

Sense & Suitability

a novel

PEPPER BASHAM



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Sense and Suitability

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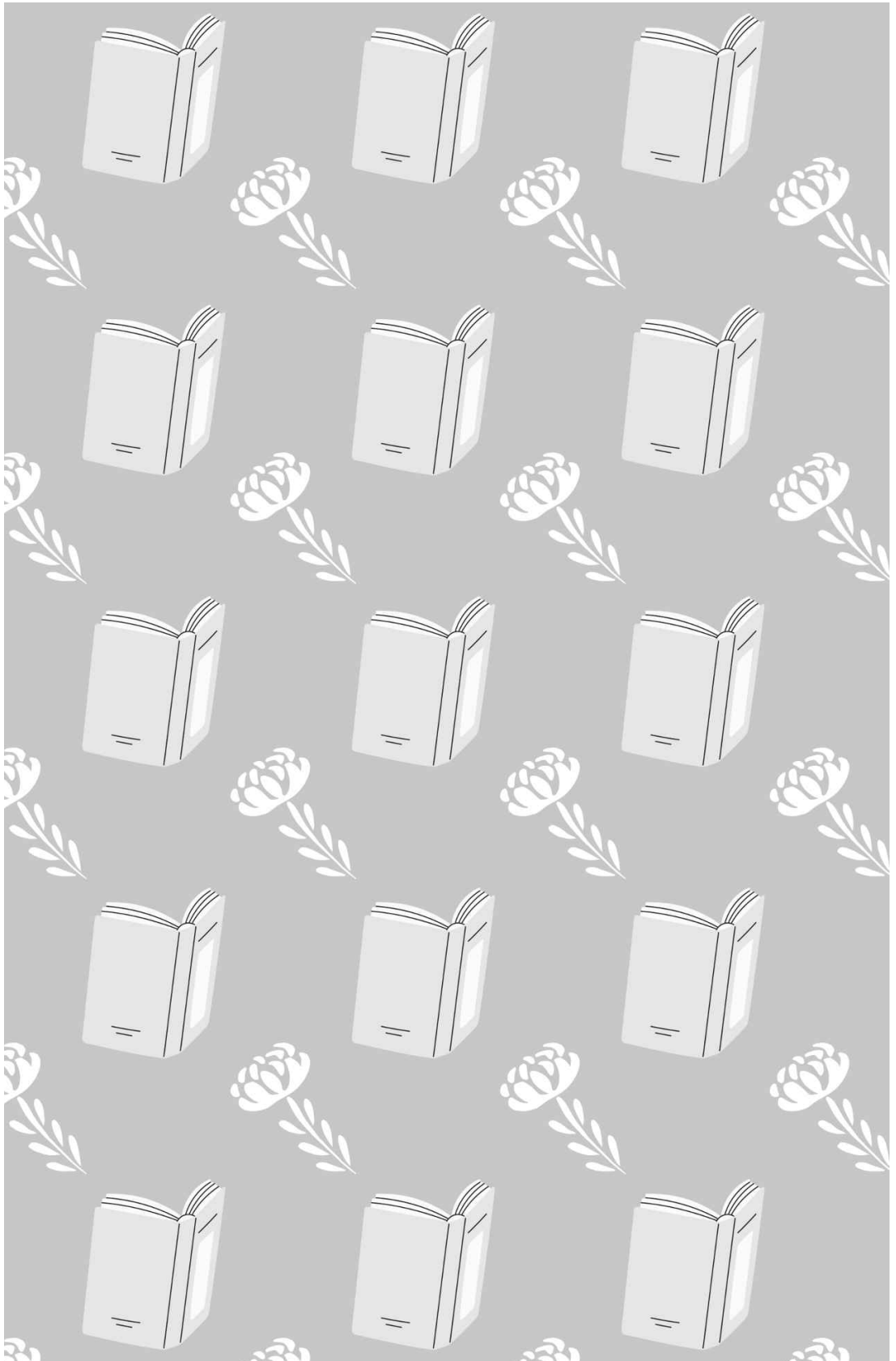
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*To Becky Monds
Who believed in me enough to bring this story to life*



PROLOGUE

Emmeline Lockhart's life teemed with secrets. Too many secrets for a country gentleman's daughter, but at least it made her parochial life a little more exciting.

Her smile tipped. Very well—a lot more exciting, in fact.

