

*The  
Last  
Word*

**SAMANTHA HASTINGS**

*Swoon* READS

NEW YORK

A SWOON READS BOOK

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*For Jon*

*Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.*

—CHARLOTTE BRONTE, *JANE EYRE*



# One

**SHE WAS FINALLY GOING TO** escape protocol prison.

Or, in other words, Miss Lucinda Leavitt was graduating from Miss Holley's Finishing School for Young Ladies, where she'd spent four aggravating years reluctantly obtaining polish and female accomplishments. She looked down at her pink dress—it had more layers than a wedding cake. She hoped her father would find it pretty and see that she was all grown up now. That she was able to make decisions for herself.

Miss Holley, the plump proprietor, came into the sitting room with another woman, who was extremely thin with a long face framed by mousy-brown braids.

"Miss Holley, by chance has my father arrived yet?" Lucinda asked.

Miss Holley sniffed. "Miss Leavitt, do not be presumptuous. Your father is a very important businessman, and he has better things to do with his time than accompany you home from school."

"Yes, ma'am, but I am to leave today. Will I be allowed to travel on the train to London alone?" Lucinda asked, unable to keep the excitement from her voice.

"Do not be fanciful, Miss Leavitt," Miss Holley said, shaking her head. "Young ladies of quality must be chaperoned at all times for their safety and for their reputation. 'For a lady's reputation is—'"

"As fragile as a flower," Lucinda finished without enthusiasm.

"I am glad you learned something at my school, Miss Leavitt," Miss Holley said. "Although not as much as I would have liked. But perhaps Mrs. Patton will be able to succeed where I have failed."

"Mrs. Patton?"

Miss Holley touched her massive bosom and said, "Dear me, I should have introduced you at the first, Lavinia. Miss Leavitt, allow me to introduce your new lady's companion, Mrs. Lavinia Patton. She is an old friend of mine."

"Companion? I don't need a companion," Lucinda said, standing up.

"Manners, Miss Leavitt, manners," Miss Holley chided. "Your father has already hired Mrs. Patton upon my recommendation. She will introduce you to the best of society and help you become an elegant lady."

Lucinda curtsied to the long-faced woman. “I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Patton. How long should I expect the pleasure of your company?”

Mrs. Patton bowed her head slightly. “Until you are married, dear girl. Which I should not think will be too long, given your face and fortune.”

“You forget her low birth . . . and that she is obstinate and headstrong, with a mind of her own,” Miss Holley said. “Still, if anyone can help Miss Leavitt to an advantageous match, it is you, Lavinia.”

*But I don't want to get married, Lucinda thought fiercely. I want to work in my father's countinghouse.*



Two weeks later, Lucinda bit her thumbnail in frustrated boredom.

*Being an elegant lady is exceedingly dull work,* she thought as she sat on the edge of her chair next to the window, waiting for the post to arrive. She had nothing else to do. It was too early in the day to make calls and too late in the day to lie in bed.

So she counted the carriages that passed the street in front of her house—thirty-two. She counted the people who walked by—forty-seven (twenty-three women and twenty-four men). She was about to count the bricks on the house across the street when the postman arrived. She jumped from her chair and ran to the door before the butler, Mr. Ruffles, could answer it. She flung open the door and startled the postman, who was opening the letter box.

“I’ll take those,” she said, reaching out her hand.

The postman touched his navy cap and bowed to her before handing her several letters and a small package.

“Thank you!” Lucinda said and shut the door. She turned to see Mr. Ruffles standing behind her. He bowed to her. He was shorter than Lucinda and had a square-shaped face and a mouth that never smiled.

“Here’s the post, Ruffles,” she said, handing him the stack of letters. They were all for her father anyway. She kept the small parcel clutched tightly in her white-knuckled hands, knowing exactly what it was. Lucinda skipped to the sitting room, where ladies sat . . . a lot. Her companion, Mrs. Patton, was already sleeping in a chair, snoring with her mouth open.

Lucinda quietly closed the door. She untied the twine and unwrapped the brown paper to reveal *Wheathill’s Magazine*, the May 1861 edition. Lucinda squealed silently and hopped up and down on the balls of her feet.

It was finally here!

She sat down on the sofa and flipped open the cover and found the table of contents. The newest installment of *She Knew She Was Right* by Mrs. Smith began on page thirty-six. Lucinda turned the pages quickly until she reached the correct page. There was an illustration—a young lady dressed in a ball gown with a gentleman on each side. Both gentlemen held one arm outstretched toward her. The caption underneath read: *Whom will she choose?* The same question had been plaguing Lucinda



since she read the April edition of the magazine. Now, a month later, her curiosity was at last to be satiated. After two years of reading the book published in serial form, she was finally going to read the ending.

Lucinda held her breath and began to read:

*“My feelings are like a tangled web, Miss Emerson,” Lord Dunstan said as he clasped her delicate hand between his two large ones. “And only you can unravel them.”*

*Eurydice’s heart fluttered and her face flushed with color. Lord Dunstan was so very tall, dark, and handsome, with only a slight white scar underneath his left ear to disfigure his otherwise natural beauty.*

*“Lord Dunstan, I do believe you are flirting with me.”*

*“I am not flirting, my dear Miss Emerson,” he said. “I am completely in earnest. You alone hold all of my affections. All of my dreams and wishes for my future are tangled up around you.”*

*Could this be a declaration? Eurydice could hardly breathe. Her heart beat wildly. She looked down at her feet, for she was too embarrassed to look him in the eyes.*

*“Miss Emerson, before I can beg you to be mine for all time, I must tell you the truth of my past.”*

*Eurydice was surprised enough by these words to*

*look up into his dark, stormy eyes and hold her breath in terrible expectation.*

*“Lord Dunstan,” Mr. Thisbe called from the door of the house. “Lord Dunstan, Mr. Emerson wishes to have speech with you.”*

*“We will have to finish our conversation later, my dear Miss Emerson. I leave you most reluctantly,” Lord Dunstan said, and kissed the top of Eurydice’s hand before releasing it.*

*Eurydice could only nod, so great was her embarrassment. Lord Dunstan walked into the house and Mr. Thisbe came out to the garden where Eurydice was picking flowers. He was not as tall nor as handsome as Lord Dunstan, but his blue eyes were open and kind. He had an air of virtue and humility. To Eurydice’s shock, he knelt down before her on the grass and took the same hand that Lord Dunstan had recently held and kissed.*

*“Miss Emerson,” Mr. Thisbe said, “I believe that the Lord above ordained us for one another. Will you do me the great honor of becoming my wife?”*

Lucinda’s heart raced as if she’d run up a hill. Which suitor would Eurydice choose? But the next page was blank. Lucinda frowned, wondering if there had been some sort of misprint. When she continued on, the next page had a note from the editor:

*Here the story is broken off, and it can never be finished. What promised to be the crowning work of a life is a memorial of death. The Editor regrets to inform the Reader that Mrs. Smith has died. But if the work is not quite complete, little remains to be added to it, and that little has been distinctly reflected into our minds. Which suitor would Eurydice Emerson have chosen? The handsome and mysterious Lord Dunstan, or the kind and generous Mr. Thisbe? Now we will never know.*

*Thomas Gibbs, Editor, 1861*

“But I must know!” Lucinda said aloud.

