



MUST LOVE SERIES BOOK ONE

*"A fresh, charming new voice."  
—New York Times bestselling  
author Tessa Dare*

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LOVE  
*Breeches*  
A TIME TRAVEL ROMANCE

*She's finally met the man of her dreams.  
There's only one problem: he lives in a different century.*

ANGELA QUARLES

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## HOW FAR WOULD YOU TRAVEL FOR LOVE?

A mysterious artifact zaps Isabelle Rochon to pre-Victorian England, but before she understands the card case's significance a thief steals it. Now she must find the artifact, navigate the pitfalls of a stiffly polite London, keep her time-traveling origins a secret, and resist her growing attraction to Lord Montagu, the Vicious Viscount so hot, he curls her toes.

To Lord Montagu nothing makes more sense than keeping his distance from the strange but lovely Colonial. However, when his scheme for revenge reaches a stalemate, he convinces Isabelle to masquerade as his fiancée. What he did not bargain on is being drawn to her intellectually as well as physically.

Lord Montagu's now constant presence overthrows her equilibrium and her common sense. Isabelle thought all she wanted was to return home, but as passion flares between them, she must decide when her true home—as well as her heart—lies.

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*Beer and Groping in Las Vegas*

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MUST LOVE BREECHES

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*To my mother, who has always been there for me no matter what, and to my late father who was always a hero to me.*

# Chapter One



Here's a sigh to those who love me,  
And a smile to those who hate:  
And, whatever sky's above me,  
Here's a heart for every fate.  
Lord Byron, *To Thomas Moore*

A REENACTMENT BALL was the perfect setting for romance. Or not. Isabelle Rochon fidgeted in her oddly-shaped-but-oh-so-accurate ball gown, surrounded by women who'd sacrificed historical authenticity for sex appeal. Red carpet ball gowns in the nineteenth century, really? Once again she was like the dorky kid participating in dress-up day at school when everyone else had magically decided it was lame.

"Gah. I feel like a green robot with strange battle armor." Isabelle pointed to her dark green dress, the shoulders flaring out almost to a point, exaggerating their width. "What were the fashionistas in 1834 thinking?"

"I have no bloody idea." Jocelyn squeezed the poof of fabric at her shoulder. "These huge-ass sleeves are ridiculous."

"Ah, screw it, we're having fun, right? I'm not going to self-sabotage the ball. Not after all the time I spent obsessing over my costume."

"And obsessing over the etiquette rules."

"That too." Besides, how fun was it to learn Jocelyn shared her obsession with guys in period clothes and bodice-ripper romances?

Isabelle eyed a guy strolling past in tight-fitting, buff-colored pants. She pitched her voice to be heard over the string quartet. "Hmm. How about the clothes on that daring derriere?"

Jocelyn sucked on her olive and plopped the empty stir stick into her martini. "Oh, yes. Definitely a breech-ripper."

Isabelle choked on her Bellini, the champagne fizz tickling her throat and nose. This was the first opportunity they'd had to socialize outside work, so she treated this moment delicately, afraid to puncture the mood.

No need to point out he sported pantaloons, not breeches.

She should ease up on the drink, though. She didn't want to get plastered at the Thirty-fourth Annual Prancing Through History Reenactment Ball. Especially since her new colleagues would be around. And her boss. She needed to impress him.

"Look lively," Jocelyn said, her voice low, with a dollop of teasing. "Here comes the office hottie."

She'd been cultivating a mild crush on Andrew since starting her new job at the British Museum six months ago. The whole situation was perfect. A guy in the same field would respect her interests, wouldn't expect her to give up her profession for a relationship. He was safe. If it worked out, great, if not, no biggie. She was happy, finally, with how her life was working out.

She'd pictured him in period clothing before, looking resplendent.

He did.

"Hi, Andrew." Her voice came out a little too high. Jeez, could she sound any more like a lovesick fool? She *always* did this around gorgeous men—went ga-ga as if she couldn't rub two brain cells together. She gazed around the Duke of Chelmsford's newly renovated ballroom and pretended as if her breath hadn't quickened and her body hadn't heated at the sight of Andrew.

"Hello, Isabelle. Jocelyn." Andrew nodded. His smile felt like a gift for her alone.

Her pulse throbbed. He'd sought her out. Play it cool. Say something witty. "So, uh, having fun yet?" Having fun yet?

Something, or someone, in the crowd hogged his attention. She followed his gaze until she found it. Or rather him. Their boss at the bar.

Andrew faced her and the remnants of calculation on his hot-as-heck features disappeared behind his over-bright grin.

He leaned closer.

The artificial tang of his cologne drifted her way. She wrinkled her nose.

"Well done on the Whittaker exhibit. Finding that journal was a bit of a coup. It'll be a fine addition to the exhibit, once it's built."

He'd noticed. She'd worked damn hard. "Thank you." Why couldn't Brits find her Southern accent as sexy as she found theirs?

“Glad you came across the pond to work with us. That find should put you in the running for the promotion.”

Good. The promotion would mean she could stay in London. Well, it would make staying easier. No matter what, she was determined to remain.

“Of course, you’ll have to beat me out.”

Cold clarity hit her stomach like accidentally gulping a glass of iced gin instead of iced water, jolting her from her usual foray into Incoherent Land around attractive guys. “You’re applying too?” Of course he was.

“Without a doubt. Career changer and all. I’m a shoo-in. Sure you still want to apply?”

Could she scrub the smug look off his face? She settled for the less satisfactory, but more controlled, “Yes.”

Now catching her boss’s attention was more important than ever. Besides wanting to escape into another era, she’d also hoped her costume would impress him. She glanced at the wet bar. Drat. Where had her boss gone?

Andrew slipped his hand around her elbow, pulling her closer. “How about we ditch this party and grab a pint? You and me.” He ignored Jocelyn, who stared back and forth between them.

It all made sense—his sudden interest after dismissing her for months, the calculation she’d caught when he’d turned back—he thought he’d intimidate and charm her into giving up the position.

She yanked her arm free, saying, “Fat chance, you smarmy horndog,” which cut through the room because, of course, the music had just ended.

Jocelyn snorted her drink, eyes watering, and coughed, fighting to catch her breath. For a moment, her coughing was the only sound punctuating the silence.

The curious eyes of the onlookers made Isabelle feel as if a huge moat had sprung up around her. The moat of Beware, All Ye Who Enter—Idiot in the Center. If one of those eyes were her boss...

Andrew trotted out his grin, the one that used to make her insides hum. “Thought we had a connection. No?” He backed away, hands up, eyes locked with hers in a you’re-such-a-fool stare, his heels snapping on the marble floor with each backward step. “Cheers, then, babe. May the best man win.” He nodded and sauntered off.

Jocelyn, bless her, completely ignored the Moat of Embarrassment and stepped to Isabelle's side. "How had we never noticed what an ass he was?"

"Probably because we were too busy drooling?"

"There is that."

"Seriously, I should just go pound my head against the nearest vertical object and repeat one hundred times, 'When will I learn?'"

"Just be careful not to poke out your eye with those lethal shoulder sleeves."

"Ha." But Jocelyn's dry humor softened Isabelle's mood. "Can't believe he expects me to just roll over. I have to get the promotion, I need the security. No way am I going to sacrifice my dream to be with a guy, I don't care how hot he is."

Never again would she let a jerk encased in good-looking skin influence her life. Been there. Done that. Have the gold-stitched Fool's cap.

"Let's get away from the crowd." Jocelyn pointed to a corner with her glass. "There's an alcove by the potted palm. Better people-watching."

"Okay, but keep an eye out for The Boss. Need to schmooze."

They threaded through the crowd, Isabelle taking a direct hit from a guy eager to reach the bar. Her drink sloshed onto her white glove. She glared, but the effect was wasted on the guy's back.

Once they reached the snug alcove, Isabelle set her glass on the marble windowsill and tugged off her damp glove. She pushed aside a crumpled paper napkin and laid the glove on the sill. "Is this how you pictured the ball?"

