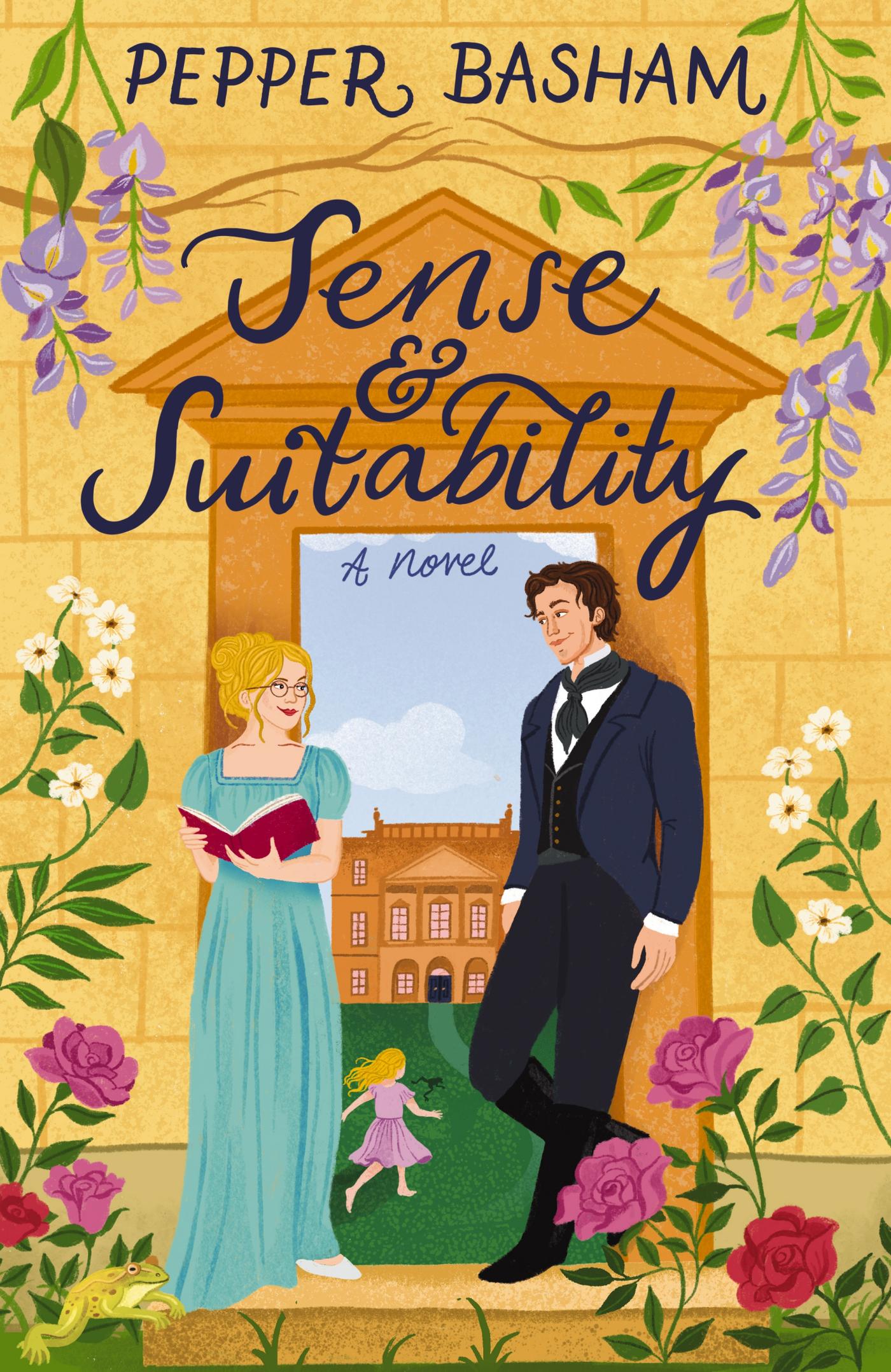


PEPPER BASHAM

Sense
&
Suitability

A Novel



Sense & Suitability

a novel

PEPPER BASHAM



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Sense and Suitability

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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, nephew 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.

PEPPER BASHAM

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 little 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."

SENSE AND SUITABILITY

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 one another 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.

PEPPER BASHAM

“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.

She’d barely made it to the steps into the garden when someone

SENSE AND SUITABILITY

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.

Her posture wilted for only a second before she rallied.

PEPPER BASHAM

She'd been preparing for this inevitable 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 comportment. Whereas Father fled discord as a whole, Aunt Bean saw

SENSE AND SUITABILITY

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.

Her parties last year numbered fifteen!

Fifteen!

PEPPER BASHAM

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 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

SENSE AND SUITABILITY

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 quite expecting your visit 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.” His eyes narrowed in playful parrying as Emme continued. “I would hazard a guess the church will be particularly full this Sunday of people

PEPPER BASHAM

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 daughters’ futures, but of course, Father could be easily swayed into worrying about something or other, especially to ensure Aunt Bean’s

SENSE AND SUITABILITY

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

Emme bit her smile into submission. Thank the Lord she wasn’t

PEPPER BASHAM

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 naïve, leaving her wiser only in the art of heartbreak. However, her experiences had at least lent a certain realism to her fictional 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,

SENSE AND SUITABILITY

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—"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 unshakeable 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 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

PEPPER BASHAM

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."

"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

SENSE AND SUITABILITY

Aunt Bean. “What do you mean?”

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



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

CHAPTER 2

Well, there it is in black and white. You *must* find a wife.”

Simon Reeves’s body braced against the invisible blow from his so-called friend, Benjamin Northrop, as the man set his glass on the table with as deafening a finality as his words. His reference to the newest tattle in the social pages somehow incited a pain just above Simon’s right eye.

A wife. The very word felt like a shackle, the weight of it pressing sharp against Simon’s already overburdened chest. It was a notion he had avoided considering for as long as possible, clinging instead to the naïve hope that he might find some other way to salvage the future of his estate and family.

But of course, the world offered no such reprieve. Not for him. Especially in a set of consecutive tragedies that started not two years before.

“Marry?” Simon placed his own glass down, rolling the word around on his tongue like a bitter draught. “Because the local tattle says so?” He raised a brow and fixed Benjamin with a look. “A fine proposition it would be for some unsuspecting bride: marry into ruin, inherit a family in chaos, and call it happily ever after. A welcome haven for any of Lady Ruthton’s protégées.”

Yet even as he mocked the idea, Simon couldn’t entirely dismiss it. If one of Lady Ruthton’s protégées came with a dowry large enough to restore his crumbling estate, perhaps the idea wasn’t as preposterous as he pretended. His pride bristled at the thought, but his situation left

SENSE AND SUITABILITY

no room for such luxuries as pride. Ravenscross needed funds, and it needed them urgently.

“The last lot,” Simon continued, tone dry, “did little else but talk nonsense, fret over lace, and read Gothic novels.”

His thoughts stammered against his own words. Except one.

The familiar burn of shame twisted through his chest. What a fool he’d been. An arrogant, reckless fool. He had never intended to meet Emmeline Lockhart, let alone court her. Their first encounter had been entirely unplanned, a serendipitous meeting that left him unexpectedly disarmed. Against all sense and propriety, he had let himself *care* for her. And when he should have walked away, he continued, unwilling to release the sweetness . . . the authentic nature of their connection.