She tugged at her gloves and stared out into the ballroom, the candlelit chandeliers casting an almost angelic glow across Lord and Lady Ruthon's glossy floors. The hosts of the St. Groves Season never failed to fill their palatial home for every one of the balls they hosted, which was a substantial number for the season. Anyone who was anyone clamored for an invitation to the parties of the wealthiest and most influential aristocrats of their flourishing spa town.

But tonight one of Emme's secrets would come to light. A secret she treasured even more than her occupation as a published author. Tonight she would finally become engaged, putting all the nasty rumors of clandestine meetings and covert affections to rest. Tonight Simon Reeves, cousin to the Viscount of Ravenscross, planned to ask her to marry him.

Her!

A woman without rank or riches.

And though her family was highly respected within St. Groves, they held no esteem in the larger world, so the entire romance proved every bit as fantastical as the fairy stories her mother used to read to her.

Men like Simon didn't marry lower gentry.

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Especially not lower gentry with an insignificant dowry and a scandalous secret profession. Perhaps if she had written books more sanguine and suitable for gentlewomen—like the anonymous author of *Pride and Prejudice*—her work might be more accepted by society. But her first two stories involved pirates, kidnappings, and other sensational exploits wholly improper for a gentlewoman to read, let alone write about.

And perhaps she hadn't counted the cost of such a secret when her cousin Thomas convinced her to submit one of the stories she'd only ever shared with her family. Danbury and Sons had taken the book and, upon Emme's insistence and Thomas's keen business sense, chosen to keep the authorship of the story shrouded in mystery. Not even her family knew of the first publication, or her newly submitted second.

And neither did Simon.

Her heart fluttered at the very thought of him.

And their engagement needed to begin with complete honesty, despite her fear of his response to her secret. She had every intention of divulging her career to him once they were sequestered alone from the public's hearing. If they determined to keep her writing a secret, it wouldn't dampen his reputation at all.

They could just go on as they were in all of their delightful affections.

And though she had very few dealings with many of his relations, especially his cousin the Viscount of Ravenscross, the title carried esteem she never wished to sully.

"She's already putting on airs," came a loud whisper to her right.

Two ladies, Mrs. Wheaton and Mrs. Low, stood near the archway where Emme waited, doing very little to hide the object of their conversation.

"It truly is appalling the way she's practically thrown herself at him."

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Emme increased the speed of her fan to cool the heat in her face and turned her attention away from the women. She'd never once thrown herself at Simon. Stumbled into him, perhaps. Crushed a foot once or twice. But never thrown anything at him, herself included.

In fact, if they hadn't chosen the same hiding spot while attempting to avoid unwelcome suitors, they would likely have never met at all. Rank ruled—quite literally, in some respects—but especially in the social world. Her smile spread at the memory of their amusing attempt to remain hidden and avoid scandal.

That one unexpected meeting began a humorous rhythm of consecutive encounters, which slowly grew into a friendship and then . . . something even sweeter than friendship.

All the rumors of the determined flirt, Simon Reeves, melded into an awareness that beneath the dashing facade lay a faithful heart worth the loving. And despite every sensible notion, every caution of society, every inward warning at the implausibility of the match, Emme had given her heart to him.

From all accounts and to her utter surprise, he'd responded in kind.

However, over the last few weeks, their clear preference for each other had become more apparent, which no doubt led to the newest rumors swirling about the ballroom. Emme hated being the topic of conversation.

"She's only a distraction for him until he finds a more suitable bride. Everyone knows he has no plans to marry until later, as he's so frequently professed," one of the ladies said.

Emme had heard those rumors too. Recognized the stories of Simon charming one lady after another with no real design to match himself to any of them.

But he had told her he meant to propose. *Tonight.*

Professed how she'd redirected his course.

Her face warmed as she smiled. And he'd told her he loved her.

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“It would not be prudent to align himself with someone so beneath him,” the other woman responded. “A motherless country gentleman’s daughter? Lord Ravenscross would never approve.”

Emme raised her fan to shadow her grin. But Lord Ravenscross had, by some miracle. In fact, Simon’s cousin cared very little for the romantic entanglements of his uncle’s eldest son, so without any resistance whatsoever, Simon was moving forward with his plans for tonight, where he promised to meet her in the Ruthtons’ garden by the waterfall to make everything official.

She’d become his wife.

An elevation for her family, for certain, but even more than that, a perfect match for her heart.