"Pretty much. What did you expect?"

Isabelle sipped her drink. "A real ball..."

"At least the decorations are authentic." They'd plastered hothouse flowers everywhere, potted palms dotted the perimeter, and white chalk covered the marble floor.

Jocelyn pointed to the silver calling card case dangling by a chain from Isabelle's wrist. "Which antique shop had that case?"

Isabelle flipped the case into her hand and rubbed her thumb over the initials, EDA, engraved on the front. Reflections from the lights, both candle and electric, winked off its surface. "I discovered it under the floorboards while renovating my house. Same place I found the journal

the museum's using. I think it might be from the mid-1800s."

She pressed the tiny button on the side and the case clicked open. White cards with her new Guildford address nestled in the faded, lavender silk lining.

Ever since she'd unearthed the case, it had acted like a lodestone for her, harbored secrets. Who had stashed it under the floorboards? And why? It was a quarter inch too small to hold her credit card and her British driver's license, but she'd wanted to use the case. At last, she had a chance.

"I didn't think they carried those to balls," Jocelyn said.

"I know, I know. I'm not being historically accurate, but I couldn't help it." She might meet someone and need to give him her card—right? Right. It was weird bringing something so inaccurate, when she'd been so anal about everything else. The case just affected her viscerally. It was imbued with... longing.

Jocelyn nudged her. "Ooh, there's my crush. Walk with me?"

"Sure—" The double chirrup from her phone interrupted her. Isabelle reached into her small purse and looked at the incoming text. Ah, Katy. "Hang on."

"No worries. Catch up with me? I don't want to lose sight of him again. Wish me luck!"

"Good luck! For 'a single man in possession of a good fortune'—"

"—'must be in want of a wife!'" Jocelyn smiled, twirled about, and disappeared into the crowd.

Isabelle pulled up her text:

*Meeting at The Mad Martini for drinks later.  
Join us after your ball thing? Bring any  
hotties u meet. Ha-ha. Love ya girlfriend.*

Isabelle winced. Not likely. About the hotties, anyway. But joining her only friend after the ball might be just the familiar haven she needed to kick away the evening's disappointment. Good Lord, yeah—Katy wouldn't let her take herself too seriously, or become too obsessed with the promotion.

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*See you there. No hotties yet.*

Men in tails kissed their partners' hands and bowed, elaborate ball gowns in jewel tones swirled with a rustling of fabric, the quartet played a quadrille, and here she carried a glaring anachronism. She slipped the phone back into her purse—no, her reticule—and pulled it shut.

The quadrille ended, and the musicians left for a break. The dance floor cleared. Where was her boss? She rubbed her bare thumb over the engraving on her calling card case, the action oddly soothing. If only she could have lived back then. Experienced a real ball, not this playacting.

“Wouldn't that be amazing, to truly be at this ball in 1834?” she whispered. The silver under her thumb flared with heat.

The room spun; the air, colors, and sounds muted, as if she were inside an abstract watercolor painting. Her heart—Oh, God—spun, swirling about to match the room, each beat a slow *thunk*, stretched.

Shit, the room spun faster. She flung out a hand to steady herself against the wall and met only air.

What the—? She slammed her eyes shut and fought a slug of nausea.

# Chapter Two



I had a dream which was not all a dream.  
Lord Byron, *Darkness*, 1816

ISABELLE SLOWLY OPENED her eyes and brokered an uneasy truce with her stomach. The colors and shapes seemed overexposed, too sharp. Nearby, French doors led to the balcony.

*Fresh air.*

Legs shaking, she stumbled toward the opening and leaned against the doorjamb.

Whoa, she'd never gotten that dizzy before. Had the bartender added a jigger of grain alcohol? Good thing she'd not had a third cocktail. She *really* should have eaten before she came, but she'd been too anxious. Cool night air soothed her flushed skin and filled her lungs. Tables, palms, people snapped back into focus. Okay. She faced the ballroom, hoping concentrating on the crowd would provide an anchor.

*Keep breathing. In. And out.*

Calmer, she glanced at the person beside her.

Wow, this girl knew her stuff. Finally, someone else took the ball seriously. Jocelyn had said the period fanatics usually came later to reenactment balls. The girl had the big skirt, tiny waist, and wide shoulders popular in the early 1830s. Her stylist had gone all out with her up-do, too. Were those peacock feathers in her dark hair?

"Love your ball gown. Mind if I post it?" Taking her head tilt as agreement, Isabelle dug out her phone and snapped a picture. She sent it to her online profile with the caption: *Loving the detail at the ball. Who's jealous?*

"Cool, thanks." Isabelle tucked her phone away, the upload progress bar still chugging away. She looked at the girl, who leaned away, eyes blinking from the camera flash. Isabelle smiled and gestured toward the dress. "So, where did you get it? Did you make it yourself?"

Isabelle loved seeing someone so young getting into a historical reenactment. The dark-haired girl couldn't have been more than eighteen. Her elaborate hairstyle set off her patrician nose, delicate mouth, strong jaw, and almond-shaped eyes. Eyes sparkling with intelligence and curiosity. Like Isabelle, she'd also gone without makeup, in keeping with the era.

The girl took in Isabelle's appearance, from toes to hair. She replied in a soft voice, "Madame Frenchet on Bond Street."

"Awesome. Looks like she knew what she was doing." Isabelle tried to maintain her I'm-confident-and-not-still-slightly-out-of-it smile. "I consulted old fashion plates and went to the seamstress we use at the museum. She makes these things all the time for the docents. She did a pretty good job, don't you think?" Isabelle spun about, smoothing her hand down the billowing skirt.

"Yes," the girl replied, the word drawn out.

Isabelle held out her hand. "I'm Isabelle Rochon," she said, pronouncing her last name with a soft *sh* sound.

Her new acquaintance stared at the hand, then darted her gaze back to Isabelle's. Finally, she clasped her palm. Tentative at first, then firm. "Miss Ada Byron. My chaperone should return momentarily."

"Oh, wow. Byron, as in Lord Byron? Is he an ancestor?"

A slight look of distaste mixed with confusion crossed the girl's face. "Yes. Lord Byron," she answered, her tone measured as if it cost her to say each syllable.

"Oh, that's neat. You must be named after Ada Byron Lovelace? Or are you reenacting Ada's persona? She's always fascinated me. First computer programmer in the world, an' all." Good Lord, she was babbling. Deep breath.

Now Ada looked even more confused. "I-I am sorry. I do not understand. The words you say are altogether strange."

*I'm such a dork.* She'd made Ada glassy-eyed. Not everyone gobbled up historical tidbits. *Oh, wait.* The girl must be playing out her persona. "I take it you're from around here. You're used to these kinds of things? The ball?"

Ada blinked and stepped back.

Before Ada could reply, a frisson of awareness streaked down Isabelle's

spine. A dark shape filled her vision. Sandalwood and a hint of something else, something elemental, wafted over her. Isabelle gazed up. And up. And—Holy Pete. She clenched her teeth to hold her chin in place.

My God, what gorgeous hair! Long, black, and wavy, it caressed the guy's shirt collar, making her want to plunge her fingers through it. Frolic in it. Twine her fingers around and sniff it.

He'd grown sideburns for the event, and his prominent chin had that sexy little indentation. Could she nibble on it? The high cheekbones and hooded eyes made her insides all squirmy. Gorgeous men always made her uncomfortable, and this one was one notch shy of being too, too perfect. Which left her trying to remember where she was, and why.

Oh, yes. Ball. At a ball in London.

A reenactment of a ball held in 1834, London, England.

Would this man look equally exquisite on the streets in blue jeans and T-shirt, or were his kind of looks enhanced by the period clothing? She'd seen that phenomenon before: someone who looked absolutely yummy in a historical flick and, when wearing modern clothes, appeared positively humdrum.

