

**Arabella's Journey**  
*To the Manor Born, Book One*

By

**Kathy Leigh**

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# Chapter One

Essex 1824

Arabella rushed into the kitchen of Linwood Manor, running her fingers through her thick, honey-colored curls and shaking off loose leaves and grass as she did so. “Oh, Mrs. Burnes,” she gasped, “nobody said anything about Uncle’s coming home today, and he gets so irritated if I’m late.”

“Nobody expected Mr. Rogers to return today, least of all with guests,” retorted the small, angular woman who served as cook in the large but neglected house that had once belonged to Arabella’s grandfather and was now the property of her uncle, Biddulph Rogers. The cook cast a worried eye over the ruffled condition of Arabella’s clothing. “Gracious girl, you have got yourself into a mess. How a girl of your age gets into the scrapes you do is beyond me,” she continued as she dusted leaves off the faded brown dress, which did little to hide the pretty shape of Arabella’s curvaceous figure.

Arabella shook her dress impatiently and answered with a doleful glance at her gown that had never been fashionable and which for the last year, at least, had been somewhat skimpy on her. “It was such a beautiful day that I had to go out and see how the flowers were growing, and I couldn’t help but run when I got outside. I don’t see why turning eighteen means that I suddenly have to stop doing the things I enjoyed doing when I was seventeen,” she muttered as she ran her fingers through her hair, loosening the few hair pins that had somehow remained fixed in the mass of curls tumbling about her shoulders and down her back. “And then there was a tree that just needed to be climbed,” she continued as she tossed her head impatiently.

“Well, a fine mess you’ve made of yourself. Do you have any hair pins left at all?”

“I think there are some,” Bella answered, passing those she had pulled free from her tangled curls to the cook. “Do you suppose there’s time for me to go upstairs and sort my hair out?”

“No, I don’t suppose that at all. They’ve called for tea already and you were late then. We’ll have to make the best of things here,” Mrs. Burnes scolded as she began to finger comb Arabella’s curls into a knot at the back of her head.

“Bother Uncle!” continued Bella. “He rarely comes down to Linwood, and when he does, he never wants me to join him and his guests. Why do you suppose he wants me this time?”

“Well that’s more than my life’s worth of supposing to tell,” Mrs. Burnes said as she finished re-pinning Arabella’s hair in as neat an arrangement as she could form with the few hair pins they had been able to salvage. “There. That will have to do. Now run along. No, don’t actually run. Walk nicely like the young lady you’re supposed to be. Goodness knows what kind of trouble there’s going to be if Mrs. Clarke finds out what you were doing instead of sitting at your sewing.”

Arabella’s pretty face pulled into a grimace. “Oh, I will make up the sewing. I promise. It’s just that I couldn’t resist going outside on such a beautiful afternoon and sewing long, tedious seams on sheets really leaves no room for imagination.”

Mrs. Burnes smiled at her indulgently. “Go on. Off with you now, before you’re even later and get into more trouble.”

Arabella hurried off towards the formal drawing room which was situated in the front part of the house, a part of the house she seldom ventured into, a part of the house used only when her uncle made his infrequent visits to his country seat in the remote northeast of Essex.

The front of the house was cold and dismal with an unused and neglected air. Arabella slowed her pace as she neared the drawing room. She had not seen her uncle since his last brief visit to Linwood almost eight months ago, and was not sure why he had summoned her to partake of tea with him and his guests now, at the height of the London Season. Usually when he came to Linwood Manor, he ignored his niece, confining her to the back rooms and keeping her as much as possible out of the way of his guests. Anxiety engulfed her as she pondered the unusualness of her uncle's current summons.

Just as she turned the corner to the drawing room, the door opened and Mrs. Clarke stepped out briskly. Arabella stood still against the dark wood that lined the walls of the gloomy corridor, hoping that somehow the dour housekeeper would not notice her in the shadows of the passageway. But Mrs. Clarke was not so easily put off. The skeletal woman strode forward, glaring at her from steel grey eyes. "So, here you are," she hissed, her voice low and threatening. Arabella flinched as the housekeeper leaned towards her. "We've been searching everywhere for you because you do not have the decency and breeding to be where you should be at any moment of the day. Your uncle is not pleased with you." Mrs. Clarke's sharp nose quivered as her thin face pulled into a sneer. "We'll see what punishment you get." Her thin white hand gestured towards the door while her eyes remained fixed on Arabella's anxious face. "Go on. Go on in." Mrs. Clarke pushed the girl forward and Arabella stumbled a little. The housekeeper tsked behind her.