And then she’d become the first casualty of his world falling apart.

She deserved far better than a man forced to choose duty over affection.

“Needs must, Simon,” Ben quipped, his gaze flicking pointedly toward the threadbare tapestries and the dim, insufficient light of the drawing room. “Gothic novels may well prepare them for your family and estate.”

Simon refused to follow his friend’s directive. Updates and candles were luxuries that Ravenscross could scarcely afford. They barely had enough in the coffers to pay the remaining servants, let alone fund repairs. And the debts left by his cousin with the estate—not to mention his father—were as numerous as they were insurmountable.

Even after all these months of the truth being thrust into his face on a daily basis, it still felt surreal, this sudden turn of fortune that had made him Lord Ravenscross. Two years ago, the title had been a distant prospect, held by a cousin Simon barely knew, and destined, Simon had assumed, to pass to his cousin’s yet-to-be born son from a yet-to-be-wed wife. But then came the letter—the one that informed him of the storm off the Indies that had claimed the lives of both

PEPPER BASHAM

his cousin and his father. How was he to have known his father had gotten himself entrenched in Cousin Rupert's nasty affairs? And how was Simon to have known he'd end up paying for the mismanagement and profligate spending of two men who should have ensured the reputation and future of Ravenscross?

Of course, he hadn't known. Hadn't even fathomed.

And so the estate, the title, the responsibility—it had all landed on him with staggering suddenness, shattering the carefree existence he'd once known, altering *every* plan. The first six months, he'd passed so much time attempting to understand his new role while uncovering the extent of his father's massive loss in trade and his cousin's liberal spending, he'd not noticed his mother's failing health. But when his brother Theodore joined the military ranks to fight the French, it had served as the last loss for his mother. Within months, she'd succumbed to illness and grief, which appeared to propel his sister Arianna to run away with her proposed lover.

After all those months, all those heartrending months, Simon Reeves—once carefree and certain of his place in the world—no longer existed. The man who bore the title of Viscount of Ravenscross was burdened, humbled, and all too aware of his inadequacies.

"You flatter me, Ben," Simon said with forced levity. "I fear my very real life may exceed the requirements of any Gothic novel."

Ben's smirk disappeared. "I wish it were fiction for you, Simon. God knows I do. But you had no hand in your cousin's decisions or your parents' fates, and you cannot change Arianna's. Besides, you've done all you can to find her. Months of searching. You've kept the estate afloat against impossible odds. But you can't solve everything with sheer will. It's time to think practically."

Practically? He almost laughed. As if the burden of practicality hadn't been thrust upon him from the moment that blasted letter arrived. But what to do? He felt the answer but didn't want to accept

SENSE AND SUITABILITY

it as his only option, so he offered another deflective smile. “I assume the gossip mill has also selected my bride for me?”

And his friend’s humor resurfaced with its usual buoyancy. “Not yet, but give it time. They’ve already chosen your replacements for half the tapestries in this house.”

Simon huffed a laugh despite himself, though the sound lacked any real humor. “As if new tapestries will fix anything.”

“They might.” Ben’s tone remained light. “But they’ll require a dowry to match. Which circles us back to the matter at hand.”

Simon had tried to stall such a decision by learning the hard work of labor. Once, he’d scoffed at tradesmen, but in the past months, he’d known the hand-callousing occupation of mending fences to save the sheep they desperately needed for income. Wool remained an ever-present need and sheep were aplenty. He’d become familiar with the feel of a hammer as he attempted to shore up some loose boards in the stables. And somehow, within the work, he’d learned to appreciate things he’d never even noticed before.

The true value of a coin or a faithful servant or a sturdy wall.

The importance of good people and hard work.

And the realization that desperation truly did lead to ingenuity . . . but also, as he felt it now, resignation.

“If you marry well and a woman of good reputation, it will restore more than the estate.” Ben leaned forward, his tone taking on an earnest edge. “It will elevate your family, provide for your siblings, and allow you to hire a proper governess for the younger three.”

Simon groaned, dragging a hand down his face. What governess could possibly withstand the youngest three Reeves children? Aunt Agatha was the only one who’d ever managed to keep them in line, and she’d deserted Ravenscross a month ago to visit an ailing friend, leaving Simon to navigate the treacherous waters of guardianship alone.

PEPPER BASHAM

“The prospect is not so bad,” Ben continued. “I hear marriage can be pleasant—with the right person.”

Emmeline Lockhart’s face flashed in Simon’s mind unbidden, bringing with it a familiar ache. As reckless as he’d been with her emotions, his affection had been sincere. He’d cherished their conversations, her laughter, her sharp humor. If things had been different—if his cousin hadn’t died, if his father hadn’t squandered his fortune, if the title hadn’t fallen to him—he would have known a future with someone he loved.

Simon’s eyes closed. There was no use torturing himself with what-ifs. He had to turn his mind from Miss Lockhart and face what was.

Now, he was Lord Ravenscross, and duty had to come first.

“Marriage? A pleasant option?” He forced a grin and gestured toward Ben. “Says the bachelor with whom I’ll be competing this season. Tell me, will you take your own advice and seek out a wife of good fortune? Perhaps even find this ‘right person’ you so readily recommend?”

Ben’s smile was maddeningly unrepentant. “I’m not opposed to the idea, should the right one present herself. But unlike you, my friend, I can afford to be selective.” He stood, looming over Simon both in height and ease of circumstance. “You, alas . . .” He tsked, smile crooked to soften the blow. “But I shall give you first choice since you’re desperate and I am not.”

“How gracious of you.” Simon reached for his drink, letting the sharp tang dull his sarcasm. Desperation was an unsavory word—one he loathed to apply to himself. Yet here he was, neck-deep in it.

God help him. That prayer had become his refrain of late. No one else *could* help him. Not if he wished to save the estate and marry a woman who would accept his family. It *would* take a miracle, and he wasn’t too certain God had any left to spare for him and his brood.

Simon stood, grateful at least that where Ben bettered him in height, Simon excelled in breadth of shoulders.

SENSE AND SUITABILITY

“Take heart.” Ben failed to control his grin. “Your somewhat . . . colorful past and current predicament lend you an air of mystery. Ladies will find you a vast deal more alluring. Work up a brooding scowl or two, and you’re nigh irresistible.”

Simon snorted. A scowl? That he could manage. What with a strong-willed brother off fighting the French, a runaway sister, and his three youngest siblings who were one step shy of feral.

“See, that expression will do quite well.” Ben gestured toward Simon’s face. “The ladies will swoon.”

Simon pinned Ben with a look. “Why are we friends?”

Ben’s laugh echoed off the parlor walls and offered a momentary levity, but the respite was short-lived.

The library door creaked open, just wide enough to allow twelve-year-old William space to slip into the room. Pale and thin, the boy’s pallor had the matrons at church constantly murmuring over his health, but since the sun rarely touched the boy’s face, there was no other tint he could possess.

He offered Ben a tentative nod—a small but significant improvement from the last time Ben had visited—before fixing his gaze on Simon.

Simon’s chest tightened. “What is it, Will?”