But never mind that. Right smack in front of her stood a man at noble ease in form-fitting pantaloons and coattails. The black coat molded to his frame, and the starched white collar poked just high enough to accentuate his jaw. With a hand-tied cravat to boot. Hoo! Which brought her to his deliciously sculpted lips, one side cocked up a smidge.

Above those lips and proud nose, his eyes stared right at her. Oh, oops. A fuzzy warmth spread across her chest. This was awkward. His gaze shifted to Ada. Isabelle tried not to look like, well, like a cartoon character knocked on the head, with big X's for eyes.

"Miss Byron. Always a pleasure." He gave a perfect bow, not at all cheesy, as though he practiced bowing. Definitely not his first reenactment ball. "May I have the honor of an introduction?" He raised a brow at Ada.

May I have the honor? Really? She was starting to enjoy the whole reenactment thing, but this was a tad over the top. So, he was handsome. Well, okay, drool-worthy. Maybe she *would* cut him some slack on the over-acting bit.

"Miss Isabelle Rochon, may I present Lord Montagu," Ada went right

with the flow. “Cousin, Miss Rochon.”

Isabelle stuck her hand out to shake his. Lord? Okay, cool. *Lord Drool-Worthy's* penetrating eyes held hers. He lightly grasped her hand, the warmth permeating her glove. Without losing eye contact, he slowly raised it to his lips and feathered a kiss across her knuckles.

Electricity spiked up her arm, stealing her breath. Her knees telegraphed: *Yep, can't handle this, checking out now.*

Isabelle managed to turn the knee-buckle into an awkward curtsy, but who cared since this was all pretend, right? Must have worked, because His Hunkiness smiled, the corner of his mouth quirked, as if he sensed her distress.

And that mouth had been moving only a moment ago. Damn, he'd been talking this whole time? Something about dancing?

“D-dance?” Her stomach back flipped. Other couples headed for the center, and the quartet, back from their break, took up their instruments.

He held out his hand, open, waiting.

Oh, God. Her palms were sweating. Was that why ladies wore gloves? Smart ladies.

She placed her hand in his, and he led her onto the dance floor. If she could focus. Tune out her surroundings. Detach. Not grab the moment too hard, or she'd get so nervous, so flustered, she'd be a pile of goo. A slippery hazard on the marble floor.

The first notes from the musicians floated through the air. A waltz.

Lord Montagu bowed.

Isabelle curtseyed and stifled a giggle. Oooh, boy, she could get used to this treatment.

He swept her into a dizzying swirl of sound and color. His confident fingers on the small of her back shot warmth up her spine. Subtle pressures guided her through the music and crowd in a way she'd never experienced, so very aware of his body, of *him*. She'd thought the waltz quaint, but she was stunned.

Well, not stunned, but... aroused. *Who knew this dance could be sexy?*

This—her heart pounded, pounded, pounded—this was what she'd pictured. All the preparation, the diligent work on the dress and hair and shoes, had led to this moment. Because, yep, as usual, she'd built an expectation for this ball.

Until this moment, she'd wanted to curse her imagination. It was wonderful to finally have an experience at an event match up.

She let the moment etch into her memory, a rare, sparkling gift to savor. The soft, mellow glow of nearby candles, the glint of jewels, the murmuring voices—the occasional titter of laughter—her partner's intoxicating scent, and the notes from the violins intertwining through all, through *them*, while they rode its rhythm. She grinned like an idiot but didn't care.

He wasn't much for small talk. Amazing, and a smidge intimidating. He stared at her while he whirled her around the floor, mesmerizing her with those eyes. They strayed from hers to linger on her neck and slowly travel to her chest and waist.

Each area of her body tingled as if he'd touched her, and her heart thumped against her chest as if seeking his notice too. Damn heart. Something was different about his eyes, and she couldn't figure out what it was in the dim lighting. Someone must have finally doused the electric bulbs.

She couldn't look away. *Weird*. Her stomach did another flippin' flip. Not for the first time, she wondered where her confidence traipsed off to around attractive men.

The last guy who'd hit all her lust buttons had derailed her life back in the States. She'd never let that happen again. So, she fought against the too-strong-to-be-safe attraction by doing what she sensed would most likely break the spell, and perhaps turn Lord Laconic from her: talking. Anything to deflect, protect.

"So, is this your first time at one of these shindigs?" She hoped her voice didn't sound quite so shaky to his ears.

She tore her gaze from his to see if she could spot Andrew. Or Jocelyn, to give her the lookee-what-I-have-here face. Or her boss. She must stay focused on her goal. A flash of bright red hair in the corner. Jocelyn? But the next turn whipped the red hair from view.

"Shindigs?" He pronounced it carefully, drawing her attention back to him. His eyebrows swooped closer together, the inside edges slanting up.

Okay, that was adorable, dammit. "Yeah, you know, these reenactments? You seem quite a natural." The words sucked up what air was left in her lungs. She concentrated on breathing through her nose. *Stay calm*.

And—he was still staring at her.

Oh great, did she have something in her teeth? Did she have stinky breath? Did he think she was some uncouth American and regret asking her to dance? She ducked her head and checked her teeth with her tongue and nearly stumbled. She swung her gaze back to his face to regain her rhythm.

He cocked his head to the side. “I am not at all sure what you believe we are reenacting, but unfortunately, I find I am expected to be at these balls with an appalling regularity.”

He had the period syntax and cadence down pat. “Wow, you’re quite good at this. Don’t worry, I’ll try to play along.”

Her partner did the eyebrow-slanting-up-in-the-middle thing and looked away. She could have sworn he muttered ‘Colonials’ under his breath.

Huh? Wait, he was referring to her. “Hey, no need to be rude, and I’m not a Colonial. We soundly beat your hides and settled that score, like, two hundred years ago.” She gave him a playful swat on his shoulder. “Man, you British can sure hold a grudge.”

His head whipped back, and he gawked at her. “Two hundred years ago? Are you daft, woman?”

Surely, she looked like a candidate for the poster child of dumbfound-ness: mouth agape, brow creased. *Oh*. She chuckled. “I get it. Man, you *are* good. You don’t break character, do you?”

He continued to stare at her as if she were the one who was nuts. Her smile slipped. She looked away and muttered, “Reenactors.”



PHINEAS EXECUTED ANOTHER TURN on the floor and inwardly cursed his impulse to approach Miss Rochon for this dance. Earlier, her countenance and attitude while she watched her fellow participants had intrigued him. It was as if she were worlds away, yet utterly in the moment, and he felt an overwhelming desire to know, to understand fully, what occupied her thoughts. He was certain it was more than the latest gossip or mere cuts of gowns.

It had surprised him to note she was quite striking. Surprised, because

he noticed it second—not first. He maneuvered her around the room and let his gaze sweep her pleasing form again. Her dark brown hair was arranged in loose curls upon her head. But the rounded, hooded Gallic eyes captivated him, whispered of secrets.

Despite an ill-fitting dress, her form was discernible—one that quickened his pulse. It was evident she had recently been to Paris, because the style of dress was *de rigueur* there, but had yet to cross the Channel. He knew, because his sisters had insisted he take careful note of the fashions when it had been his misfortune to journey to Paris a week ago on behalf of the Crown.

Earlier, when he observed Miss Rochon conversing with his cousin, he felt strangely relieved. Miss Byron was the only lady of his acquaintance at the ball who would deign to speak to him, let alone introduce him to a female friend.

After all, the *haut ton* called him the *Vicious Viscount*.

Despite a French name seeming to confirm his initial assumption, when she opened her mouth, she proved to be a Colonial. Even more baffled—and drat it all, intrigued—he gritted his teeth. What brought an American to the Duke of Chelmsford's ball of all places, in a style of dress only Parisians would know was all the rage? Her gloveless left hand on his shoulder was slightly shocking as well, though its warmth penetrated, seared into him, providing the focal point between them—an awareness he could not shake, and was not certain he wished to.

She was a puzzle, full of contradictions. To unravel her secrets... An unfamiliar sense of anticipation trickled through him. No. He expunged the feeling. She was not *his* puzzle.

