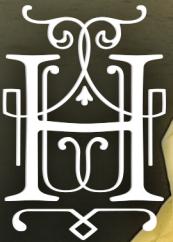


JOSI S.
KILPACK



A HEART
REVEALED

A PROPER ROMANCE

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Set in Regency England, Amber Marie Sterlington is the most sought after young woman in London, but when she begins to lose her hair (due to alopecia areata), Amber is exiled to the countryside where she meets Thomas Richards. Even as she is falling in love with him, she knows she must end things before he realizes what she's been hiding from him.

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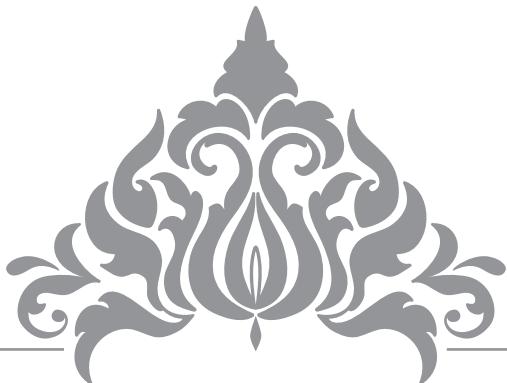
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*To Thomas Richards and Amelia Hey,
my personal link to England.
Thank you for the legacies.*

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BOOK ONE

London



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CHAPTER 1

April

Thomas knew the moment Amber Sterlington entered Almack's ballroom. Not because he was watching the door, or because someone spoke her name. No. The reason Thomas Richards knew when Miss Sterlington entered the room was because every gentleman straightened his bearing and turned his head in her direction. Simultaneously, the women in the room either narrowed their eyes or raised their chin a fraction of an inch in the feminine version of the same response. Amber Sterlington was the Rage of the Season, after all, and in the space of a glance and a breath, the room was changed by her arrival.

Thomas cared little for the attention *society* gave to her, but like everyone else, he reacted to her arrival by standing a bit taller in case she looked his way. The truth was that Amber Sterlington was quite simply the most attractive woman he had ever seen, and he was as struck by her arrival as every other man.

In the month he'd been in London, this being his third Wednesday night ball at Almack's, he'd seen Miss Sterlington nearly a dozen times at a variety of events, and his reaction to her had been equally profound each time. When his notice passed, he berated himself for it, wanting to believe himself a man apart from such fancy. She would marry for title or fortune or both—everyone knew it—and as a younger son of a modest Baron,

Thomas offered neither, which made his attraction toward her that much more vexing.

Her sultry laugh washed over him, serving as yet another defining quality that set her apart from the trilling young women of the *ton*. Everything about that woman was equal parts distracting and irritating to Thomas, who in every other case felt himself to be a logical, determined, and well-balanced sort of man.

“As you were saying, Mr. Richards?”

Thomas returned his attention to the young woman standing before him, holding a glass of lemonade in her delicate hands and looking at him with the wide-eyed expression of interest he expected had been taught to her by her mama, a woman who had made no secret of how eager she was to marry off her youngest daughter.

He was not entirely opposed to Miss Carolyn Morton. She possessed the manners of genteel birth and did not seem the type who would drag her future husband to London because she loved the social atmosphere Thomas found so tedious. It was her level of intellect that worried him. Despite the dire warnings against having a bluestocking for a wife, Thomas wished to find a bride with whom he could converse on occasion. He had not realized it would be so difficult a prospect. While a great many of the season’s debutantes had been taught of literature and art—two areas of study he also enjoyed—none could give much critical opinion on either topic nor did they know the slightest bit regarding matters of economics or politics.

But Miss Morton *was* an agreeable girl, and Thomas had been so distracted by Miss Sterlington’s entrance that he had broken off his reply regarding his thoughts on the current parliamentary session.