After all, *he* wasn’t a viscount, so at the foundation of rank, for the most part, they were the same: He was a gentleman’s son and she a gentleman’s daughter.

“Once he drops her, she’ll be ruined. Everyone will know she’d chased after him and been found wanting.”

Emme stepped away from the women, waving her fan in time with her pulse. She’d fought the worries of his future regret in the inequality of the match, wondered if he’d come to rue her lack of wealth or connections. But he’d quelled her doubts at every turn, promising her that their future happiness would overcome any of the social ramifications.

And he kept proving to be the veritable hero of any good novel.

She sighed. Only her hero wasn’t reserved to the page.

The clock chimed the hour, and she turned her attention to the room. She’d not seen Simon since her arrival, but he often arrived late. In fact, she wondered whether he may already be waiting for her in the garden. With a rather saucy glance back to the gossipmongers, Emme slid down the hallway and out onto the steps of the veranda, breathing in the cool March air.

What a glorious way to end her very first St. Groves Season.

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She'd barely made it to the steps into the garden when someone called her name.

Turning, she found a manservant approaching at a clipped speed. How very odd. How had he known where to find her?

And then something much less warm and delightful than her previous feelings quivered in her chest.

"Miss Lockhart?" He paused, still in the light of the doorway. "Miss Emmeline Lockhart?"

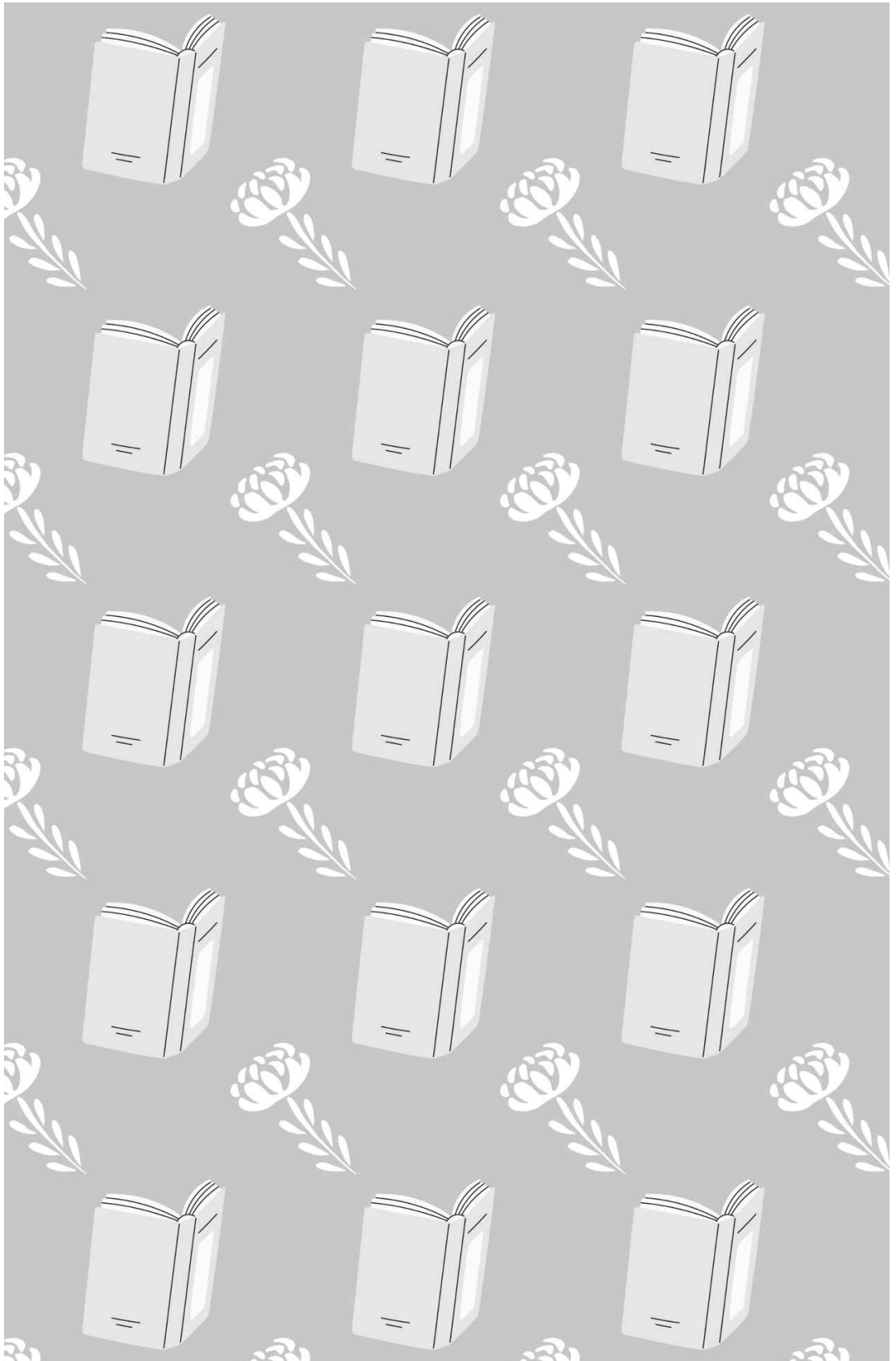
Her throat tightened. "Yes."