Though that warm, bare hand. Those lively eyes.

The dance mercifully completed, Phineas led Miss Rochon to Cousin Ada's side. She introduced Miss Rochon to Mrs. Somerville, Ada's chaperone for the evening. Because the last dance was the supper waltz, he escorted all three to the supper room. Miss Rochon appeared ill at ease. She mumbled something about a 'boss'.

He settled the ladies at a table and sought victuals for them. He rolled his right shoulder, the heat of her bare hand still a palpable weight. Reactions to his presence—the rude glares, the protective shuffling of eligible females out of his way by concerned matrons—were commonplace. He

spared no notice, no anxiety. Annoying, yes, but he was inured to it. Indeed, he had cultivated the fear his name and presence engendered. It was a valuable commodity, a valuable blind for enacting his long-laid plans.

At the buffet table, Lord Edgerton looked straight in Phineas's eyes and turned away with no acknowledgment. Question settled as to whether he was still part of that gentleman's circle. He had not yet received Edgerton's calling card after his recent marriage. Now, Edgerton's 'cut direct' confirmed it—Phineas would no longer be receiving invitations to the homes in Edgerton's circle.

Ironic, since the persona he cultivated had been calculated to infiltrate that very circle. If he did not wish for his investigation to cease, Phineas saw no alternative but marriage. Marriage would burnish his image, thus gaining the very invitations he needed.

Yes. The Vicious Viscount was a liability. His wealth and title were insufficient to secure a wife from London's *ton*.

*Damnation.*

Phineas prepared plates of delectables, ensuring he had plenty of blanc-mange, Miss Byron's favorite dessert. What did Miss Rochon prefer? He pictured her gloveless hand—her bare, gloveless hand—elsewhere on his person. Heat bloomed through him. Perhaps on his knee. His thigh. His—He gritted his teeth. Enough. He enlisted a footman to carry the plates to the table.

On his return, he espied a young lady he knew to be of remarkable intelligence, but of a shy nature. On a whim, he bowed.

Several people gasped. The young miss turned white.

*Excellent.* Word would quickly spread, putting her in the orbit of the young blades of the *ton*. Surely, some worthy gentleman's sense of protectiveness would be aroused, and he would take notice of her.

Perhaps his reputation still had *one* noble function.

# Chapter Three



The night  
Hath been to me a more familiar face  
Than that of man; and in her starry shade  
Of dim and solitary loveliness  
I learned the language of another world.  
Lord Byron, *Manfred*, 1817

FEELING SIMULTANEOUSLY BEREFT and relieved, Isabelle watched Lord Montagu stride away without another word. Weird, but Ada and her chaperone acted as if this were normal. Why hadn't the organizers said there'd be a buffet dinner? And the period fanatics had taken over, just as Jocelyn had said. Unease settled in her stomach like a lump.

She shouldn't have had that last drink. Not on an empty stomach. She glanced down. Aaand, she had only one glove on. She yanked it off and stuffed it in her purse. Probably a good thing she hadn't run across her boss.

"I do not believe I have seen you yet this Season," Ada said. "Judging by your accent, you are an American? Have you only lately arrived in London? Who is your escort to the ball? She must be positively anxious about you."

"Oh, I came by myself, though two of my co-workers are around here, somewhere." Isabelle craned her neck but saw no one familiar. She swallowed hard and turned back to Ada. "And to answer your other question, yes, I'm an American. Came over in December to work at the British Museum."

Ada's eyes grew rounder with each word. Isabelle intended to say more, but stopped. What was with her inability to communicate lately without disturbing folks? The tight lump of nameless tension in her belly grew heavier.

Ada's mouth opened and closed several times. Her eyes fluctuated from shock and disbelief to growing admiration and curiosity. She turned

to her chaperone—to gauge her reaction?—but her gaze snagged on the space over Isabelle’s shoulder. Without turning, she knew who it was, as if some kind of homing beacon had been planted in her when she touched Lord Hotpants and now her body hummed, sensing his approach. He came into visual range, and her heart pitty-patted faster. He held a large plate, mounded with food, in one hand, and an event staffer set empty plates and several glasses of lemonade on their table.

*Jeez, they’re in costume, too?*

With a practiced and oh-so-elegant flip of his coat tails, Lord Montagu sat beside her. His body dominated her left side, his scent and heat buffeting her. He didn’t seem inclined to talk, so Isabelle nibbled on the food set before her, half of which she had trouble identifying. A solid white substance appeared harmless, her pokes not turning up anything scary, so she sampled it. Nice, with an almond flavor that lay delicately on her tongue. She ate the rest, as well as the fruit on her plate, hoping to dilute the alcohol in her system. And maybe whatever this Lord Montagu attraction thing was. And maybe this uneasiness she didn’t want to explore too closely.

No one spoke at their end of the table, though all the other party goers filled the room with their laughing and animated conversation. The situation rapidly approached the Awkward Stage.

“Well, that was quite a storm earlier, wasn’t it? Luckily, my friend Jocelyn had a ginormous umbrella, or I would’ve looked like a drowned rat.” Her attempt at small talk garnered only a round of stares—so much for the vaunted weather conversational gambit. Lord Montagu now sported a scowl.

*Alrighty, then.*

She’d handled him and the whole situation wrong, she just knew it. He seemed to give off an I’m Interested vibe—whenever she glanced in his direction, she’d catch him looking away—but otherwise his body language screamed Not Interested. Well, as far as she could tell. She sucked at reading signals. And giving them, too. Did she really care about impressing him?

*Erg.* She was over-analyzing again. She’d been enjoying the ball since meeting Ada and Lord Montagu, but keeping up with such pro reenactors—and obsessing over the hunky guy next to her—was becoming too

much. She still didn't feel well, either. She needed to leave. But, she didn't feel like meeting Katy and her friends at The Mad Martini for a chilly glass of Pinot Grigio. No—she closed her eyes—a good cozying up in front of her library fireplace, with a smexy romance and a cup of hot chocolate.

Yes. Home, with time alone to recharge her batteries. She was done trying to fit in. The spell had been broken.

She searched the room. Where were her co-workers? She could use one as an excuse to leave these three, but she didn't spot anyone she recognized. Well, no matter, she'd have to be abrupt. It wasn't as if she'd ever run into them again.

She looked at the three in turn and plastered on a smile. "Wow." She fanned her face with her hand. "Did the air-conditioning break down or something? I need some air." She patted her lips with her napkin. "Well, been nice meeting you, but I think tonight's worn me out."

She tore her gaze from Lord Montagu's. No, she could *not* be so forward as to give him her number. So what if he was drool-worthy, and a lord to boot. Unless the title was part of his reenactment persona, too; one never knew with these committed folks. Besides, he'd said nothing to her since the waltz.

Isabelle steeled herself and stood. Adorably, so did Lord Montagu. Blood pounding in her ears, she held out her hand first to Mrs. Somerville, then Ada, and finally to His Hunkiness. "Nice meeting you," her voice, well-modulated at the start, ended on a slight crack. She winced.

He bowed over her hand, looking at her, forehead creased as if she'd announced she would perform the hokey pokey on the tabletop. Had she? Staring into his eyes, she wasn't so sure. She shook her head and opened her mouth to say—what? *No. Resist.*

She turned on her heel and worked her way through the crowd to the cloakroom. *Deep breaths. Deep breaths.*

Everything seemed so surreal, almost gauzy, after meeting him. Was it her imagination, or were there more candles lighting the room than she remembered seeing when she'd first arrived? But damn, it did feel as if the AC was busted. While May was still cool in London, the crush of bodies and all the candles made the room stuffy. Sweat trickled down her spine.

Several guys lurked in the main hall in animated conversation, and she could have sworn they referred to the British East India Company as if it were still around. She shook her head and muttered, “And I thought Civil War reenactors were bad.”

At the cloakroom, she dug out the claim ticket from her purse and handed it to the attendant. Unlike the person on duty when she’d arrived, this one was also dressed in period costume. The lump of uneasiness coiling in her stomach grew heavier. *Home.*

The attendant gazed at the ticket in her hand and then at her.