“Yes,” Thomas said, remembering the conversation he’d let slip away. “As I was saying, I am hopeful that parliament will address the agriculture reforms Northern England is in such desperate need of. As mining gains greater investment, I fear for the future of the herds and fields that England is dependent upon. Should the mining industry continue to take

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such liberties with the land and subsequent water rights they are buying out at an alarming rate, I shouldn't doubt that we'll be importing beef from the continent. A repulsive solution, to my mind, when we have the resources to be self-sustaining if parliament will but protect the interests that are most certainly theirs as well as those of all England."

Miss Morton nodded, but he'd seen the blankness enter her expression and knew he had gone too far afield with information of no interest to his companion. In an attempt to repair the situation, Thomas bowed slightly and smiled at the girl most chivalrously. "Would you care to dance the next quadrille, Miss Morton?"

The light he'd cast out of her face with his talk of cows and corn immediately refreshed itself, and she nodded so quickly that the curls on either side of her face jiggled as though they too were excited to take the floor. Miss Morton smiled, revealing broad front teeth he would not mind so much if the girl were a bit more engaging to talk with. "I would most definitely like to dance a quadrille with you, Mr. Richards."

"Capital," he said with a slight incline of his head. "I shall return for you when this set has finished."

She bobbed those curls again as Thomas made his way through the crowd toward one of the assembly rooms not so tightly occupied. He could only abide crowds for so long, and he needed a moment to himself before leading Miss Morton across the dance floor. Thomas caught sight of Miss Sterlington holding court with half a dozen suitors and felt his jaw tighten in another seemingly uncontrollable reaction.

He had come to London because it was reasonable to expect that a man in search of a wife would find one amid the young women who came for the entertainment season that coincided with the parliamentary session. Yet after a month in London, Thomas had yet to meet any young woman who could hold his interest for the length of an evening. He thought of Miss Sterlington and shook his head at the irony that the only debutante who drew his attention was one he could never have.

Thomas found a nearly empty corner where someone had, blessedly,

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opened one of the diamond-paned windows. He took the liberty of pushing it open a bit more to get some cooler air on his face; he would never go so far as to call London's air *fresh*, but the outdoors was far better than the stuffiness of the ballroom. He looked toward a garden some distance away and felt a wave of melancholy as he took in the trees and walking path.

He missed Yorkshire, where he'd lived all his life and where his father and oldest brother were buried. He missed the moors and the cattle and the sheep of North Riding. He missed fishing in the River Wiske that ran through his families' estate lands, walking through mud in his wearing boots, and eating apples right off the tree when they were in season. He missed his mother and his brother and his niece, Lizabeth, who was adjusting to the birth of her baby brother, the next Lord Fielding. And so help him, Thomas missed the simple country dances where attendees did not feel the singular pressure of having to find a marriage amid the crowd.

"Just one season," his mother had begged two months ago, revealing a plan that had been some time in the making on her part. "I feel certain that once you commit yourself to your lands you shall never leave Yorkshire again." He could not adequately relieve her fear on that count and therefore agreed to her wishes.

"Tell me it is not The Honourable Thomas Richards." Recognition of the nasally voice behind him was instantaneous, and Thomas was smiling before he turned around to see a dandy of a fellow looking at him through a quizzing glass tied to his waistcoat with a black ribbon. "Pray, I don't believe it!" the fop said with a pretty stomp of his green, square-toed shoe. He put one hand on his hip, lowered his glass, and looked at Thomas with growing astonishment. "Thomas Richards at *Almack's*? In *London*?" He shook his head and closed his eyes while taking a dramatic breath that flared his nostrils. "No, no, you must be an imposter. The Thomas Richards I knew, bless him, would never make such an appearance. No, it would go against all he stood for, I am sure."

Thomas laughed and put his hand out for his old schoolmate.

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Though they were different sorts of men, Thomas had counted Fenton as a great friend for many years. “I for one would be far more surprised if Viscount Fenton *weren’t* at Almack’s. In *London*,” Thomas countered in mimicked cadence. “The true question of the hour is why I have been in this city for nearly a month and I am just now seeing him.”