With a bow of his head, he offered her a card. "For you, Miss."

Hesitantly, she took the card, and the man removed himself back into the house. She slid her finger beneath the seal of the envelope and stepped forward into the light glowing from the doorway. The note held only a few words in a dearly familiar hand, but nothing about those words felt dear.

Everything has changed. Please forgive me.

S.



CHAPTER 1

A knock at the front door of anyone's house before ten o'clock in the morning rarely boded well for the home's inhabitants. And in this particular case, it boded abominably for Emmeline Lockhart.

She'd attempted to brace herself for the lengthy intrusion after her father's unexpected announcement the night before. Likely he'd waited until the very last moment to apprise his unsuspecting daughters of their fate.

Father, as good-hearted as he was, had a tendency to avoid conflict at all cost. When pressed, he sprung unwelcome information on people, and then he disappeared into his study or garden or nobody knew where for the aftermath of his revelation. Some people said that the loss of his dear wife after bringing Alfie, the lone Lockhart heir, into the world ten years ago had led him to an acute need for peace and tranquility, but in all truth, Father had fled conflict in every possible way well before Mother died. Over time, though, his tendency had grown almost chronic.

Another sharp knock echoed through the halls, and Emme could practically hear the doorframe flinch. As if everyone else in the house knew the eventual consequences of opening the door, no one did, prompting another impatient assault on the wood. Emme sighed. As the eldest daughter and in the absence of a mother's guidance, the responsibility of dealing with social expectations inevitably fell to her.

Even this.

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Her posture wilted for only a second before she rallied.

She'd been preparing for this fateful confrontation since early morning, alternating between fervent prayers and envisioning it all as a comical plight for one of her novel characters. It did help to have an outlet for her frustrations.

Fictional disasters for fictional people were, after all, far safer than real-life ones.

Setting aside her spectacles and tucking away the slips of paper bearing her latest scribbles, Emme pushed her small pile of novels to the desk's corner, except for one—*The Heroine*—which she took in hand, should distraction become necessary.

She'd strategically placed her desk in this spot by the window for two reasons: One, it allowed morning light to bathe her in enough warmth to dampen any chill from the low-lit fires of the night, and two, the location afforded her a view of the entrance hallway if she twisted just so.

Carter, the long-suffering butler, ambled into view, his pace slower than usual, if that was even possible. The dear man had appeared ancient when Emme was a child, but now he seemed to have approached near antiquity, though his wits proved rather alert and his ears even more so, for good or ill.

He cast her a weathered look down the hallway, his jaw set for battle. Poor man. It was moments like this that she was certain he earned every shilling of his somewhat inflated salary.

Emme stood, novel in hand, and drew in a deep breath before the plunge. Once Carter opened that door, her blissfully quiet life would be turned on its head—for the next four months, at least.

Another series of heavy knocks ushered in the entrance of Aunt Albina Bridges, rather unaffectionately referred to as Aunt Bean, whose self-importance rose from the ends of her pearl-tip shoes to the zenith of her long and usually upturned nose.

She and Father failed to resemble each other at all, in looks or

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comportment. Whereas Father fled discord as a whole, Aunt Bean saw it as her duty to generously find or create crises wherever she went. In this respect, Emme tended more toward her father's disposition . . . and desire.

Unless in fiction, of course.

"It was quite irksome to remain on the stoop like a beggar for so long, Carter."

And the sweet greetings whisked down the hall with the same melodic ring as a new violinist.

