

The Bet

A woman with dark hair styled in a bun is seated in a dark, high-backed chair. She is wearing a dark, long-sleeved dress with a high collar and a long necklace. She is looking off to the side with a serious expression. The background is a deep teal color with some faint, dark patterns. The overall mood is dramatic and mysterious.

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Preface

Marcus Paulen, Earl of Brentwood was handsome, clever, proud, and needless to say arrogant. When he intends to seduce innocent Miss Frances Hill, he finds himself falling for her. Will he be able to swallow his pride and follow his heart?

Chapter 1: Wellington Ballroom, London

Frances was trying to escape into the ladies' retirement room and take refuge there for an hour, no! As long as she could escape from her mother. As if on cue her mother appeared in front of her; Frances was sure her mother could hear her thoughts.

"Frances! I hope you are not planning on spending this evening in hiding", admonished her mother.

"Mama! how could you accuse me of such a thing? You know how much I like London Balls." said Frances, her innocent act fooling no one. They both knew she hated the London season. Frances was a country girl, she didn't do well in the polished society.

"Come along, Viscount Waymound asked for a waltz with you" said her mother Sophia Hill.

Mrs. Sophia Hill was not an ambitious mama like the rest of mamas the town; she didn't want her daughter to be married to a wealthy gentleman. She just wanted her to be married before Frances does any permanent damage.

"Not Lord Waymound", Anne said" Frances started to moan before her mother quelled her with a glare.

Mrs.Hill groaned internally and thought, "what did Anne say this time. If Anne doesn't shut up, Frances is going to end up a spinster, although Frances can manage it all by herself".

Frances was one and twenty and breathtakingly beautiful with her green eyes and brunette hair. This was her first London season. She was considered the season's diamond. Her dance card was always full. When she said she was thirsty, there was a mad rush to the lemonade stand to fetch her a drink. Their sitting room was filled with bouquets.

Others may think Mrs.Hill's worries were baseless, but she knew better. Mrs.Hill's plan was to get Frances married to a decent gentleman when he is befuddled by her beauty before he

stumbles upon her "problem".

They had traveled all the way from Liverpool as Frances managed to scare away every gentleman there. Mrs. Hill had hoped that Lord Kenworthy would marry Frances, he was friends with Frances and mostly kept her problem in check, but he married the all mysterious Indian girl Sanah James.

"Remember the London rules, Franny", ordered Mrs.Hill.

"Yes Mama!", Frances sighed.

"Lord Waymound", curtsied Frances.

"Miss Hill, you look as lovely as ever, shall we" said Lord Waymound.

Frances counted to ten and said "Weather seems to be pleasant today, Lord", said Frances.

Lord Waymound offered his hand with a "Shall we". Frances took it as he led her to the dance floor. Frances was a good dancer, but she preferred Scottish reel to Waltz.

They bowed as the dance ended and Frances sidled toward the retirement room but was ambushed once again not by her Mother but her aunt. Her aunt Lady Mary Smith Baronies of Nottingham was notoriously famous for her gossiping skill and she knew everything happening in London.

"Come on girl, we need to find your mama, I have important news for her", said Lady Smith.

"Mama is near the lemonade stand, I need to use the ladies' room", said Frances. Lady Smith gave her you-don't-fool-me-for-a-second look, took Frances's elbow and frog marched her.

"What happened Mary? What did Frances do?", asked Mrs.Hill looking mortified.

"Relax Sophie, Frances is well-behaved, and am sure she remembers London rules," said Lady Smith giving a stare which Frances knew to mean "I'm an adult, I know what I'm doing and you should do well to remember it". Frances nodded barely managing to roll her eyes.

Her Aunt Mary was excellent at giving messages through her eyes. "You can't mother nine children without learning a thing or two", thought Frances.

"I saw Frances dance with Lord Waymound. We should stop his advances, he is not a good match, I heard he is a drunk and gambler", said Aunt Mary.

"But he seemed sober when we danced", said Frances, but thankful she didn't have to reject him. She knew if aunty Mary said he was a drunk, he must be.

Mrs.Hill said, "As long as he doesn't get violent, I think it would be better if he is drunk. Mostly, it would keep his mind off you know -", she lowered her voice and said " Frances's problem". This time Frances did roll her eyes.

Frances believed in love, she did not want to marry anyone as her mother would like for her to. She missed George, he knew her better than she did herself. She would be forced to call him Lord Kenworthy if he was here. But he couldn't come as his wife Sanah was 7-months pregnant. Frances hoped she could be back home before Chundu, Master Kenworthy, arrived. What a weird nickname to call a kid! Sanah had explained that it was a nickname for mouse in her native language. Frances smiled again - who would call their kids a mouse? But George, to her astonishment, went along.

"Frances! Frances! are you listening to what I said?", asked her Aunt Mary giving her a look which meant what-are-you-doing-not-hanging-to-every-word-I-tell-you.

"Sorry Aunt Mary, what did you say?", apologized Frances.

"Lord Vandam is attending today", said Aunt. Seeing Mrs.Hill's incomprehension, "Earl of Brentwood" explained her Aunt.

"I thought he didn't attend parties," said Frances.

"Stay clear of him, avoid him by all means".

"Why? He is quite vocal in parliament. I read reports that under his stewardship agriculture

production tripled and he was appreciated by the king himself. And he is friends with Prince Philip. Such a person can't be a bad person. I really hope you would introduce me" concluded Frances.

"No!", her aunt nearly screamed, many people turned in their direction.

Aunt Mary smiled apologetically, lowered her voice, and said, "He is a beard" "Mary!", admonished Mrs. Hill glared at Aunt Mary the way she usually reserved for Frances. "splitter" finished Aunt Mary.

Frances was amused to watch this exchange, though she didn't know what was wrong with spitting bread. It was obviously a bad thing, she supposed wasting food is wrong.

But one thing was clear: if Lord Vandam could induce such a reaction in Aunt Mary, she should avoid him.

Chapter 2: Lord Marcus Paulen

Marcus got up and dressed, it was nearly 10 and he needed to attend the Wellington ball. His mother had accepted the invitation on his behalf; and he couldn't insult his mother by not showing up.

The Italian opera singer Carmella lay deliciously naked staring at him seductively.

"Leaving already, My Lord?", she asked as she trailed her hand from her breast to her navel.

Well, it wouldn't be an insult if he showed up late, thought Marcus as he joined her in bed again.

It was eleven when he entered the ballroom, by when the party was in full swing. And no one heard the teller when he announced his name over the Scottish reel. But he didn't suppose his entrance would be missed by ambitious mamas for long. He made his way to the champagne stand as the song came to an end.

When he turned back he saw his friend Antony Bennet walking toward him, in his arm was the most beautiful woman looking happily exhausted.

Marcus was sure she was a new debutant because there was no way he could have missed her. She was breathtakingly beautiful with a full round breasts, showing ample cleavage. Marcus kept staring at her; he tried but he could not take his eyes off her.

Frances saw a handsome man staring at her and she felt her stomach twist.

The man he danced with "Bother! what was his name" was leading her straight to him.

"Antony", greeted the stranger with a short nod of his head.

"Miss Hill, meet Lord Marcus Paulen, Marcus this is Miss Frances Hill" Antony made the introduction.

Frances curtsied, murmuring "Lord Marcus". He took Frances's hand and kissed her knuckles lingering longer than usual, all the while staring at her. Frances's stomach gave another jolt and she felt warm in her cheeks.

"Lords if you will excuse me, I'm parched" said Frances tried to weasel away.

"Allow me" said Antony and went to fetch her a lemonade. Frances turned pretending to look at the people milling about, she could feel Mr. Paulen staring at her. Mercifully, Mr. Antony was back with lemonade.

"How are you enjoying London? miss Hill" asked Antony.

"Lord Vandam" someone called.

Frances was curious to see how Earl of Brentwood looked. It was Lord Wellington walking their way and Marcus Paulen answered "Lord Wellington" with a nod.

"You are Lord Vandam, Earl of Brentwood, I shouldn't" blurted out Frances in shock and scurried away.

"What was that about", wondered Marcus loudly. Marcus thought he shouldn't have started her like that, but he couldn't help it.

Marcus felt hungry. He and Antony made their way to the sandwich tray. Marcus took a bite and spit it out immediately. Antony looked at him questioningly - "Peanut" answered Marcus.

Marcus was allergic to peanuts and strawberries, and the last time he had one, he looked like a zebra for a week.

He took another sandwich, which turned out to have peanut butter as well. Marcus thought sandwiches should be sorted and served based on the fillings. He took another sandwich that had strawberry jam. After wasting three sandwiches, he gave up

Frances prayed to all gods known and unknown that her Aunt Mary never hears of her encounter with Lord Vandam. She took refuge in a balcony that had dim lighting.

She was intrigued by Lord Marcus. She spied him and saw him walk towards the sandwich tray he took a bite of sandwich and spit it out. He took another and did the same. Frances gasped as he took the third one and spit it out too. Her Aunt was correct, he was a bread spitter.

Marcus searched the crowd for Frances. Antony gestured with his eye towards the balcony, Marcus looked casually about and saw her partially hidden watching him closely.

Frances saw Marcus walk to the other end and she lost sight of him, "Where are you, Lord Vandam?" she mumbled and arching her neck.

"Looking for me" came a voice so close.

Frances gasped, turned and lost her footing. He caught her with strong hands and set her on her feet.

"I shouldn't be seen with you" she shrieked and practically ran away. He usually ran off from debutant advances, seeing it reversed. He couldn't help himself and laughed out loud.

Chapter 3: Chestnut House, London

Frances was groggy as she sat up from her bed. Anne was shaking her and talking something. She looked at the clock, it was half-past eight.

"Anne why are you waking me up so early" moaned Frances.

"Early! you should be up and about an hour ago," replied Anne.

"Anne, we came back by 2 AM, 2 AM!", groaned Frances.

"Fine, go back to sleep," said Anne curtly and left the room, slamming the door.

Frances laid back, but she couldn't sleep. Cursing Anne loudly she got up and got ready.

"Why did they have to make sisters so annoying?" she thought bitterly. When she opened her door, Anne was waiting for her.

"I knew you were awake, tell me everything that happened yesterday", asked Anne excitedly.

Frances recounted everything including Marcus and his bread spitting. Though Frances finds Anne annoying she is one of her closest confidants.

When they entered the dining room, Aunt Mary was in full-swing about all the gossip she collected yesterday.

Frances and Anne resumed their discussion in whispers, "Did he really split all three sandwiches", asked Anne. "How many times should I repeat it Anne. Yes! he did split, right after popping it in his mouth".

"What do you think of Mr. Bennet, Frances", asked Aunt Mary.

"Mr. Bennet! Who?" asked Frances.

"You danced with him yesterday," said Aunt Mary, Looking at incomprehension in Frances, "The one you danced Scottish reel with, You should know the town's members by now" scolded Aunt Mary.

"Ho! you mean Antony," said Frances without thinking.

Everyone stopped eating and stared at Frances. Her mother was the first to recover, "Did he already ask you to call by his given name?" she looked positively delighted.

Before Frances could answer, aunt Mary said, "Am so happy Sophia, he is kind and thoughtful, though he doesn't have much standing, he has a noble heart. He will be a perfect match. You should discuss with Mr.Hill about increasing her dowry".

"But, aunt Mary" Frances started to speak but was cut short by her mother.

"You are right, Mary. I shall write immediately to Mr.Hill and request his presence. Mr.Bennet may request an audience with Mr.Hill for permission".

"Mama" Frances started again, but once again cut short by her aunt.

"I knew he must like our Frances, he has danced with her four times so far, it's so exciting if Mr.Bennet wants to marry in London you can use Chestnut House".

"You should have the wedding dress in forest green or jade, it will bring out your eyes' ', chimed in one of her cousins.

"Yes! That would be lovely" agreed her mother.

"Mama!!", Frances shouted.

Everyone turned to look at her. She didn't even know the poor guy's name until Lord Marcus called him so and her mother was planning her wedding to him.

"No! he did not ask me to call him by his given name. I heard Lord Vandam, call him so", said

Frances.

"You met Lord Vandam", asked her Aunt with a frown.

"Just after we finished dancing, Mr.Bennet introduced me to him. But I left immediately" said Frances defensively.

That's when lady Amelia Smith entered the dining room. Mercifully conversation turned towards her wedding. Amelia was Aunt Mary's eighth child, she is to marry Mr. Hugo Allen in a fortnight at Smith family's country house in Nottingham. The whole family would gather there, and it was a week-long celebration. Frances liked family gatherings, it was boisterous and fun. Frances wished Amelia's wedding would come sooner.

Chapter 4: Hyde Park, London

Frances marched toward Hyde park with a newspaper tucked under her arm. It was exciting to read the newspaper on the same day. Newspapers in Liverpool were always delayed by 3 to 4 days.

She was followed by a maid, who was acting as her chaperone. Frances couldn't go out of the house without a chaperone in London, she was used to roaming around the country on her own in Liverpool.

"Poor thing is stuck with me, till I read this", thought Frances as she settled on a bench on the long water shore. She liked this spot, it was far from the main part of the park and was least likely to be disturbed, except for occasional riders.