Pausing in front of the large oak door to take a deep breath, Arabella smoothed down her old, faded dress. She did not know what to expect, did not know whether the room would be crowded with a rowdy gathering of her uncle's cronies, or if there would be only one or two of the leering, grasping gentlemen who sometimes came down to the country to hunt in her uncle's coverts. Neither option appealed to her, but she had to proceed, with Mrs. Clarke hovering behind her and her uncle expecting her entrance into the room. The door creaked as she slowly pushed it open and the faint conversation that had filtered through the heavy oak suddenly ceased.

Silence, thought Arabella, was the most intimidating sound in the world. As she opened the door, her uncle and another man turned to look at her. She flinched under the onslaught of their intent focus on her and she could not prevent her cheeks from turning rosy pink with the blood that rushed to her face. She was particularly flustered by the austere intensity of the gaze of the tall, dignified man who was standing next to her uncle. He frowned slightly as his eyes wandered up and down her body. Waves of critical appraisal emanated from him as he took in her grubby dress and untidy hair.

Arabella shivered. She took a half step backwards when a momentary smirk marred the finely formed face of the stranger as his eyes ran rapidly over her rumpled, ill-fitting clothes. She dropped her eyes; her ears buzzed with the rush of blood to her head.

It took a moment for her to realize that her uncle's voice was reverberating through the room. Finally, it cut through her confusion, reminding her of the common courtesies, and she gathered her manners like a mantle of protection around her shoulders. Her feet managed to regain their mobility and she moved slowly towards her uncle and the intimidating stranger.

"Ah, Lord Edmund, let me present my niece, Arabella Mason." Uncle Biddulph's unctuous society voice, an intonation that she hated even more than the dismissive and cold tones he usually used on her, slithered over the worn-down chairs and sofas, the old tables, and the worn carpet of the shabby drawing room. "Arabella, come here, dear, and greet the earl." Uncle Biddulph smiled

in a way that made Arabella shiver, and held out a hand to her. “Let me present Edmund, Lord Moreland, the Earl of Cumberwell.” Her uncle’s nasal voice dripped with sycophantic obsequiousness as he beckoned her into the room.

Slowly Arabella moved to her uncle’s side. When he gripped her arm tightly and hissed a warning not to embarrass him with any rustic behavior, Arabella realized that he was unusually agitated. The cool confidence exuding from the earl made even her usually bumptious uncle nervous. Arabella took short sharp breaths to try to calm her own sudden panic.

Arabella’s quiet little world tilted on its axis.

The sheltered upbringing Arabella had been subjected to had kept her far from the society of most men; she was not used to being introduced to strangers and she found the earl’s intense scrutiny of her disorienting. She nibbled on her lip, wishing that she could escape the steady blue gaze that had been on her since the door had opened. But the earl, groomed in good manners since birth, and although somewhat bemused and a little repulsed by the clumsy manners and frightful clothes of the girl being introduced to him, stepped forward with a stately bow. It took all of Arabella’s natural courage not to shrink back, not to hide behind her usually despised uncle.

“Miss Mason, I am honored to meet you,” the earl’s voice, rich and deep like the dark woods just after sunset, filled the room and swept over her like the heat from a fire.

Arabella’s eyes flickered over his thick, dark hair that curled slightly where it touched the collar of his perfectly tailored blue riding coat and to his shoulders that filled that coat with impressive breadth. Her breath caught in her throat before she finally remembered that politeness required her to respond to his greeting. Pulling her hand loose from her uncle’s grasp, she managed to remember how to curtsy, without tripping over her feet, and murmured, “Your lordship, welcome to Linwood Manor.”

Then for the first time she looked up properly at his face, and almost gasped. If she had thought it difficult to breathe before, she found it almost impossible to do so now. Her eyes moved up a well-defined chest dressed in a fine, white-linen shirt and light-blue waistcoat delicately embroidered in darker blue thread. The earl was younger than she had first thought him to be—certainly much younger than her uncle. He could not yet be thirty years of age. His chin was firm and strong, his mouth generous, full and turned up in the beginning of a sardonic smile. But it was his eyes that held her captive. They continued to watch her with undisguised interest, glinting with a hint of amusement as he continued to observe her intently.