The boy flinched, shrinking under Simon’s scrutiny. Simon silently cursed himself. Had he been too sharp? Or was William simply that skittish? Perhaps both. He’d been gone far too long, chasing the faintest traces of Arianna while his youngest siblings grieved and floundered without the proper guidance of their eldest brother. Another failure to add to his growing ledger.

“Lottie’s gone missing,” he stammered, his words barely audible. “Mrs. Patterson sent me to fetch you.”

“Not again,” Ben groaned. “Didn’t this happen on my last visit?”

Simon refrained from admitting that Charlotte’s disappearances were a near-daily occurrence. “Which direction did she go?”

PEPPER BASHAM

William looked away and shrugged. “I w-wasn’t outside.”

Of course not. The boy likely had been sitting by one of the upstairs windows reading or painting. Simon placed a hand on William’s shoulder. “Thank you for letting me know, Will.”

William’s body eased under the touch, and he offered the faintest of smiles. It was enough to cement Simon’s resolve. He’d failed these children before, but no more. In the absence of their parents, he would do whatever it took to protect them. To be a better man.

He had to. There was nothing else for it.

Simon dashed from the room and down the hall, bypassing the grand staircase to his left, the unused ballroom on his right, and the dining room, which now rarely hosted family members, let alone guests. Ben followed on his heels.

At the main back door, Mrs. Patterson awaited them, her apron streaked with mud and her expression one of weary exasperation.

Oh, dear Lord, Simon inwardly prayed. *Please don’t let her leave us.*

Mrs. Patterson was the linchpin holding their fraying household together, especially in Aunt Agatha’s absence. She’d been steadfast for years, even when Simon’s selfishness before his parents’ deaths might have driven her away. Surely the kindly housekeeper could see his efforts to atone for those past failings, even if they didn’t always manifest in his siblings’ behavior.

“I’m so sorry, Mrs. Patterson. If I’d been here more regularly—”

“Charlotte had her tendencies before you left, sir.” She sighed and studied Simon for a moment, those clear eyes softening around the edges. “But it’s good you’re here now because the more eyes on this brood, the better.”

Her ready kindness humbled him all the more. She deserved sainthood, without a doubt. “I’m here to stay,” he whispered—the words as much a promise to himself as to her—then stepped back, clearing his throat. “Do you have any idea where she might have gone?”

“I haven’t the foggiest, sir.” Mrs. Patterson wiped her forehead

SENSE AND SUITABILITY

with the back of her hand, glancing down at the muddy smears on her apron without so much as a sigh. “But let us hope it’s not back to Mr. Dean’s stables. Last time she went there, they nearly shot her for trying to ‘rescue’ one of his horses she claimed was being mistreated.”

Simon drew in a breath and cast a glance to Ben from his periphery. His friend’s look of confusion twisted into a slight hue of horror. A legitimate assessment for someone who hadn’t lived through the last few months learning the idiosyncrasies of the lot.

Lottie had gone positively wild since their mother’s death, and Arianna’s disappearance had only exacerbated her defiance. It was as though she aimed to challenge the entire world.

Beyond the back door, the late-morning skyline stretched before Simon—a pine forest to the left, pastures rolling out to the right, and the Hemston property abutting their land at the far edge. Somewhere past these familiar boundaries lay St. Groves, quiet and indifferent to his mounting struggles.

“Miss Sophia is in the water puddles with the dogs again.” Mrs. Patterson looked up at him, holding his gaze. “*This* time, she’s catching frogs and refuses to come inside to be bathed.”

Ben’s horror must have worn off because he chuckled . . . fueling Simon’s growing headache.

“I believe Miss Sophia knows exactly where her sister went and is disinclined to share the information, my lord.”

Simon’s lips pressed into a thin line. “Is she?” He eyed the overgrown garden, already suspecting the answer.

“But you have a way with her, sir.” Mrs. Patterson’s voice gentled. “She wants to please you.”

The statement warmed a knotted spot in Simon’s chest. Could he have some good influence on these children yet? It wasn’t too late to redirect whatever path they currently were careening down, was it?

He gave Mrs. Patterson a grateful nod and strode into the garden, a tangled expanse of greenery that once flourished under his mother’s

PEPPER BASHAM

loving care. The scene was too much like his own life at the moment to linger on the view.

As Simon reached the nearest bend in the garden path, his gaze fell upon the central fountain, a pair of stone swans poised in eternal embrace. Beyond it, a familiar cascade of wild curls peeked out from behind a cluster of flowering shrubs. Fair hair. Sophia was the only child with such a hue, so like their mother's.

A sudden pang tightened his chest. Grief had an uncanny way of rising at the most inconvenient moments. He refused to succumb to the pull and stepped toward the shrubs. "Fia?" His tone of voice wasn't as gentle as he'd hoped, so he tried again. "Fia, love?"

Perhaps adding the "love" helped a little. Mother always seemed to respond with a smile on the rare occasions Father used it.

Rounding the fountain, Simon found the five-year-old crouched beside the stream, a wriggling frog clutched triumphantly in one mud-streaked hand while the other absently patted Dodger, the ever-loyal hound. Fia had practically lived outside all summer, and even as the season waned, his fairy-sister kept to her routine of earth and sky. Her focus remained fixed on the frog as though the rest of the world had simply melted away.

"Fia," he repeated, and this time she looked up at him, her round face lighting with a toothless grin.

Variations of plant life stuck from the little girl's curls, giving off the appearance of Medusa's snakes. Mud smudged her cheeks, her neck, and the once-white pinafore over her dress.

Perhaps William's look of terror was founded, especially with such sisters.

In fact, the longer Simon lived, the more terrifying women became.

"Simon, I found diamonds." The sweet voice doused some of his ire—the toothless grin probably helped too. "Come see."

The exasperation knotting his chest unraveled slightly. He counted

SENSE AND SUITABILITY

to ten in the steps it took to make it to her side. How could he blame her? She barely remembered their parents, so the fault for her behavior lay completely on his shoulders.

He was beginning to think his shoulders were not so broad after all.

He knelt beside her. "Show me, lamb."

The endearment somehow had her edging nearer, or perhaps it was the fact she wanted him there. Close?

"Do you see?" She pointed eagerly to a cluster of quartz glinting beneath the water's surface. "Aren't they lovely?"

"They are quite lovely."

"Do you think they can help us pay for the blasted repairs?" She blinked those piercing brown eyes up at him.

The mixture of her repeating his "blasted repairs" sentiment paired with the desire to find a way to help mend their home took all words from his mind. In fact, his throat closed with more emotion than he cared to contemplate.

He lowered his head and swallowed—gathering himself—and then gentled a palm against her shoulder while ignoring the frog, which appeared to be wrestling for its life. "You are so kind and clever, but I'm afraid these particular types of diamonds will not be able to help us."

A frown pulled at her bottom lip.

"But," he added quickly, somehow finding his smile, "they'd make a fine addition to the library table. What do you say I help you collect them after we've found Charlotte?"

Her eyes brightened. "You would help me?"

His mind reared against the request. He didn't have time. Not with all he needed to do, but the hope in her eyes proved his undoing. "Yes, but only after we find your sister."

Sigh. *Yet another sister to find.*

She rewarded him with a double-dimpled grin. "She went that way

PEPPER BASHAM

on her pony.” Fia pointed toward the north fields. “But the pony wasn’t behaving, so she was fussing at him. Blasted ponies!”