Frances was deeply engrossed when she heard someone call her. She looked up and saw Lord Waymound walking towards her tipsily.

"Miss. Hill, if you goth a moment" said Lord Waymound drunkenly.

She got up and said, "I think you are drunk my Lord, we should talk when you are sober".

She held her maid's hand and made to walk away. But, Lord Waymound was blocking their way. "No! We will thalk now".

She sighed and asked, "What do you want to talk about?".

"What doh you think of marriage, Marriage tho me", he said menacingly.

Frances felt her anger rising, this drunken man was blocking her way and asking, no threatened to marry her.

"No, I don't ever want to marry a drunk", she replied. Frances could see his face reddening with anger.

Marcus and Antony were riding in Hyde Park. They usually met in Hyde Park to talk. Antony didn't belong to any gentlemen's club and Marcus knew her mother did not approve of Antony.

According to Lady Martha Paulen, if Marcus should have friends, it should be of his standings. A no-titled man, who didn't have two pennies to rub was not worthy of her or her son's time. Marcus never invited Antony home, not wanting his friend to be insulted by his mother.

Marcus was tutored privately and didn't go to school, as any rich aristocrat would. When he was twelve, he started taking his lessons with Prince Philip, who was missing the company of lads of his age. The self-importance of Lady Martha only doubled, so did Marcus's.

Marcus went to Oxford to get his degree. It was a refreshing change. For the first time in his life, he felt independent. That's when the two men met and formed a strong friendship. Marcus knew Antony would jump in front of a bullet for him, and so would he.

"So, Lady Davies joins the rank of Vadam mistress list", asked Antony.

"You should consider joining espionage, you are wasting your talent" joked Marcus.

Antony laughed and said, "No! you are very predictable especially when it comes to young widows".

"Hey, I have my codes too, I never make advances on unwilling women", said Marcus.

"Ho, I think your code is not to mess with women who you can't get away from", said Antony.

"You got me", replied Marcus with a sly smile.

That's when two men saw Frances standing with Lord Waymound hovering threateningly over her.

"You think she is in trouble, should we intervene?" asked Antony.

Marcus nodded and spurred his horse. Before the men could reach her, Lord Waymound made

to grab Frances' hand. Frances brought her knee to his crotch. Lord Waymound fell with his arms clutched between his legs and went limp.

Marcus laughed out loud. He never knew a woman who could unman and in particular in public. Here, he thought he was going to act the hero.

She turned sharply and asked "What are you laughing at?" with a glare.

"You knocked the poor man silly" replied Marcus.

"He deserved it" she replied curtly.

Marcus fell silent at the glare she was giving him. "Even Medusa could not match her glare," thought Marcus.

"Are you alright?" asked Antony to the maid, who looked as though she would faint.

"No! I should have been more careful. Miss. Hill is going to be ruined" she cried out.

"Ho no! Mama is going to kill me when she finds out about this" gasped Frances.

"No, you will not be ruined and no one will know about this. We swear, we will never breathe a word", said Antony reassuringly.

"You wouldn't but he might," said Frances glancing towards the limp form of Lord Waymound.

"Ho! don't worry about him, I will make sure he remains silent," said Marcus.

Frances didn't look convinced. "Trust him, he has his ways," whispered Antony to Frances.

"We should escort you home," said Marcus.

"And leave him lying here, someone might find him" interrupted Frances.

"You escort the ladies home, Marcus, I will take Waymound", said Antony.

"No! I would rather you escort us home Mr.Bennet", interrupted Frances. On seeing the arched look on Marcus "The sooner you deal with Lord Waymound, the better lord" added Frances.

Antony and Frances started towards Chestnut house with the maid trailing behind them.

"Can you trust her not to talk?" asked Antony in a whisper.

"Ho! yes she would talk. Only my aunt will get to know but no one else. Or my aunt would have never assigned her as my chaperone" replied Frances.

Antony planned to drop both women at the entrance and leave. Before he could say his farewell. He was invited in for tea by Lady Smith.

"She never misses a trick", thought Frances as Lady Smith appeared at their side just at the right moment.

Asking how Antony preferred his tea, Lady Smith herself prepared his tea. She interviewed him all about his parents, siblings, and work. Frances kept shooting him apologetic glances.

"Do you have any engagement this evening, Mr. Bennet? Italian opera singer Carmella is performing in the theater and our family owns a balcony with a good view." invited Lady Smith.

"It will be my pleasure" replied Antony. But, Frances saw him wince lightly when Aunt Mary was not looking.

"Am sorry, Aunt Mary can be a little overbearing. You don't have to attend the opera if you don't like it. I will make your excuse", apologized Frances as she walked him to the door.

"No, I don't mind. It's the first time a noble lady is interested in me, so the experience is not as bad as you might think" replied Antony.

"I find it hard to believe, you have been invited to all balls I attended so far," said Frances.

"I think it's Marcus doing. You know I hold no title, why would debutants or mamas be interested

in me?" asked Antony.

"You have a good heart" replied Frances. Antony smiled and bid his farewell.

Chapter 5: The Royal Opera house, London.

Antony was waiting at the entrance for Frances's family to arrive, when he saw Marcus walking towards him.

"Are you sure, you don't work for espionage, you seem to know my every move" teased Marcus.

"No, I am not spying you. I was invited here", replied Antony.

"Invited! Don't tell me, by a lady", Marcus said with a sly smile.

"Yes" said Antony, giving him an equal sly smile.

"In that case, I must stay to watch everything," Marcus said, propping on the railing.

Frances saw Antony waiting for them at the entrance, but he wasn't alone Lord Marcus Paulen was standing with him. When Frances saw Marcus, her stomach gave a jolt. When he looked up and saw her, she felt another heavier jolt. Scowling at this unfamiliar reaction she made her way towards them.

Marcus was amused to see Frances scowling as she made her way towards them.

"Hello, Mr. Bennet" she smiled at Antony. And gave a little curtsy murmuring "Lord Vandam" without looking at him.

She said to Antony, "Aunt Mary, I mean Lady Smith is waiting near the other entrance, Mr. Bennet. I am here to escort you".

Marcus cleared his throat "hem", she didn't look at him. He gave a false cough, "ahem" she still didn't look up. He felt irritated.

"Problem with Lord Waymound has been taken care of, in case you are wondering", said Marcus.

"Thank you" replied Frances, she still wouldn't look up. This irritated him, Marcus was not a patient man, if someone irritated him, he made sure they were irritated ten folds.

"I don't want to attend opera alone, why don't we invite your family to join me in my box", said Marcus.

At this, she looked at him with surprise, he gave her a bright smile. Frances felt as if her stomach had dropped out of her.

"What is wrong with me? Why is my stomach reacting this way whenever I look at Lord Marcus" Frances thought.

Marcus was satisfied to see her blush. She made to talk, gulped some air, and tried again but no sound came. She looked like a gulping fish.

That's when Lady Smith and Anne arrived to find them. Like Frances, Lady Smith too scowled to see Lord Marcus with Antony.

"We came to check what was taking Frances so long," said Anne.

"Lady Smith, we have never been introduced. I am Lord Marcus Paulen, Earl of Brentwood," said Marcus.

Aunt Mary looked taken aback, but she quickly recovered. "Lord Paulen, Am Lady Mary Smith, Baronies of Nottingham and this is Miss. Anne Hill".

"It would be a great pleasure to invite you all to view opera from my box as I find myself without company today" invited Marcus.

Frances could almost hear her Aunt's thought. Lord Marcus owned the second-best box in the theater. His father was sponsoring the play, they may even get a chance to meet the performers in person. She also wanted to keep away Frances from Lord Marcus. Finally, desire won and she accepted.

Marcus was taken aback to see the crowd that followed him, there were eleven members

Frances, Anne, Mrs. Hill, Mr. and Mrs. Smith, Frances's 3 cousins, and their spouses. Frances gave a smug smile, seeing Marcus' reaction.

There was a murmur of excitement as they entered Marcus's box. They entered directly to a parlour furnished grandly, from which were stairs leading to six private balconies to seat couples. There was a pantry. Another entrance led to two large balconies, which had formal seating arrangements on one side and several card tables on the other side.

Mrs. Hill and Lady Smith took seats in one of the largest balconies. And the three couples quickly left to claim the couples' balconies. Mr. Smith dropped in one of the couches and began to snore promptly.

Frances and Anne made their way to the other large balcony and took seats, Marcus followed them. Antony not knowing what to do followed Marcus. Marcus sat near Frances leaning slightly towards her, while Antony settled on Marcus's other side. Frances could almost smell Marcus and feel the heat radiating from him. She felt a tight clenching in her lower abdomen. She had a strong incline to lean toward Marcus and take a whiff.

The play began, it was "Acis and Galatea". She could feel Marcus's eye on her, but she couldn't turn and look at him. She felt shy, God! she felt too shy to look at him. She kept staring at the stage, but she couldn't concentrate.

Marcus kept staring at Frances, "Look at me dammit" he thought irritably and she wouldn't look at him.

Part 1 of the play came to a conclusion. Anne excused herself and left for the retiring room, Frances got up to follow. Marcus jumped in front, blocking her way. She tried to sidestep but found her path blocked once again.

"Look at me", he growled,

Frances looked at him and turned pink. "I shouldn't be seen talking to you", she said.

"Why is that?", asked Marcus.

"I know you are a bread spitter, I have Agh! ", gasped Frances as Marcus grabbed her arm painfully.

"What did you call me?" growled Marcus, his irritation turning to anger.

How dare she call him a beard splitter to his face, he has never been insulted such.

"Let go, it hurts" she pleaded. Antony was equally angry, and did not intervene. He felt she had gone too far and she needed to be taught her place.

"How dare you call me such a thing", exploded Marcus.

"It is not like it's not true, I saw in Wellington ball", now she was angry she tried to yank her arm but he held it firmly.

"Spying you mean," snorted Marcus.

She flushed red with anger, "Not like you were hiding it. You did it in front of everyone. You even went for a third one", she growled back.

At this Marcus asked, "What are you talking about?".

"I saw you do it, you can't deny".

"What do you mean? third one?" roared Marcus, did she count her as third person, he didn't do anything to her, yet.

"I saw you bite three sandwiches and split them all out and you still speak as though you are not a bread spitter".

Marcus' face turned from anger to confusion and then one of amusement. He laughed and Antony joined in.

"Ho! Bread spitter, that's a good one" said Antony, and they both laughed again.

"This is so not funny", roared Frances.

"Miss Hill, I am allergic to peanuts and strawberries, i was searching for a chocolate filled sandwich and ended up having peanut butter twice and strawberry jam once" said Marcus trying to keep a straight face.

"Oh! Is that why you spit the bread. I am so sorry Lord Marcus" apologized Frances.

"Am sorry too", he said looking at her arm which was red in the place he held.

"Who did you hear call me bread spitter?" enquired Marcus. She just blushed and didn't answer. Marcus guessed it must have been her Aunt who called him "beard splitter" and Miss. Frances took it as "bread spitter".

The play resumed, this time Marcus could feel Frances shooting him secret glances when she thought he was not looking. He smiled to himself.

Chapter 6: The Courting

Frances was sitting in the rose salon, jabbing her needle in her embroidery. She first started it as a flower, but she didn't know what it was anymore.

"Is that a bear dear", asked her mother.

Frances gave a non-committal shrug. She looked at her mother's work, it was a beautiful butterfly. She has no idea why her mother made her embroider, she had no skills.

Frances was good in wood carving, but her mother never let her do it, as it was gentleman's skills.

Butler entered with calling cards, "Callers for Miss. Hill". He handed Frances the cards. Her afternoons were usually filled with callers trying to court her, watched over by her Aunt. She sighed in relief as she put down her embroidery ring.

She leafed through the cards as she walked. Frances stopped in her track to see Lord Marcus' name. She felt apprehensive and excited at the same time.

When she entered the drawing room, only Lord Marcus was there. She looked around, "where are the others?" she blurted out.

"They seem to have important work and left in a hurry" replied Marcus.

"All of them", asked Frances incredulously. Marcus only shrugged.

"Would you like some tea, Lord Vandam. Lady Smith will be arriving shortly", said Frances as she made to sit down.

"No, let's head out for an ice cream. The weather is particularly fine today".

Turning to the Butler he added, "Miss.Frances will need a chaperone, we will be waiting at the

entrance". With that he offered Frances his hand and walked her out.

"I can't believe you got out before being sabotaged by my Aunt", she said with an impressed look at him.

They were joined by a maid, who kept a respectable distance, as they walked through the busy London street. They sat down at an ice cream parlour.

"what ice cream do you want Miss. Frances", enquired Marcus.

"I will have strawberry ice cream" said Frances mischievously.

Marcus's eye glinted with mirth as he pouted. She giggled seeing him pout. He bought strawberry ice cream for her and chocolate ice cream for him.

"I saw you being mentioned in The Observer again this week" said Frances.

"Am I?" asked Marcus.

"You need to read the newspaper more closely, Lord" said Frances.

"Why read a paper, when you are the news. Did it report my bread spitting incident?", asked Marcus with a straight face.

"No, it was about the crop rotation you employed with such staggering results, " replied Frances. They entered into detailed discussion about crops, he never knew barley, turnips and oats could be such an entertaining topic.