Never had anyone looked at her the way the earl was looking at her now. She needed to remove herself from his line of sight before her knees crumpled beneath her and she was forever humiliated. Her uncle, fortunately unaware of her discomfort, and satisfied that the greetings had passed off with appropriate decorum, took matters in hand and turned to the earl. “Good, good,” he rumbled. “Lord Cumberwell, please be seated.”

Edmund Moreland, Lord Cumberwell, current in a line of earls who dated back centuries, whose family had already been prominent when William brought his troops across from Normandy, raised a perfectly formed eyebrow at his host’s lack of civility towards the young girl who stood awkwardly in the center of the drawing room. Although her appearance was sadly lacking, quite disheveled and tousled, and her curtsy betrayed a clumsiness that his sisters could have bettered before they were six, that did not preclude a gentleman from behaving with the politeness that had been drilled into him since he could walk.

Rogers was almost pushing him towards a faded red sofa near the fireplace, but Edmund shrugged off his host’s arm and turned to Arabella. He nodded briefly. “Miss Mason, where will you take your seat?” A gentleman did not sit down while a lady was left standing.

Her vivid green eyes flew to his face with a startled expression. Her soft pink lips formed a shocked O. Her dainty hands bunched the material of her brown dress between slim, white fingers. All of this Edmund noticed almost unconsciously. What it all amounted to, he realized, was that this strange young girl was not used to having gentlemen taking care for her comfort, or treating her with any consideration at all. He found himself beginning to look past his initial impression of Arabella and to notice how vulnerable and sensitive the girl was. And the earl's innate chivalrous need to protect and defend vulnerability wherever he encountered it was stirred by the air of misplacement evident in this young woman.

Arabella took a sharp breath, but before she could answer, Rogers intervened. "Never mind her, my lord. Let's get you comfortably settled on the sofa. The fire seems to be drawing decently and you should be warm enough over here."

Arabella was startled to see a flash of something that looked like anger mixed with irritation race across the earl's face. She took a half step backwards, uncertain of what had elicited such a reaction. The restrained power that radiated from the earl as he turned towards the sofa frightened her. But he glanced at the fire and shrugged an elegant shoulder, gathering control of his irritation.

"Seems a bit warm for such a mild day in June," he drawled, his voice at odds with his feelings, and moved to the far end of the sofa, away from the heat of the fire. He looked at Arabella with a quick smile and gestured towards the seat her uncle had intended for him. "Of course, a lady might find the warmth more desirable." For a moment, everything in the room seemed to hover in a state of unpredictability. No one moved. Arabella realized she had stopped breathing.

Finally, Uncle Biddulph huffed out a grunt and heaved himself into the warmest corner of the sofa, with little regard for manners or propriety. "Well, it's been a long journey, I'm at home and if a young blood like you don't feel the chill, I certainly do."

The earl raised an eyebrow and, watching Arabella select a straight-backed chair some distance from the fireplace, eased himself onto the rather uncomfortable sofa.

The chair Arabella chose was as far as politely possible from the earl and her uncle. Her seat would keep her from actively engaging in conversation, for she had no idea what could be said to one whose face and bearing suggested a knowledge of the world about which she knew nothing. He would not be interested in her silly descriptions of which flowers bloomed in the garden and which birds nested in trees beneath her window which was all the conversation her limited world gave her. She wanted only the opportunity to observe him discretely, to fill her mind with images which she could draw on in her imagination when this enigmatic guest of her uncle left Linwood and she was once again left to her own society. She did not think she was likely to see many such examples of manhood again in her secluded life. Indeed, she had not thought it possible that such elegance and power could combine in a single human being. In fact, Arabella thought as she watched the earl through lowered lashes, he seemed almost too well put together to be altogether human.

Arabella sat as still as she could in her hard chair, only half listening as her uncle rambled on about the conditions of the roads between London and Linwood. She was aware that the earl nodded occasionally although he said nothing. He stared steadily at the fire that burned sluggishly in the hearth. Absorbed as she was in her perusal of this unusual guest, she noticed his mouth draw into a hard line and his jaws clench tightly as her uncle complained about the postilion who would not run the horses at the pace Uncle Biddulph had thought was necessary. The earl's shoulders stiffened and Arabella was wondering what had happened on the road, when the earl spoke in a laconic drawl that belied the rigidity of his posture.

“Seems to me the horses were doing as well as they could under a very capable driver, considering the muddiness of the road you were just describing, Rogers.” Arabella could not see the earl’s eyes directly, but she suspected that the glint of humor she had glimpsed earlier had disappeared altogether. A smile formed at the corners of her mouth at the set down her uncle received, while at the same time she wondered why a gentleman so obviously at odds with her uncle and so very different from her uncle’s usual companions had come to Linwood. He did not seem to enjoy her uncle’s company.