“Well?” Isabelle asked, more sharply than she would have liked.

“Well, miss?”

“My coat, please.” She moved her hand to indicate the ticket and put on her best everything’s-normal smile.

“Certainly, miss, but I am uncertain what you mean by gifting me with this scrap of paper.”

Isabelle sighed. British humor. Whatever. “I’d like my coat, please.”

The attendant shrugged and took the ticket, although with a slight hesitancy, as if the paper might come to life and bite him. He cleared his throat. “Your name, miss?”

“My name? What does—Oh, whatever. It’s Isabelle Rochon.” She tapped her foot, trying to picture the crackling fire in her library. And perhaps a glass of white wine, instead of the hot cocoa. And a piece of dark chocolate to go with her book. And Lord Drool-Worthy stretched beside her, reading a book by the fire. Aaaand, she seriously needed to get him off her brain. That had been a non-starter from the get-go.

Isabelle looked up. The attendant still stared at her. At her glare, he retreated into the cloakroom and returned after several minutes. “Sorry, we don’t ‘ave your coat, miss.”

“What do you mean? Did you use the ticket?” She couldn’t help but raise her voice. *White wine, dark chocolate.*

The attendant frowned and glanced at the ticket clutched in his hand. He donned a polite and tolerant air and replied, “No, miss, I did not.”

*Good Lord, seriously? Okay, two bars of dark chocolate.*

The attendant’s gaze shifted to peer over Isabelle’s right shoulder. His eyes grew round, and a panicked look stole across his face.

“Is there a problem?” The deep, newly familiar, baritone voice came

from behind, resonating within her.

Isabelle whipped around. Lord Montagu, Mrs. Somerville, and Ada stared at her, eyebrows raised.

*Yes. You make my insides all squirmy.* And—her breath caught. “Oh, your eyes are two different colors! Did you know? Of course you did. I’ll shut up now.”



CONTEMPLATING MISS ROCHON’S anxious brown eyes, Phineas questioned the complete soundness of his judgment. Why he deemed it necessary to ensure she was settled in her carriage was beyond him. Miss Byron, however, had been concerned—evidently Miss Rochon lacked a chaperone. Yes. That was the only reason. To appease his cousin. He would ignore how his body hummed like a tuning fork in her presence.

“My eye color is of no import.” Some of his closest friends had never taken note of the variant hues.

Her neck and cheeks turned delightfully pink. “Yeah, probably not the time to get into it.”

“What is the issue here?” Phineas indicated the footman with a tilt of his head.

“He can’t find my coat. It’s the only one I have.”

He raised an eyebrow at the servant—he always found that to be quite effective, as well as expedient.

“I-I don’t have her wrap, your lordship.” The fellow turned crimson.

“Very well.” Phineas proffered his arm to Miss Rochon and held her gaze. Yes, her eyes were quite lovely. “We will be happy to escort you to your carriage. It is warm for May, so I trust the short distance should not inconvenience you too much.”

Miss Rochon gave every appearance of mounting a protest, her stare boldly assessing and still locked with his. However, she shook her head instead and said something under her breath that sounded like, ‘Whatever, dood.’ *What in the devil’s name was a dood?*

However, she did accept his arm.

Miss Rochon’s bare hand curled around his arm, her warmth penetrating the sleeve of his evening kit. The air in his lungs hitched and he

forced a full, steadying breath. He must resist her charms for many reasons. Chief among them—what possible good could it serve to be attracted to a Miss Rochon of America, of all people? About her and her connections, he knew nothing, and to relieve his ignorance, folly. Besides, Edgerton's cut direct had been a salient reminder of his true purpose, and *she* was a distraction. A distraction he could not afford.

Not at this critical juncture.

But Christ, her scent was intoxicating: dewberry and something more earthy, more arousing, more female. The waltz, intimate as it was, had not brought him this close to her. He had definitely not bargained on being arrested by her fragrance. Setting his jaw, Phineas forced himself to lay aside all inconvenient thoughts of Miss Rochon from America.

With Miss Byron and her chaperone, Mrs. Somerville, ahead, Phineas escorted them to the front doors of the duke's townhouse. They crossed the threshold, and Miss Rochon gripped his arm tighter. Out of reflex, he laid his free hand on her bare one, lending his support. And wished his own gloves to Hades.

"Oh, this is getting to be a bit too much. Carriages? I'm over it. You guys really take this all so seriously, don't you?" Oddly, her tone sounded as if it were laced with false bravado.

Phineas peered at Miss Rochon. He looked at Miss Byron and Mrs. Somerville to see if they understood this latest outburst better than he, but they also appeared at a loss. "Shall I call for yours?" he ventured.

Miss Rochon rolled her eyes. She had the most undisciplined expressions he had ever encountered in a lady. "Oh, of course. Fine. I know. I'm being a party pooper. If you're going to do something at all, you might as well do it right, my mother used to say. A bit tired, I guess. Don't mind me, y'all have been nice. Really. Appreciate it. I'm going to catch the subway down the street and go home."

"The subway?" Though he and Miss Byron spoke at the same time, her voice held a slight stammer.

"Oh, yeah, you guys call it a tube, I keep forgetting. Anyway, toodle-oo, as you Brits say. And thanks again." She pulled her arm from his, her bare fingers slipping past his gloved one, waved and walked away from them. Alone.

Phineas flexed his now empty hand, dropped it to his side, and tried

to recall earlier conversations with Colonials. They did use different words and expressions, and were informal in their speech, to be sure, but this one made the others look as if they could converse with the King himself and not make anyone blush. Moreover, because she was determined to walk away from them alone, he knew he had but one choice.

“One moment, Miss Rochon, if you please. We will accompany you.”

“You don’t need to. Thanks, though.”

“I insist.” He searched the line of carriages amassed on this side of Grosvenor Square and hailed Mrs. Somerville’s carriage.

“Really, I’m fine. It’s not very far.”

Devil take it, she sounded annoyed. Keeping one eye on Miss Rochon, he watched Mrs. Somerville’s carriage approach. He handed the elder lady in. Miss Rochon was now several paces away.

“One moment, Miss Rochon, please.” For propriety’s and expediency’s sake, he instructed the driver to follow them. With that accomplished, he focused his attention on the exasperating Colonial. “I will not hear another word of protest.”

“Fine.”

With Miss Rochon and Miss Byron on either arm, he proceeded to the corner, with Mrs. Somerville following in her carriage. At first, the silence was amiable, and because their conversations had been baffling so far, he deemed it wise to remain silent. However, as they neared the corner, Miss Rochon walked slower and slower. He risked a glance. The skin around her eyes and delicate cheekbones was stretched tight. Confusion and, if he was not much mistaken, fear, clouded her cinnamon-colored eyes. Her nostrils flared slightly.

She glanced frantically from one spot to another and appeared ready to cast up her accounts.

Alarmed, he edged closer, in case he was called upon to relieve her evident distress. He matched his pace to hers.

They reached the corner of Davies Street and turned left. She came to an abrupt stop. The other three street corners and the little plaza across the street received her slow perusal.

A tremble went through her body, and her hand tightened its grip on his arm. “But, I know the *tube* station is here. I made a point of checking.” She peered up and down the street, panic glazing her eyes. “More horses

and carriages,” she whispered. “Okay, this is getting a little weird. This doesn’t look anything like I remember. Where’s the Hog in the Pound?”

“The what?” asked Miss Byron.

Miss Rochon did not answer, but continued her frantic inspection of the block. She swung around and looked at him, eyes narrowed. “Did you guys cordon off the whole freakin’ block for this thing? Cart off your cute red phone booths? There’s not a single car or bike to be seen.” She pulled her arm away. “Your reenactor buddies are taking this too far. I mean, everyone’s in costume up and down this street, also. The gas lamps are a nice touch, but—” She glanced down and pointed. “And, is that horse poop? Seriously?”