Marcus couldn't remember the last time he had such lengthy conversation with a woman, it was always lengthy work at bed. When he looked down, his ice cream was a melted gool.

Frances was waiting outside as Marcus paid for the ice cream. He saw her looking longingly at a poster of a boxing match.

"You like boxing", asked Marcus.

"I have never seen one, my mother would never let me", said Frances sadly. When they reached Chestnut house, Marcus took Frances's hand and kissed her knuckles.

"I will call upon you tomorrow by 2", said Marcus. She blushed as he winked and left.

Aunt Mary was agitated to have missed Marcus twice.

"He didn't even have the courtesy to come and greet", she mumbled. Frances told Marcus would come calling tomorrow, and she knew this time Marcus wouldn't be so lucky to evade her aunt. She was sure, her aunt would take residence in the drawing room so as not to miss Marcus.

Frances couldn't sleep that night, she tossed and turned. Whenever she closed her eyes all she could see was Marcus's pouting face. She imagined pinching his cheeks and kissing him. She blushed. She knew she was falling for Marcus, she hoped she could have the happy ever after like Sanah and George.

Next day she was in nervous excitement, she couldn't stop looking at the clock every few minutes. At half past one, she found herself fully dressed waiting for Marcus with Aunt Mary.

Marcus was right on time, he was carrying a huge flower bouquet. She felt elated watching him walk inside, while Aunt Mary spotted a scowl.

"Lady Smith", he said, kissing her hand and handing her the bouquet. Aunt Mary scowl turned to delight. And they departed with Aunt Mary waving them goodbye.

They walked a few yards when she saw his carriage waiting for them, with a footman holding the door.

"Where are we going today? ", asked Frances.

"One moment", Marcus excused himself and walked over to the maid, he bent down and whispered something to her. She walked past the carriage looking happy.

"Where is she going and what did you tell her?", asked Frances.

"She will meet us in 2 hours in the ice cream parlour" replied Marcus.

He helped her inside the carriage and climbed in after her. The carriage was well-made, and when it moved she could hardly feel any bumps.

"Where are we going?", Frances asked again.

"I don't want to spoil the surprise", answered Marcus with a wink. She felt her cheek grow hot, so she turned to hide her blush. She noticed a large package on the other side. "What's that", she asked, he just smiled and didn't answer.

"You enjoy keeping me in the dark, don't you" accused Frances.

She felt extremely nervous being alone in a closed carriage. Her stomach twisted in odd ways. The carriage came to halt in a few minutes to her surprise. He got up, when she made to follow, "Wait" he said and retrieved the package which held a black traveling cloak with hood. He pulled it over her, buttoned it and pulled the hood up slightly brushing her cheeks. She almost swooned.

Marcus jumped down the carriage and helped her down. When she saw where they were, her jaw dropped in surprise, he chuckled at her reaction. "Shall we", he offered his hand.

Frances was elated, when she saw they were going to a boxing match.

Marcus couldn't help smiling, as he saw Frances smiling and walking with spring in her steps. She looked like a child who got a bag full of candies for Christmas.

Boxing house had a raised boxing stand on the center with ropes running through the corners. The boxing stand was surrounded by chairs on three sides and an overlooking balcony on one side. It was crowded with gentlemen milling around.

Marcus took Frances' hand and let her to the balcony. "Do you want to place a bet?" asked Marcus. Seeing her confusion, "You bet money on who will win" he added.

"Who is good?" She asked.

"Tom Molineaux is good", as he pointed to a African man standing with bare chest, "and his opponent is William Rimmer" Frances looked at Rimmer, she thought he must be in his twenties.

The match started, and the two men went about punching each other with bare hands.

Frances had seen a number of her cousins brawl and egged them on too.

She shouted, "Punch his nose", and moaned "Aahw" in repetition. But she grew quieter as the rounds went on.

Brawls Frances had witnessed the fighting parties were separated before things got worse, but here both men spotted bruises and bloody faces as rounds progressed, she didn't feel right, she was scared and wanted to cry.

Marcus saw Frances clutching her cloak tightly and wincing at every blow. "Are you alright?" he asked over the noise, she shook her head.

He took her arm and pulled her to her feet and attempted to walk. Frances felt her legs were wobbly and wouldn't support her. Marcus threw his arm over her waist and almost carried her. With Marcus supporting most of her, they made their way out.

Frances has no idea how she got into the carriage. She was crying onto Marcus's shoulder. Marcus was holding her and repeatedly apologising. She gradually subsided.

"Am sorry, I am such a pussy", apologised Frances.

"Am sorry, I should have never taken you there, I am such a bloody idiot" said Marcus.

"I wanted to go, it's not your fault" countered Frances.

"Are you alright?", he asked, brushing tears from her cheeks. She blushed and said, "Am parched". He produced a hip flask, on her arched look, he said "it has water".

She sat up straight and he took his arm from her shoulder. It was an awkward moment.

"Where are we going?", asked Frances as she noted the carriage was moving.

"I instructed the driver to drive around for an hour," said Marcus.

She nodded and surreptitiously tried to wipe her face with water. She got her face wet, but was confused on how to wipe it dry. Her dress had short sleeves, if she lifted her dress he would notice. He offered her his handkerchief with a mischievous smile. She took it, embarrassed.

"Do i look like i cried", she asked.

"You look perfect", he replied.

Marcus got out of the carriage to bid farewell. "Will I be able to see you at Kenston Ball today?" asked Frances.

"No, I have other engagements, am busy for the next two days too" replied Marcus.

"Oh, I see.. I am leaving for Nottingham for a week for my cousin's wedding in two days", she mumbled sadly. Frances had looked forward to the week-long getaway from the London season, but now she didn't want to go.

"I know, your aunt mentioned earlier", said Marcus.

That evening she got a delivery of an orchid bouquet from Marcus with a card that read "Am Sorry".

Marcus knew he shouldn't dally with Frances, but he had no choice. He felt guilty.

If Frances was like other ambitious debutante, who wouldn't look twice at him if it weren't for his title and standings. He wouldn't care one way or the other. But Frances, she didn't see him as Earl, he was just Marcus.

He had sent a sorry card to her, but she wouldn't know the reason he was apologizing for. Though it was early he made his way to Carmella's apartment unable to bear the guilt . The only way to forget about one woman is another.

Chapter 7: Kenston ball

Frances wanted to skive off Kenston ball. Really what was the point, Marcus wouldn't come, she thought.

But, her mother would have none of it. So, she found herself dancing with one gentleman after another. Her dance card was full, the moment she entered the ball room. Though her dance cards were full most of the days, the speed in which it did today was astounding.

She missed Marcus, even though he said he wouldn't come she couldn't help wishing he would.

"Miss. Hill" greeted Antony.

She curtsied, murmuring "Mr. Antony".

He laughed at her gesture and said, "Am not a noble man, so you need not curtsy me".

"Ho! I forgot", replied Frances.

It was so like Frances not to mind about titles and standings, Antony thought.

"If you do not want to dance the rest of the evening, I suggest you fain a twisted ankle" he whispered to her.

She looked at him sheepishly and asked, "Is it that obvious", her cheeks coloring.

"Am just absorbent" replied Antony.

She nodded and made to walk, but stumbled howling "Aww".

Antony was surprised, he meant it as a joke. Her acting was so natural he almost believed it.

He helped her up and asked "Are you alright?".

"No! I think I hurt my ankles", she said in a loud voice.

Antony noticed Frances was clutching her right leg when she fell, but she was walking with a limp in her left leg, and couldn't control his mirth.

He helped her into a chair.

"I will be fine, i just need to rest my foot, I am sure I will be alright tomorrow", she reassured the crowd around her, which seemed to be of gentlemen in marriageable age with expressions appropriate to friends death bed.

Some helpful gentleman had found her a foot rest. She became nervous, she forgot which leg was supposed to be hurt. She looked at Antony pleadingly. He pointed at her left foot with his eyes. She looked relieved as she placed her left foot on the stool.

Antony craftily suggested that she should have something to drink to calm her nerves.

Every gentleman rushed to fetch her a drink. Antony took a vacant seat near her.

"Thanks", she murmured.

"You are an exceptionally good actress, you miss your calling", he said teasingly.

"You are too", at his incredulous look she added, "Ho! the look of surprise on your face when i feel, no one would believe you gave me the idea".

"I suggested it as a joke, and did not think for a minute that you would actually do it". He laughed seeing her face which seemed to tell, "Well I am devious, what did you expect?".

The table near Frances was covered with many glasses of lemonade, eclairs and even champagne.

"I would choose eclairs if I were you. Nothing is better pick-me-up than chocolate".

"Why do you think I need a pick-me-up" she asked as she took two glasses of Eclairs and handed one to him.

"As I said, I am absorbent," he replied.

She took a sip, she felt a little better. "So Marcus" he started, she choked.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"Yes yes am fine" she gasped with a little cough. She couldn't help looking around to see whether Marcus was there.

Antony could see Frances has been taken in by Marcus. He didn't know what to tell Frances, so she wouldn't get her hopes up.

"You were saying" she asked, interrupting his thoughts.

"Yes, I just. Well! So Marcus came calling," he said awkwardly. "Yes, twice", she replied glowing. Antony was upset, it was unlike Marcus, he had gone too far this time. Antony decided to have a talk with Marcus. He gulped down the rest of the eclairs and bit his farewell.

Chapter 8: Somewhere on the road to Nottingham

Aunt Mary, uncle Smith and Amelia departed to Nottingham first. Frances and the rest of the family planned to depart two days later.

Four carriages with fourteen members started from Chestnut house. Frances, Anne and their hand maid were sharing a carriage.

Frances grew irritable as they rolled out of London, she ended up having more verbal spat with Anne than usual .

"Stop leaning towards me, you can look out from your window", spat Frances.

"I want to look on both sides" replied Frances,

"it's the same," said Frances.

"You need to look to be sure, " replied Anne.

Frances scowled at Anne said "it's the same" and returned to her book. It was important to get the last word in an argument.

Three hours passed, Frances and Anne got in to three more verbal spat. They were well past London and riding through the countryside. The carriage suddenly gave a wild lurch and came to a halt.

Frances poked her head out to see what the problem was. Anne mimicked the same.

"Don't push me" said Frances angrily.

"I want to look out too", said Anne.

"You always keep pushing me" Frances spat back.

"I am not," replied Anne.

"You are," said Frances.

When Mrs. Sophia Hill came to investigate what the problem was, the sisters were still at "I am not" and "You are".

Ignoring them she went to the footman to enquire. The rim of a wheel was bent badly and two of the spokes, that held the rim had been broken. She instructed the footman to take a horse to a nearby village and find someone to fix the wheel.

Mrs. Sophia didn't know what to do next. If they all stayed, they could not make it to Nottingham before nightfall. They were going to have to accommodate both sisters in the remaining carriage, it was going to be cramped. Seeing Frances and Anne still arguing, Mrs. Hill sighed heavily. It was going to be torture.

As she made arrangements to move the sister, Anne howled "Am not going to sit in lap for the entire journey".

"You could sit on the floor", Frances said vehemently.

"Frances that's enough, I think you should both take turns sitting on the floor".

Both Frances and Anne, looked outrageous. "It's all your fault" accused Anne.

"You should have agreed to sit on lap" spat Frances.

That is when a sleek and obviously well-made carriage came to a halt near them. And to Frances' surprise, Marcus and Antony climbed down.

Three hours earlier:

Antony climbed in Marcus's carriage saying "Don't tell me, you are making me attend a house

party like the last time I was forced to endure” with a scowl. Some Duke spawn, held a week long bachelor party which involved whiskey and women.

“However, you still came”, on seeing the look on Antony's face Marcus added, “No! it is not. It's a week-long wedding party” said Marcus.

At this Antony looked amused, “A wedding? And who pray tell, is getting married?” asked Antony.

“It's Hugo Allen. You don't know him” said Marcus.

“And you do?” asked Antony mockingly.

“Don't think you fool me for a moment, which lady will be added to the famous Vandam mistress list when we get back” added Antony.

Marcus gave a fake outrageous look and didn't answer.

“Which part of England are we traveling to?” asked Antony.

“Nottingham,” replied Marcus.

Antony mumbled “I should have known” as he got down and saw Frances standing with her family.

“Lord Vandam” murmured Mrs. Hill as all three ladies curtsied. Frances gave a warm smile.

“Is there anything I could do to help?” enquired Marcus looking at the bend wheel.

Mrs.Hill quickly explained the shortage of space for Frances and Anne.

“It is easily solved, I will be happy to escort both ladies to Nottingham” said Marcus.

"You are travelling to Nottingham" asked Mrs. Hill in surprise.

"Yes, I have been invited to Mr. Hugo Allen's wedding", he replied.

"Mr. Allen is marrying my cousin", said Frances with delight.

Mrs. Hill was not happy with this development. She knew if Lord Vandam was invited, she would have been informed. She suspected the last minute guest addition had nothing to do with the wedding, but with Frances. Mrs. Hill saw Marcus taking Frances's hand and helping her up the carriage with an unhappy expression. Antony spotted a similar expression.