The two men shook hands, and Thomas was reminded through the power of his grip that, should Fenton choose to, he could lay Thomas flat in a trice. He’d done exactly that more times than Thomas cared to remember when they were suitemates at Oxford and trying to prove who was the stronger man, as young men often did in any number of competitive games.

“How are you, my friend?” Thomas asked, disposing of the jesting tone.

“I am very well,” Fenton said, his voice low and even now that he was not putting on a show. “Have you truly been in London a month?”

“Nearly so,” Thomas confirmed. “Darwood said you were in Brighton.”

Fenton nodded. “That I was, but the company bored me and so I gave it up. And what luck that I did. It is splendid to see you again. How are you enjoying the city?”

Thomas opened his mouth to reply only to have Fenton cut him off before he’d said a single word.

“Ah, let me guess,” Fenton said, returning to his foppish allocution and putting a hand to his chest. “You are repulsed by the dinginess of it, bored with the frivolous entertainment, and only here because you desire what every man both wants and fears—a wife.”

Thomas laughed again. “My answer was far less patronizing.”

“And far less honest, no doubt.”

Thomas did not argue. “If you must know, my mother sent me. She would like me to find a suitable wife and feels I shan’t find her in Yorkshire.”

“Well, how many women are there in Yorkshire?” Fenton asked,

raising his eyebrows to emphasize the question. “Other than your mother, of course, and your brother’s wife, which you need not consider, there can’t be more than two or three women in the entire county, let alone any of marriageable age. I can’t help but think your mother had the right of it.”

Thomas did not attempt to hide his smile. “I suppose this is the point in our conversation where I try to convince you that Yorkshire is not the uninhabited wilds you perceive it to be.”

“Perhaps, but then I shall refuse to believe it—as always—and you will end up with your nose in a joint over defending your homeland and I’ll feel wretched for taking things too far.” He waved his hand through the air. “Better not even to start.”

Thomas laughed again and clapped his friend on the back, taking note of the striped satin coat of green and gold, which matched Fenton’s extravagant shoes, far different from Thomas’s conservative evening dress consisting of a black coat, gray waistcoat, and buff-colored knee breeches.

“Oh, I am glad to see you, Fenton,” Thomas said sincerely. “London has improved by spades just by you being here. Darwood is somewhere in the crowd.”

“Darwood is a singularly obnoxious fellow. I should prefer to avoid him as long as possible.” Fenton sighed and fluffed his lace cuffs with exaggerated attention.

“I can only guess that your father continues to harangue you regarding your modishness?” Thomas asked, indicating Fenton’s extreme clothing.

Fenton gave Thomas a conspiratorial grin and stepped closer so as to be heard while lowering his voice. “He despises it,” Fenton said with a gleam in his eye. “Almost as much as the women adore my sense of style.” He lifted his chin as though posing for a portrait.

Thomas shook his head in mock disappointment and tsked loudly. “If I’d had any idea the high collars you sported at university would lead to this, I’d have burned them while you slept.”

Fenton laughed, then did away with his foppish façade once again.

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“Now,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest, “tell me about your plans while you are in town—other than wife hunting. Do you need an introduction to any of the gaming hells? Have you joined any clubs? I’m a fan of Brooks myself. Great tables.”

“I’m not such a gambler,” Thomas said, shaking his head. As the heir to a wealthy earldom, Fenton had a far different situation than Thomas did.

Fenton raised an eyebrow. “London makes a gambler of many a man.”

“Perhaps if they have a deeper purse than I do.” Thomas had no reason to be vague regarding his situation. “I am to be self-made, and the only thing standing in my way of it, is a proper wife.”

Fenton turned his head slightly, regarding Thomas with a questioning look. “One with a fortune?”

Thomas colored at the suggestion that he expected his wife to make his living. “Certainly not,” he said. When Fenton pulled back, Thomas knew he’d spoken too sharply. He repaired his tone as he continued, “I have made an arrangement with my older brother: most of my annual inheritance for the fields near Romanby. In the long term I shall be far better for the investment and am still left with a modest inheritance.”