What nonsense was she babbling now? Phineas stared.

She punched him in the shoulder. “Knock it off, will you?”

Phineas blinked. And blinked again. He was supremely confident this was the first occasion in his thirty-one years he had ever been hit by a lady.

“This isn’t funny anymore,” she continued. “I really am tired and just wanna go home.”

The last part, at least, he understood. He would not hazard inquiring into the meaning of the rest. “I am sure Mrs. Somerville would be happy to escort you home in her coach. What is your direction?”

“Coach?” She frowned. “Forget it. I live in Guildford, and I’m not going to ride in a carriage, no matter how period and charming.”

“Guildford? You mean to travel all the way to Guildford tonight?”

He had thought Miss Rochon a puzzle? She was exasperating.

No, he amended. Daft.

“It’s not far by tube to the train, and it’s not late.” She glanced around again, and back at him, “You know, forget it, I’ll text my friend Katy and see if they’re still at The Mad Martini.” After this incomprehensible speech, she pulled out a round, thin, brass object from her reticule. Her thumbs glided along the surface, a tiny glow emanating from it.

Phineas could only stare. What device was this?

Miss Rochon emitted an unladylike snarl and shoved it back into her reticule. “Figures, no signal. And my photo didn’t post.” She pursed her lips and peered around. “Doesn’t matter, it’s only a block or two away, I’ll hop over and see if they’re still there.” She turned to Miss Byron. “Really,

you guys have been nice, thanks again. One of them can give me a ride.”

She stepped away, waved, and walked alone down the dark street. Again.

Yes, a candidate for Bedlam, this Miss Rochon. He contemplated leaving her and her idiotic expressions to her certain fate. He looked at his cousin.

Miss Byron returned his gaze with concern in her eyes. “Cousin, we cannot let her walk alone. She certainly is a strange creature, but we cannot in good conscience leave her be. There could be footpads about, even in this neighborhood.”

At times, Phineas hated being a gentleman. Of course, Miss Byron was right. Despite her youth, his cousin possessed an innate sense of other people’s character and situation. He felt it only prudent to agree, since her assessment matched his own sensibilities. Besides, Miss Rochon was obviously distressed by her surroundings and endeavoring to put a brave face upon it. Something was amiss. With a grunt, he tucked Miss Byron’s arm under his own, and they hastened to catch up with Miss Rochon.

“We will accompany you to your destination.” He gave her his best glare, to stifle any objection she might effect. He also hoped it would discourage her from continuing with her Colonial babble.

“Whatever. Suit yourself.” She shrugged. “Well, Katy *did* say to bring a hottie, and she’s sure to like you, too, Ada.”

He whipped his body around to regard her more fully, surprised at her for being so free with Miss Byron’s Christian name.

The less discourse the better, in his opinion. They proceeded in silence. As earlier, Miss Rochon’s steps slowed by degrees, until she stiffened and marched around the corner onto Marylebone Lane. She stopped, her brow furrowed, her lips trembling.

He followed her troubled gaze down the lane. The dark windows of the butcher’s and peddler’s shops gave no hints as to the reason for her distress. No dark shapes loomed. The new gas lights provided ample illumination.

“What happened to The Mad Martini? I was here just last Friday.” She gazed up and down the length of Marylebone. She looked back at him, and he was certain of her fear: her voice quavered and her eyes seemed wild as they pierced into his, almost pleading. “Okay, I’ve been

trying to stay calm this whole time, but now I think—I think I might scream or faint. Yes, faint. And then I can wake up in Kansas.”

She pinched herself.

Kansas? He was unfamiliar with that particular place. Perhaps it was the town from whence she came. But—why would she expect to wake up there? Homesick?

Insane?

A street urchin streaked by, bumped into Miss Rochon, and dashed across the street.

“Hey, my calling card case. Come back here! Shit!” Miss Rochon darted into the street after the thief.

Miss Byron gasped. Phineas stared, his muscles locking him in place, his breath now lodged somewhere in his body. Perhaps in the soles of his Hessians.

A hackney cab clipped past and knocked her to the ground into a stinking puddle of water and offal. Her head struck the curb.

Phineas’s gut tightened. His muscles unlocked and he leaped forward. She did not move.

# Chapter Four



I stood

Among them, but not of them, in a shroud  
Of thoughts which were not their thoughts.  
Lord Byron, *Childe Harold*, Canto III, 1816

THE RHYTHMIC POUNDING in her head expanded and contracted with each heartbeat. Isabelle rose from unconsciousness, and her awareness coalesced into thoughts: Why? Head injury? Or, was this the Hangover to End All Hangovers? She didn't remember drinking *that* much. She raised her eyelids a fraction and winced. Too bright. She groaned and squeezed her eyes shut.

She'd been at the ball. Yes. And it had become overwhelming... and Lord Drool-Worthy and the carriages... the odd imaginings. Had someone spiked her last Bellini with some hallucinogen? She'd been queasy for a bit there, but—

She tried to harness and ride the insistent pounding. Part of her head felt bruised, painful. Wait, that must be why her head hurt; she'd fallen at the ball, bumped her head, and the rest was her over-active imagination.

Wherever she was, it was soft. And stationary. Yep, she'd open her eyes and be resting on a couch in the Ladies' Room at the ball, a museum co-worker helping her.

How embarrassing.

A distant staccato sound intruded into her consciousness.

She groaned. No, no, no! It sounded suspiciously like horseshoes clip-clopping over cobblestones, trotting in syncopated time with her pounding headache. She moved her head from side to side. A tickling of nausea tripped through her stomach.

"I think she is awake," came a gentle, feminine voice to the left. Skirts rustled and a door snicked open and shut. The voice sounded familiar.

*Where am I?* Isabelle tested her senses further. She lay on a soft bed,

not draped on a couch. The heavy covers anchored her in a way that negated her body below the neck. And she was thirsty as all get-out.

Well, nothing for it but to open an eye.

Through the dry, sleep-coated blur of a contact lens, Isabelle got a vague impression of a bedroom drenched in daylight. She inhaled deeply—fresh linen smell. Clean.

She risked opening the other eye and blinked until her lenses cleared, adjusted position. *Thank God for extended wear lenses.*

An over-bright glimpse of a gorgeously decorated bedroom done up in soft pinks and Regency-era antiques swam into view. The chirp of a bird called for attention. A yellow canary fluttered back and forth, up and down, in a white ornate iron cage in a corner.

Someone had nice taste and a great eye for detail. She found the source of the voice from earlier: Ada Byron sitting in a chair, her brow furrowed. Then who had left the room?

Isabelle groaned. “Where am I?” She kept her head still, using only her eyes, so as not to tempt her nausea further. No more head shakes.

“Thank goodness you are well. We worried we might have to send for Dr. Somerville. You are in a guest bedchamber of his house in Chelsea.”

Isabelle digested this. Dr. Somerville? Oh yeah, Ada’s chaperone was a Mrs. Somerville. “What happened?”

“You see, when the footpad made off with your pretty silver case, you hit your head. After the horse bumped you, that is.”

Not the best question to have asked, then. For her sanity’s sake, anyway. Footpad? Horse? Fabulous.

Isabelle clamped her eyes shut. When she reopened them, she’d be back in her home in Guildford. Or, draped on that couch at the ball. Anything.

She risked a peek. Sight—Ada’s wan smile, obviously worried about her.

A logical, rational explanation existed. She was unsure what it would be, but regardless, one existed. What she suspected last night could *not* be true. However, she had no clue what to say next.

Ada took care of it for her. “Miss Rochon, Lord Montagu wished to pursue the footpad to retrieve your case. It seems you hold it quite dear. However, we determined it was more important to get you someplace

safe. He deposited us here and returned to search, but he sent a note earlier informing me he had not met with success.” She took a deep breath. “Moreover, he said he would call this afternoon to inquire after your health.”

So, he was real, too. Had she imagined his good looks and the frisson of awareness he generated whenever near? His intoxicating scent that reminded her of woods after a thunderstorm—clean and elemental?