A snort of laughter erupted from behind him, but Simon resolutely ignored Ben’s amusement.

“Thank you, Fia.” Simon gave the girl a kiss on the one clean spot on her forehead and stood, turning to Ben. “You *really* don’t have to stay.”

Ben didn’t take the hint. “I’ve grown accustomed to looking for lost people when I visit you, Ravenscross.” He shrugged a shoulder. “Besides, it’s the most adventure I’ve had all week.”

And to think, Simon used to grow bored on nice, quiet days.

Foolish man. Quiet, uneventful days sounded positively divine.

Simon shot Ben a glare before setting off at a clipped pace in the direction Fia had indicated. Fortunately, not a half hour into the walk, Charlotte and her pony came into view as the thirteen-year-old rode back toward home.

With a great deal of effort, Simon curbed his inner fury.

“Did you really have to come looking for me?” she called out as they approached. “I wasn’t even a mile away.”

Her unrepentant response did little to assist his self-control. “How many times have I told you that you cannot leave the house without alerting someone to your whereabouts?”

Her chin came up, those fiery brown eyes narrowing. “I told Fia.”

“Fia is five,” Simon retorted, stepping forward to meet her and the pony. “You must inform an adult, Charlotte. I am responsible for your safety.”

“No one’s safe here,” she shot back. “And I’ve been doing fine on my own while you’ve been away. Someone needed to look after the younger children.”

Her words struck a nerve, their truth undeniable. She had been forced to grow up too quickly. Even with Aunt Agatha’s guidance, the weight of responsibility had fallen far too heavily on Lottie’s young

SENSE AND SUITABILITY

shoulders.

He shouldn't have gone after Arianna—certainly not for so long. The youngest three had needed him. But well, to be honest, he hadn't known what to do. Perhaps he'd run away as much out of cowardice in facing his impossible future as to find his ruined sister.

"I am here now," Simon replied, his tone firm. "And I expect you to inform an adult when you leave the house."

"I am not a prisoner," she snapped. "You don't ask William or Teddy to report their whereabouts."

"William never leaves the house and Teddy is a grown man," Simon countered, though not certain if the military had reformed or exacerbated his younger brother's rambunctious ways. "I've already failed by losing one sister, Lottie. Do you wish to cause me to lose a second?"

He hadn't meant to voice the words. They'd slipped out before he'd even thought them. But he felt them. Every single day, he felt them. Arianna's disappearance haunted him, like so many of the other failings flashing before him.

Charlotte's defiance faltered, her expression softening just enough to show she'd understood. She was too perceptive by half, her awareness far beyond any other thirteen-year-old's. He had to be more controlled. More careful. The burden was *his*. Not hers.

Simon shook his head, needing to shift the subject. "Where were you headed anyway?"

Her chin tilted once more, though the fire in her eyes dimmed slightly. "Lord Hemston's son has archery lessons on Tuesday afternoons. I've watched every one."

"You ride your pony to watch Lord Hemston's son's archery lessons every Tuesday?"

Ben feigned a cough to cover his laugh.

"How else am I to learn? You won't teach me," she said with a pointed look.

PEPPER BASHAM

“I promised to teach you when you got older.” However, he inwardly winced at the unfulfilled pledge.

“You always say that,” she replied coolly, nudging her pony forward. “But it never happens. Someday I shall dress as a boy and join a hunt myself. Then I’ll learn.”

She rode past as if she hadn’t heightened Simon’s concern to near implosion.

“By the way, the sheep are getting out over the back fence into Lord Hemston’s pasture.” She tossed a haughty smile over her shoulder, her dark hair fluttering loose in the breeze. “I thought you’d want to know.”

Lord, help me. He wanted to throttle her.

If Simon’s shoulders could have descended any farther while he stood upright, they would have. He couldn’t continue living life like this—for his own sake as well as for his siblings’.

As if reading his internal thoughts, Ben stepped up beside him and exhaled audibly. “You need a wife, Simon.” Ben shook his head and studied Lottie’s retreating frame as if the girl had taken on terrifying qualities. “Or her money, at the very least.” He met Simon’s gaze. “You really have no choice.”

CHAPTER 3

Simon was back?
Emmeline's throat squeezed in a breath as she ushered all her strength to maintain a neutral expression. *Simon.*

Her heart pitched again. Perhaps if she stopped referring to him as Simon, it would help. "Lord Ravenscross" felt suitably distant—less personal, less capable of conjuring a roguish smile or tender look. She had thought herself well on the path to conquering her feelings, of moving beyond him, but the mere prospect, after all this time, of seeing him across a ballroom or theater sent her composure to tatters.

Her fingers pinched around her book to the cramping point.

"I have already encouraged your father to purchase a subscription to the season, particularly to the fancy balls." Aunt Bean smiled, or so Emme thought, but Aunt Bean's smiles never seemed to understand the full intention. "Eighteen this year."

Eighteen? Emme wrenched her thoughts from striking blue eyes and shattering humiliation to focus on her aunt's words. Eighteen fancy balls? She had barely survived the ten she'd attended last year, and that had been when Simon wasn't even present. The thought of enduring such a parade of insipid introductions, relentless chatter, and suffocating crowds—this time with Simon likely among them—was enough to wither her to the floor.

Surely there weren't even enough eligible men in St. Groves to warrant so many balls.

Perhaps if she managed to offend everyone by the fifth ball, she

PEPPER BASHAM

could graciously bow out of the rest, leaving Aster to secure the next family wedding.

“We will succeed, Emmeline Lockhart, if it is the last thing I do.” Aunt Bean’s penetrating gaze locked onto hers, as if the sheer force of her will could extract all resistance. And despite the chill running up Emme’s arms at the sight, she realized she’d just uncovered marvelous inspiration for a new character in her latest novel.

The readers would be duly terrified.

Thomas, bless him, stepped forward as if to intervene in the hypnotic moment. But a noise from behind turned everyone’s attention toward the hall, where Emme’s father attempted to disappear into his study through the back stair.

“John, is that you?” Aunt Bean’s voice sliced through the air with the precision of an expert arrow, freezing Father mid-step.

Father turned, eyes as wide as a barn owl’s, brown brows quivering upward. He paused, sent a longing look toward his study door, and then, with a deep breath that straightened his entire body, he turned.

“Bina, you’ve come already?” He failed to add any surprise in his tone.

“Of course I’ve come.” Aunt Bean also failed to notice. “How could I not, given your evident desperation?”

Desperation? Even Emme, whose situation could be charitably described as precarious, found the word overly dramatic, but the drama appeared to work wonders to encourage a deepening of the wrinkles around Father’s eyes. He blinked behind his own spectacles, so Aunt Bean took that as her cue for clarification.

“We have no time to lose. Emme has already endured two failed seasons, complete with public humiliation at the hands of a rake, and she is nearly twenty with no prospects in sight.”

If trusting Simon Reeves had been Emme’s great mistake, she had little faith in society’s judgment to steer her toward someone better. How was she to trust herself in the brutal machinery of the marriage

SENSE AND SUITABILITY

mart again? Simon had seemed so different—gentle, charming, impossibly dashing. No one had warned her of his tendency to flirt to the edge of propriety and then drop the woman like a stone—or so that was how it felt as she stood alone in the garden two years before. And he hadn't *seemed* the sort. Not once she'd gotten to know him. Not once he'd become her friend.