She sat up in disbelief and quickly read the editor’s note again. She bit the end of her thumbnail and blinked away tears that had formed in her eyes. Her favorite author could not have died. It was impossible. *Unthinkable*. Mrs. Smith’s novels were Lucinda’s only escape from the endless monotony of her existence.

Mrs. Patton awoke from her dozing. She blinked several times and brought her lace handkerchief to her mouth, sighing long and loud.

“Really, Lucinda,” she chided in a singsong voice. “That is hardly a ladylike tone to be using.”

“She’s dead,” Lucinda said numbly and slumped back on the sofa, tears falling freely from her eyes. She wiped them away with the back of her hand.

“Who is dead?” Mrs. Patton asked, sitting up straight.

“The author of *She Knew She Was Right* is dead,” Lucinda said with a sniff. “And now the story will remain unfinished.”

Mrs. Patton gave another long sigh and leaned back in her seat. “You quite shocked me, my dear. I was thinking it was one of our friends.”

Lucinda merely rolled her wet eyes in reply and gave a loud sniff. She didn’t have any friends. Mrs. Patton was only a hired companion; a widow with little money, noble birth, and no love of literature.

“Perhaps you need an airing, Lucinda,” Mrs. Patton said in chipper voice as she stood up. “We haven’t been outside in three days. I’ll call for a carriage. Why don’t you get our calling cards? We can leave one at Mrs. Randall’s house. A most advantageous social connection, indeed, especially considering her son is your father’s business partner. Particularly when your own origins are more, shall we say, humble?”

“Humble,” Lucinda echoed numbly and clutched the magazine to her chest.



Mrs. Patton and Lucinda sat in the carriage while the footman left calling cards at nine separate houses, including the Randalls’. For an airing, they weren’t getting much air at all, and were instead just sitting like well-dressed dolls in a carriage. Lucinda still held the magazine against her chest, hoping somehow that she had misread it and the whole afternoon was

only a terrible dream. But every time she flipped open the pages, the editor's note told her once again that Mrs. Smith was dead.

"Really, my dear," Mrs. Patton sighed, "you are not behaving like a well-brought-up young lady from Miss Holley's select school. It is foolish, and dare I add *unladylike*, to take so much to heart the death of a complete stranger."

"Yes, Mrs. Patton," Lucinda said and tried to chew on her thumbnail, only to remember she was wearing gloves.

But she was not a well-brought-up young lady—she was a stubborn one. And never knowing the ending to her favorite story was simply unacceptable.

Lucinda needed a plan. She would go to the editor and demand to be told everything he knew about Mrs. Smith. Surely one of Mrs. Smith's kin, or a particular friend, must know how she intended to finish the story. Or at the very least they could allow Lucinda to peruse Mrs. Smith's notes and final papers. She opened up the magazine and read the address on the cover page.

She was about to give the directions to her driver when a thought stopped her—*What if the editor refuses to see me?* The business district in London was run entirely by men. As much as it made Lucinda fume with indignation, an unchaperoned, unmarried young woman wouldn't make it past the front-desk clerk. If she wanted to be taken seriously by the editor she would need a man to accompany her. It was preposterous nonsense, but Lucinda was willing to swallow her own pride in order to learn Eurydice's fate.

She knocked loudly on the side of the carriage. Mrs. Patton jerked her head in surprise as the carriage slowed to a stop. Lucinda leaned her head out of the open window and called, "Simms, please take us to my father's office on Tooley Street."

"Very good, miss," the coachman said, and tipped his hat to her.

Lucinda pulled her head back inside and said with a bright voice, "One more call to make today, Mrs. Patton."

"Just as you wish it, dear girl," Mrs. Patton said. "But keep in mind we have the party at the Freshams' tonight and it would be wise for a young lady to rest before the exertions of dancing."

"I don't think I am in any danger of too much exertion walking from the carriage into my father's office."

Mrs. Patton sighed again and Lucinda ignored it. She had not been to her father's office in nearly four years, but before then, from the age of eight to the awkward age of fourteen, she'd spent nearly every day there. She'd played with dolls surrounded by the ledgers until her father started to give her little tasks to complete. The tasks grew more complicated over the years until she was faster at addition than any of his clerks and could catch a mistake in a number column better than even her father.

The carriage came to a stop and Lucinda flung open the door and jumped out before the footman could assist her. The sign on the front of the imposing two-story brick building read **RANDALL AND LEAVITT** in bold black lettering.

Ignoring Mrs. Patton's calls for her to wait, Lucinda opened the door. Immediately she was met by the familiar smell of paper and leatherbound books. She breathed in deeply, inhaling memories. She did not bother to speak to any of the clerks; she knew her way around the office and didn't need—or want—them to escort her. Instead she walked past row after row of desks, up the stairs, and down the hall to her father's office. She knocked on the door but did not wait for a reply before she opened it eagerly, only to find the room empty.

The room looked exactly the same as she remembered it. She caressed the well-worn desk with her fingers and then touched her father's wingback chair. She turned to see a familiar elderly man with snowy white hair and black-beetle eyebrows standing behind her in the doorway.

"Excuse me, miss," he said. "May I be of assistance?"

"Mr. Murphy! How long it has been?" Lucinda asked. "How does your family?"

"My stars, it's Miss Lucy!"

"In the flesh," she said with her most winning smile. Miss Holley always said that a lady's greatest weapon was her smile.

"All grown up," he remarked kindly. "Mrs. Murphy will be so pleased that I saw you. She asked after you only last week. But I am afraid that your father has gone to his warehouse about some business."

"It is no great matter," Lucinda said. "I can wait in his office. I've learned that waiting is what ladies do best."

Another *invaluable* lesson from Miss Holley's Finishing School.

"And a fine lady you've turned out to be, Miss Lucy," Mr. Murphy said. "But your father might not return for several hours. If you need assistance, you should request it of Mr. Randall. He's in his father's old office, down the hall."