Fenton’s eyebrows rose throughout Thomas’s recounting and his arms dropped to his sides. “You gave up your inheritance? I’ve never heard such a thing.”

Thomas shrugged as though his decision was a common one when in fact he had come up with the idea himself. Most men would not give up the security of guaranteed income to make their own way. “I believe in time that the land will more than make up for the forgone income,” he said simply. After Charles—the eldest of the three brothers and their father’s heir—had died, Thomas had more fully realized how dependent they all were on lineage and inheritance. He also better understood that as generations—specifically his own posterity—became more distant from the security the title offered, he wanted something of substance to pass on. It was a unique perspective amid the noble class to be sure, but one

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that settled so comfortably in Thomas's mind that he did not doubt the wisdom of it.

The sound of a familiar and distracting voice prevented Fenton from making a reply, and they both looked toward the interruption. For the second time that evening, Thomas straightened in response to Amber Sterlington, who was walking arm in arm with her younger sister whom Thomas recognized from other events. For the second time that evening, he was taken off guard at the effect Miss Sterlington had on him. And for the second time that evening, he noted that he was not the only man so affected by her presence. Fenton struck a posture of distinction and bowed toward the women, looping his hand as he lowered it nearly to the ground.

"Miss Sterlington," Fenton said as he rose. He glanced at her companion and inclined his head. "Miss Darra. What a lovely happenstance to receive your company this evening."

Amber Sterlington fixed Fenton with a playful look that sparked instant jealousy in Thomas.

"What a lovely happenstance for us that you are receiving, Lord Fenton," she said in that haunting voice, acknowledging that she and Fenton knew one another. She put out her hand, which was covered in a white satin glove. It matched the white satin gown that opened in the front, revealing the light green underdress that set off Miss Sterlington's similarly green eyes to distraction.

Fenton took her hand and bowed over it with an easy manner Thomas wished he himself possessed. "You look absolutely breathtaking tonight, Miss Sterlington," he said. "Like a goddess brought to life."

"Oh pish," Amber said, shaking her head as she returned her hand to her sister's arm; Miss Darra was a beauty in her own right though Thomas doubted many people noticed. "It's bad enough that Almack's is such a sad crush week after week, but the requirement that debutantes may only wear pasty colors is not to be countenanced." She waved toward him. "Is it not offensive to your sensibilities that you can appear in all manner of

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pattern and color, and all of us females are relegated to look like infantile dowds?" She pouted—such a pretty pout—and let out an equally pretty breath. "I tell you, it's not fair, Lord Fenton. Not fair at all."

"Ah, but you look like an angel in white, my dear, and, for you particularly, white is quite the canvas for your hair and your eyes. I can't fathom why you would be cross toward such regulations when they show *you* off to your very best light."

Amber smiled, her mood repaired by the compliment that, while true, was over the top of anything Thomas could say. Did it not embarrass Miss Sterlington to hear such outrageous flattery?

As though to answer his unspoken question, Miss Sterlington reached up and fingered one of the long auburn ringlets draped over her shoulder while giving Fenton a coy look. The rest of her hair was piled on top of her head, a mass of curls into which small white flowers with diamond centers had been woven. The only other jewelry she wore was an oval pendant—amber, as her namesake—that hung just below her collarbone, drawing the eye, which then naturally looked over the rest of her.

Where so many of the debutantes looked as though they were barely women at all, Amber Sterlington had a figure worthy of admiration. Her inquisitive green eyes—with gold flecks, Thomas noticed—smooth skin, and vibrant hair left him no doubt that the other young women could not hold a candle to her. So mesmerized was Thomas that he did not realize Fenton had introduced him until Thomas heard his name said out loud.

Thomas felt his mouth go dry when Miss Sterlington's gaze settled upon him. "I'm very p-leased to meet you, Miss Starringt—I mean, Miss Sterlington." He gave a quick bow nowhere near as elegant or graceful as Fenton's had been.