*Agh.* She needed to stop thinking about him and make sense of last night instead. She stomped on the little flicker of excitement which competed with her nausea by dancing stupid butterflies in her stomach.

“So, it’s morning?” Isabelle swallowed, trying to get more moisture into her dry throat.

“Yes, almost eleven. You must be famished. I shall have the cook send nourishment and tea.”

Goose bumps pimpled Isabelle’s arms as several thoughts vied for attention:

1. Ada still sported a period costume, though less formal than last night’s.
2. They were in a house with at least one domestic servant.
3. Ada used words modern Brits would never use.

Isabelle sat up and rested her back against the headboard. Her vision swirled, and she bit down a new wave of nausea. She concentrated on staring at the embroidered flowers on her coverlet, willing them to stop moving. Oh, man, did she have a concussion? She closed her eyes, breathed several times through her nose, and opened her eyes. The flowers had stopped moving. She looked down and noticed:

4. That she wore a granny nightgown.

*Okay, stay calm.* It was her imagination playing tricks.

The clatter of wheels over cobblestones and the pounding of horses’ hooves drifted through the window again. A high-pitched voice outside chanted: “Buy my matches, my nice, small, pointed matches. Do you want any matches, maids? Buy my matches, my nice, small, pointed matches.”

Isabelle squeezed her eyes closed, pinched the bridge of her nose, and took a deep breath.

“Are you feeling poorly? Do you wish for a little food?” Ada asked.

“No, I’m not hungry, thanks.” Isabelle’s stomach rumbled.

Ada's eyebrows quirked up.

"Okay, I am." She rubbed her stomach. "Sorry, just suffering from the shocks of last night, thank you." She needed time to think, was all.

Her phone! If this was a big joke concocted by her co-workers, her phone would squelch it—they would have taken it to keep her guessing.

"Wait, before you go. My purse. Do you know where it is?"

Ada stopped at the door. "Purse? I did not see a bag of coins. Do you mean your reticule?"

Another term no one used anymore. "Yes, thank you."

"I set it over here." Ada headed to a Sheraton mahogany bureau with a white porcelain bowl and pitcher on top and returned with the purse. She set it on the nightstand. "It is an unusual reticule. You were fortunate the footpad did not snatch it as well. Most likely, he saw only the flash of silver on your other arm and took the opportunity that presented itself. I shall return with a tray, and you will feel much better after a dish of hot tea."

Ada left, and Isabelle pulled her purse into her lap. Hands shaking, she reached in and grabbed her phone.

*It is here.*

Then the reenactor theory was probably out. Still, she ached to connect to the outside world, to dive into the stream and see what text and email messages she might have, to see if anyone wrote on her profile. Man, even to see the regular inanities posted on her newsfeed. She pressed the *space* key and the menu lit up. No red asterisks adorned any of her message icons.

"Well, poop." She scrolled to the newsfeed, but it didn't refresh. Nothing new posted since last night. She thumbed over to her social-networking feed. Nothing. She glanced at her signal strength—a red circle in the upper-right corner.

No signal.

All right, no reason to panic. Sometimes, it was rare, but sometimes, reception sucked in certain parts of London. Why hadn't she switched carriers earlier? So, how to proceed from here?

Talk to Ada like normal and risk having the girl think her batty?

*Wait, I am batty to even be thinking what I am. If it's true, I've managed to travel back in time, and that's impossible.*

“Meaning—”

Meaning—she was batty.

Maybe a fellow party goer *had* slipped her a drug last night.

Or, she’d met some passionate reenactors who loved antiques, had a sick sense of humor, an overactive imagination, and too much time on their hands?

No. Pretend everything was normal.

On cue, Ada returned with a tray and set it on Isabelle’s bed. The yeasty aroma of fresh bread curled into Isabelle’s nose. Her stomach rumbled. Jam occupied little bowls along with heaping plates of toast, hot bread, eggs, and a steaming pot of tea. Isabelle spread jam on a slice of toast and took a bite.

*Mmmm, apricot.* She nibbled and sipped her tea, using the time to think what her next step should be.

“Ada, thank you for taking care of me. I’m so sorry if I’ve been a lot of trouble. I’ll make it up to you.” She took a deep breath. Into the breach. “I need to get in touch with my friend Katy. Can I use your phone?” Innocent expression, bland smile. Breath held.

For most of Isabelle’s short speech, Ada made gestures of acceptance, nodding. On the last word, she cocked her head and frowned.

Isabelle’s stomach twisted. She set down the thick slice of bread.

“Phone?” Ada asked.

*All right, nothing for it, girl, but brazen this out, come what may.*

“Yes.” Isabelle concentrated on stirring her tea with a little silver spoon, though she’d not put in any cream or sugar. Stir, stir, stir. “I need to call her.” Stir, stir, stir. “Let her know I’m okay.”

“Oh, no trouble at all. I shall have Devin bring around the carriage later, and we can call on her.”

Isabelle swallowed. Back to the joke theory? No. That didn’t pan out or make sense. Back to severe head injury, and she imagined all this? Still a strong possibility.

She massaged the lump behind her head and winced. She *felt* awake. She stroked the bedspread, her fingertips tracing each embroidered stitch. No dream she’d ever had was this vivid. Okay, Severe Head Injury/Am Imagining This theory downgraded to a weak possibility.

That left—what?

She'd traveled back in time? Her mind flinched.

Wacky reenactors? Even fanatics never took it this far. Deep breath. "Ada, I'm a little woozy from the head injury. What's the date?"

"The 10<sup>th</sup> of May."

Okay, so it was the next day. "And the—uh—the year?" She screwed her eyes shut.

Silence.

Isabelle opened her eyes. Enough of her desperation must have found its way to Ada, because the latter cocked her head to the side and said, "1834."

Isabelle shuddered and dropped her head in her hands, shaking it back and forth. She wrestled with the wave of panic threatening to engulf her.

Either she was crazy, or she'd traveled back in time. If the former—not good. If the latter, well, it would probably cause her to become the former.

"What is in your lap?" Ada asked.

Confused, Isabelle opened her eyes and followed Ada's gaze to the phone. The insanity of her situation bubbled up, like an instant and silly-giddy high, and she answered in an overly light tone: "Oh, this? It's my phone!" She added a smile she feared looked scary.

*Keep it together, girl.*

Isabelle witnessed the inner struggle in Ada's eyes: the desire to believe Isabelle sane, the worry she wasn't, and the ingrained need to be polite.

How to proceed? Embrace the time travel theory? Isabelle also wanted to believe herself sane.

So. She had to convince Ada to help her, because—realization dawned to pierce through her with its cold reality—she had no friends, no money, no home, no clothes! And it wasn't as if she could waltz out in her tattered ball gown and snag a job waiting tables.

*Don't panic.*

Isabelle set down her tray of food and folded her hands. "Ada, I'm going to tell you my situation, and I need you to be open to what I'm going to say. Open to the possibilities. I need you, period." Isabelle's hands balled into fists, gathering in the folds of the bedspread. She relaxed her

fingers and felt the sweaty heat warm the fabric. "I'm scared and unsure what to do. Do you understand?" She held her breath.

"Oh, yes. I knew when I first made your acquaintance you were different and had a story. Most of the time I find your speech difficult, but I am intrigued by the possibilities of your words."

Their conversations last night *would* spark curiosity in an active mind like Ada's. Words and their implications might allow her to bring Ada around.

Ada must have interpreted Isabelle's silence as reluctance, because she spoke again in a rush. "I am different, too. I am passionate about numbers and mathematics, and the mysterious workings of the world. I attend lectures to expand my mind..." She trailed off, gaze averted. Had her good breeding kicked in and stopped her from boasting?

Isabelle stared at her phone. Should she do this? Was the phone the best way to illustrate?

Yes. Get Ada's attention first.

Isabelle smiled and held out her phone.

Ada took it in her small, pale hand, holding it at an awkward angle, the round shape of the phone exactly fitting her palm.