"I'd much rather not," Lucinda said, sitting down in her father's wingback chair and tapping her fingers on his mahogany desk.

"Your father may not return to the office at all today, Miss Lucy," Mr. Murphy said anxiously. "I should hate to have you waste your entire afternoon. You'd much better go speak to Mr. Randall."

Waiting and doing nothing was what Lucinda did every afternoon, but she did not wish to offend Mr. Murphy, who had always been so kind to her when she was younger. He'd often brought her cakes and cookies that his wife had made. But she cringed at the thought of having to ask Mr. David Randall for assistance. Even though he'd been her first—and only—friend.

David was the son of her father's business partner. She'd taught him how to read an accounting ledger, and he'd taught her how to play marbles and quoits. But then David's father died, leaving him—at only fifteen years old—as owner of his father's half of the business. And then he was no longer her friend.

He was one of the reasons why she had been sent to a finishing school prison. She'd told him something in confidence



and he'd told his mother, who'd told her father, and Lucinda had found herself packed up and sent away to that ivied prison to become a lady. Just thinking of his self-satisfied face made Lucinda long to slap it.

Lucinda stood up and exhaled. "Very well, Mr. Murphy. I will go and see if Mr. Randall will assist me."

She gave him a warm smile as she passed by and found that David's office door was already open. Unlike her father's office, which hadn't changed a whit in twenty years, this room had undergone a transformation. The shelves were lined with books instead of antique snuffboxes, and a large circular globe sat prominently on a much larger white oak desk. And behind it sat Mr. David Randall.

Lucinda fought the urge to roll her eyes; he was more handsome than she remembered. In the four years since she last saw him, his face had lost some of its youthfulness. Thick brown sideburns now ran down each side of his face, elongating his square jaw. His light brown eyes looked at her in surprise, and he stood up. He was one of the few men that was taller than Lucinda, at least six feet tall. It felt odd to look up to speak.

"Is there something I can help you with, ma'am—miss?" he asked in a pleasant tone.

He clearly didn't recognize her.

"I have never thought highly of your intelligence, Mr. Randall," Lucinda said, "but really, you should be able to remember your partner's only daughter."

Lucinda felt pleasure in seeing his eyes widen and his jaw

drop. She smiled and took a seat. She gestured her hand for him to sit down as well. He sat down, perched on the edge of his chair like he was on a social call instead of sitting in his own office.

“There is something you can help me with since my father is not here,” Lucinda said. His jaw dropped slightly lower. “Do not worry, it does not require any great effort on your part. I need you to accompany me to a publishing house and get me an appointment with the editor.”

“A publishing house?”

“Yes, the place where they publish things,” Lucinda said, as if he were a small child.

David did not respond immediately, but blinked at her as if he thought she was an apparition caused by the excessive heat.

“As much as I would like to assist you, Miss Leavitt,” David said at last, “I am afraid that I have far too much work to do today.”

He pointed to the stack of ledgers on his desk.

“I should not wish to keep you from your work.” Lucinda turned in her seat to look at the door where Mr. Murphy was standing waiting patiently. “Mr. Murphy, would you be so good as to tell my coachman, Simms, to take Mrs. Patton home and then return here for me?”

Lucinda turned back to David as Mr. Murphy disappeared to do as she asked. She placed her magazine on his desk, then removed her gloves and bonnet. “Which one shall I start with?” she asked, smiling brightly.

He did not immediately reply, so Lucinda took the ledger from the top of the stack and picked up David's pen. She flipped to the last page and carefully began examining the columns, adding the numbers in her head.

"I have already done that one," David said as he pulled another pen out of his desk drawer and placed it on the ledger he'd been checking when she walked in.

"I know," Lucinda said, circling the third line over. "But you missed a mistake. The clerk is off a farthing in this column."

"Thank you, Miss Leavitt," David said drily. "A quarter of a penny matters a great deal to our company's financial success."

Lucinda shrugged her shoulders and muttered audibly, "It's still a mistake."

She handed the ledger back to David. He took it and then handed her another.

"I am grateful for your assistance," he said in a tone that sounded anything but thankful.

"I'm sure you are," she said. She loved numbers. She loved adding the impossibly high sums in her head with no other assistance but her mind. She checked the next ledger. Then the next. And finally, between the two of them, they had completed ten ledgers. She handed the last book back to David.

"I daresay, Simms has probably returned with the carriage by now," she said. "It is only a few blocks to my home and back. Shall we go to the publishing house?"

“The place that publishes things,” David clarified with a small smile.

Lucinda wished to slap it from his face, but she was on her best behavior. So instead she nodded and said, “Precisely.”

Lucinda pulled on her gloves and bonnet, then picked up her magazine as David put on his coat and his tall beaver top hat.

She could not wipe off the smug look on her face. She didn't even try to.



## Two

**DAVID RANDALL HATED RIDING BACKWARD** in a carriage. It always made him feel rather sick. But he'd rather feel sick than sit next to Lucy—*Miss* Lucinda Leavitt now. Although sitting across from her gave him ample opportunity to view her alarming transformation from gangly girl to grown-up woman. He could hardly believe they were the same person. That is, until she opened her mouth; then David had no difficulty discerning his partner's outspoken daughter.

Gone was the stooped, overly tall girl with untidy braids. In her place was a woman who embraced all of her inches. Dark brown curls—nearly black—framed her oval face. She had large, startlingly light blue eyes with thick black lashes and

brows. She was certainly an attractive young woman, but her expression was smug and self-satisfied.

David felt a twinge of annoyance. Lucinda's smug look reminded him of the expression on his father's face whenever he had made a mistake. His father had always made him feel foolish. Incapable.

"What is your business with the publisher?" David asked impatiently. "And, yes, I realize what a publisher is."

"I would love to gratify your idle curiosity, but I prefer to keep you in suspense," Lucinda said archly. "We require a few moments of the editor's time, a Mr. Thomas Gibbs."

David nodded and did not venture to speak again until they arrived at the offices of *Wheathill Magazine*. The black building was tall and narrow, like a small book pressed between two larger ones, with a sign hanging above the door.

David waved aside the footman and hopped out of the carriage. He turned and offered his hand to Lucinda, who took it and carefully stepped down.

He could not help but notice that she smelled nice. Like flowers. David shook these irrelevant thoughts from his head and entered the building behind her. A bald clerk with thick sideburns gave a deferential nod to David and Lucinda.

David took out his business card and gave it to him. "I am Mr. David Randall, of Randall and Leavitt, and I require speech with your Mr. Thomas Gibbs immediately."