Before she could puzzle out any solution to the conundrum, Uncle Biddulph decided to change tack. He turned abruptly to Arabella in an attempt to show off his niece’s accomplishments as a hostess. “Niece Arabella, as the lady of the house, it is fitting for you, my dear, to serve the tea. Here it all is ready and waiting for you to pour.” With a flourish of a plump hand and lace cuffs, he pointed to the tea tray set on a table near the sofa. Arabella noticed that the earl had switched his gaze from the fire and was now looking at her again. His renewed attention made her uncomfortably aware of her lack of social graces. She was not used to presiding over social events. She did not usually even attend social events. Her uncle kept her isolated at Linwood and she was certain she had never in her life had tea with an earl. Arabella took a deep breath and then stood up. How difficult could it be to pour tea and pass around a plate of cakes? She might not mingle much with society but she wasn’t an idiot! And no matter how handsome and sophisticated the earl was, she told herself severely, he was still just a man. With a quick glance at him to reassure herself that this was so, she rose from her seat and approached the tea tray.

She only hoped that her legs would hold steady and her hands would not shake and spill the earl’s tea.

As she moved past the earl to the tea tray, she was deeply conscious of the shabby condition of her dress. She did not know much about fashion and clothes, but she was certain from what she had seen of the earl that his clothes were skillfully tailored from materials that were luxurious and opulent. He presented an elegant and stylish image. Even her uncle’s customary, ostentatious way of dressing could not compete with the grace and refinement of the earl’s fitted coat and fawn riding breeches and highly polished top boots. She realized that her movements could not help but draw attention to her own clothes, and wondered what the earl would make of her unfashionable, plain, and decidedly worn garment. But she could not disobey her uncle, and she remembered guiltily that she still had a punishment due for running off earlier when she was supposed to have been hemming sheets.

As Arabella busied herself making the tea, she bit her lower lip, trying to disregard the air of authority that surrounded the earl. She looked at him from wide green eyes that held a strange mixture of trepidation and courage and asked, in her voice which Edmund had noted earlier sounded like the chiming of soft silver bells, “How do you take your tea, your lordship?”

Edmund, Lord Moreland, Earl of Cumberwell, in the meantime, watched the young girl as she busied herself at the tea table in front of him. He had not expected that there would be any female company at Linwood to alleviate the tedium of the business he had come to transact. He was puzzled. The girl’s entrance to the drawing room had lacked the grace and polish required by society. Her greeting had bordered on gauche. But now that he looked past her odd clothes and lack of society manners, he realized that she was exceedingly pretty: her soft curls glowed with a touch of gold, and her cheeks were pleasantly rounded and rosy. And when she was focusing on a task and not on people, her movements were fluid and graceful, quite sensual, like a cat that wound its way sinuously amongst its favorite cushions. Her voice was musical. Lyrical. Sweet to the ear.



There was something altogether appealing in this young girl, something in her completely unspoiled innocence that he found himself drawn to.

Edmund's general irritation at being at Linwood and in the company of the buffoon Biddulph Rogers eased somewhat as he watched this oddly unfashionable girl pour his tea. He had not known that Rogers had been hiding such an unpolished treasure in this ramshackle mansion. What an odd little creature she was. She fascinated him. And he liked it when people fascinated him. So many people were bland and uninteresting that it was an effort to be in their company. This girl had something different—something unusual—and he thought it would be fascinating to explore what she made her unlike the girls and women who usually surrounded him.

While he was amusing himself with thoughts of the niece, her uncle turned to the earl again and began to speak about Arabella almost as if she could neither hear nor understand what he was saying. "Well, so you see, my dear chap, my niece has been kept protected from all outside influence that could have perverted her innocence. She is a simple country girl with no pretense or artifice about her."

Arabella, attempting to ignore her uncle, turned to the earl with his tea as her uncle continued his monologue. She was embarrassed and discomfited at her uncle's pomposity and every impulse in her cried out to run from the room. But as she handed the earl his tea and a slice of cake, he looked directly into her green eyes with a hint of sympathy and a sincere smile. His murmured, "Thank you," made her feel appreciated as she seldom was. His smile eased her uneasiness to some extent, and an answering smile shyly lit up her face, hinting at a sense of mischief and delight that had been hidden behind her more serious demeanor. That brief smile sent blood rushing through the earl's body in ways that were not quite proper for tea time.