"Likewise," she said, but she looked back to Fenton before she'd even finished her polite reply. "Now, I escaped the crush of the ballroom in order to have a private word with my dear sister. Would you two gentlemen excuse us for a moment? I fear that once my absence is noted, I shan't get another moment's peace. I must insist on a bit of privacy, and this is

perhaps the only vestibule available. Do you mind?" She offered another pout, and this time Thomas and Fenton equally fumbled for words as they assured her they were not the least bit put out by her need of a private corner.

"Good grief, is she not a diamond of the first water?" Fenton said, somewhat breathless from their quick retreat back to the crowd of the ballroom. Thomas was surprised that Fenton was so undone by the woman; he had dealt with her quite calmly up until the end of their exchange. Thomas felt even lower as he acknowledged that only a man of Fenton's station had a chance of gaining Amber Sterlington's attentions.

Thomas pulled at his collar. The awkward exchange had left his heart racing and he was beginning to sweat. "She must think I'm an absolute nitwit," he said under his breath as he and Fenton moved toward the refreshment table. The more distance he put between himself and the girl who rendered him such an idiot, the more his irritation increased. "Why could I not react like a grown man?"

"Don't be so severe upon yourself," Fenton said, patting Thomas's arm as he picked up a cup of ratafia with his other hand. He took a drink and made a face—ratafia was a mild drink and obviously not what Fenton was hoping to encounter. "There's not a man in London who can keep his head around such a woman as Amber Sterlington. The breeding of a wife and the appeal of a mistress."

It did not make Thomas feel better to be reminded he was as besotted as every other man. Nor did it improve his mood when he realized he had missed the beginning of the quadrille promised to Miss Morton. With a groan, he excused himself of Fenton and soon found Miss Morton blinking back tears near the balustrade. Miss Morton did not deserve such treatment, and he felt badly for causing her distress.

It was too late to join the dance so Thomas spent the duration of it coaxing Miss Morton from her mood through compliments of her appearance—she did look lovely in her light blue gown—and a humorous account of a gentleman being chased by a dog through Hyde Park the day

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before yesterday. By the time the next dance was announced, Miss Morton was giggling behind her hand. He asked her to stand up for this set and she gratefully accepted his invitation, giving him a chance to redeem himself, for which he was glad.

It was after thanking Miss Morton for the dance some time later, and avoiding her mother's approving eye as he departed her company, that Thomas saw Miss Sterlington again. She had likewise finished the set with a young man in full regimentals, and he was bowing over her hand in a simpering manner that left Thomas embarrassed for him.

A moment later, however, a mad thought seized Thomas's mind and before he knew it, he was standing in front of her at the exact moment she was quit of her former partner and had not yet accepted another.

"Might I have this dance, Miss Sterlington?" Thomas heard himself say as though it were not him at all. He could feel the flush in his cheeks and the sweat beneath his collar as those beautiful green eyes looked him over, a bit more than he thought was warranted.

"Sir," she said, her eyebrows coming together. "We have not had a proper introduction, therefore I certainly could *not* dance with you." Her tone was not as rich and playful as it had been when she'd bantered with Fenton.

"Lord Fenton introduced me to you not half an hour ago, within one of the assembly rooms." No sooner had he said it than he realized how pathetic he sounded, begging for her remembrance of something she hadn't given enough attention to remember for herself.

"I'm sure he did not," she said sharply, lifting her chin and taking a step back. "Besides, Lord Norwin has asked that I reserve the waltz for him. . . . Ah, there he is." She stepped to her right in time to lift her hand to a man wearing a blue superfine tailcoat and satin knee breeches.

In a moment Miss Sterlington was gone, the sound of her laughter trickling back to him as she took her place with Lord Norwin on the dance floor. Thomas came to himself in time to see numerous attendees look away; the quickness of their diverted glances evidence that they had

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seen the set down he'd just received. From the looks on their faces, they were not sharing in his embarrassment; rather they were taking his measure just as Miss Sterlington had.

Overwhelmed with embarrassment, Thomas turned to the staircase and quit Almack's without a word to anyone, not even Fenton. It was unfashionable to leave the dance before supper but Thomas could not stay another minute.