The clerk took the card and bowed again. "Yes, Mr. Randall. Just one moment, sir."

He disappeared through the door.

“Bravo,” Lucinda said with a grin and clapped her hands. “That was positively imperial.”

Despite his efforts, David couldn’t keep his lips from forming a small smile.

A few minutes later, the clerk returned with another gentleman. He was a head shorter than David, with red curly hair and even thicker sideburns than his clerk. The editor shook David’s hand and then began to bow to Lucinda but stopped midway to ogle her. The editor must have realized that he looked too long, because he straightened his posture and reddened right up to the roots of his hair.

“I am Mr. Thomas Gibbs. I assume I have the pleasure of addressing Mr. Randall and Mrs. Randall?” he asked.

“No,” Lucinda said. “I am Miss Leavitt. Mr. Randall is my father’s business partner and he kindly agreed to accompany me here. And I can assure you that the pleasure is all mine. I am a great fan of your magazine, sir.”

“Um, thank you.”

“And I know a true connoisseur of literature like yourself would only be to ready to assist me in my quest to discover the true ending of Mrs. Smith’s story.”

David shook his head in disbelief, but Mr. Gibbs swallowed Lucinda’s flattery like pear-drop candies.

“Of course,” he said.

“Thank you so very much, Mr. Gibbs,” she said. “Now, I would like the deceased Mrs. Smith’s forwarding address, her first name if you know it, and the names of any surviving kin.”

Mr. Gibbs’s eyes widened and he sputtered. “Excuse me?”

Lucinda gave him a condescending smile. "Mrs. Smith, the author of *She Knew She Was Right*, the book you serialized in your magazine."

Mr. Gibbs blinked several times. "Of course I would be only too happy to help you, Miss Leavitt. It is a pity the Lord took Mrs. Smith too soon."

"A great pity," Lucinda concurred. "Would you like to take us back to your office so that you can retrieve the requested information?"

Gibbs blinked several more times. "Y-y-yes. This way, Miss Leavitt."

Gibbs opened the door for Lucinda and then followed her through it, allowing it to swing back and closed. David sighed. The fellow had forgotten his existence. He opened the door and found Lucinda leaning over the editor's desk. Gibbs flipped through a file, then took out a sheet of paper and handed it to her.

"We sent Mrs. Smith's last four payments to a Mrs. B. Smith in number fifteen Laura Place, Bath."

"Do you know what the *B* stands for?" Lucinda pressed.

"I'm afraid I do not," Gibbs said, shaking his red head. "No one in our office ever met her in person."

"I see," Lucinda said as she perused the paper again. "What address did you previously send her pay to?"

Gibbs rifled through the file for several minutes.

"My clerk must have misplaced it," Gibbs said at last.

"May I keep this paper?" Lucinda asked.



“Of course, Miss Leavitt,” Gibbs said, his face reddening by the moment.

“And may I ask you another question, sir?”

“Anything.”

David snorted.

Lucinda gave the editor a fulsome smile. “When was the last time you heard from Mrs. Smith?”

Gibbs rifled through the file one last time and pulled out a sheet of paper with the tiniest handwriting David had ever seen. “The last time I heard from her was in March, Miss Leavitt. Someone else sent these last two pages of the story, as well as a letter notifying me that Mrs. B. Smith had died.”

He handed her the sheet of paper and David leaned closer to hear Lucinda whisper underneath her breath:

*“My feelings are like a tangled web, Miss Emerson,” Lord Dunstan said as he clasped her delicate hand between his two large ones. “And only you can unravel them.”*

She mumbled more lines that he could not understand before she said:

*“Miss Emerson,” Mr. Thisbe said, “I believe that the Lord above ordained us for one another. Will you do me the great honor of becoming my wife?”*

“It’s the last scene you published,” Lucinda said as she looked up at Gibbs. “Who notified you of her death?”

The editor pulled another letter from the file, but the handwriting on this page was entirely different from the first. Each word was completed with a curvy flourish at the end, and the letter was one of the shortest he’d ever seen. Gibbs handed

it to Lucinda and pointed to the bottom, which was conspicuously missing a signature.

“Here is the letter. Not signed as you can see.”

She shook her head and read aloud: “*Mr. Gibbs, I regret to inform you that the author Mrs. B. Smith died on March 3, 1861 from an internal complaint. I’ve included the last pages that she gave for me to read. Yours.*’ Unsigned. How very frustrating.”

David pried both pages from Lucinda’s fingers and handed them back to Gibbs. “Thank you for your help, Mr. Gibbs. If we require any additional assistance, we will let you know.”

“Very good, sir,” he said and smiled as he added, “Miss Leavitt, it has been a very great pleasure making your acquaintance. It is a delight to meet a young lady who is as passionately fond of literature as yourself.”

“You are too kind, Mr. Gibbs,” Lucinda said, but her expression was forlorn.

David bowed to the editor, then took Lucinda by the elbow and escorted her out of the building. She did not pull away, but walked as if she were dazed. David handed her into the carriage and then nodded to Gibbs, who had followed them to the front door. He tapped his cane against the side of the carriage to signal the coachman to drive.

“That was rather abrupt, Mr. Randall,” Lucinda said, rubbing her elbow. “What is your hurry?”

David rolled his eyes. “I have real work to do and I could not stand to listen to him fawn over you any longer. Why did you encourage him?”

“Why shouldn’t I encourage a man of comfortable circumstances to compliment me?” Lucinda asked, back to her sharp self. “Is it not a young woman’s purpose in life to find a suitable man to marry her, and take on all of the worldly cares that are too difficult for her delicate constitution?”

“Yours is anything but delicate,” he retorted, knowing full well she was needling him.

“Well, you should know,” Lucinda said. “We’ve been acquainted since childhood and I have not altered.”

“In some ways you haven’t,” he said, looking her up and down. “And in others you most definitely have.”

“And you haven’t changed one bit,” she said, folding her arms across the silly magazine that she’d carried around all day like a doll.

“Thank you.”

“It wasn’t meant to be a compliment.”

“I am aware of that.”

Lucinda pursed her lips and eyed him with a fastidiousness that made him squirm beneath her gaze. After moments of contemplation, she finally said, “Shall I drop you off at the office or shall I take you home?”

“The office is fine, Miss Leavitt.”

She did not speak again until the carriage pulled up in front of the red brick building. He exited the carriage and turned to tip his hat to her. She nodded and said, “Good day, Mr. Randall. Thank you for your assistance with the publishing house.”

“The place that publishes things,” he said gravely and bowed to her, then turned to enter the countinghouse, not waiting for nor wanting to see her reaction.