"Mother, if I may clarify," Thomas interjected, stepping to Emme's side and resting a reassuring hand on her arm. "The rake in question succeeded only in revealing his own deficiencies, earning Emmeline nothing but sympathy from those who matter. His true colors came clear in the end."

"Which is all the more proof of why I am needed." Aunt Bean sniffed, tapping her cane sharply against the floor. "Sympathy is cold comfort in these matters. A lady's reputation is a delicate thing, Emmeline, and even the faintest breath of impropriety can leave an indelible mark. Society does not forgive indiscretions, no matter how undeserved. I have ample lessons for both you and your sister on how to catch an appropriate husband."

Husband catching? Aunt Bean mentioned catching a husband as if it were like catching a cold. If a man required catching, perhaps it was better to let him escape entirely. Indeed, with the memory of Mr. Reeves—or rather, *Lord Ravenscross*, as he was now—and the quiet hope inherent in her little secret, perhaps marriage wasn't a necessity at all. Couldn't real life echo the gumption of one of her fictional heroines?

Could she be . . . brave enough to strive for independence?

Thomas coughed into his hand and then gave a slight dip to his head. "Well, Uncle John, while you and Mother discuss the very serious sport of husband catching, would you mind if Emme gave me a tour of your garden? It's been awhile since last I saw it and I believe it may provide some inspiration for my own improvements at the parsonage."

PEPPER BASHAM

The corner of Emme's lips twitched. She could certainly appreciate *this* sort of rescue.

Father, well aware of Thomas's gallant intentions, paused. His shoulders slumped slightly at the prospect of being left alone with Aunt Bean, but with a sigh, he stepped forward with reluctant resolve. "Of course. I am certain the garden will provide ample . . . inspiration."

With a slight bow, Thomas offered his arm and Emme walked with him toward the back of the house.

Once they were outdoors, surrounded by sunlight and the whisper of late-summer birdsong, Thomas broke the silence. "I feel as though I owe you an apology." His playful tone contrasted the contrition in his words. "If I hadn't taken this appointment so near to St. Groves, it wouldn't have brought Mother—and all her glory—down upon you."

A laugh bubbled up despite herself, a much-needed release from the tension coiling her stomach. "How could you not take it? Your uncle's rectory is a most generous offer, and as a third son, your options were . . . limited." She shrugged, following the garden path away from the house toward a gazebo at the edge of a hedgerow. "At least you love the church."

He gave her a half smile. "I'm obliged to say so after earning a Bachelor of Divinity in addition to my other degree."

She squeezed his arm with her hand. "You jest, but underneath all your teasing, I know you are really happy."

He responded with a good-natured shrug, though his eyes betrayed his contentment. As they rounded a curve in the garden path, placing them out of view of the house, he reached into his coat pocket and produced a thick envelope. "Speaking of happiness," he said, "I thought some additional pin money might benefit you and Aster as you launch into the upcoming season."

Launch? What a word! But before Emme could reply, Thomas pushed the envelope into her hand. The paper bulged from the contents. "What is this?"

SENSE AND SUITABILITY

“Money, clearly.” He lowered his voice. “*Your* earnings.”

“Oh, Thomas!” She pressed the envelope back toward him, glancing around as if the entire household were spying from the windows. “I thought we agreed you’d keep it invested until I was ready to tell Father.”

“It’s been over two years, Emme. Three books. At some point, you *must* tell him.”

“Must I?” Her grip on the envelope tightened. In reality, how long could she keep this secret from her father?

“Why not? It’s 1813.” His palm came up as if the declaration changed everything. “There aren’t a great many, to be sure, but more women are writing novels than ever. What about that woman who wrote one of your favorite books? *Pride and Prejudice*? At least she reveals herself as a lady, even if she doesn’t use her name.”

Emme tilted her chin, staring out at the rolling green hills. “Because anonymity suits my purposes. My pseudonym brings no scandal, no suspicion. And with the shadow of my failed seasons still looming, the timing couldn’t be worse. Can you imagine Father dealing with the potential conflict of such information when he’s already shouldering the work of a single parent to three? And after my first season’s disastrous—”

“Mr. Reeves . . . Lord Ravenscross,” Thomas spat out the correction. “His actions were not your fault and no one of consequence thinks so.” He steadied those serene eyes on her. “The right man will encourage your pursuits, Emme. He’ll support you—writing and all.”

Would it were true? Why did she feel as if young women were poised on the edge of a knife and one wrong step easily led to eternal disaster?

And a well-positioned and respected gentleman supporting a bride who wrote novels? She refrained from rolling her eyes. Not everyone was as clear-sighted or open-minded as Thomas Bridges.

They walked on in silence a little longer. “I would help you tell

PEPPER BASHAM

your father if you—”

Her palm raised, stopping his words. “Please, Thomas. Not now. Besides, I think I am better off writing for the joy of the story than considering profit and loss. The less I know, the easier it is to pretend that E.K. Winsome is someone else entirely and solely separate from me, which will serve all of us better for Aunt Bean’s husband . . . catching.”

“Very well. Then I’ll quit my argument for now.” He held her gaze and narrowed his eyes. “For now. But when you *are* ready, your accounts and”—he gestured toward himself—“Your favorite cousin will be at your service.”

The silence slipped between them as they stepped up to the gazebo to take a seat inside. “I do wonder, Emme, if it might not do you some good to write a story with less . . . shadows.”

She looked up from the envelope she’d just discreetly tucked into her book. “What do you mean?”

“Well, these books by the anonymous lady are laced with real life and humor. They still include the romance you adore but with, dare I say it, a subtlety of heart?” His smile crooked in an encouraging way. “I believe your wit and clever observation of the world around you would fit a similar style.”

Write of real life? Emme frowned and looked back at *The Heroine* in her hands. She readied an argument on her tongue for how uninteresting such a book would be, but then her disagreement died when she reflected on both *Pride and Prejudice* and her most recent read, *Sense and Sensibility*. They’d held her interest but also left her with the most glorious sense of happiness at the end. As if she could step right into that story, meet the characters, and engage in conversations.

Could she write something so . . . familiar?

“Clearly, your current novels are doing well, but perhaps you could think about broadening your skills. Many ladies of your acquaintance are more likely to live lives similar to a country gentleman’s

SENSE AND SUITABILITY

daughter than”—he gestured toward her—“Your mysterious Arabella Somersby.”

He referenced the heroine of her latest book and the poor woman’s plight from housemaid to stowaway to captive in a castle before finding her dashing romance on the far side of the sea.

“I’ll think about it.” She raised her book to him, nodding toward the envelope. “And thank you for this. I suppose if I am to catch a husband, having a new gown or two would meet Aunt Bean’s approval.” And perhaps help Emme stop pairing each of her current dresses with an event in time associated with Simon. “And Aster would delight in some new things.” She breathed in the plan, especially if it meant promoting her sister. “She captures the room wherever she goes, even when she doesn’t want to. I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s not swept up into a lasting romance long before me.”

Thomas’s hand rested briefly on her arm. “Lord Ravenscross does not credit to his sex, so do not measure yourself by his standards.”