As he made his way back to his rented rooms in a less fashionable district of town, he brooded over all the things he had hated about London prior to this evening and how much more he despised them now.

As the third son of a Baron—and a modest, Northern Baron who had little connection in London—without enough fortune to raise him above what he lacked, Thomas Richards knew his place among the aristocracy. He was acknowledged but not afforded, accepted but not sought after. That he was decent, generous, hardworking, and intelligent had always seemed to him a reckoning of sorts—a way of balancing what he did not have with those virtues he possessed. Until tonight, he had believed that he was, for the most part, equal to other men of higher rank in the ways that mattered most.

Now, however, he felt sure he would never forget the look on Amber Sterlington's face that had said, clear as church bells, that while he might consider himself an equal, she did not. Perhaps that would be enough to rescue him from the reaction he had each time he saw her. Regardless, he vowed never to put himself within reach of her opinion again.

 CHAPTER 2

Amber Sterlington turned the page of the most recent edition of *The Ladies' Monthly Museum* and spoke without looking up. "Make Darra attend, Mama," she said, reviewing the renderings of the new fashion plates and finding them near enough the designs from the last periodical that they were barely worth her notice. "You know I don't like to attend events alone."

"You won't be attending alone," her mother, Elsinore Sterlington, Viscountess of Marchent, said from the seat in front of her mirror as her lady's maid, Nelson, put the finishing touches on the perfectly afforded chignon that set Lady Marchent's auburn hair—a faded version of Amber's own—to perfection. "I'll be in attendance," her mother said. "And you are never lacking for company."

"It would not countenance for me to have my mother hanging about me, and you shall want to visit with the other matrons." Amber kept to herself that other than her younger sister, Darra, she did not have female acquaintances to shore up her confidence like so many young women found in each other. It was to be expected that the debutante who drew most of the attention would be at odds with her competitors, and having her sister at her side kept Amber from noticing how the other girls talked and laughed together so easily. "Darra gives me companionship, Mama, make her attend."

"As I've said, she is not feeling well. You would have me force her to go?"

"Yes, I would," Amber said without hesitation, though she did not meet her mother's eyes in the mirror and felt a sting of conscience at the insistence. She turned another page and reviewed an array of half boots that looked like every other half boot she'd seen since coming to London nearly six weeks ago. "She is not *ill*, Mama. She is pouting over the obvious preference the gentlemen have of my company."

Lady Marchent didn't comment, but turned her head side to side, inspecting herself in the mirror. "You may go, Nelson," she said to her maid. "Mind you prepare my lavender morning dress as I will be receiving tomorrow."

"Yes, your ladyship." Nelson bobbed a quick curtsey then gathered up the linens left over from having helped Lady Marchent dress for the evening before she left the room as silently as she'd come.

Lady Marchent's expression was critical as she observed her reflection and patted the underside of her chin that was becoming fleshy as she approached her fortieth year. "Age is an odious taskmaster," she said, frowning as she stood. The skirts of her gown rustled as she shook them out and then fixed Amber with a pointed look. "You would do well to remember that and procure yourself a husband before you tempt the fates by waiting any longer than you already have."

Amber put the periodical down on the empty portion of the cushioned bench and returned her mother's look with a precocious one of her own. "I am barely nineteen, Mama. Hardly in need of such dire warnings."

Men of title and fortune—or both—had taken considerable note of her these past weeks, and once she clarified her choice of whichever gentleman she decided upon, she had no doubt an arrangement would be made. Once she married, the level of affection she enjoyed from numerous suitors would come to an end, and she would be left with only the regard of her husband, which would surely be far less exciting.

She was not a romantic in pursuit of a love match—such an

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arrangement always seemed to involve one party settling below his or her station. Instead, she focused her ambitions on choosing a husband who would secure her a similar position in society that she'd always known and give her the foundation she needed to make a name for herself alongside him as her mother had done in her own marriage. To factor love, beyond a future potential of their match, into her consideration could obscure her goals.