Frances couldn't hide her delight, all her irritation with Anne vanished. She was going to spend a whole week with Marcus under one roof. She was thrilled.

Marcus sat near Frances, while Antony and Anne settled in the opposite.

"Why didn't you tell me you will be attending the wedding?" whispered Frances.

"I wanted to surprise you, and I think I did," whispered Marcus back.

They continue to whisper to each other and with Frances giggling frequently. Antony watched apprehensively at this exchange. Helpfully Anne moaned "am bored!" after sometime.

To Marcus amazement Frances produced a deck of cards from her basket.

"How do you intend to play without a desk?" asked Marcus.

As an answer, Frances took a blanket handling a corner to each of them. Frances and Anne promptly pulled the blanket tight and tucked it under their legs.

"You should do the same", she instructed Antony and Marcus. This effectively formed a makeshift table. She shuffled the cards and evenly dispersed them.

"What are we playing?" asked Antony.

"Cheat" replied Frances. Marcus eye's glinted with mirth.

She proceeded to explain the rules, "We will each take turns as lead, lead will declare a card, each of you should place the same card face down or you can pass or lie if you don't have that card. You can place any number of cards. The first one to dispense all cards is the winner and one with more cards is the cheat master".

This game was introduced to Frances by Sanah, but Sanah was bad at this game, she was a horrible liar as she blushed whenever she lied.

"Anyone can challenge if they think a player is lying if it's a lie, the player should take all the cards if it is not a lie the challenger should." said Frances,

"If no one challenges in a round, the card will be moved to a side and the next player will take the lead" added Anne.

They had so much fun, Marcus and Antony were exceptionally good liars. Not a single round went unchallenged, so the cards rotated between their hands. Best friends though they were, Marcus and Antony challenged each other wrongly half the time.

To Frances amazement, she knew when Marcus was lying and when he was not. So whenever she challenged him he ended up taking all the cards.

"You should go easy on me, Miss, Hill" whispered Marcus.

"You should lie better lord," said Frances cheekily.

He looked at her, his eyes moved to her nose, "You got something on your nose" he said.

She brought her hand towards her nose and stopped.

"You are terrible," she said and swatted at him playfully. He laughed and said, "You got me once again".

They broke for lunch in a wayside inn, The Hungry Hound.

Antony cornered Marcus as soon as they were alone. "What the hell are you doing? " snapped Antony.

"What else, going to lunch!" said Marcus offhandedly.

"I mean with Miss. Hill, this is going too far even for you" growled Antony.

Marcus didn't say anything.

"Miss. Hill is not like other women you dally with, she" Antony was cut short as Marcus asked "What makes you think I am dallying with her".

"Don't think I will believe you for a moment, that you intend to marry her" said Antony.

"Antony, this is interesting, do you have feelings for Miss. Hill?" asked Marcus.

"I don't and you know that I don't. For the love of god, don't make this about me. Miss. Hill is innocent and she believes everyone to be so, don't do this to her and show this is a cruel world" growled Antony.

"And that's what makes this all harder" said Marcus and walked away.

Antony stood confused, what did Marcus mean? Does he like her? Why is this hard?

Chapter 9: The Smith Estate, Nottingham

Smith's were a large family. Except for Frances's mother every relative had more than five children and some out did themselves by producing in double digits.

Smith's family estate was one of Frances's favourite places. She knew every knock and cranny. As long as Frances could remember, they had family gathering each year. It has become a family tradition.

It was evening, when they arrived at Smith Estate. Mr and Mrs. Smith were waiting in the drive to welcome them all.

Marcus helped Frances down and offered his hand as they climbed the stairs to meet the rest. A gaggle of young children came running shouting "Aunt Franny".

Marcus felt as though he was being ambushed as he was pushed aside. Marcus lost his footing and fell down.

Antony was unable to control himself and laughed out loud. He bent down and helped Marcus up, murmuring "Serves you right, what a delightful week this is going to be".

"Yes, I am sure I will enjoy every bit of it" replied Marcus glumly.

Mrs. Smith repeatedly apologised, Marcus reassured he wasn't even a bit angry.

Marcus was assigned a separate room, while Antony was to share a room with one of Smith's cousins.

Guests were still arriving, so the dinner was informal served in a small ballroom. Marcus helped himself bread, toast, cheese and lemon tart from the side table and sat down with Antony to eat. He kept looking around searching for Frances, but she was nowhere to be seen.

Marcus spotted Miss. Anne and waved at her, she made her way to them.

"Where is Miss.Hill?" he asked her.

"Am Miss.Hill" she replied.

"The other Miss.Hill" he asked rolling his eyes.

"Frances! she is taking her dinner in nursery with the kids" she said as though she was not one.

Marcus thought Anne must be thirteen or fourteen and just out of nursery herself. Antony couldn't hide his glee.

Anne sat in the vacant chair and started talking. "Mama never allowed Frances to eat food in the nursery. She hates it, and thinks it's hard to hide her problem, I mean Frances's. But she likes to play. Everyone likes her. Cook makes the best chocolate biscuits and she is her favourite too. I like butter biscuits too".

Marcus couldn't follow a thing, she seems to be talking about ten different things at the same time. Antony looked like he might explode with laughter at Marcus' predicament.

Marcus went to bed that night, his head aching, deciding if he had to endure Anne's speech one more time he was packing his things and heading right back to London, damn Frances for all he cared.

The following morning Marcus woke up and got ready glumly. If he didn't see Frances he bloody well was going to march to the nursery and drag her out himself he decided.

When he opened his door, two boys no more than eight were standing waiting for him.

"Are you Lord Marcus" one of them asked.

"Yes" replied Marcus apprehensively.

"He might be lying, how do we know it's him?" asked the other.

"Am Marcus and what do you need?" asked Marcus.

Antony joined them.

"Do you know Lord Marcus?" the boys asked Antony.

Antony replied, "Yes this is Lord Marcus" Antony said pointing to Marcus.

The boys believed Antony more quickly and said to Marcus. "Aunt Franny wants to meet you after breakfast in the garden". Their message conveyed they scrambled away.

When Marcus found Frances in the garden, she was once again surrounded by a gaggle of children. She smiled warmly when she saw him. And to his annoyance, Antony was there too.

Antony smiled deviously at him and said, "So good of you to join us, we thought we might have a picnic, why don't you head back to the kitchen and request a picnic basket".

Marcus knew Antony and thought two could play the game. "What's the fun in that, we are in a garden, why don't we collect fruits for picnic".

The children looked delighted at his suggestion. He proceeded splitting them into groups and assigning them each a task to collect apple, orange, strawberries, gooseberry, cucumber, tomatoes, bread, cheese and blankets. It was a more tedious process than he thought. Despite his effort he still couldn't divest three kids and Antony tagging along.

In spite of what he thought, Marcus had a thoroughly enjoyable morning climbing trees, collecting fruits. They challenged each other, who climbed the highest, who picked more fruits. And he smiled vindictively when Antony got himself pricked by a particularly large thorn from an orange tree.

Antony, Marcus followed by Frances, climbed an old gooseberry tree, with many gooseberries sticking from its trunk.

They heard Lady Smith scream, "Frances! What are you doing?".

Mrs. Smith shrieked like a banshee clutching her heart as Frances jumped off the tree.

"You have twigs in your hair and you look filthy, you should remember the London rules" scolded Lady Smith.

"Aunt Mary, but we are not in London" replied Frances.

"You should follow it everywhere, You are lady now, a proper lady will never climb trees, what will Mr. Bennet or Lord Marcus think if they see you like this." scolded Lady Smith.

Right on cue, Antony and Marcus jumped one after another looking as dirty as Frances. Lady Smith looked as if she would faint, she didn't know what to do, mumbled an apology, she positively fled.

"I got off easily, I was sure she was going to drag me back" said Frances happily as they made back to the picnic spot they agreed.

"What is 'London rules'?" Antony enquired.

"It's the rule George came up for me so people wouldn't get to know my problem" she replied.

Marcus frowned at the mention of George, he didn't know who this George was, but this George person was getting on his nerves. Frances has mentioned him no less than eight times today. No, nine adding this. Was he counting? Why was he counting?

"Your problem?" Antony asked in confusion.

"I don't know what the problem is, only that my mother refers to it as Frances's problem" replied Frances.

Marcus felt anger with Mrs. Hill, she called Frances's innocence as Frances's problem.

"And, the rules are" prompted Antony.

Frances ticked her finger as she said,

"One, never to talk to anyone unless spoken to.

Two, Always comment about the weather if spoken to.

Three: Before talking count to ten, if you are happy count to twenty, if excited count to fifty.

Four: Never do anything with your legs except walk slowly and dance.

Five: This rule is exception for friends"

Antony thought that this unknown George's idea was brilliant, this would depict her aloof, add her good looks, no wonder she is considered season's diamond.

Antony said, "I think Mr. George's idea is brilliant".

Frances said "I wish George was here, I miss him dearly".

At this Marcus felt so angry, he was squashing the orange he was holding into a pulp. Antony Smirked at Marcus' reaction.

Now she has mentioned George's name tenth time, he was putting up climbing trees and meddlesome children for her and she was missing George was she, Marcus thought vehemently. He wanted to punch something badly, Antony's face seemed a good place to start.

"But he couldn't come, his wife Sanah is 8 months pregnant" Frances added.

Marcus felt relieved, now he was feeling amiable. "My felicitation to him"

They set up their picnic. An elderly kitchen staff arrived with a picnic basket. Frances pulled her to their circle with a, "You should join us Mrs. Mecredy".

She added to Marcus and Antony "Mrs. Mecredy cooks the delicious chocolate cake in all of England".

Mrs.Mecredy produced a large cake, a large slab of cheese and a flagon of lemonade from her basket. She sliced the cake and handled each of them a piece. Marcus took a bite and chewed, Frances wasn't wrong this was the best chocolate cake he had tasted. But before he could swallow, "Don't eat it, spit it out, it has strawberries" Frances said, knocking the cake off his hand.

She asked with concern, "Are you alright? You didn't eat anything did you". Mrs.Mecredy watched them with interest.

Mrs. Mecredy said to Frances,"I bought your favourite curry mix, his Lordship may like it" as she took some Gooseberry and dusted it with the curry mix, handing them both some.

"It's spicy", warned Frances.

"As a member of the Oriental club, I have had my fair share of Indian curries" he said.

Her eyes widened as she exclaimed, "You are! I thought only royal family members were allowed".

"Am eighteenth in line to the throne, am a royal" he said.

"Ho! I forgot" replied Frances.

It was so like her to forget, thought Marcus as he chuckled.

The curried gooseberry was assault to his taste buds as he popped it in his mouth. Sourness of gooseberry in mix with spice and salt, he had no words to describe it. He simply enjoyed it, as he popped more gooseberries in his mouth.

Chapter 10: The Plunge

Dinner that night was a formal one. Lady Smith had planned smartly thought Marcus, as he was surrounded on both sides by gentlemen while Frances was sitting with Antony and Anne. He wished Lady Smith was setting the cap for him, it would have been so much easier.

Frances was chatting animatedly with Antony. He felt angry, he wanted her to talk with him. But his anger dissipated as he noticed Frances glancing at him furtively every few minutes.

Lady Smith got up and the rest of the female attendees left with her, drinks were served for the men. When the men joined the women, Marcus found Frances surrounded by her female cousins. He couldn't help staring at her, he made no attempt to hide it too.

The next morning he got up and got ready. He fully expected to find kids waiting by the door to announce Frances's plans that day. Instead, he found a folded note from Frances pushed under his door.

"I got told off last night for playing with kids. Am going to the pond in the garden after breakfast, don't tell anyone, especially Anne".

After breakfast he headed to the pond without Antony.

Frances was sitting on a rock, with her dress pulled up to her knee with her foot dipped inside water. Her face was upturned bathing in the Sun.

Marcus didn't know how long he kept standing there, staring at her. She turned and saw him watching her.

Frances gave a radiant smile saying, "Lord Marcus" warmly. His breath caught.

Frances tapped a spot near her and said, "Join me".

He removed his boots and socks dipping his legs in water. The weather was fine, soon he removed his coat.

It was exceedingly relaxing water lapping in his legs and fish nibbling his feet.

"You didn't tell anyone that I am here, did you?" enquired Frances.

"No I didn't, and why shouldn't Miss.Anne know" asked Marcus.

"I pushed her in the pond three years back, she has been trying to get revenge ever since, " said Frances.

"Three years is a long time to hold a grudge," said Marcus.

"No it's not" came Annes voice. Accompanied by "Flump!" as she pushed Frances into water.

Frances emerged from the water spluttering and gasping. She stood up, the water was not deeper than her waist. But she had landed face first into the water and was completely wet.

"You menji little turncoat" yelled Frances. But Anne ran away laughing. Frances continued the name calls.

"She is long gone" said Marcus, unable to keep a straight face.

"It's not funny", she said, stomping her feet in anger losing her balance and falling into water once again.

Marcus guffawed. "Ho! I hate her and I hate you, it's very deep a few feet back what if i downed". as she said she moved back indicating.

"See thi..", started Frances, but plummeted right into water.

Marcus couldn't control, he clutched his stomach as he howled with laughter. But Frances didn't emerge, he saw her trying to stay afloat.