"Now, Mother," came a smoother, more amiable voice, one that immediately brightened Emme's mood. Cousin Thomas. "It is still early. I would imagine Carter has been occupied with other matters this morning."

Where Aunt Bean created persistent offense, Thomas smoothed out the edges with wit and voice, a fortunate trait for a clergyman.

"Besides, Carter," Thomas continued in a mock whisper, which Emme heard well enough from down the hall, "it wasn't *that* long."

Emme's smile brimmed . . . until she heard the resounding click of Aunt Bean's cane as it tapped the floor. Closer and closer, like the march of troops advancing in combat. Each click increased Emme's pulse toward retreat.

She glanced around the room, hoping for reinforcements. Aster? Alfie? Even Benedict, the spaniel, would prove a happy distraction, but no, Emme stood alone, left to face the tampering talons of Aunt Bean.

If only Mother were here.

Without a daughter of her own, Aunt Bean relished her role as matchmaker with the fervor of Lady Ruthton's enthusiasm for hosting balls—a zeal so boundless that she had single-handedly transformed St. Groves into a pale imitation of Bath. And her adoring husband spared no expense. They'd even recently built a new hotel, a theater, and even a concert hall.

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Her parties last year numbered fifteen!

Fifteen!

Emme's shoulders sagged yet again from the weight of her social future. Though, to be honest, she conveniently dodged five of the fifteen for various real and imagined illnesses or situations. After the difficulties of her first season, Father hadn't forced the issue.

Six clicks later, Aunt Bean came into view with Thomas at her side. In usual Thomas fashion, he wrestled with a smile, which countered the disposition of every previous rector in St. Groves. And if Thomas's youthfulness and temperament didn't spark a great deal of interest, his singleness certainly would.

"Good morning, Emme," Thomas offered before Aunt Bean pounced. "I'm glad to see you are awake and employed already." His gaze dropped to her book, one quizzical brow etching upward. "Devotional reading, I assume? To usher in the day?"

Emme tightened her grip on Eaton Stannard Barrett's entertaining novel and slipped it behind her back. "How could you doubt it?"

"Of course." A twinkle surfaced in his dark eyes before he turned to his mother. "Our cousin is a paragon of virtue, is she not, Mother?"

Not from what the gossips declared, but after almost two years, the tattling tongues of St. Groves had found new victims to exploit, leaving Emme's catastrophe well faded into infamy. Her inability to find a match last season may have resurfaced some murmurings but mostly pity, which likely sparked this very visit.

Aunt Bean heaved a sigh as large as her bosom and studied Emme from the top of her blonde head to the toe of her morning slippers. "Why is it that you are the only one to greet us this morning? Is everyone else inclined toward laziness?"

Laziness? Emme raised a brow, following Aunt Bean's survey of the room. Cowardice, perhaps.

"Actually, I do believe everyone else is otherwise engaged, Aunt." Which was true, even if "engaged" meant Father hiding in the library

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and Aster out for an extended morning walk. So extended, in fact, that she'd likely made it all the way into St. Groves by now. "Alfie is in lessons."

"Alfie?" Her cane tapped the floor as the name took agitated flight. "I have no interest in your brother. His future is secure. It is you and your sister for which the rescue must be made."

Rescue? Giving Aunt Bean the role of heroine seemed to defy the very definition of the word. At least for those to be "rescued."

But it was so. Gentlewomen had to be rescued by matrimony, inheritance, or death, for they were not usually given a living and were certainly not allowed to earn one.

Unless it was secret.

"Of course. It's just that we weren't expecting your visit quite so"—Emme almost said "early" but then thought better of it—"soon after your arrival. How have you found the rectory?"

Thomas opened his mouth to respond, but his mother overrode his attempt. "Better suited than I expected." Her face softened a little but not enough to garner much hope toward optimism. "I will not be ashamed to remain for the season. Thomas's uncle offered a rectory of no mean salary and situation. What parson do you know with five hundred a year?"

Thomas winced at the blunt declaration of his private matters. True, everyone knew, but the subject of such gossip rarely wished to hear it dangled about like a prize to be won. Or a horse to be sold.

"Indeed. I have no doubt my youngest son will be the talk of St. Groves in no time."

He already was, and none of the single ladies of the parish had even laid eyes on him yet. "Single" proved a powerfully magnetizing word among the Christian and pagan alike, especially when paired with such an income!