"I shall never understand why you chose to wait until now to have your season," Lady Marchent continued, looking through the contents of her reticule she would take with her this evening. "I should not have allowed it."

"You truly do not know my motivation?" Amber asked, unwilling to believe her mother's claims to ignorance. "It is your very example I have been following."

Her mother looked at her with an irritated expression, and Amber continued.

"You were married at seventeen to a *Viscount*, Mama," Amber reminded her. Though the Viscount of Marchent was her father, he rarely interacted with his daughters, reserving his attention for her younger brothers, his numerous estates, and his interest in parliament. He did not hold a seat himself but followed closely the enactments of the government and shared his opinions with his friends who had representation. "And, pray remember, Father was already in his title at the time of your arrangement. You know as well as I do that there are very few prospects already in possession of their title attending this season, and there were even fewer last season, which is why I chose to wait."

"There a handful of appurtenants who have made their affections for you known."

"Yes, but Daniel Greenley's father is in his prime, and I shan't be surprised if he doesn't keep his seat for another score," Amber said, singling out her most ardent suitor. He'd proposed to her half a dozen times at least and would post the banns by morning should she accept him. "David Harrington won't inherit until his uncle passes and should his uncle marry

and procure an heir of his own—I have seen the ridiculous man at any number of events around town eyeing the widows—Mr. Harrington has no recommendation at all. Mr. Morrison is nearly your own age, Mama, and I would be settling for only three thousand pounds—never mind that his estate is in *Leeds*. Lord Fenton is a shameless flirt whose intentions are unreliable at best, Bertram Welshire is in need of a fortune to repair the damage his younger brothers have made on the family coffers, and Lord Norwin is simply a bore—though he might be my best prospect as his father did not return to parliament this year due to an illness that has not yet been disclosed through the gossip lines. It's rumored he has nearly ten thousand a year settled upon him, however, and his family *is* well connected.”

While Amber did not have female friends, there were plenty of girls who would associate with her for connection, and Amber made use of them by procuring whatever *on-dit* they possessed. Amber never shared what she learned with anyone else but simply filed it away for her own purposes.

Seeing the surprise on Lady Marchent’s face turn to admiration of her eldest daughter’s shrewdness, Amber finished her commentary. “I have heard, however, that the Earl of Sunther may be returning to London within a fortnight. With the title so new upon his shoulders, he’s most certainly mindful of the need to secure himself a wife and an heir.” Amber looked at her mother with a smile. “Do not think me a simpleton in my pursuits only because I have not shared with you the workings of my mind. I am the eldest daughter, Mama. I plan to make you and Father proud and ensure that my children are raised with the same level of distinction I have known.”

“I regret to have doubted you,” her mother said with a complimentary smile. “I fear that with so many events demanding my attention I had forgotten to consider what a wise girl you are.” She crossed the space between them and took Amber’s hands in a rare display of affection. “I shan’t let my concerns interfere with my confidence in you.” She leaned in and pressed her cheek ever so quickly against her daughter’s.

Amber inhaled the scent of her mother’s perfume and closed her eyes. Her mind turned to the times of her childhood when she’d so often

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pined for her mother's return to Hampton Grove, the estate where Amber and her siblings—her younger sister, Darra, and her three brothers, two of whom were now at school—had spent their childhood. It seemed as though Mama was always away, and Amber had not yet lost the ache of wanting her mother's attentions.

Amber clearly remembered the day Mama had come home from a stay in Bath and looked upon her eldest daughter in surprise. "Why, you are becoming a woman," she'd said to Amber, who was barely fifteen. "And a lovely one at that. We must attend to your education in the graces that will secure you the future a beauty such as you deserves. A woman gets one chance to secure herself any power in this life, you know, and we shall make certain you do your family credit."

For the first time Amber had a place in her mother's life and had from then on kept a sharp eye toward the world in general in hopes of becoming everything her mother wished her to be. Tonight, Amber felt the validation of her efforts. She ignored the stirring within her that wished it had not taken so much accomplishment to earn Mama's attention.