"Can't" she said and plunged in water. She came again and gasped "help", all the while her arm flailing. Her movement propelled her farther in the lake.

Marcus jumped into the water and started swimming towards her, only one thought in his mind, "Don't be hurt, Don't be hurt".

When he reached the spot, she was no longer floating there. He gulped a large breath and dived inside the water hoping to see an arm, a leg, anything. He only came up briefly for air. He dived again but the pond's depth was dark in spite of the clear day. He didn't want to lose her, not like this. He will find her. He came out for the third time for some air.

"Found what you were looking for" came the unmistakable voice of Frances.

She was floating a few yards away from him. She was floating in perfect balance and she looked fine.

Marcus' first feeling was of relief, he didn't know he had a tight knot in his chest, until the feeling lifted.

"Dived in to save the fallen beauty" she said laughing.

Marcus could feel his fury rising. He shouted "you menji little turncoat" using Frances's words and dived towards her.

She let out a squeal and swam away from him. She was an exceptionally good swimmer, when he caught up with her, she dived into the water. She didn't have to surface as much as Marcus for air. When he came up for air, he could feel her tick him and swam away before he could catch her. He cornered her near the shore.

Frances pushed him as she tried to escape, he pulled her along and they both tumbled in to shallow water. Frances fell above Marcus.

Frances tried to stand, but he pinned both her arms behind her back and pulled her up along with him. Both were panting and laughing. Frances tried to push Marcus and escape, but he held her tight. When Frances looked up and saw Marcus, she stopped struggling, she felt something hot and needy stirring within.

Marcus was angry with Frances that she fooled him in to jumping after her. But when he pulled

her up, with her arms pinned behind her back, her body pressed against him, he could feel his need, grow for her. The damp clothes clung to her body revealing her curves, he couldn't control his desire. He wanted her. When she looked up at him, Marcus had to kiss her. Just like breathing, he had to kiss her.

Barely his lip touched her's, "What the hell" came a roar.

Frances jumped and hid behind Marcus with a squeal. It was Antony, and he was seething with anger. Marcus was similarly angry, why did I bring him along he thought spitefully.

Frances tugged at Marcus' shirt, he called out "Will you be kind and throw my coat".

Antony took his jacket and hurled at him. Marcus caught it and draped it around Frances. They both climbed up.

Antony thundered, "What are you doing? What were you thinking".

Marcus pushed Antony in the pond telling "I wasn't".

Antony was soaking wet as he climbed up. Frances and Marcus were laughing. The laughter was infectious. Antony couldn't help himself, he laughed too. Three of them made their way to the estate.

Chapter 11: The problem

"We can go in through the kitchen" said Frances as they neared the estate.

"Mrs. Mecredy", she called.

Mrs. Mecredy gasped when she looked at them, "I imagine you want me to sneak you in. But your aunt will know and so will your mother, if she doesn't already".

Mrs. Mecredy gave instruction to find Lord Marcus's valet. They could hear the unmistakable voice of Mrs. Sophia Hill scolding in the distance.

Frances edged towards the door and peered out.

Mrs. Sophia came in to view, she was accompanied by Anne. She looked vivid with anger and was scolding Anne in a loud voice.

"You are not a child anymore, I hope you don't follow in your sisters steps. Why did you have to push her in the pool".

Frances shouted, "You little monkey" and made to lunge at Anne.

Marcus didn't know, how Mrs. Hill managed it. One moment, the two sisters were wrestling, the next they were far apart held by ears.

Holding both her daughters by the ears, Mrs. Hill lashed out, "I don't know where we went wrong, why are you both behaving like this, what will Mr. Bennet and Lord Marcus think, if they see you like this".

She lashed, "I don't know where we went wrong, why are you both behaving like this, what will Mr. Bennet and Lord Marcus think, if they see you like this".

Marcus rolled his eyes, seriously!.

Mrs. Hill turned and saw both aforementioned men dripping wet. She clutched her heart with a gasp.

She turned to Anne and shouted, "How could you push them in?".

"Mama! I never pushed them, I only pushed Frances. He was on the shore, completely dry when I left", said Anne indignantly.

Mrs. Sophia Hill was livid as she shouted "Frances, how could you push them in, when will you grow up. Haven't you caused enough mayhem in Liverpool. Do you plan to ruin yourself? Yesterday you were climbing trees with kids. Can't you control yourself, your problem is getting out of hand."

Marcus was infuriated to see Mrs.Hill insult Frances in front of everyone. When she mentioned "Your problem", he could contain himself no longer. He will not see Frances insulted before him, not even by her mother.

He said in condescension "She did not push Antony, I did. I jumped in myself as it looked fun. Please don't insult Miss. Frances in front of me. Mrs. Mecredy, if the hot bath is ready, we will leave. Miss. Frances is cold".

"Come on" he said and took Frances's hand and pulled her along.

He was still seething as they made their way to their quarters.

"Lord Marcus, thanks". She mumbled.

He held her face in his hand and said fiercely, "You are perfect the way you are and you don't have a problem".

She started saying, "I ..".

He said again, "You are perfect".

Frances didn't know what her problem was, and she believed she didn't have one. Only George believed her, he never thought she had a problem. Marcus thought she was perfect, she felt a rush of affection towards him.

Before knowing, she heard herself saying "Kiss me".

Marcus just started at her as though she was the most precious thing in the world. He slowly bent and caught her in a searing kiss.

Marcus got to his room, with the help of his valet, he quickly bathed and got changed. Swimming had made him hungry and tired.

There was a knock on the door. A maid entered laden with a large tray. "Mrs. Mecredy sent me, in case his lordship is hungry and wants to dine in his room".

He nodded, she set up the tray on a nearby table. It had enough food for three, there were sandwiches, meat, treacle tart and tea.

Antony entered as the maid exited. Marcus was sure, Antony was about to tell him off, for the pond kissing incident. But to his surprise, he said nothing about it. He simply sat down and had lunch with Marcus. Nap seemed like a good idea as both friends slumped on their chairs after a heavy lunch.

Frances found herself waiting in the drive for her father's arrival with her mother and Anne. A carriage rolled through and Frances' dad got down. Frances and Anne shouted in unison "Papa", and ran to hug him.

Mr. Harry Hill was a jovial man, his eyes were the same as Frances which hinted mischief. Once he was settled, Mrs. Sophia Hill wasted no time in recounting about Lord Paulen.

Mr. Harry sat in thought for a few minutes and said, "You should lay off them".

When Mrs. Sophia looked mutinous, he added, "You cannot keep on holding Frances. She needs to take her own trails".

Mrs. Sophia said, "Am not holding her back, am trying to protect her".

Mr. Harry said, "Sophina, I understand. You are her mother, but this time just let Frances be".

Mrs. Sophia sighed heavily and nodded.

Dinner that night, Frances found herself sitting between Marcus and Antony. Mrs. Hill seemed to have given in to the inevitable and allowed Marcus to sit near Frances. Frances couldn't hide her delight as she chatted with Marcus.

Frances was recounting her childhood misdeeds with George, Marcus found himself talking about his time spent in Oxford, and how Antony and Marcus met.

Frances was funny, charming and devious. She didn't have the restraint other society women had, she expressed what she felt and Marcus liked it.

He found himself saying, "You should call me Marcus".

She didn't protest, she looked at him and said "Marcus" with a smile.

"Frances", he called back.

Frances blushed. Marcus stretched his arms under the table and took hers. Frances felt her cheek grow warmer

Marcus noticed Antony watching them both. On catching his eye, Antony shrugged and looked away.

Chapter 12: Windsor Castle, London

Marcus left for London after the wedding, Frances with her family was leaving after two days.

Marcus kept running through the moments he spent with Frances, on his way back to London.. She wore a peacock blue dress and looked like a picture of beauty during the wedding. Marcus danced with her thrice, damn the gossip for all he cared.

Marcus and Prince Philip frequently meet for hunting trips in Richmond Park. Deer hunting was one of their favourite sports.

Marcus bought spiced gooseberries for the prince, knowing the prince liked all Indian food.

"This is exceptional!" remarked the prince.

"It was introduced to me by a lovely lady" said Marcus with a wink.

Though Marcus and Prince Philip did not have the friendship Marcus has with Antony, he and Prince were trusted confidants. Marcus told about Frances he didn't realise he was talking about her for a long time until he saw Prince grinning at him.

"I must meet this young lady, who seems to have charmed you. How about lunch in two days", said Prince Philip.

Marcus didn't know or didn't want to know how serious he was about Frances. But found no way to decline the invitation without insulting the Prince.

Chestnut House was in frantic, when a royal invitation arrived for Frances inviting her for a formal lunch. A note arrived from Marcus shortly informing he would escort her and would pick her up by 12 noon.

Frances didn't have any formal gown. She never attended Queen Charlotte's debutante ball held each year, as she didn't have any sponsor. It was difficult to get a proper gown in two days, so they decided to go with Amelia Smith's debutante dress.

Frances had endless instruction and rehearsals on how to talk, sit, eat and not to do anything which she normally did. Sitting with a hoop was particularly difficult, she managed to topple the chair multiple times and once whacked her mother with the hoop.

Rachead day finally arrived, Mrs. Sophia Hill wanted Frances to skip her breakfast, but Frances refused saying, "It will not do if I faint mama".

"You won't faint skipping a single meal" retorted Mrs. Sophia.

But Frances went ahead and had her food with extra helpings. When she got dressed, she felt as though her backbone would snap under all the pressure. She thought bitterly, should have listened to mama. It was extremely uncomfortable with a bloated stomach and had hard time breathing.

Frances could only inhale half the air needed and that never reached her lungs which she was sure must have been squeezed to half its size too. She was forced to wear a wig and she had to control her hand hard not to scratch it.

Marcus arrived to collect Frances. Before leaving, Mrs. Sophia whispered something to Frances to which Frances replied, "I will take care".

Marcus was sure it was advice not to behave the way Frances usually did.

It was with some difficulty Frances got into the carriage. She tried to climb in the carriage with repeated failure as she couldn't get her foot past the hoop.

Marcus on her fifth attempt, simply carried her and deposited her inside the carriage. He bid his farewell to Mrs. Hill and climbed in after her and sat on the opposite side, there was clearly no space left apart from her dress.

"I look hideous don't I?" asked Frances.

"No you look lovely", Marcus said, but Frances was sure he was just telling to patronise her.

They were having lunch at the South Wing of Windsor Castle. Frances couldn't contain her eye as they drove through the long walk leading to South Wing.

Marcus helped her climb down and they headed to the first floor through the South Wing. Frances and Marcus were assured to a large sitting room lavishly decorated. They were joined by Prince Philip shortly, accompanied by Princess Charlotte. Marcus bowed, while Frances curtsied.

Dinner was served in a formal dining room, dinner table was decorated with several candelabras, flower arrangements and a large fruit display. It also had several plates of toast, muffins, meat, pork, fish. Frances mouth began to water seeing all those food

Frances was helped to her chair by a footman. To her great relief she didn't blunder on and managed to sit with her hoops without an incident.

Prince Philip and Marcus chatted amiably. Soup was served to all of them. The Dining etiquette was if you need something, you should ask the footman who is waiting on you. And ofcourse Frances never had anyone wait on her, just stretched and stood on her toes to reach out for a toast which she thought would go well with her soup.

In the process, she managed to upset her chair with her hoop. With a loud crash the chair toppled back. Frances was embarrassed, mumbling repeated apologies she tried to sit down on the chair which was retrieved and held by a footman.

In her mortification, she forgot she was wearing a hoop and should think and sit, she sat without thinking. Flump, her hoop pressed the wrong way her whole dress sprang forward. Flump another crash, but Frances couldn't see anything, the rached dress was blocking her view. She was sure she was giving everyone a good look at her underwear.

Frances stood up with some difficulty, this rached dress was good 2 feet flared from her body in all directions. When she looked up, her embarrassment changed to mortification, she had toppled a candelabra in the process and the table cloth was on fire. She hurried to the cup filled with water, but it only made it worse. She had heard the saying "add fuel to the fire", but this was too much. She had quite literally added fuel to the fire.

Marcus cried out “Frances” and made towards her. Now she had done it. Before leaving, her mother asked her to be careful, and she set fire inside the palace. She didn’t know what the punishment was for setting fire, surely it is an offense. Frances cringed as Marcus came near.

Marcus on reaching her side, set about stepping on her dress. She looked down and saw she had managed to set fire to her dress too. The dress was so far away, she couldn’t even feel the heat.

But the fire was spreading rapidly, smouldering her dress laces. With quick movement, Frances had to give Marcus credit, he had managed to undress her. He pulled her out as the dress with hoop and crosset falling to the floor.

She was in her shimmy. Marcus removed his coat and helped her inside. She couldn’t help feel a little satisfied as she saw the offensive dress smolder. But it was not long-lived, the fire at the dining table was another story. Several guards congregated and evacuated Prince and Princess out, while footmen tried to put out the fire.

It took several minutes to put out the fire. Frances had managed to completely wrecked the room. She didn't even have the strength to apologize, surely no apology could repair the damage she caused.

Marcus held Frances by shoulder reassuringly. He apologized on her behalf, she could do nothing but look around dejectedly.