Her throat tightened as she absorbed his words all the way down to her wounded heart. How could she have been so blind? Surely, not having a mother to guide her had led to some weakness on her part, but she had been such a fool. In fact, she’d written about such cads in her novels. How had she failed to recognize the signs in real life?

She paused on the thought. Perhaps there was some benefit in writing real life after all. She knew heartbreak. Knew scandal, unfortunately. Could those elements inspire an engaging story that reflected the loves and losses of a regular life?

“I can’t imagine there being a great deal more marriageable options than last year, Thomas.” She forced lightness into her tone. “It’s not London.” With the envelope in hand, however, the heaviness of the daunting task lifted a bit more. “But at least I have options. Marriage isn’t the only path forward, which is always an improvement over feeling desperate.”

“Undeniably.”

PEPPER BASHAM

“And I’ll play the part for Aunt Bean.”

He grinned. “Though I expect you’ll disappear from every ball as quickly as decorum permits.”

She raised her brows in mock innocence. “A lady is expected certain allowances, cousin-dear.”

“Hmm.” He shook his dark head, his grin growing. “*Now* you’re taking advantage of being a woman, are you?”

She ignored his sarcasm and stared ahead, a sweet sense of opportunity dangling before her with each book she published. Though she adored the idea of a family of her own, perhaps marriage wasn’t her only option. Her shoulders pinched at the thought. But if a man couldn’t accept her as an authoress, would she be willing to give up writing?

If he loved her.

Her jaw tightened. Yes. Only love would induce her to marry.

“If I can use writing to become independent, then I can earn a choice very few women of my station or reputation have.” She turned to him, drawing in a freeing breath. “I will hold out for love or become an independent and happy spinster. Either way, I’ll settle for nothing less.”



Lights and music spilled into St. Groves’s illustrious Assembly Rooms, the premier setting for the season’s most sought-after balls. Simon Reeves paused at the threshold, tugging his cavalier vest into place beneath his tailcoat. Doing so allowed a few more moments to compose himself before stepping into the fray.

The last ball he’d attended, he’d arrived with the single purpose of proposing.

And she’d looked radiant that evening—utterly spellbinding in her pink gown, her hair a crown of golden curls, and that ever-present

SENSE AND SUITABILITY

quirk of her lips always ready to deliver a teasing remark at his expense. He almost smiled at the memory, before the low-lying ache that accompanied every remembrance of Emmeline Lockhart quashed it before it could take root.

He'd wronged her. Treated her poorly. Like a coward.

Left her standing on the veranda waiting for him.

He'd almost made it to the garden, barely a few steps behind her.

Almost voiced his desire to make her his.

But a servant had rushed toward him, delivering news of the shipwreck that had claimed both his cousin's and his father's lives. And he hadn't known what to do. How to think. What to say.

So he'd written the simplest of notes and left.

Their deaths had not been a simple tragedy; it had been the unsealing of Pandora's box. Stories of his father's misdeeds surfaced, each more sordid than the last. Debts came crawling out of hidden ledgers, dragging their talons through the estate's fragile coffers. One wound after another created more and more distance between his failed proposal and an explanation to Emme.

Until he didn't have any heart to confront her at all.

So he'd run away.

He had justified it to himself as the distraction of responsibilities and funerals and a search for Arianna. But he knew the truth.

He'd been a coward.

Not only of coming face-to-face with Emme, but of embracing the mantle of Viscount Ravenscross. But time and relentless hardship had forged in him some semblance of strength and wisdom—perhaps even a bit of courage.

Until now.

Until this moment, standing on the edge of a crowded ballroom, his gaze fixed on the gilded chandelier while his courage threatened to desert him altogether.

The sound of familiar laughter drew his attention to the dance

PEPPER BASHAM

floor and the din around him blurred into silence. Emmeline Lockhart danced with a gentleman Simon didn't recognize. She wore a confection of deep green, her golden hair spilling from her coiffure. His breath caught. Had she become more beautiful in the span of nearly two years?

Without thinking, he stepped behind a nearby pillar, shielding himself from view but not from the ability to observe.

That smile—he'd welcomed it into his dreams more times than he could count. Sometimes it felt as though he lived off the hope it gave him, foolish as the notion might be. She held kindness and strength in her countenance, and so many times he'd needed both.

Even if only in a dream.

Yet now, she was smiling up at her partner in that same way she had once smiled at him—wholly engaged, her bright gaze sparkling with unspoken wit.

His eyes closed, shutting out the sight and the ache that accompanied it.

Another loss. Another piece of his shattered world he had no power to reclaim.

"Lord Ravenscross." Benjamin Northrop appeared through the crowd, his grin as irrepressible as ever. In fact, he looked like he wanted to laugh, which for some reason tightened Simon's posture from toe to forehead in defense. "The hunt begins in earnest now, does it not?"

Simon had the sudden desire to hit his best friend in the chin. "If you're referring to my search for a wife, Ben, perhaps we could discuss it without the theatrics?"

"Theatrics?" Ben raised his brows, feigning innocence. "I'd never. I'm merely the messenger tonight."

Simon didn't trust the gleam in Ben's eyes, but it proved a helpful diversion from his attention roving back across the room. "What message, precisely?"

"Well . . ." Ben's grin widened. "Since you've been away from St.

SENSE AND SUITABILITY

Groves's society for a while and rather occupied—what with your heroic efforts to salvage Ravenscross and raise your siblings—my sister has taken it upon herself to assist.”

Simon's face went cold as his fingers balled into fists at his side, almost teasing him to act out his desire to place a dent in Ben's grin. Nora Northrop—now Chawley—blew into people's lives with the purpose of a hurricane. Oh, her intentions were good, but her methods . . . “What have you done?”

“I've done nothing.” The man had the effrontery to raise both palms in the air in declaration of his innocence. “But my sister, *as I said*”—Ben exaggerated his repetition—“Has compiled a list.”

“A list?”

“Indeed.” Ben pulled a folded sheet of paper from his pocket, offering it with all the flourish of a courtier presenting a royal decree. “Allow me to clarify: This was entirely Nora's doing. I am but the delivery boy.”

“And yet you're enjoying this far too much,” Simon muttered as he accepted the paper.

“You wound me, truly.” Ben smirked, palm to his chest with continued theatrics. “In fairness, Nora claims she's saving you from wasting time and effort on unsuitable matches. A noble gesture, don't you think?”

Simon shot him a withering look. “I think meddling is the favorite pastime of women with too much leisure.”

“And my sister is quite at her leisure, so I assure you, she was most thorough. This list”—Ben tapped the paper now tucked into Simon's coat—“Could rival the naval records for precision.”

Simon pinched the bridge of his nose. “And what am I to do with this . . . gift?”

“Why, use it, of course!” Ben gestured to the room. “You're in desperate need of a wife with a dowry that could outshine the Bank of England. The ladies on Nora's list meet all requirements: wealth, family

PEPPER BASHAM

connections, and presumably some tolerance for your peculiarities.”

“Peculiarities?” Simon’s brow arched as his glare fixed on Ben, who, predictably, remained unfazed.

“Former rogue, tragic history, lonely guardian of your siblings, vast and haunted country house . . .”

Simon’s lips twitched in reluctant amusement. “Haunted country house?”

Ben shrugged, thoroughly enjoying himself. “Tragic houses must have tragic ghosts, don’t you know, Simon? Everyone else seems to.”