Back upstairs in his office, he found that enough work for three men had been left on his desk. David sighed, taking off his hat and untying his cravat. He needed more air and more time.



# Three

“HOW WAS THE OFFICE TODAY, Father?” Lucinda asked as she sipped a spoonful of mock turtle soup.

“Adequate,” her father said, not bothering to look up at her from his own bowl. He continued eating as if Lucinda and Mrs. Patton were not even in the room.

Mrs. Patton raised her eyebrows and said in a chipper voice, “Lucinda and I had a wonderful day. We finished embroidering the most beautiful cushion, did we not?”

“Oh, we did,” Lucinda said with false enthusiasm. “*All* afternoon.”

“And Mrs. Randall left her calling card,” Mrs. Patton continued. “I had hoped that she would actually come in and visit, but she didn’t.”

“I wish she had as well,” Lucinda said. “I’ve never actually seen Mrs. Randall. I am not sure I believe she really exists. Have you seen her, Father?”

He looked up from his bowl of soup, but did not look at Lucinda. “I have had the pleasure of dining with her and Mr. Randall at least a half dozen times. And I can assure you that she does indeed exist.”

A half dozen dinners in more than twenty years of doing business with their family did not seem like many to Lucinda.

“I have also seen Mrs. Randall at a party,” Mrs. Patton added. “But I didn’t make her acquaintance there. It was such a crush, the house so full of guests, all from the very best families.”

Neither Lucinda nor her father responded to this remark, leaving an awkward silence around the table. Lucinda’s lineage was anything but noble. Her father began life as a street sweeper, and through his natural talent with numbers and hard work found a place as a clerk in a countinghouse. Her mother had been a nursery maid to a middle-class family in Kensington before she married her father. But her mother had wasted away from consumption when Lucinda was only eight years old, and her father never truly recovered from it. He removed everything that reminded him of his wife—her portrait, her embroidery, their furniture—and he and Lucinda moved to a new house. He threw himself entirely into his work and rose to a partnership in the same countinghouse. Then David betrayed her confidence and Lucinda began to resemble her mother too much for her father’s comfort, so she was

sent away to school. Like she was just another dispensable reminder of something he'd lost.

The awkward silence was broken when Mr. Ruffles and the first footman took away their soup bowls and set out plates for the next courses: pheasant, oyster pâtés, lamb cutlets, asparagus, bread au jus, and a roast saddle of mutton. The dining room was soon entirely silent except for the scraping of silverware on plates.

Lucinda slowly chewed her bite of oyster. Before she'd gone to finishing school, dinners had been much more casual affairs. They didn't change their clothes and they never ate in the formal dining room, but rather in the much smaller breakfast room. And she and her father had talked—*really* talked—about things that mattered to him. Mostly about his countinghouse, because his work filled his entire life.

A life that grown-up Lucinda no longer seemed to fit into.

Once they were finished with the main courses, Mr. Ruffles and the footman removed their plates and the tablecloth, then served champagne and a pudding for dessert. Desserts always made her think of her mother—her mother had loved dessert. Chocolate mousse was her very favorite dish. Lucinda wished for the thousandth time that her mother was still alive. Still with them.

But all she had left of her mother was a small cameo brooch likeness of her. She'd kept it hidden from her father all of these years. Even as a child, she'd been afraid that he would take it and consign it to the attic with her mother's portrait, to gather dust and be forgotten. But Lucinda hadn't

forgotten her mother, even if she couldn't remember the exact details of her face. She remembered how loved she always felt when her mother looked at her. And how much she wanted to feel that love now.

"I was wondering if I might, perhaps, have my mother's portrait to hang in my bedroom?" she asked, taking a sip of champagne. "It is only gathering dust in the attic, after all."

"No," Father said.

Lucinda swallowed and pressed on. "But if I keep it in my bedroom, you won't have to see it . . . and I have almost forgotten what she looks like—"

He abruptly stood and dropped his napkin on the table.

"Where are you going, Father?" Lucinda asked, rising from her seat.

He didn't look at her. He never looked at her.

"To my study," he said. "I have work to do."

"But it's nearly nine o'clock."

"Excellent," Mrs. Patton said, standing. She grabbed Lucinda's elbow and steered her away from her father. "Lucinda and I shall adjourn to the sitting room for some coffee."

"But I—" Lucinda started to protest, but her father was already gone. Mutely she allowed herself to be guided by the much shorter—and yet surprisingly strong-gripped—Mrs. Patton to the sitting room, where she dutifully and dully drank her coffee.





The next morning Lucinda ran her pen down the column of her household accounts. Every farthing was accounted for. Naturally.

The sitting room faced west, and the heat of the afternoon blared through the three large windows that faced the London street. Lucinda tapped her pen against the table impatiently. Her mathematical mind was wasted on simple household accounts. The repetitious inanity of it all!

Lucinda needed something to occupy her time. She picked up a sheet of paper and touched the end of her pen to her lips before writing:

*No. 15 Laura Place, Bath*

*To the Owner of the Establishment:*

*I am writing to you to request any forwarding information on a guest, Mrs. B. Smith, that you had staying in your boardinghouse from January to February of this year. I am trying to locate her family or nearest relations on important business. I have enclosed a fresh sheet of paper and a penny stamp, so replying to my letter will not cost you a farthing. I appreciate your time and attention in this matter.*

*Yours Sincerely,*

*L. Leavitt*

*London*

Lucinda poured a little sand on the letter to help dry the ink and then blew it off. She picked up a second sheet of paper and folded it inside the first, then placed a penny stamp inside the letter and sealed it with wax. She waited for the wax to firmly dry before turning the letter over and addressing it, and then she pulled the cord for a servant. Mr. Ruffles came into the room with a bow.

Lucinda handed him the letter. "Please see that this letter leaves with today's post," she said.

"Yes, miss."

"Thank you, Ruffles," Lucinda said. Across the sitting room, Mrs. Patton was snoring ever so slightly, her head hung to one side and her mouth agape. Mr. Ruffles looked at the sleeping companion and shook his square head in distaste before bowing to Lucinda once more and leaving the room.

Lucinda dabbed the sweat from her brow with a handkerchief and noticed that the door to her father's study was ajar. She carefully tiptoed past her sleeping chaperone and eased the door open further so that her enormous skirt could fit through. Lucinda closed the door behind her and walked over to sit in her father's chair.

On the desk was a large stack of ledgers. She opened the first one and ran her finger down the column of numbers. She dipped the pen in the inkwell and put a checkmark at the bottom of the column. And then the next one. And then a third. She found a few petty errors—which she corrected—but nothing substantial.

