with familiar people, if she had to socialize at all. She would never find a husband that way, but what if Cassie could help Lenora overcome her anxiety? What if, instead of pouting and grumbling, Cassie helped Lenora make a match? That would free Cassie to pursue a match of her own.

The idea came with a rush of invigoration, an eagerness to do something—*anything*—to change the situation she found herself in now. The possibility that Cassie could take action of any kind on her own behalf was like taking a breath after holding it as long as she could.

Cassie put her sketchpad and pencil on the end table and rose without saying anything to her mother. She did not want Mama to take credit for this decision. Mama's eyes followed her across the room, however, and Cassie rankled at the sense of victory she felt emanating from the other side of the room. Such victory wasn't as important as what Cassie was going to do, however, and so she refused to let Mama's ownership of the suggestion dissuade her.

Cassie headed to the second floor in search of her sister. Embarking on this new plan felt something akin to crossing enemy lines, but the end justified whatever means, humility, and effort were required on her part. Her parents were stubborn and unbending, but *she* would prove herself just the opposite by helping Lenora do what she could not do on her own.