“And who, pray tell, is haunting my country house this time?” People were exhausting. And he threw Ben squarely into that lot.

“I believe the latest rumor is that the ghost belongs to your mother.”

Simon ran a palm over his mouth, attempting to relax his ever-tightening jaw. “Well then, if Mother is haunting Ravenscross, I do wish she would deign to offer some practical advice while she’s at it.”

Ben chuckled. “Ah, but that wouldn’t suit the Gothic narrative, now would it? A brooding viscount with a crumbling estate, three unruly charges, and a reputation just scandalous enough to make you the toast of the town? Why, Simon, it’s impossible not to find you utterly fascinating.”

Fascinating, indeed. Simon rolled his gaze skyward. Reality and fiction chronicled two vastly different tales. He was well aware of his new reputation: “The Raven of Ravenscross,” they called him. Some of the gossip was close to the mark: ruinous debt, a dilapidated estate, and a viscount whose disposition leaned toward the surly. Other rumors, however, bordered on absurdity. Haunted houses, murdered mothers, and—most ludicrous of all—that he was some kind of vampire. Simon gave his head a slight shake. What a bunch of rubbish. “Am I supposed to thank you for that summary of my shortcomings?”

“I live to serve.” Ben bowed with mock humility. “Besides, as Nora put it, one of these prospects should prove savior to Ravenscross, so

SENSE AND SUITABILITY

what harm could a curated list do?”

Simon sighed, tugging at his cravat. A “savior” for Ravenscross. *Heaven, help me.* The very idea of marrying for wealth and convenience, rather than affection, struck far too close to the unhappy union of his parents. Perhaps that was why he had clung to harmless flirtations and fleeting connections until . . .

His attention flitted to the dance floor, chest tightening at the sight of her. *She* would not be on the list. No wealth, no status—nothing society deemed suitable for a viscount.

But for him, the man?

A wry laugh escaped before he could stop it. He hadn’t even known he wanted someone like her until she’d come into his life. Witty, kind, companionable—dare he say, a friend?

Yes, a dear friend. And more. A sliver of longing clawed its way up his throat before he crushed it. *You must push her from your mind, Simon. Emme isn’t an option.*

It was time to bury any fanciful notions of a match with her. He no longer had the luxury of marrying for himself.

He dragged his focus back to Ben, a deep sigh pulling at his shoulders. “Who would your sister suggest first?”

Ben nearly stumbled in surprise. “Pardon?”

“No doubt you’ve seen the list.” He gestured toward the room. “Which of the ladies do you think I would have the most possibility of winning with the best financial remuneration?”

“Well, that does cut out the frills, doesn’t it?” Ben drew in a deep breath and surveyed the room with exaggerated deliberation. “Miss Algerton?” he announced at last, gesturing toward a brunette in pale blue. “Nora’s words, mind you: ‘Tell Simon she’s well-tried—third season, you know.’”

Well-tried? Simon’s eyes slipped closed. “How delightful.”

“But between us, though”—Ben leaned in conspiratorially—“I suspect there’s one name on the list you’ll want to avoid.”

PEPPER BASHAM

“Do I dare ask?”

Ben gestured toward Simon’s jacket, as if referencing the list. “Selena Hemston.”

Simon resisted the urge to retreat outright. “Let me guess. She still believes Ravenscross should be hers?”

“Determined as always, I’d wager.”

“It’s the *always* bit that keeps me up at night,” Simon countered, stilling a shiver at the thought of the woman. And “lady” rarely fit her, despite the title. “I’m certain Mr. Hemston would like nothing better than to have his daughter permanently connected to the land adjacent to his own.”

“He makes no secret of his wish for it, I’m afraid,” Ben admitted. “A title *and* influence over the extensiveness of Ravenscross through an heir, just imagine . . .”

Simon’s jaw twitched from sudden tension, and he almost turned and left the ball altogether, but that would succeed at nothing. If he failed to secure a bride soon, Ravenscross itself might be lost. Would it fall to auction? To Mr. Leo Hemston’s hands? The thought turned his stomach. Simon would not fail at this.

He couldn’t.

Though Miss Hemston brought a dowry the size of which would restore Ravenscross and care for his siblings, she proved as boorish and arrogant as her father. Most likely she wished to remake Ravenscross and Simon too.

Six dances and a mounting headache later, Simon wondered if selling Ravenscross to a tradesman might not be preferable. Just as he sought solace in a drink, a pair of dark-brown eyes locked onto his. Her lips curled into a predatory smile, and she began weaving her way through the crowd like a cat stalking its prey.

Miss Selena Hemston.

“Dash it,” Simon hissed under his breath. He’d thought for certain Selena was still abroad.

SENSE AND SUITABILITY

Oh, how the past brought claws with it. Long, feminine-looking claws.

He'd made many mistakes in his life, usually involving women or horse racing. But encouraging any acquaintance with her had been the worst. Indulged, determined, without any comprehension of the word "no," she took his harmless flirting and massive estate as her personal challenge to gain.

And now? With a title to win? She'd prove intractable.

"Lord Ravenscross." Selena's voice, one he'd learned to locate in any crowd in order to avoid her, cut the room like a knife.

He turned, intending to escape, but she intercepted him with envious speed.

"It's been too long. Two years?" She blocked his forward retreat, thrusting her amply revealed neckline in his direction. "I thought you may have forgotten about me."

He inclined his head and averted his eyes. "I believe that would be impossible."

"I've been told I make quite the impression, by you even." Her fingers wrapped around his arm, nails pinching just a bit as if to literally make an impression. "You've been back two months and not once called upon me. I feared you were avoiding me."

"I fear that may also be impossible."

A fire lit in those dark eyes of hers. "You could just make everything easier on both of us and marry me. Clearly, your little flirtation two seasons ago failed to satisfy, and whatever you've been doing since hasn't led to matrimony." Her gaze roamed over him with shameless intent. "It must be a sign."

"A sign?"

"That we would be a most advantageous match."

Dropping all pretense of civility, he replied, "Whose advantage?"

Her smile never faltered. "For us all, of course. I conquer you and gain a title, which would be immensely gratifying. My father gains

PEPPER BASHAM

access to Ravenscross, which he desires. And you, my dear Simon, gain the funds to restore your family's estate and live as a gentleman of leisure." Her brow rose in triumph. "A perfect situation."

"Conquer me?" He straightened to his full height, heat rising to his neck. "You mean to exact your revenge for a perceived slight years ago?"

"It doesn't have to be a punishment." Her smile turned razor-sharp. "In fact, it could be delightful—if you would temper that iron will of yours." She took a deliberate step closer. "Your father was always rather nasty to my father, and I must admit to a small bit of Hemston pride in knowing I could secure the old man's estate as recompense." Her tone was silk, her brow arching higher. "I am quite determined, my lord."

The sheer audacity of her ambition left him momentarily speechless. The very thought of Ravenscross in Hemston hands was an affront he could not abide. The threat hit his pulse. And as far as his will was concerned, she'd only ensured that it remained ironclad.

Before he could voice a scathing retort, his name rang out to his right, saving him from further engagement. A lady approached with a train of companions, their bright eyes alight with purpose. Another called from his left. A third followed suit, her entourage not far behind, all eager for "a conversation," "a little more information," "tell us about your sister . . ."