Finally she opened the last ledger—a Mr. Quill's from the Bath office. The first eight pages were flawlessly perfect, but the ninth page was perplexing. The beginning numbers did not match the ending numbers on the eighth page. The ninth page was added correctly, as were the twenty pages after it. But between the eighth page and the ninth page, twenty-three pounds had simply disappeared.

Lucinda bit what was left of her thumbnail. Perhaps a page had fallen out? She turned the ledger over in her hands, but it looked brand new, the binding clearly intact. Had the clerk simply forgotten to carry over a few numerals? Lucinda doubled-checked her math, but surely not even the greenest of apprentices in her father's employ could make such a blatant error and not notice. There were no two ways about it: Mr. Quill was an embezzler.

Lucinda stood up excitedly. She could show her father this ledger and prove that she was clever enough to work in his countinghouse. That she was capable of so much more than her current banal existence of embroidery and endless sitting.

She tucked Mr. Quill's ledger underneath her arm and tiptoed out of the office. Mrs. Patton was now lying down on the sofa, still fast asleep. Lucinda quietly left the sitting room and asked Mr. Ruffles to call for her carriage. She carefully placed the ledger into her embroidery bag—which finally had a *useful* purpose.



When Lucinda arrived at the countinghouse, all the windows were open but the heat was just as unbearable there as it had been at home. She walked past the clerks, who were mopping their sweaty brows with handkerchiefs, and went upstairs, where she opened the door to her father's office without knocking. Her father looked so slight sitting in the large wingback chair at his desk. The top of his head was bald and shiny with sweat, a gray band of hair surrounding it. His beard and mustache were the same iron gray of his hair. His long, thin fingers gripped his pen tightly as he wrote a letter. Lucinda did not wait for him to greet her before entering the room.

"Hello, Father," she said gaily.

He glanced up at her, but his eyes immediately dropped back down to the letter he was writing. "Lucy, what are you doing here?"

"I was hoping that I might be able to assist you," Lucinda said. "I found some ledgers at home and I checked them. There were only a few petty mistakes, until—"

Her father shook his bald, shiny head back and forth, still not looking her in the eye. "Ledgers are not for young ladies, Lucy."

"Then I could help you with your letters, Father," Lucinda pressed, touching the stack of letters on his desk. "You had me open and file letters when I was only a little girl. Surely I could be more helpful now that I am eighteen."

He stood up, though he was several inches shorter than her. "Your Mother wanted you to be a lady, and a lady is what you will be."

“But—”

“No buts,” he said, raising his right hand. “This conversation is nonnegotiable. There will be no more looking through ledgers at home and no more visits to the counting-house. Do you understand?”

“I understand, but I don’t agree,” Lucinda muttered.

“You don’t have to agree,” he said. “Now shall I escort you back home?”

“No need, Father,” Lucinda said, and then lied, “Mrs. Patton is waiting in the carriage. I will shut the door behind me.”

Lucinda pressed the door closed and leaned back against it, exhaling slowly. She looked at the floor and breathed in and out several times. She wanted to yell in rage and frustration at the unfairness of it all, but she didn’t. If there was one thing she learned from finishing school, it was to keep everything bottled up inside. Arguing had only ever earned her stripes from the strap and enforced isolation in the attic. She continued to breathe slowly in and out until she dropped her embroidery bag on the floor and heard a clunk.

Mr. Quill’s ledger was still inside of it. Her father had never given her the opportunity to tell him about the embezzler. She looked down the hall and saw that David’s office door was open again. *Probably for the circulation of air*, she thought.

Lucinda lifted her head up and walked resolutely to David’s office. She knocked lightly on the open door.

David sat at his desk with his cravat untied and the top of his linen shirt open. His vest and jacket were hung on the

coatrack in the corner. She could see a bead of sweat on his exposed collarbone. The slight breeze from the windows behind him stirred his hair. He did not look up but continued to write a letter; he must not have heard her knock.

Lucinda took a few steps forward and cleared her throat.

David glanced up at her and shot to his feet in surprise. Or attempted to. He'd forgotten to push out his chair first, so instead the tops of his knees slammed into his desk and he nearly toppled back into his chair before he managed to stand up. He gave her a stiff bow and then clutched at the opening at the top of his shirt.

"Lucy—Miss Leavitt, how do you do?"

Lucinda grinned; she'd never seen the perfect Mr. David Randall so disheveled. She pointed to the chair and said primly, "May I sit down, please?"

"Yes, of course," he said. He hastily buttoned up his shirt, one button off of the correct one.

Lucinda sat. After a moment she said coyly, "Must you tower over me?"

He dropped into his chair instantly and then looked over his shoulder for his vest and coat. He stood again as if to go retrieve them.

"There's no need," Lucinda said. "It's hot enough already."

David smiled at her and inexplicably she felt hotter. He sat back down, rested his elbows on his desk, and interlaced his fingers. "What can I help you with today, Miss Leavitt?"

"Why do you assume I need your assistance?"

“I can think of no other reason for you to be here in my office.”

Lucinda let out a tinkle of laughter. “I am not here for your assistance, but rather to offer you mine.”

“What assistance?”

She pulled Mr. Quill’s ledger out of her embroidery bag and handed it to David. “My father had me go over some of the ledgers at our home and I found one that I think you ought to look at.”

He opened it and looked at the first couple pages. “What’s wrong with it?”

“The numbers between pages eight and nine are not consecutive,” Lucinda said. “Somehow between the two pages, twenty-three pounds disappeared into thin air.”

David turned a few more pages and then looked back and forth from page eight to page nine. “You are right.”

“My father would like us both to go to the Bath office and perform an audit on all the books,” Lucinda continued quickly, careful not to look him in the eyes. It was easier to lie if you didn’t maintain eye contact. Another *invaluable* lesson from finishing school. “You’ll probably want to contact the Justice of the Peace about Mr. Quill while we are there.”

“I do not see why you need to come,” David said slowly.

“Don’t you want my help?” Lucinda asked. “I’m much faster at numbers than you.”

“That’s true,” David admitted. “But I can’t help but think you only wish to perform the Bath audit so that you may visit

Laura Street and inquire after your dead author. And I am very busy at the moment.” He gestured to the stack of letters on his desk.

“I have underrated your intelligence, David,” Lucinda said, forgetting to be formal in her excitement. She untied her bonnet and took it off. “But I do believe that the Bath audit is truly essential. And if we are, by happy coincidence, already in Bath, what could it hurt to make a short visit to Laura Street to make an inquiry? And, if we hurry, we can finish all of the correspondence on your desk and set out for Bath on the earliest train tomorrow. I should not think we need stay there for more than a night. Be sure to have your man pack the appropriate clothes.”