Prince Philip and Princess Charlotte grinned at each other as though enjoying a private joke. They accepted the apology, saying no permanent damage was done.

Princess Charlotte ordered a maid to escort Frances to her private chamber. Frances found she couldn’t walk on her own, Princess herself held Frances arms and guided to her chamber. A royal physician was summoned to check on Frances.

A maid bought a new dress for her to change into and mercifully it was like her normal dress, though more prettier and well fashioned. She changed in to her new dress and a maid did her hair as somewhere in mayhem the wig had fallen off.

Princess Charlotte walked in with a small box and said "I have a gift for you". The Princess opened the box, revealing a beautiful emerald earring. Frances said sadly, "How can i possibly accept this, when i managed to burn your house".

"Prince Philip wanted to redecorate the room for a long time, you just helped him speed it up" she said with a twinkle in her eye. The maid helped Frances put on the new earrings.

They made their way to the secondary dining room to finish their lunch. Marcus was waiting there, he came to her side immediately and pulled her aside. "Are you alright", he enquired.

"Yes", mumbled Frances.

"You don't get any wounds, I enquired the royal physician. He recommended rest. If you want to leave now, we can go" he said with concern edged all over his face.

Frances replied, "Am really alright, let's have lunch before we leave".

Frances sighed in relief as the carriage left Windsor Castle. Seeing Marcus looking at her she said, "I shouldn't be happy all things considered, but am happy that I am out of that hoop and Wig". Marcus smiled.

"Am sorry, I embarrassed you today", she apologized again.

He put a finger to her mouth with a "shh". Frances' face fell, Marcus immediately put his arms around her shoulder and asked

"What happened? Does it hurt somewhere" .

"How am I going to explain it to my mother? It's going to be a nightmare" she said with a shudder.

"Don't worry i will take care" he said with gently squeezing her shoulder.

Frances looked up to thank him, but her words were lost, as she gazed onto his eyes. He

seemed similarly transfixed.

Slowly Marcus cupped her cheeks and brought his lips down to meet her. He was achingly gentle. First Frances didn't know what to do, and then her inexperienced lips mimicked Marcus and started moving. She was kissing him back. His tongue gently nudged her mouth, she opened her mouth allowing his entrance, his tongue darted in tasting her. She let out a moan of pleasure. Marcus lifted her off the seat and brought her to his lap. They broke apart only after reaching Chestnut House.

Frances got out with reluctance, she didn't want to part with Marcus. She wanted something, even though she didn't know what she wanted, she was sure Marcus could give it to her.

Marcus concocted a story in which a footman accidentally ruined her dress with soup and Princess Charlotte very kindly offered to replace it with one of her own. Marcus also said that it was an exhausting day for Frances and that she should rest. He gave direction to a hand maid to help her to the bed before leaving. To her immense relief her mother and Aunt accepted the story.

Dinner that night, she was bombarded with every single detail from the palace to the Princess. When she lay in bed that night, all she could think was Marcus. Marcus had kissed her on the lips, but she felt the kiss all over her body.

Chapter 13: Lady Martha Paulen

Frances was at bliss the next day. She got up early and was waking Anne. Frances told Anne what really happened. Somehow the retelling made it hilarious and both sisters were giggly throughout the breakfast.

Mrs. Sophia Hill looked at them suspiciously with pursed lips. They had callers or nosy mama's as Frances would put it, all came to enquire whether Frances had really attended lunch at Windsor Castle. But thankfully the whole fire incident had not got out.

At 11, carriage arrived with Marcus's family crest, Frances felt elated. Marcus usually calls on her by noon this was unusual, thought Frances. But it was not Marcus, a footman arrived with a letter.

It was from Lady Martha Paulen inviting her for a tea that day and the carriage waiting will take her to Brent Castle where Lady Martha Paulen will see her in 30 minutes.

It was more of a summon than an invitation. Mrs. Sophia was not happy in sending Frances alone, but she couldn't ignore a duchess request. Frances found herself in the carriage on the way to Brent Castle. Frances felt excited and a little nervous, she was going to Marcus's home for the first time.

Brent Castle was huge with a large garden, there were three wings. Two of the wings were large and while a smaller one was little apart from the rest.

A valet was waiting for her and escorted her directly to a large sitting room. Frances was informed Lady Paulen will arrive shortly. Maid arrived carrying a tray of refreshment, she set it before Frances and left in silence.

Frances had some biscuits from the tray and didn't know what to do. A freshly ironed newspaper was on a writing desk, Frances picked it up and started reading. Soon she was so immersed she didn't hear Lady Paulen walk in.

Frances looked up when she heard a loud cough. It took her several seconds to realise where she was and the lady standing must be Marcus's Mother. Frances got up and curtsied to her.

Marcus had crossed paths with many women and Lady Martha kept tabs on every single one. He was the future Duke to Stevenage, as his mother she was always on the lookout.

Lady Martha knew that Marcus was taken in by an untitled and unknown girl. Martha was sure her son was once again after some pretty lady. But when she got to know that Marcus had taken her to lunch with Prince Philip and Princess Anne, she knew she had lapsed. Martha immediately set out to find more about this unknown girl.

The reports were disturbing. Marcus had been courting this lady for two weeks. Marcus was not up to his usual misdeeds but was formally courting. He had travelled to Nottingham with that no-good Bennet so he could spend time with Frances during her cousin's wedding, to which Marcus managed to get an invitation by bullying the groom. He had danced thrice with her at the wedding.

The reports about Frances were even more disturbing, Frances has been in London no more than two months, she has already rejected five proposals from an earl, two viscount and a wealthy landlord. She seemed equally taken in by Marcus.

So Martha decided she had to put Frances in her place. Frances should have known what she was getting in to before she seduced Marcus. So she summoned Frances to Brent Castle and made her wait for a better part of an hour alone.

Martha expected to find a squirming Frances. However, when she entered, she found Frances hidden behind a newspaper. And Frances was ignoring her, at her own house. Only when Martha cleared her throat loudly did Frances look up. Also, only after a defiant pause she got up and curtsied.

Marcus knew his mother, he was sure his mother would retaliate when she hears about Frances. He planned to give Chestnut House a wide breadth for a few days. He also had bribed one of his mother's handmaids to tell him if she plans a meeting with Frances.

So when the maid entered, he asked, "What is it?".

The Maid curtseyed and said frantically, "Your Lordship, Lady is meeting with the miss".

This was expected, so Marcus asked casually, "When?".

"Her ladyship is meeting with her now in the blue sitting room" she said.

Marcus stood up in surprise, upsetting an ink bottle. This was quicker than he expected, he had underestimated his mother. Without a backward glance he set to the blue sitting room in long strides.

When he entered the blue sitting room, Frances was talking animatedly about an orphanage in Liverpool and the difficulties Lord Kenworthy faces in raising funds. Marcus rolled his eyes, Frances can't let a day pass without mentioning George.

Both the ladies saw Marcus at the same time and said "Marcus" in unison. While Frances' tone was of welcome, Martha's was curt. Marcus took a chair opposite to both ladies.

Frances said, "Lady Martha has kindly invited me to the annual charity auction held in honour of your dad's, I mean Lord Paulen's birthday" brightly with a smile.

"The proceeds would go to an orphanage, you should contribute too dear" said Lady Martha.

Marcus could tell his mother hated Frances, Martha only called the people she hated as dear, which included his father.

Frances glowed with pleasure at being addressed as dear, she said, "Of course Lady Martha, I know just the thing".

At this Lady Martha looked taken aback, reports about Frances said she was from a modest family, surely she can't contribute.

"How many children are there in the orphanage?", Frances enquired.

Marcus could tell his mother didn't know, the idea of charity auction was fashionable, it increased her esteem. She just left the steward to do the rest, she didn't care about the orphans.

Lady Martha replied, "About 40 children". At this Frances exclaimed, "40 children! those poor things! You are the kindest person i ever know".

It was so like Frances, Marcus came fearing how her mother was going to treat Frances. He once again didn't get to act the hero. Marcus couldn't keep a straight face and grinned. Frances misinterpreting Marcus's smile and beamed back.

Martha was fuming, this Frances was very good. When Martha suggested Frances contribute to the auction as an insult, Frances had accepted it as a challenge.

Martha didn't know which orphanage they were contributing, it was stewards work not hers. But Frances has used it and by the look on both Frances and Marcus, she knew she was losing the battle and badly at that.

Thinking it was prudent to remove Frances from his mother's vicinity, Marcus said, "Why don't you look around the garden Frances, I will join you shortly". Frances got up and left.

Marcus made sure she was well out of earshot and asked, "What are you doing mother?".

"The same question I might ask you, " retorted Lady Martha.

Marcus chuckled and said "fair enough".

"What do you think of her?" he asked just to rub the salt.

Lady Martha exploded, "She is an arrogant tart and I don't like her one bit".

Marcus didn't like her mom talking about Frances in such a way.

"I know why you choose her, she says openly she doesn't mind if you have mistresses, when i mentioned you have three mistresses".

"You asked her what?", snapped Marcus, he was livid. He got up and left.

Chapter 14: Garden, Brent Castle, London

When Marcus suggested that Frances wait for him in the garden, she got up and left. She saw columns of tulips of different color from the carriage window on her way. How lovely it will be to walk in the tulip garden with Marcus at her side. She blushed and looked around but there was no one.

Frances walked trying to remember the way she came in, but after a few minutes she had to admit, she was lost. The castle was so huge, she kept walking hoping she would run in to someone.

The delicious smell of chocolate wafted through the air. Surely there would be a door in the kitchen she thought, as she followed the scent.

When she walked out of the kitchen door she had a plate full of hot chocolate biscuits. She headed towards the tulip garden. The site was mesmerizing, there were white, red, pink, orange and yellow tulips each planted in a column. She deposited the plate on a bench and bent down to smell the tulip.

A sharp voice said, "You shouldn't pluck the flower". Frances turned and saw an old gardener walking her way.

"I wasn't going to pluck, I just wanted to smell them" she said.

"You should not climb into the flower bed," said the gardener again.

Frances indicated her feet which were on the sidewalk and said, "I didn't climb down, see".

He grunted and set about planting seeds in a freshly made patch. Frances walked over and watched him work, asking questions now and then.

She sat down on the bench and started on her biscuits. Frances invited the gardener to join her. He grunted in reply, but came and sat next to her.

"Am Miss.Hill", she said and held her hand, he took it and shook without a word,

"And.. you are?" prompted Frances.

"Am Brent" said the old man.

"You must be Master Paulen's fiance", Brent asked.

Frances could feel her blush as she said, "No am not engaged".

"Pardon me mam" said Brent.

"It's alright, Mr.Brent" replied Frances.

He stood abruptly and made towards the orange tulip, plucked a few. He came and handed it to Frances telling "Not all tulips have a smell, but this orange one has".

"What happened to" she mimicked his voice "You shouldn't pluck the flower".

Brent gave a hearty laugh. Soon they were talking about flowers, Marcus, garden, Marcus, biscuit, Marcus.

The gardener must have been working for the Paulen's for a long time thought Frances as he said many stories about younger Marcus.

Marcus was seething with anger, as he searched for Frances. She must have been hurt when her mom talked about his mistress to her. Marcus didn't want to end things with Frances. He had to find her and apologies. But he couldn't find her in the front garden.

Muttering he made his way to the other side. He saw Frances sitting on a garden bench, there was someone with her, but the tree hid his view. He made his way towards her.

Marcus watched as Frances clutched her stomach and laughed. Marcus walked near enough to hear her talk.

She was telling, "Offense: Burning the palace, Weapon used:", she said

Another voice completed "The hoops", it was Marcus's father. Marcus watched as both Frances and Duke Winston guffaw.

Frances turned and saw Marcus staring at them. She said, "Marcus" and stood up.

"Do you want a biscuit? They are delicious, " said Frances.

But Marcus was looking at Mr.Brent as he greeted, "father".

On this Frances looked from Marcus to Mr.Brent mumbling "father?".

Marcus ignored Frances as he said, "Seems you have already met Miss. Frances Hill. Frances this is my father Duke Winston Paulen".

Frances curseyed and said "How come you never mentioned it Mr. Brent" with a wink.

Duke Winston Paulen guffawed again.

Duke Winston turned to Frances and said, "Miss.Hill, why don't you inform the kitchen maid to bring out another plate of these delicious biscuits".

Duke Winston waited till Frances was away and asked "Do you think she will do good as Lady Vandam?".

Though Marcus did not think about marriage, he was angry that his father would ask such a question.

He retorted angrily, "what is wrong with her not to make one?".

"Nothing, Miss. Hill seems a good egg" replied Duke Winston. He added, "But good eggs won't survive with your mother".

Marcus' already raging mind came to a boiling point, "Just because you couldn't, doesn't mean everyone can't". He turned and left.

Marcus has never raised his voice in front of his parents. But, Marcus didn't regret his actions.

Marcus' parents were not like arguing spouses, they simply ignored each other. He could count on his fingers the number of times he saw his parents talk. He hated the dinner when both were present, it was like a funeral.

Frances came with a fresh biscuit, to find Duke Winston standing alone. He pointed towards Marcus retreating form and said, "You should follow him".