Emme raised her brows and smiled at Thomas. "I'm certain the position will make an excellent *match* of its own for Cousin Thomas."

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His eyes narrowed in playful parrying as Emme continued. "I would hazard a guess the church will be particularly full this Sunday of people curious to hear from the new rector, especially the young ladies."

"Young ladies?" Aunt Bean's frown expanded her chin to three. "What do we care for other young ladies? We are here to discuss you, Emmeline." She stepped closer, narrowing her eyes and attention with such intensity that Emme's throat tightened. "I give you my word, I will have you married before I return to Bristol to celebrate my first grandchild's birth."

All humor fled Emme's body, replaced instead by a chill that ran up her spine at the determination emanating from Aunt Bean's terrifying expression. Why did the prospect of marriage have to sound more like a threat than a promise? Emme was certain the original design offered much more joy and happiness than whatever gleamed in Aunt Bean's pale eyes.

Thomas stepped in before Aunt Bean could elaborate further. "Mother, I know you are the preeminent expert on finding women husbands, if you *do* say so yourself." He studied his mother, the gleam in his eyes in contrast to his complacent grin. "But must we discuss matchmaking upon our first arrival at Thistlecroft?"

"How can we not?" Aunt Bean's entire body stiffened so fast that her hat shook. "We have much to repair!"

Thank you for the reminder, Aunt Bean. Yet another barb to stick into Emme's lingering incompetence. But she'd learned her lesson. Do not trust intelligence, handsome features, and a quick wit.

Or excellent dancing skills.

And delightful conversation.

Or a tender heart.

She nearly groaned. What on earth was left to rely upon?

"This is of utmost importance to Emmeline's future and weighs heavily on her father's mind."

It was unlikely Father spent a great deal of time considering his

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daughters' futures, but of course Father could be easily swayed into worrying about something or other, especially to ensure Aunt Bean's speedy departure. How the woman winkled her way into an invitation in the first place probably involved a little bullying, a heavy dose of guilt, and a massive amount of sweets.

"You haven't even met the prospects yet." Thomas cast a sympathetic look in Emme's direction. "There may not be a decent fellow in the lot."

"We are in St. Groves, Thomas." Her nose rose even higher, if that was possible. "Not some backwater country parish. There are plenty of eligible men who will do for Emmeline." Her hawk eyes returned to Emme. "Whether Emmeline will do for them is why I am required."

After another dramatic second of scrutiny, Aunt Bean released Emme from her gaze and stepped, cane in rhythm, to finally be poised in a chair. *Seated* was a much too relaxed word for Aunt Bean's position.

"Whether Emme will do for them?" Thomas's brows rose in exaggerated mock horror before he turned. Cradling his chin with his thumb and forefinger, he examined Emme, his gaze glimmering like the mischievous boy he used to be. "Well, her eyes are tolerably large and her nose has an acceptable slope." He waved a dismissive hand toward her, the dimple in one cheek the only mark of his teasing. "But there is the question of her chin."

Emme nearly lost complete control of her laugh. Thank God for Thomas and his desire to keep the conversation away from the past. Oh, how she'd missed him. Apart from her sister, Aster, he'd been her dearest friend in all the world. "Ah yes, many a marriage has been ruined over an imperfect chin."

"Chins are in fashion, I am told. And yours is suitable enough." Aunt Bean squinted in focused study of the offending protrusion. "But your nose is rather fine too, despite being marred by those unsightly

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freckles. The waters in Bath would do wonders for your complexion, Emmeline.”

Emme bit her smile into submission. Thank the Lord she wasn't wearing her spectacles to complete the ensemble of inadequacies. “I have heard similar tales.”

“She's not too tall,” Thomas interjected with a lopsided grin. “And she does read devotionally.”

Emme rolled her eyes. Trust her cousin to weave such nonsense into her aunt's relentless critique.

“I have every confidence we will secure an excellent match now that I am here to set things right.” Aunt Bean raised her cane like a pointer. “We start at a disadvantage, naturally, but despite the mishap of your first season, followed by an unfruitful second, your reputation has only been slightly tarnished. Mercifully, no true scandal has occurred, even if its stench remains.”

How reassuring. No true scandal—only mortifying humiliation and the lingering ache of a shattered heart. But what were those trifles when set against the towering edifice of matrimony?