All signs of the smile had been tucked away when Arabella carried a cup of overly sweetened tea to her uncle. She demurely resumed her seat, placing her own cup of tea and a slice of bread and butter on the table at her elbow. Sipping the lukewarm brew from time to time, she continued her surreptitious study of the earl, hoping that the conversation between the two gentlemen would help her to discover what had brought a peer of the realm to Linwood and why her uncle wanted her to be a part of whatever it was that had brought such a distinguished guest to this out of the way estate.

The conversation did not offer much clarity on the situation. The earl continued to focus on the fire and her uncle was rambling on about one of his favorite topics. "Yes," continued her uncle, "there's a lot to be said for keeping little girls like her away from the temptations of the city and all that society and the Season offer." He gulped his tea as Arabella sat seething with suppressed fury in her seat, her cup perched on the armrest of the stiff brocade chair. "Very particular notions about raising girls, I have. They don't need much attention at all, as long as they learn some simple household chores and how to make life comfortable for the men. When my sister died and Arabella was left in my care I brought her up quietly here, learning to do her duty. No need for girls to dash around to schools and what not, seeing as their brains don't cope with much anyway. Not made the same as us men, eh?" he smirked.

Biddulph Rogers glowered across at the silent earl. Edmund realized that politeness required him to offer some kind of answer. "Women are very definitely not made the same as men," Lord Edmund agreed, casting a sweeping look at Arabella from head to foot and then back again from her boots to her glossy curls. A sudden appreciative grin brightened his face for a brief second, changing the rather aloof features into something far more boyish and genial, before settling back into his previous supercilious expression. He set his tea cup down on the small table next to the lumpy sofa on which he could not get comfortable.

Edmund scowled at the tea cup. What an awful brew. It was so weak, he was certain the leaves must have been used at least three times. And what he really needed now was something much stronger than a cup of tea. The cake was as dry as sandpaper even though his host was guzzling it down as if it were the finest meal ever concocted by the best of French cooks. He was finding Biddulph Rogers more and more despicable with each word that poured out of his insufferable mouth. What a dreadful idiot the man was. It took all the earl's breeding and education to remain even vaguely civil in his company.

Edmund was scarcely following the ramblings of his host; he longed for this sham of a polite gesture of tea time to be over so that they could get down to business. The sooner they did, the sooner he could return to his life in London and his own estates, so he could focus on his main businesses and political concerns.

He was, however, finding some solace in the presence of the girl who was sitting so sedately in her seat. Edmund always enjoyed the company of a pretty woman. Even without looking at her directly, he was aware of her sweet mouth, the profusion of soft honey-colored hair even though it was rather messily pinned back at the nape of her neck, and the suggestion of her curved breasts under the hideous dress she wore. He was certain he had never seen a dress more badly made or more unsuitable for its wearer. Considering the flamboyance of the uncle's outfit, Edmund wondered if the girl was careless of her clothes, lacking consideration for even the fundamental decency of neatness. He had noticed a stain on her skirt and that one sleeve was torn and her boots were scuffed. This kind of negligence in matters of dress he found distasteful in any woman. He expected women of his acquaintance to take some interest in their appearance, as he did with his own clothes. He liked a woman to be neat and well turned out, to make the most of her figure and face, even if she was not precisely fashionable. It annoyed him that someone so pretty was so slipshod. It suggested carelessness in character that he found generally displeasing.

And yet as he watched Arabella Mason, he was stirred by her natural sensuousness. In this, her uncle had been right. There was no pretense about her. Although she had entered the room somewhat awkwardly, when she shook off her self-consciousness, she moved with an easy grace that was completely unstudied and suggested little awareness of her own attractiveness. Accustomed as he was to the pleasures of sensuality, he was intrigued to note that her body roused in him desires that some of the most sophisticated sirens in London could not summon. The effusive curls of her hair and the smooth silk of skin caused a throbbing in his groin that the most fashionably accoutered socialites in Paris had never done. When she had appeared in the doorway of the drawing room in her shabby brown dress and with untidy curls surrounding her soft face, she had filled that bleak space with a vibrancy and vitality that had elicited an almost visceral response in him. The apprehensive shimmer in her eye as she had taken in the situation, the straightening of her shoulders as she had gathered the courage to face the formidable stranger, details she thought had passed unnoticed, had tugged at his desire to protect and defend this little girl. Beneath the vulnerability he saw hints that she burned with fires of passionate intensity. Her gentle smile when she had passed him his cup of tea had sent blood rushing to his cock that was even now still pulsing as he covertly surveyed her.