Marcus made his way angrily towards his wing. His was the smaller wing slightly apart from the rest. He remembered Frances and turned, he found Frances a short distance away from him. His anger dissipated as he saw her walking towards him grinning as though she was having the time of her life.

Chapter 15: Small Wing, Brent Castle

Marcus took Frances' arm and walked her to his study. Marcus wanted to apologize for his mother's behaviour, his behaviour, for hearing about his mistress. But he did not know what to say.

Frances being Frances brought that up, "Is Opera Singer Carmella one of your mistresses?". He didn't want to lie to her, but he can't tell anything. He winced not knowing what to do.

Frances continued, "Can you get me an autograph when you visit her next time, Anne likes her".

Marcus's mouth fell open. Marcus asked, "Do you know what a mistress means".

To which Frances replied, "Yes , mama told men go to mistress for pleasure, as we all go to the theater or a musical".

Marcus almost groaned. Frances was too innocent. That's what set her apart from the rest. There was no one like Frances. Marcus looked at Frances in fascination. He wanted to apologize for everything.

She was examining his writing table, she said, "You got ink spill".

Marcus walked to her and hugged her from behind and mumbled, "Am sorry".

Frances tensed a little but relaxed. Marcus rested his head on her shoulder. She placed her finger on his cheeks and said, "You haven't done anything that needs apology".

Frances could feel the heat of Marcus' body sweeping through her clothes. Frances gasped as she felt something hard, press in her back and it seemed to be moving, no! growing. When she turned and told Marcus that, he just smiled sheepishly at her. She was frustrated, something was in Marcus' bridges, when she asked him to check, all he did was smile at her.

Marcus pulled her closer and kissed her. He was not as gentle as the last time, it was hot with

passion. Marcus pulled Frances close, his mouth moved from her lips to her neck, she arched her neck giving him greater access.

Marcus' hands were everywhere cupping her, squeezing her, and stroking her. Frances squealed "Marcus".

He stopped, but did not take his arms off her. He asked, "Do you want me to stop?".

Frances didn't know what Marcus was doing, she felt a strange sensation but it was a pleasantly strange sensation.

Marcus asked again "Do you want me to stop?".

She said "No, don't stop" it sounded like a plea to her.

Marcus carried her to his bedchamber and showed her what exactly was hard and growing in his bridges. Marcus made her feel things, things she never felt and he was very good. Both were panting heavily when Marcus slid from her top to lie near her.

Frances asked in wonder, "What did you do to me Marcus?".

Marcus chuckled at her question. He pulled her closer and said, "I made love to you".

She blushed and buried her face in his chest. Hugging both feel asleep.

Frances woke up, to find Marcus reading a book sitting next to her.

"Wake up sleepy head", Marcus said.

"Almost, what time is it?" enquired Frances.

"Half past one".

Frances made to get up, let out a squeal and hide behind the blanket. She turned her head and saw a pile of her clothes in a chair.

"You should wait out," said Frances blushing.

Marcus chuckled but left the room, closing the door behind him. Frances got up and dressed, mercifully she didn't wear a dress that had buttons in the back.

Indicating to the lunch tray "I rang for lunch", said Marcus as Frances entered his study.

"Both your parents are lovely, I like them very much," said Frances.

Marcus winced, but Frances was busy with lunch and didn't notice. They ate in companionable silence.

Frances wanted to bid her farewell in person to Marcus' parents. However, Marcus insisted she leave a note behind. So she penned a letters for Lady Martha and Lord Winston thanking both for their hospitality.

Marcus accompanied her to Chestnut house. When they reached, Marcus pulled her in his arms and kissed her deeply.

"I have an engagement tomorrow, will call on you in two days" said Marcus as farewell.

Frances was aglow as she recounted her meeting with Lady Martha and Lord Winston to her mother and Aunt Mary. She didn't tell the part about Marcus and her, it felt more private, it was their moment.

Mrs. Sophia Hill had tears as she hugged Frances and said "Am so proud of you Frances. And, you got another royal invitation".

Frances took the invitation with trepidation, what were they thinking inviting her? Maybe they wanted to demolish some other room. She didn't want to spend another day in those hoops. She opened the letter. It was from Princess Charlotte inviting her for riding in Richmond Park.

Chapter 16: Richmond Park, London

Marcus and Antony meet that day in Hyde park, this day the friends opted to sit rather than ride.

"So Miss. Hill burned Prince Philip's dining room" Antony said with a chuckle.

"Have I told you before, that you are wasting your talent. You make the best spy" said Marcus.

"Yes you have, a million times if i care to count", said Antony and moved on to other topics.

Marcus eyed him suspiciously, "Why aren't you nagging me about Frances?" asked Marcus.

Antony replied, "I know your intentions are genuine, when you defended Miss.Hill to her mother. Am not worried about her anymore".

Antony knew Marcus so well, but he was wrong about him this time, he liked Frances. However, he didn't have any plans to marry her. Any decent man would not do what he did to Frances, thought Marcus.

Marcus returned from his errands and got into the carriage, the driver asked whether he should set course to the opera house where Camellia is currently stationed. Marcus asked him to ride home straight.

Marcus was sure he could still smell Frances in the pillow she layed. Marcus has never brought ladies to his house, Frances was the first. He had never climbed a tree as a child, he was an earl and future duke, he had responsibilities. It was a first time too. Everything seems to be a first to him when he was with Frances. As he slept he dreamed of her, he woke up in the morning hot and needy.

Richmond Park was a large private park of more than 2000 acres that was exclusive to the royal family. Richmond park was surrounded by thick brick walls. Major attraction of the park was

deer hunting.

Frances was excited as she rode through gates of the park. She wore dark green riding habit matched with emerald earrings Princess Charlotte presented.

Frances was accompanied by a guard, he escorted her to where Princess Charlotte was. Princess Charlotte was accompanied by two more ladies Frances didn't know. The guard helped her dismount. She curtsied to the Princess.

Princess Charlotte gestured to Frances and said, "This is Miss. Hill", Indicating to the two ladies Princess Charlotte said to Frances, "This is Princess Galina and Princess Irina from Russia".

Frances noticed the two women with identical thin and long noses, they wore their hair in long plates and a flat hat, they had rather powdery pale looks as though they rarely saw sun.

Frances jumped when she heard a gunshot nearby. "Don't be scared, they are setting targets for a shooting match".

Frances felt a tap in her shoulder, she turned and it was Marcus, she blurted, "Marcus, what are you doing here?".

Marcus laughed and said "the same question, i might ask you".

"Princess Charlotte invited me for a ride," replied Frances.

On her questioning look he answered, "I am visiting with Prince Philip". And right on cue Prince Philip arrived with two men, Frances bowed a quick curtsy.

"This is Captain Andrew and General Levi" introduced the Prince. Frances curtsied to them both.

Captain Andrew took her arms and kissed her knuckles.

Frances looked at Marcus, he was frowning at Captain Andrew, this made her blush.

"Shall we make our way to the shooting sight", asked Captain Andrew, offering his hand to Frances.

Frances gulped, she found no way to refuse without insulting him. So she took it and he led her.

Marcus was furious, it is common to kiss a ladies knuckles as greeting, but he didn't like the way Captain Andrew did. What was more infuriating was Frances blushed, that small patch of her skin in her cheek which he liked, turned pink. Frances should be walking in his arms not someone else's. He wanted to pound Captain Andrew limb to limb. Marcus grudgingly escorted one of the Russian Princesses.

Maids have arranged a few chairs for viewing, ladies departed to take the seats. Marcus could tell, Frances left reluctantly to join the ladies.

"We will play five rounds and find who the winner is" Marcus was telling the rest of the gentlemen.

Frances joined the ladies and said, "I wish I could join in the shooting match too".

"We don't have enough pistols, seeing you don't have one, you can join next time" replied Marcus curtly.

To Marcus' disgust Captain Andrew said, "You can join us Miss. Hill, I will be happy to share mine".

"You will" beamed Frances. Marcus gritted his teeth loudly.

Marcus didn't want Frances to share anything with Captain Andrew, so he devised a plan.

"Lets make things interesting, We will play the same five rounds, each round we will eliminate the worst participant". Marcus was sure Frances would be the first to be eliminated.

Prince Philip took the turn first, he took aim and shot. When the target was brought forward, he had missed it by two inches.

Next Captain Andrew shot, much to Marcus' irritation he had hit the target. Frances cheered for him.

Marcus was so furious, he took aim and shot, when the target was brought forward . Marcus had missed the target by several inches.

Next came Frances' turn, before Captain Andrew could offer his pistol to her, Marcus thrust his pistol in Frances hand. She smiled at him warmly and said "Wish me luck".

She took aim and shot, she had hit the target.

Marcus was the first one to get eliminated. He was fuming as he took a seat with the other ladies. Smug smile on Captain Andrew's face wanted Marcus to pummel him.

Each round progressed, Frances and Captain Andrew made it to the final round. Captain Andrew gave a smug look at Marcus, Marcus balled his fist.

Captain Andrew shot, he had hit the target.

Frances' turn came, she aimed and shot, she had hit the bulls eye. Everyone cheered, Captain Andrew made a mock bow, Frances laughed. She bounded to Marcus and handed him his pistol squealing "I won".

Marcus couldn't help but to return a smug smile to Captain Andrew, as Frances talked to him animatedly about the match.

Chapter 17: White Lodge, Richmond Park

Prince Philip suggested they all ride to White Lodge, where they could have a vista of woods and London beyond.

Marcus took Frances' hand this time and helped her into her saddle. They all rode through grassland, rather than the proper roads.

Frances stopped and slid down her horse. Marcus stepped down and to Marcus' annoyance Captain Andrew too stepped down, they both asked in unison, "What happened?".

Frances looked at Marcus and said, "I think chocolate hurt her legs, she can't seem to support me, she isn't used to rough terrain".

Marcus bent down and saw the horse held one of its legs off the ground.

"You can take mine, I will be happy to walk you and chocolate through the road" said Captain Andrew.

Marcus threw the reins to Captain Andrew "Do take, chocolate through the road. I shall take Miss. Hill with me" Marcus said insolently. With that Marcus helped Frances into his saddle and mounted his horse, sliding behind Frances. Before Captain Andrew could do anything, Marcus set his horse into a trot.

Frances was sitting partially in Marcus' lap. She couldn't stop blushing as the memories of last time wafted through her.

Without meaning to, she said "Marcus".

He looked at her, she didn't mean to call him, now he was looking at her. She said the first thing that came to her mind, "It was good of captain Andrew to offer to help chocolate".

His eyes flashed "Yes" he said curtly.

Frances bit her lip, she asked, "What's wrong?".

"Nothing", he replied even more curtly .

Frances had enough, Marcus was ignoring her all during the match, she kept looking at him, but he was staring the other direction all the time. She didn't know why he was angry.

She asked, "Why are you angry at me?".

"No am not", said Marcus.

She was angry now, "Yes you are. You have been ignoring me all day, and answering me curtly. If you didn't want to be with me, why didn't you just let Captain Andrew walk me"

Marcus' eye flashed even more, Frances knew she had crossed lines this time. she blurted, "Are you jealous?".

Marcus' face blanched, as he said "No am not, why should I be".

Frances couldn't suppress her giggle as she said, "O! Now I see, you were jealous".

He started "No I", before he could finish she kissed his cheeks and said, "It's sweet".

Was he jealous as Frances said. He wanted Frances to be his and only his. Marcus pulled her closer, hugging her possessively. He wanted to beat that infernal Captain Andrew limb to limb.

They reached the White Lodge. It was a three story building. Frances was amazed by the grand building. It was larger than her house in Liverpool, though this was a mere hunting lounge. The walls of the great hall were covered with deer head trophy and antlers.

Lunch served was delicious, it included games hunted from the park. To Marcus' delight, Captain Andrew who had arrived before them had retired to his allocated room without lunch.

Marcus and Frances left for the stable to see how Frances' horse chocolate was doing.

Chocolate needed someday to recuperate, The stableman promised to return her to Chestnut House once Chocolate was better.

When Marcus and Frances returned to White Lodge, everyone had already retired. Marcus pulled Frances into his room. He did everything he dreamed about her and more.

Marcus woke up, but he lay in bed listening to Frances move about in the sitting room attached to the bedchamber. Marcus could still hear Frances asking him "Are you jealous". Was he jealous, it was natural to want to beat Captain Andrew limp to limp, well he had to control that particular feeling. If he had to be honest with himself he was jealous. He didn't want Captain Andrew to get close to Frances. Damn! He didn't want any man, not just Captain Andrew.

Marcus wanted Frances to be his and only his. Unbitten his mind imagined Frances with another man, he had a strong urge to punch and maim something. He would kill any man who even looked at her that way. She was his and only his.

Marcus knew what he had to do, he had to marry Frances. Marcus thought about the times he spent with her and the passion he felt for her, he decided marrying Frances was not a bad idea.

Marcus was a man of action, if he planned something he did it, he didn't fiddle his finger and waste his time. Marcus was going to propose to Frances now. He pulled on his bridges and looked for his shirt, but it was nowhere to be found.