“I cannot escort you to Bath—”

“Without a chaperone,” Lucinda finished. “Mrs. Patton would love to visit Bath and drink the waters. The poor dear’s health seems quite precarious; she falls asleep at the least provocation.”

David exhaled loudly.

“Which stack of letters shall I start on?” Lucinda asked brightly.



Lucinda stood perfectly still as her lady’s maid dressed her in a blue taffeta gown for dinner. She felt like a doll as her maid moved her arms up and down and buttoned the back of her dress. The maid curled the hair around Lucinda’s face and



intertwined a matching blue ribbon through her locks. Then she expertly applied carmine on Lucinda's lips and rice powder on her face. Lucinda stuck her tongue out at her reflection in the mirror—she truly looked like a white-faced porcelain doll.

But when she went down to dinner, she wore her best weapon—her smile. Lucinda nodded politely at all of Mrs. Patton's ramblings during the first three courses.

"I had my own horse when I was a young lady, named Nebuchadnezzar," Mrs. Patton said. "A neatish brown mare with the most excellent of manners."

"It is a pity Nebuchadnezzar isn't still alive," Lucinda said as she picked up her wineglass. "With his excellent manners we could have invited him to dinner. I am sure he would have enlivened the conversation."

She sipped her wine while Mrs. Patton laughed and her father even smiled.

"My dear Lucinda," Mrs. Patton said. "You know, you can really be charming when you wish to be."

"Dear Nebuchadnezzar reminds me of something that happened at finishing school," Lucinda said, setting her glass back on the table. "Miss Ursula Atkinson put horse manure on her face because Miss Clara Hardin told her it would rid her of her freckles."

"Oh, dear!" Mrs. Patton said with a high-pitched laugh.

"I assume it did not," her father said dryly.

"It did rid her of something."

“What?” Mrs. Patton asked.

“Companions,” Lucinda said. “The poor girl smelled awful for a week and never lived it down.”

Her father laughed. It was the first time she’d heard him laugh in nearly four years. It was extremely loud and jolly. Miss Clara Hardin would have called it vulgar. Lucinda loved the sound of it. She could tell he was pleased. She was behaving like the sweet society debutant he wanted her to be.

“Father,” Lucinda said, sensing her opportunity. “Another schoolfellow, Miss Amelia Butterfield, told me of a lace-maker in Bath that makes the most exquisite point lace. It would be the perfect trimming for my scarlet evening gown, and I want to look my very best at my first dinner invitation next week. It is terribly important that I make a good impression. Please say that Mrs. Patton and I may go to Bath to purchase some point lace? Please, Father?”

He stroked his chin. “Bath seems an awfully long way to go for lace.”

“Lace-making is an art form,” Mrs. Patton said, coming to Lucinda’s aid. “A truly gifted tatter is worth seeking out whatever the distance.”

“And Mrs. Patton and I could drink from the waters of Bath,” Lucinda added quickly, surprised that Mrs. Patton had supported the idea so easily. “It has been so hot and I have been feeling quite poorly, which has caused me to behave in an unladylike manner. I believe that drinking the waters of Bath would be just the thing to set us both up. Don’t you agree, Mrs. Patton?”

“I have drank the waters of Bath before and found them to be greatly beneficial,” Mrs. Patton said. “I was a lady’s companion to Lady Louisa Moulton, then. Such a dear girl. She made a very good match to Viscount Etters.”

“Please, *Papa*?” Lucinda asked, using the name that she’d called him as a child. It was the ace in her hand and she played it with precision.

“I suppose—” he began.

“Excellent,” Lucinda said, cutting him off. “Mr. Randall is traveling to Bath tomorrow and he can accompany us.”

“Mr. Randall would be an excellent escort,” her father said.

“How do you know that, Lucinda?” Mrs. Patton asked.

Lucinda’s eyes darted from Mrs. Patton’s suspicious ones to her father’s shrewd ones. “My dear Mrs. Patton, I forgot to tell you. Mrs. Randall paid us a call this afternoon and told me all about it. I almost woke you, but you were sleeping so soundly that I didn’t.”

Her father’s sharp eyes turned from studying Lucinda to evaluating Mrs. Patton. She saw the older woman’s color heighten as she sat up even straighter in her chair.

“In the future, always wake me, Lucinda,” she said, attempting to retrieve her slipping dignity. “I am not only your companion, but your chaperone. It is vital for your social importance to have me present when you have visitors.”

“I did not know,” Lucinda said, as innocently as she could. She lowered her eyes as she added, “I am so sorry. It will not happen again.”

“I should not have been sleeping,” Mrs. Patton said. Then fanned herself and added, “But this heat is so oppressive.”

Lucinda stood up. “I will go have the maid pack my things. We have an early train to catch tomorrow.”

She left the dining room still in the character of an elegant young lady, but when she reached the stairs, she climbed them by twos. And once in her room, she jumped up and down and squealed silently. Tomorrow she would escape her prison.



## Four

**MRS. PATTON YAWNED WIDELY AS THEY** stood at the entrance of Paddington Station. Lucinda pulled out her pocket-watch and looked at the time: it was half past eight. If David didn't hurry they would miss the first train.

As if he'd heard her anxious thoughts, David stepped out of a two-wheeled hansom cab with a small portmanteau. He paid the driver and strode purposefully toward them with his broad shoulders back and his head held high.

"There you are, David," Lucinda said with a wave of her hand. "Allow me to introduce my chaperone and companion, Mrs. Patton."

He touched his gloved hand to the rim of his top hat.

Mrs. Patton, for once, was wide-awake and gave him an enormous smile and curtsy. *He isn't that handsome*, Lucinda thought with annoyance.

"Mr. Randall, please accept my apologies for my charge addressing you so informally," Mrs. Patton simpered. "Lucinda, a lady never calls a gentleman by his given name unless they are closely related family members."

"Very well," Lucinda said, "*Mr.* Randall, will you please help us with our luggage?"

"Are both of those yours?" David asked, pointing to their two sizable trunks.

"Yes."

"We are only going for one night."

"I know, or else we would have had to bring *four* trunks," Lucinda said brightly. "Being a lady requires a great deal of baggage, does it not, Mrs. Patton?"

"Yes, yes it does," Mrs. Patton agreed emphatically.

David shook his head bemusedly. "I'll get a porter."

"Not strong enough to carry them yourself?" Lucinda asked teasingly.