Uncle Biddulph suddenly turned his attention back to Arabella, who had been hoping that he would somehow forget that she was in the room. "We need to address the issue of your tardiness, Niece Arabella." Arabella shuddered and flushed with embarrassment. Did he have to do this now, in front of the earl? She glanced at the earl's face but he was looking at her uncle with the same indifference with which he had followed most of the conversation that Biddulph had offered. The earl made no movement and no comment, as if the scolding of naughty girls was not worth his

particular notice. Arabella looked back down at the carpet beneath her shoes. “What do you have to say for yourself, girl?” insisted her uncle.

Arabella blushed more deeply. “I’m sorry,” she muttered.

“That is not an explanation,” intoned her uncle pretentiously. And then he looked back towards the earl, passing comment on her behavior as if she were a specimen in a laboratory that needed explanation to a curious onlooker. “You see, your lordship, I insist on absolute obedience from my niece at all times. She is duly punished if she breaks any of the rules that I have imposed for her well-being.” He chortled snidely.

The earl stood up abruptly. “Then perhaps I should leave you to it. It is clearly a family matter.” It was not that Edmund objected to the public punishment of naughty young ladies. Indeed, he had been known to indulge in that pleasure himself quite frequently, in the right circumstances.

“Ah my dear chap, considering that you—”

“Mr. Rogers, there is much that still needs to be discussed before our business is finalized. I will see you at dinner.” With that Edmund swept from the room.

He quickly found a servant to show him to the suite of rooms allocated to him during his stay. All through the house were signs of neglect and disrepair. There were few paintings or ornaments, furnishings were frayed and many windows lacked curtains. Clearly the owner of the house had been siphoning off any profit from his inheritance for many years. It was a dreary place. If his room was the best to be had, he shuddered to think what the rest of the house must be like.

His manservant, Wallis, was waiting for him. “My lord, I managed to get some hot water for you; I thought you would want a bath after travelling down from London.”

“Good man, Wallis. I do indeed. How much have you found out about this wretched place?” he asked as his valet helped him prepare for the bath.

“There are only six servants. Mostly women. The house and gardens are dreadfully neglected. There is a land agent attached to the place, but he serves on some other estates nearby as well and so does not give much attention to the lands here.”

“Mmm. I did expect the place to be neglected but not quite as run down as this. How close is the nearest village? I fear we shall need to get in some supplies if we are to survive here for more than a few days.”

“Yes, my lord. I had ascertained that we would be needing certain provisions. I do have here some of the brandy you prefer. Could I pour you a measure now?”

“Good God, man, why have you been holding out on me? If you had had to suffer through the tea I have just had...”

Edmund sighed with pleasure as Wallis handed him a snifter of French brandy. He sipped the dark amber liquid appreciatively as he leaned back in the bath and thought about the circumstances that had brought him to this ghastly place. And then his thoughts drifted to the young Arabella Mason. She looked about sixteen, but he believed that she was some years older than that. Why did she never accompany her uncle to town? Surely she was old enough to be out? And with her pretty face she could easily have captured a husband by now. Yet she had not contributed at all to the conversation at tea time, not that it had been much of a conversation with Rogers mouthing off about various matters, but she had said hardly a word beyond her greeting. Quite the behavior of a girl not yet out. Was she simple minded? He did not think so; there was a brightness in her eye that had suggested otherwise. She dressed like a drudge, yet she had a sweet manner that spoke of breeding and gentility and hints of an underlying passion that Edward found quite appealing. Truly an enigma that could occupy his leisure time thoughts.

“Wallis, did you hear anything about Miss Mason?”

Wallis chuckled as he laid out his lordship’s clothes for dinner. “It seems she went wandering off this afternoon to enjoy the gardens and rather neglected her sewing.”

Edmund glanced quizzically at his valet. “That seems perfectly reasonable to me. She seems such a demure, diffident little thing, quite a mouse.”

“I think, my lord, that she is not quite as she has appeared. I believe that she was climbing trees this afternoon when we arrived, which is why she was not found when tea was called.”

For the first time since arriving at Linwood, Edmund laughed. “Climbing trees! That explains a few things. I think I am going to enjoy getting to know her. There might just be some fun to be had here after all.”