"Punch any of the keys," Isabelle said.

Ada frowned. "Punch?" She rotated the phone, inspecting both sides. She looked up.

"Any of the buttons."

Ada looked at it again. "I am sorry, Miss Rochon, but I do not see any keys or buttons on this. It seems much too small to have either. And punching them sounds painful."

Isabelle sighed. Damn the language barrier. Not only did she have a problem with modern Brits, now she had to communicate in a land of nineteenth-century ones. Words had morphed and changed through time, of course, to denote more modern inventions. A 'key' to Ada meant only a big metal object to open a door. A 'button', a fastener on an article of clothing.

*Back up, take this slow.*

"See the little letters circling the edge?"

At Ada's nod, Isabelle continued. "Press any of them."

Ada did and gasped. She dropped the phone into her lap. Her eyes,

now round, gazed up at Isabelle.

Oops, maybe not the best way to have proceeded. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten you.” Isabelle held out her hand. “Here, let me have it, I’ll explain.”

After getting the phone from Ada, Isabelle sat back and considered her. Was she going to say this out loud to another human being? What if Ada didn’t believe her and they packed her up and carted her off to Bedlam—the real Bedlam—the insane asylum so notorious its name became synonymous with madness? Isabelle closed her eyes and took a long, slow breath.

“What I’m about to tell you is going to sound very strange, very unbelievable. In fact, what scares me most is you won’t believe me and will think I’m crazy.” She snapped her eyes open and captured Ada’s gaze. “I need you to promise you’ll listen, ask any questions you might have, and allow me to prove it by showing you some of how this works.” Isabelle held up her phone.

Still wide-eyed, Ada nodded. “I promise, Miss Rochon.”

Oh, God, how to word this? The next half-hour or so, however long it took, would be crucial. She couldn’t afford to make a mess of this.

“Do you remember how we met last night?”

“Certainly.”

“Have you ever seen me before at any social event you’ve been to?”

“No.”

“Do you know most of the people who attend these events?”

“Yes.” Ada shifted in her chair, edging closer to the bed.

*Good, she’s intrigued.* “But you do meet new people occasionally, right?” Isabelle asked.

“Yes, of course.”

“And how do you meet them?”

Ada looked at her blankly.

Isabelle helped her along only a little; Ada must be brought to the conclusion by her own reasoning. “Are you introduced to them by someone else?”

“I understand. Yes.” She blushed. “I am sorry, I hope I do not offend, but, yes, new people are introduced by a mutual acquaintance.” She tipped her head a fraction. “Generally, one hears about a new individual

before they appear. Particularly someone who came all the way from America.”

“And I quite rudely introduced myself, didn’t I?”

Ada shifted in her seat. The blush remained, deepening.

“It’s okay, I’m not trying to judge you, and don’t worry about offending me. I’m simply trying to explain myself and my situation. The only way to do this is for me to walk through last night and show you how I, uh, vary from the norm. I mean, differ from what you’re used to.” Isabelle prayed Ada understood. She crossed her fingers. “Please be honest and say what’s on your mind.”

“If you insist,” Ada replied. Isabelle could have sworn she saw a mischievous twinkle flit through Ada’s eyes.

“All right, so we’ve established I’m from America. And this is unusual enough you would’ve heard of, say, a diplomat’s relative or daughter arriving in your social circle. I also didn’t conform to etiquette and wait to be introduced to you. Can you remember anything else last night that struck you as unusual?”

“Besides not being able to understand the majority of your speech?” A smile tugged at Ada’s lips.

Isabelle laughed. “Yes, though try to remember our conversation, and ask me about things that puzzled you.”

Ada seemed to enjoy this, as if it were a game.

If only.

“Let me think. Well, if you are certain you wish me to be entirely frank, though this will be difficult. Particularly as the first item will sound as if I am puffing myself up, but it is the truth.”

Isabelle nodded and waited, though it was hard.

Finally, Ada screwed up her courage. “You did not know who I was.” A deep pink blush crept up her neck and face.

“I, uh, sorry, go on,” as it hit Isabelle who she was talking to. Could she truly be—

“You inquired whether Lord Byron was an ancestor.”

“Yes.” Isabelle held her breath.

“Unfortunately, everyone here knows I am his offspring.” Ada paused. “Though, perhaps this is not everyday knowledge in America.” She looked at her hands.

“Ohmigod! You *are* Ada Byron Lovelace! This is so amazing. Wow! It’s so cool to meet you.” Isabelle stopped herself from bouncing up and down on the bed. *Shouldn’t frighten her.*

Ada jumped in her seat. “That is also peculiar. Your speech and manner proclaim to know who I am, but you use a family name with which I am unfamiliar—Lovelace.”

Oh, right, Ada wasn’t married yet. And didn’t her future husband gain the name later as a title or something? Instinctively, Isabelle picked up her phone to look up Ada’s bio and laughed, tossing the phone down.

“Sorry, my mistake.” Probably better not to answer Ada’s question. “Any other differences?”

Ada gazed at the ceiling. “You said you had consulted *old* fashion plates for your gown, but your dress is in the first stare of fashion.”

Oooh, Isabelle had forgotten she’d said that. Good thread to unravel more. “Do you remember what else I said about my dress? Who made it?”

“Yes, your answer struck me as odd.” Ada continued pointing out details she’d noticed, encouraged by Isabelle’s prodding, concluding her list with Isabelle’s behavior on the street.

“Yes, that sums up last night pretty well,” Isabelle said. “I *was* surprised to see all those things. To see gas lights everywhere instead of only in some of the historic districts. To see period clothes. The thick smell of coal smoke. The absence of things I’m used to seeing on any London street. Plus, the fact there’d been a heavy rainstorm last night, and when I left, the ground and streets looked as if it hadn’t rained in days.” Isabelle closed her eyes and shuddered. She looked at Ada. Would she understand? She rubbed her forehead. Couldn’t her headache die down a little?

Isabelle sighed. “And then, I’m robbed by a street urchin straight from a Dickens novel and wake up here, in a room beautifully decorated with antiques that look brand new.” *Oops, probably shouldn’t have mentioned Dickens, since he hasn’t started writing yet. Not novels, anyway.*

At the last, Ada gasped. “Antiques! Mrs. Somerville does not have a stick of old, ratty furniture. This is all entirely modern, I assure you.”

Isabelle smiled. It was time. “To you, they are modern. To me, however, they are,” she crossed her fingers again and took a deep breath, “they are from an earlier time. Much earlier.”

Ada frowned.

“What I’m trying to tell you, the reason all this is strange to me, is because it is. I don’t normally see these things in my life.”

“Is America truly so different? I have heard tales, but generally—” and again, Ada blushed, “generally the tales I hear make it sound as if you are, you live, well, more primitively.” Ada took a breath and held it, her face further reddening.

Isabelle picked up her phone and hit the *space* bar. “Come closer, Ada, let me show you something. You like numbers and are good at math. If I remember my timeline right, you know Charles Babbage already, and he has talked to you about his Analytical Engine?”

Ada’s face drained of color. “Yes, though not many people know. How do you?”

Oh, yeah. He was still working on the Difference Engine right now. “He wants to use the engine to calculate numbers automatically, correct?”

Ada nodded.

“Look closely.” Isabelle scrolled down to her Applications folder and pulled up her calculator.

A sharp intake of breath sounded beside her.

What must this look like to Ada? Magic? They didn’t still hang witches, did they? Isabelle shook her head and demonstrated anyway.

“See these little numbers here? I’m going to add forty-eight plus fifteen hundred and sixteen.” Isabelle punched buttons while she talked. “And the screen here shows the answer.”

Isabelle peeked at Ada to gauge her reaction.

Ada blanched again. She held a trembling hand to her mouth. “How—how—I do not understand.”

Man, she’d just rocked Ada’s world. Probably almost made her mind explode. Hopefully, it was able to take a little more. “I’m sorry, Ada, but the truth is, I’m from the future.”