Lady Marchent pulled back from the near-embrace and smiled. "I shall talk to Darra about tonight's attendance," she said. "I don't want you to be out of sorts for the night's assemblies. I shall also be sure to ask after Lord Norwin's father at the dinner party. Mrs. Heyworth is sure to know the circumstance."

Amber nodded her approval. She'd known Mama would comply with her, and she enjoyed the internal victory she felt at having been correct in that expectation.

Lady Marchent released Amber's hands which were left cold from her withdrawal. "We leave in just over an hour, and I am sure your new abigail awaits you quite anxiously."

"Then perhaps she will be eager about my presentation," Amber said, frowning at the memory of the difficulties she'd had with her prior maid, Helen, these last weeks.

Amber quit her mother's rooms and returned to her own bedchamber

where the new maid was waiting with Mrs. Nitsweller, the housekeeper. Just as Lady Marchent had supposed, both women seemed anxious about the time left to prepare Amber for the dinner party.

“Miss Sterlington,” Mrs. Nitsweller said. “Might I introduce to you Suzanne Miller, your new maid.”

Amber kept her gaze unaffected as she looked at the woman who bobbed a curtsy before her. “It is an honor to have been requested to assist you, and I thank you for the position,” the woman said.

The new maid had surprisingly high tones, not the Cockney accent Helen had retained. Suzanne was also older than any other maid Amber had had, likely in her thirties. Amber hoped that her age communicated experience.

“I am to call you Miller, then?” Amber asked. She’d never had an actual lady’s maid, who would traditionally be addressed by their surname. Amber turned her attention to Mrs. Nitsweller when the answer was not immediate.

“She is more of an abigail than a lady’s maid as she has served multiple women in a household before now,” Mrs. Nitsweller said, causing Amber to purse her lips in disapproval. “But she is very skilled and well recommended. She even reads some. In a few years’ time, I’m sure she will arise to that station.”

“So I shall call you Suzanne,” Amber said coldly so that both women would know of her irritation that she’d been told this woman was a lady’s maid when she was not one.

Suzanne nodded and kept her eyes on the floor.

“Might I leave you to your toilet?” Mrs. Nitsweller asked, her introduction complete.

Amber nodded and waited for the housekeeper to leave before she explained her expectations to the new maid. She always dressed before the rest of her toilet, with a cape to shield her clothes. She preferred at least a portion of her hair to be worn about her shoulders in order to show off the color and curl. She did not fancy tightly curled fringe at the sides of

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her forehead though she would tolerate long ringlets so far as they reached her chin at least.

Beads, flowers, ribbon, and feathers were appropriate so long as they did not distract from her natural beauty. She was partial to gold, white, and green accessories as they brought out the color of her eyes and hair.

She had a diamond tiara she wore on occasion but not often as it was such a memorable piece. It was kept in her father's safe and only Lord or Lady Marchent could retrieve it. Her other jewelry was stored in her mother's room; Suzanne would need to coordinate with Nelson to procure whatever items best fit the event's dress. The only piece she kept in her own room was the amber pendant she wore whenever an occasion warranted the unique and personal item.

"Very well, Miss," Suzanne said when Amber finished. "I shall do my best to meet your expectations."

"Be aware that if you do not, you shall not last a fortnight in this household," Amber warned. There was no reason to be less than honest with the underling. "I was far too indulging of my former maid's inadequacies, and I will not be so generous again."

"Yes, Miss," Suzanne said again, bowing slightly in response.

Convinced she'd made her point, Amber turned her back to the woman so Suzanne could help her out of her day dress and into the silver crepe evening gown she'd chosen for the night's events. They would be attending two assemblies tonight: an evening party and a coming-out ball, though Amber felt it ridiculous that the girl's parents were holding it so late in the season. She'd seen the girl at two different events and found it very bad *ton* to have a ball touted as a debut when the girl had already made appearances. Still, there promised to be a good turnout, several of Amber's admirers would be in attendance, and Amber's parents were well acquainted with the family.

There was always a goal to be achieved regardless of the event, and she was prepared to make the most of it.



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