Simon bit back a groan. He needed escape. Now.

The throng of women surrounded him, asking after his family, his plans, his very existence as though he were some prize bull at market. As the clamor grew, he spotted salvation—a set of glass doors leading outside, he hoped. And to escape.

Taking advantage of the ladies distracting Selena, Simon ducked into the crowd, but their voices pursued him, with Selena at the helm. Mr. and Mrs. Craven appeared at his left, calling his name to introduce him to their daughter. Mr. Lund did the same. He'd never experienced

SENSE AND SUITABILITY

such a chase before, except when in pursuit of a rather muddy Sophia through the garden on a rainy day with the dogs in chase.

Did becoming the landowner of Ravenscross truly produce such pandemonium?

As if on cue, Ben stepped out of nowhere, garnering the attention of the throng with some redirection at just the right time for Simon to turn the corner of a pillar in the room, duck down behind a nearby plant, and slide out the doors.

Ah! A balcony.

Fresh air. Freedom.

Veering left, he pressed himself into the shadows of the stone wall, another step away from the door. Relief surged—until he collided with something soft.

Not stone, like the railing he'd expected.

"Oh!" A feminine cry pierced the night.

Simon's arms instinctively wrapped around the woman to steady her, her precarious balance sending her teetering toward the railing. He pulled her close, the scent of apples enveloping him like a spell—a deliciously familiar spell. It fogged his thoughts and mingled too well with the fit of her softness against him. Dancing didn't allow for this sort of embrace.

"Pardon me, Miss . . ." He steadied her, the light from inside casting a halo down on the woman's face.

All heat fled his body and then surged back through him in a second.

"Emmeline." Her name escaped on crushed air.

Her pink lips opened in surprise and only a wisp of breath released, but he nonetheless felt the touch of it against his chin. So close. Too close.

And yet his arms only tightened.

She stared up at him, her wide eyes betraying a flicker of vulnerability before cooling to ice. "This . . . this is *my* hiding spot,

PEPPER BASHAM

Sim—Mr. . . . Lord Ravenscross.” The sentence wobbled from her lips in halted puffs.

Beautiful lips. Lips he’d dreamed of kissing dozens of times.

“And . . . and you’re going to attract attention,” she hissed, pushing back from him only to nearly tumble over the edge again. “Making my attempts utterly useless.”

He wanted to smile. Smile at her ridiculous sweetness after racing from Selená’s claws. Smile at her trying to hide from the guests at the halfway mark of every ball. Smile at the fact he actually knew about her hiding.

He kept his arms around her. “Emme.”

Those beautiful lips parted again, only to firm back into a frown. “If you recall, you forfeited the right to address me on such intimate terms, *Lord Ravenscross*.” Her gaze flashed back to his, searching his face, hesitating a second to stare, before snapping to attention. “If you would be so kind as to release me.”

Her emphasis distanced them with formality, her volume assured them of discovery, and her reminder of what he’d lost gutted him.

“If you wish to hide, you’d best lower your voice.”

Her cheeks flushed, but her chin tilted higher. “I’m not certain I wish to hide any longer, especially with you.” She moved toward the door and then froze, quickly returning to the shadows of the balcony, her back pressed against the wall.

Simon peered over her head through the glass. A blond man pushed through the crowd in search of something. Simon’s attention fell on Emme. Someone?

“Is that Mr. Marshall?”

Her gaze snapped to his. “Don’t you dare open that door.”

“Does he fancy you then, Emme?”

“Stop calling me Emme,” she hissed, her voice rising. “We are not on such friendly terms, Lord Ravenscross.”

“Shh.” He looked over his shoulder, catching sight of the gaggle of

SENSE AND SUITABILITY

ladies not far from the door. “Mr. Marshall is very near.”

“Don’t you shush me.” She stepped forward, her eyes alight. “You have no right to shush me.”

“Miss Lockhart.” The male voice was very near the door.

Emme’s lips parted for a retort, but Simon silenced her with a hand over her mouth, pulling her deeper into the shadows. Fire lit those eyes, drawing his attention even more to those marble-like hazel depths. *Oh, he’d missed her.* More than he even realized. And to have her in his arms? His breath lodged in his throat. “I apologize, Emme. But neither of us wants to be found right now and Mr. Marshall is nearly at the door.” Mr. Ezra Marshall? Consummate complainer who found fault with the temperature of the tea, the length of the waltz, and even the alignment of the stars?

Certainly not the right match for her.

She pushed his hand away. “Then leave. I was here first.”

Could her voice get any louder? Selena’s face emerged from the crowd, along with a small collection of other ladies on her heels. How on earth was he to survive them? “It would not do well to be found out here together alone,” he warned. “Stop talking.”

“If we are found out, it will *not* be my fault.” She jabbed a finger in the air at him. “You followed me, if you’ll recall.”

Good heavens, she had to stop talking for both their sakes. He stepped forward, lowering his voice even more. “Emme . . .”

“I said, stop calling me—” She pushed away from his arms too quickly and stumbled, once again, too near the railing. This time, she squealed as her back tipped over the edge.

With another quick movement, he held her against him again, her fists pressed to his chest, her breaths shallow, and her face so close.

Wonderfully close.

He stared down at her, words clogging his throat. So many things to say and none of them sufficient.

She stared back, frown tight, eyes narrowed. And even her scowl

PEPPER BASHAM

lured him nearer.

Thank heavens she wasn't wearing those cursed spectacles of hers. Something about the way the golden rims framed her large eyes in such a bookishly innocent way unraveled every bit of his control. Not that he had a great deal of control right now, because the longer he remained in the presence of her scent and familiarity, the more and more dangerous the seconds grew.

Suddenly, she ceased struggling. Stopped frowning. Heaven help him, was she even breathing? Those eyes changed. The fury dissipated into something altogether more dangerous—hurt.

The look raked over him.

"I'm so sorry, Emme." The apology scraped through his hot throat. "Sorry for all of it."

The words hung between them, raw and unguarded. Her breath caught, gaze softening in some intoxicating way. Then that tempting bottom lip of hers wobbled, and before he could think better of it, he went mad.

He breached the distance between them, his mouth capturing hers, stealing any words in one swift and certain act of lunacy . . . and desperation. For one fleeting moment, she relaxed against him, her hands clutching his lapel, drawing him closer. He thought he felt a quiet hum of acceptance purr from her throat, feeding his impossible hope. The full potency of apples engulfed him like a step into an autumn orchard. Sweet. Alive . . . wholesome.

He'd dreamed of her kiss. Craved it like a dying man for food.

She tasted like coming home, and he wanted to keep feasting.

Then, her entire body tensed, and she pushed back.

"How . . . how could you?" she whispered, voice shaking.

And with a flash of fire in those eyes, her palm connected with his cheek, a sharp sting that left him reeling—not from pain, but from the knowledge that he'd just made everything so much worse.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Pepper Basham is an award-winning author who writes romance “peppered” with grace and humor. Writing both historical and contemporary novels, she loves to incorporate her native Appalachian culture and/or her unabashed adoration of the UK into her stories. She currently resides in the lovely mountains of Asheville, North Carolina, where she is the wife of a fantastic pastor, mom of five great kids, a speech-language pathologist, and a lover of chocolate, jazz, hats, and Jesus.



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