"Not stupid enough," David retorted. He returned in less than a minute with a porter dressed all in blue, pushing a trolley. The porter loaded the two heavy trunks onto the trolley and led the way to the platform where they would board the train. Lucinda walked beside David as Mrs. Patton endeavored to keep up.

A conductor opened the door to the first-class train car

for them. David handed Lucinda in and then Mrs. Patton. They found an empty compartment where Lucinda chose the seat facing forward, and Mrs. Patton sat beside her. The porter secured their luggage and David tossed the man a coin before entering the compartment and sitting down across from the ladies.

A short time later the train lurched forward and began to rattle over the tracks. The gentle movement soon had Mrs. Patton right to sleep, her head hanging forward. Lucinda looked at her other traveling companion and saw that David appeared rather pale.

“Are you feeling sick?”

“No,” David said, covering his mouth and nose with a handkerchief.

Lucinda stood up and sat back down next to him. She touched his arm in concern. His eyes were closed and he seemed to be concentrating.

“What can I do to help you?”

“I’m fine,” David said, opening his light brown eyes. “I just get a little unwell when I travel sitting backward.”

“Why did you not say so before, Dav—Mr. Randall? You silly man,” Lucinda chided. “Take my seat and I will sit over here.”

David did not immediately move, so Lucinda gave him a slight shove with the hand that she had rested on his arm. Reluctantly he moved to the opposite seat and sat down. He did not speak for several minutes, but his color returned to

normal—not that Lucinda was looking. But she happened to notice it between enjoying the scenery that whizzed past the train.

“I don’t mind if you call me David, as you did when we were children,” he said at last.

“You may *not* call me Lucy, as you did when we were children.”

He blinked in surprise.

She gave him a saucy smile and tipped her head forward. “You may call me Lucinda.”

“Lu-cin-da,” he said slowly, as if he were tasting each syllable. Then he nodded toward Mrs. Patton’s gently snoring form. “Does she always sleep this much?”

“Yes,” Lucinda said. “If she sits down, she falls right to sleep.”

“A sleeping chaperone is hardly an ideal one.”

“Depends on your perspective,” Lucinda said. “A sleeping chaperone can be a perfect one if you do not want them overly involved in your every moment. *You* would not be able to endure any chaperone at all.”

“True,” David said. “But I am not a young, unmarried woman.”

“One would think with a woman on the throne -, that women in England would have more freedom,” Lucinda said. “If anything, it is less. Miss Holley—the lady who ran the finishing school I attended—told me that when she was a girl, ladies were allowed to go on carriage rides alone with young



men. Now if a lady were to do that, her reputation would be ruined.”

“Is there a particular young man you have in mind?”

“No,” Lucinda answered honestly. “I should like to ride around in a carriage all by myself. I just wish young women were granted the same privileges as young men. The same opportunities for education and business.”

“I was wondering when we were going to get to business,” David said with a sympathetic smile. “But you are fortunate in your father. He is allowing you to be a part of his business.”

Lucinda had the grace to blush. She had no intention of disabusing David of his belief that her father was supportive of her helping at the countinghouse.

“Odd, isn’t it?” Lucinda said. “You left school to join the business, and soon after I left the business to go to school. Do you regret not finishing your courses at Eton?”

David shook his head slowly. “I have regretted far more that my father did not teach me anything practical relating to his business affairs. Whenever I tried to help, he sent me away like a pesky child. And at Eton, I studied the classics and natural sciences. Neither of which have proved particularly useful in my employment.”

“I daresay they are still more useful in your life than courses on needlework and music,” Lucinda countered.

“You forgot deportment.”

“How could I?” Lucinda said. “I was hit on the back with

a strap until I learnt to sit up straight and walk with my head up.”

Subconsciously Lucinda brought her hand to her neck and shoulder, remembering all the many times she'd be struck for slouching. She had slouched because she was so tall and did not want to bring more attention to herself and her height. The meanest teacher, Miss Tenney, wasted no opportunity to punish Lucinda for every slight infraction.

Lucinda met David's eyes. He must have realized that he had conjured a painful memory, for he tried to change the subject. “And drawing. Don't all refined young ladies draw?”

“Alas, I have no talent for drawing,” Lucinda admitted. “Or music either. Although no effort was spared to teach me the rudimentary knowledge of the pianoforte. I have learnt by heart three pieces of music should I ever be requested to play.”

“It is too bad you cannot display your mathematical skills,” David said. “Members of the audience could call out two numbers and you could tell them what they added up to.”

“They would need to call out at least three numbers,” Lucinda countered, “so that I would be slightly challenged.”

David nodded at this, then turned towards the window. Lucinda resolutely stared out the window on the other side. They passed several farms and could see a few villages in the distance. Mrs. Patton continued to snore. Lucinda glanced again at David who was, to her surprise, watching her intently.

“I am sorry that you were treated harshly at finishing school,” he said. “I had no idea that they treated girls like that.

The strap was used pretty freely at Eton as well. . . . When I told my mother what you confided to me, I did not know she would tell your father to send you to school.”

“What did you expect?”

David’s face flushed red. “That she would explain to you about a woman’s menses. About the changes that were happening to your person.”

“I thought I was dying,” Lucinda said at last. “I am grateful that you at least assured me that I wasn’t.”

“I was a fifteen-year-old boy, hardly an ideal person to explain such things to a fourteen-year-old girl,” David said, the exasperation clear in his voice. “And I thought you would be more comfortable hearing about it from another woman.”

“And I thought my only friend was trying to get rid of me,” Lucinda said. “Out of the office. Out of his life.”

“I wasn’t trying to get you out of the office or out of my life,” David said. “I was only trying to help you, like you helped me when my father died. You were the one who taught me all the different aspects of the business. I would have been sunk without you, despite your father’s patience. And as I said before, I was only trying to help you.”

“Next time *ask* me how I would like to be helped,” Lucinda said, much louder than she had meant to.

Mrs. Patton stirred. “Oh dear, I must have dozed,” she said. “How long to Bath?”

“I will go ask the conductor,” David said, and abruptly left the compartment.

Mrs. Patton looked from David's departing figure to Lucinda sitting on the opposite seat.

"Lucinda, pray, why are you sitting over there?"

"Mr. Randall was feeling sick riding backward."

Mrs. Patton nodded. "Well, I suppose I had better switch sides as well. I am your chaperone, after all."

Mrs. Patton awkwardly got out of the seat and plunked down next to Lucinda. David returned after a few minutes and said the trip should be over within half an hour. Mrs. Patton thanked him cordially and even managed to stay awake until they reached the train station in Bath.