“A woman grows wiser and stronger when thwarted in love,” Aunt Bean added, as though dispensing great wisdom. “And the further we stay from scandal, the better your prospects. A faded rose is still a rose.”

Encouragement clearly wasn't Aunt Bean's natural gift.

“Mother,” Thomas drawled, “I do believe you're verging on sentimental. None of us are prepared for such a shift.” With a sly glance at Emme, he added, “However, if I must indulge this rare moment, I'd say Emme's finest qualities are her quick wit and her good heart.”

Thomas's gaze searched Emme's, voicelessly seeking her mood, so she offered a small smile in return. Her good heart proved all too naive, leaving her wiser only in the art of heartbreak. However, her experiences had at least lent a certain realism to her fictional

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tales of rakish heroes, dashed hopes, and clandestine liaisons turned disastrous.

She sighed. While her modest ventures as a novelist fell short of true disgrace, the revelation would hardly enhance her standing, especially in the wake of her first season's embarrassment. Aunt Bean, she suspected, would be positively apoplectic if the truth ever emerged.

With Thomas's help, she had kept her little profession hidden by granting him full control of her business affairs. No one thought twice about a man negotiating contracts and royalties, after all. She didn't even know how much she'd earned from her three books, only that the reviews had softened considerably since her debut effort.

"Don't be ridiculous, Thomas," Aunt Bean declared with the finality of a gavel. "Her best feature is her two thousand pounds. It may not be as enticing as some other ladies' fortunes, but I feel we can use her first season's . . . misstep . . . and last season's reticence to evoke the proper amount of sympathy for her marital plight. It is understandable that Emmeline should fear stepping back out after the blemish to her reputation, which will only increase compassion from the mothers of sons in want of a wife. Her excellent family"—she raised her chin with pride at full tilt—"should elevate her to a competitive standing with at least one marriageable gentleman of the gentry."

Now *she* felt like the mare in a horse race.

"I have made a list of some of the most suitable candidates," Aunt Bean continued, extracting a carefully folded slip of paper from her reticule and handing it to Emme with the air of a royal decree.

"A *list*?" The word burst from Thomas. He cast his mother a sharp glance. "Really, Mother, is this necessary?"

"Emmeline did not have my guidance the last two seasons and look how those turned out," she replied with unshakable conviction. "I shall steer her toward men who are not only upstanding but also well within her means. One of the difficulties with your first

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seasons, Emmeline, was that you aimed too high above your station, dear girl.”

Emme did not feel very “dear” at the moment. “He was a gentleman, Aunt Bean . . . Albina,” Emme corrected. “We are of the same station.”

Though the word *gentleman* was perhaps a generous stretch. Simon Reeves had charmed her with kind words, unexpected attentions, and stolen moments: a carriage ride alone and—heat rose to her cheeks—a near kiss in the garden.

He had made her believe he cared.

Cared enough for . . . forever.

Then he’d left her to deal with the consequences: whispers of impropriety, the sting of being deemed “tainted,” and the bruising weight of a broken heart. She should have known better. Simon’s reputation as a flirt was well documented, his name even linked with the likes of the infamous Selena Hemston on one occasion. It seemed he lived up to the charm without any intention of hurting or truly pursuing the ladies involved. And yet, she had foolishly believed he’d been different with her.

That he’d . . . loved her.

Aunt Bean, of course, referred to Simon’s newly altered position. When he had courted Emme, their social difference had been present but not insurmountable. He was simply the heir to a modest estate. Yet everything had changed with the tragic deaths of his father and cousin. Now Simon was the Viscount of Ravenscross, the inheritor of an ancient title, an expansive estate, and, if rumor held true, significant debts. His responsibilities—and expectations—had grown exponentially.

“A man in Lord Ravenscross’s position will only trifle with the heart of a girl with a mere two thousand pounds,” Aunt Bean declared, punctuating her words with an imperious wave of her finger. “He will marry someone much richer. So keep your head this season, Emmeline, and do not let yourself be drawn into another . . . dalliance.”

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“You have no worry on that score.” Emme’s words escaped with more force than she intended, her face flaming. “If I never see him again, it will be too soon.”

Aunt Bean’s dark eyes narrowed. “Do you not read the society pages?”

All heat drained from Emme’s face as she looked from Thomas to Aunt Bean. “What do you mean?”

“Rumor has it that Lord Ravenscross is back in St. Groves and in search of a wealthy wife.”