Frances entered from the sitting room with a tray of treacle tart and a cup of tea. "The Maids have left this in the sitting room when we left for the stables, so thoughtful of them," she said to Marcus.

At lunch, Frances couldn't eat the treacle tart as her stomach was full of meat. Marcus had noticed the look of longing in Frances' face as she finally accepted she couldn't possibly eat even a single mouth. Marcus had requested a maid to leave the dessert in his sitting room.

"Is that my shirt?" Marcus asked with his eye twinkling. Frances was wearing his shirt, the rest of her was a feast for his eyes.

Frances blushed as said, "Yes, my habit shirt had buttons in back, I can't wear them without help. I didn't want to walk about" she gulped blushed even more.

Marcus knew she meant to say nude, but she couldn't bring herself to do it.

She said "Do you mind".

"No, I don't mind. And I don't mind if you walk around, you know", he passed here, gave Frances a wicked smile and said "naked".

She blushed and said in a mock outrage, "Marcus".

As Frances was placing the tray on a side table.

Marcus drew near her. He took her hand in his and kissed it. He went down on one knee and asked "Frances, will you do me the honour of becoming my wife?".

Before Marcus knew what happened. Flump! and a Crash! Marcus was covered in sugar syrup.

Frances waited for Marcus to wake up, so they could have the treacle tart together. When she heard him move about she had taken the tray to the bedchamber.

Frances placed the treacle tart on the side table, she turned to find Marcus right behind her. Everything after that moment felt like a dream. God! This handsome man she loved so much was on one knee.

Marcus was asking her to be his wife. She wanted to say "yes". She felt weak, her legs felt like jelly. She was going to collapse. She thought, please Frances don't fall, don't ruin a perfect proposal. She placed a hand on the side table for support, except her hand connected to the rim of the plate.

The plate acted as a catapult, it sent the treacle tart flying. Flump! The treacle tart flew and hit Marcus squarely on the face. Crash! The plate, its job done clattered to the ground.

Frances shouted, "No!.. I mean Yes".

"Did you just hit me with a treacle tart", asked Marcus amused.

Frances said, "No!.. yes".

Frances was mortified, she knew she had ruined any chance he had with Marcus. Why would a man marry a girl who hit him with a tart, when proposed

Marcus guffawed, he was confident that the proposal would go smooth, why would she reject, while she liked him. However, Frances was well frankly Frances.

"Only you could make a proposal amusing" Marcus said as he pulled and kissed her.

She melted into him, this kiss was sweeter than treacle tart. Marcus knew being Frances' husband would not be easy, but definitely amusing.

Chapter 18: The Squabble

Frances borrowed a royal carriage to drop her home. Marcus had promised he would call on her tomorrow, to request her fathers permission for his hand. Frances informed her parents that Marcus wanted to meet them both.

Anne squealed, "Did he propose to you?". When Frances nodded,

"What did you say? Tell me everything" asked Anne.

Frances thought how Marcus proposed to her without his shirt and she with only his shirt, the treacle tart and the kiss. She blushed and told he proposed to her as they rode through Richmond park.

Mrs. Sophia Hill visited Frances at her bedchamber, that night.

"Mama" said Frances as she sat up.

Mrs. Sophia came and sat near Frances. Mrs. Sophia looked at Frances for long time, but she didn't say anything.

"What is it mama?" asked Frances.

Mrs. Sophia let out a sigh and said, "Usually mother and daughter have this talk before the wedding. I know you are green and things I tell may come as a shock to you".

Frances didn't know what it was, but the tone of her mother made her worry.

Mrs. Sophia continued, "Once you are married, your husband, I mean Lord Marcus will want to do things".

Frances interrupted, "What things?".

Mrs. Sophia reprimanded, "Please don't interrupt, this is hard as it is".

She continued "Where was I? Yes, Lord Marcus will want to do things to you. I am sure he will be kind and gentle, but it may hurt at the beginning. I promise, it will get better".

Mrs. Sophia proceeded to explain what the things were, Frances listened in silence. The things her mother was telling didn't even scratch the surface of what Marcus and she was doing.

Mrs. Sophia finished saying "and that's how babies are born".

"What?", Frances asked, sitting up straight.

"I thought you need to be married to have kids. You said god puts the baby in the stomach, when married women sleeps" said Frances in outrage.

"Well Frances, I wasn't lying. Not everyone who does it has a child. It's god who blesses with a child", Mrs. Sophia said.

"Am talking about the part about being married, you can have children without marrying if you do the thing right" asked Frances.

"Goodness girl! Just because I told you, doesn't give license to do it. I told you, so you could act appropriately" snapped Mrs. Sophia as she stood up.

Frances lay that night wondering whether she has been blessed with a child. A child, how wonderful that would be, if she had her own child she could play all day.

Marcus usually avoided dinner at house, his parents though never spoke with each other, had their dinner together. And he hated dinner, if Marcus' mother wanted to say something, she conveyed it to the footman, the footman relayed it to his father and vice versa. Both acted as if they could not hear each other, though they sat barely 3 feet apart.

However, today was an exception, he wanted to tell his parents of his intention to marry Frances.

When Marcus entered the formal dining room, his parents were already seated and having their first course. Marcus sat, when the footman brought out dinner for him, Marcus waved him off.

Marcus didn't know how to tell his parents, it was easier to propose Frances. But, telling his parents was an entirely different story, his mother is likely to explode and after the insulting thing he said to his father, he was not sure of his reaction either.

Lord Winston was eyeing him with gleam as he asked, "Are you engaged to Miss. Frances yet? son".

Marcus looked at his father in surprise.

Lady Martha said, "Frankly, I am amused that it had taken you so long to propose".

Marcus eyed both his parents suspiciously. This was not the reaction he was expecting. What are you both up to Marcus wondered, this is unlike them.

"Am meeting Frances' parents tomorrow" said Marcus.

"Good for you Marcus", wished Lord Winston. Marcus bid farewell and left for Small wing his residence in Brent Castle.

Marcus arrived at Chestnut house, Frances' whole family was waiting for him in the sitting room. Frances prepared him tea, she already knew how he took it.

Marcus said without preamble, "I would like your blessing, I want Frances to be my wife".

Mr. Harry considered Marcus for some time and asked him, "Are you sure? You know our Frances is careless and mischievous".

Marcus replied even before he could finish, "Yes sir, I am well aware of it, but she is also honest and kind".

Frances beamed at him. "I know being Frances' husband will not be an easy one, I will cherish her for all her carelessness and mischieves".

Mrs. Sophia sniffed and wiped her eyes, even Frances looked like she might cry too.

Marcus found himself alone with Frances, sitting on a garden bench.

"I have a present for you", he pulled a small box from his coat and handed it to Frances.

Frances opened it, it had a ring with a large emerald on the center with small diamonds surrounding it on all sides.

Frances' voice was choked as she said, "Marcus! it's so beautiful, you should put it on" and held out her hands.

Marcus took her hand and put on the ring. He didn't let her hands go, he drew circles on her hand as they spoke.

"Did you know, we could have a child from what we have been doing? Mama told me, yesterday" Frances said.

"You told your mother? what we did?" asked Marcus in alarm.

"No I didn't tell her. I asked you, whether you knew" asked Frances again.

"Yes, I knew" replied Marcus.

Frances blushed thinking of the first time Marcus did his thing, as her mother had put it. However, Marcus said that was love.

Frances gasped as she understood his question that time. She pulled her hands away from him and got up. Without a backward glance she marched towards the house.

Marcus called "Frances", but she didn't stop. Marcus got up and followed her.

When Marcus caught Frances by her arm, she yanked her hands back. Marcus placed his hand on his hip as he asked "Frances, what happened?" his tone condescending.

She was so furious, she punched him in his gut as she said, "Am furious at you, God! I have been a fool."

"Will you at least tell me what you are furious about", asked Marcus, he didn't even wince at her punch.

"You already know why I am angry and don't pretend otherwise," shouted Frances as she landed another punch. This time he said "Ouch".

"It has started already" mumbled Marcus in a stage whisper.

"And what's that supposed to mean" retorted Frances.

"You already know and don't pretend otherwise," said Marcus, mimicked her sarcastically.

Frances made to punch Marcus again, he expertly side steps caught her hand. Before Frances knew, he had pinned both her hands behind her back with his and pulled her close.

Mrs. Sophia watched Frances punch Marcus in his stomach. "Harry!" she shrieked.

Mr. Harry came to Mrs. Sophia's side in an instant. "What is it Sophia?".

"Harry you got to go and stop that, that girl is out of control" she said in hysterics, as Frances punched Marcus again.

Mr. Harry peared out, when Frances made to punch him for the third time he expertly manoeuvred and caught both Frances hand behind her back.

"I think, he got it under control. Sophia, you should stop worrying".

"If you say so", Mrs.Sophia went with Mr.Harry.

"Do you know, you look cute when you are angry" saying that Marcus kissed her.

Frances could feel her anger melting away. She was kissing him back with more vigour. When they broke apart, Frances was not angry anymore, she felt her heart ache.

Marcus put his arms in her cheek and asked. "Frances, what is bothering you?".

She looked sad, she opened his mouth but she couldn't speak. Marcus pulled her closer and held her.

After some time she said, "I didn't mind at first, I didn't know. But it's painful" she gulped, "It's painful to think I have to share you, you said you made love to me. I just realised I wasn't the only one". A single tear escaped her eyes, she wiped it surreptitiously.

Marcus didn't know what to tell, He didn't know what to do. Marcus felt his heart squeeze seeing Frances hurt and vulnerable. He just held her.

After a pause her voice became even more painful. "Do you have any children with any of them? I won't reject them I promise, how can I, when they are part of you. But, I would rather know it from you".

Marcus's hold on her tightened as he replied "No I don't".

"Frances, I can't undo what I did in the past".

Before he could finish Frances nodded and said "I understand, am sorry for punching you. Can we go in? I feel cold".

Marcus could tell, she was still hurt. So without a word he led her inside the Chestnut House.

Marcus felt awful that night, when he closed his eyes, all he could see was the hurt face of Frances. When the morning came, all he wanted to see was Frances.

Marcus found himself in Chestnut House at 10 in the morning. It was a bit early to call on someone, damn! he can't wait any longer. But when he arrived, Frances and Mr. Harry had gone to a nearby workshop and would only return by evening, informed a disgruntled Mrs. Sophia.

Marcus gathered Mrs. Sophia didn't approve of Frances accompanying Mr. Harry to the workshop, and apart from it he couldn't gather any information. Mrs. Sophia wouldn't even reveal the nature of the workshop.

Marcus penned a note to Frances and handed it to Mrs. Sophia. There were many things he wanted to tell Frances, but he couldn't explain them in a note, so wrote "Am sorry. I miss you - Love Marcus".

Frances returned from the workshop with her Father in evening. According to Mrs. Sophia both looked dishevelled and dirty. She looked at the pair in disdain.

Mrs. Sophia turned to Frances and said "Lord Vandam came calling in the morning, I didn't know what to tell him. He left you a message".

She handed Frances the note. "What does he say? Is he angry?" Mrs. Sophia asked.

"No mama, he says" Frances hesitated. She repeated once again "He says" but didn't complete her sentence.

Mrs. Sophia pulled the letter from Frances in frantic, placed her hand over her heart and said "Ho! Frances! Isn't he the most thoughtful".

Mr. Harry who read the note over Mrs. Sophia said, "You better send him a note informing of your plans tomorrow. I can finish up if you want".

"No papa, it's my work and I need to finish it. If it's ok with you, may I ask him to call on the

workshop?" asked Frances.

"What! Don't tell me you are planning to go tomorrow too!" scolded Mrs. Sophia.

Both father and daughter, suddenly remembered they needed a bath and scurried away.

Frances sent a messenger to Marcus saying, she had errands tomorrow too.

Mrs. Sophia had disapproved, point-blank to inform Marcus where Frances was going. So she had no choice but to be vague of her plans. And promised they would meet on the day of the auction.

Frances knew Marcus must be worried about her to call on her so early, but she was really alright. As Marcus had said, he can't undo what he has done in the past.

Chapter 19: The Charity auction, Brent Castle

The Charity auction was held in the ballroom of Brent Castle. Frances was in awe to see the size of the ballroom, it could fit a large cathedral easily. There were more than a hundred people milling about, but it hardly felt crowded.

The auctioned items were displayed on one side, which included famous paintings, jewellery, artifacts from India and Africa, Ivory dolls. Each item held a note with information about it and the largest amount of the bid.

Information about the donors and bidders were anonymous. As the climax of the ball, donors and winning bidder will be announced.

There was soft music and the lighting was perfect. It almost felt magical.

Frances saw the program mentioned in the invitation, the party started by 6 PM, where guests could view the items in auction and place their bids. A formal dinner by 8 PM, followed by auction results and Opera by Carmella.

Frances didn't know many aristocrats in the guest. To her great relief Mr. Antony Bennet was in attendance.

He walked straight to her and said, "It's been so long since we met, how are you?".

"Am fine Mr. Bennet, How are you? You are always welcome in Chestnut house" replied Frances.

"Call me Antony," said Antony with a smile.

Antony offered his hand to Frances and asked, "Shall we take a turn".

Frances took it and they moved around viewing the items. When Antony made to go in a way Frances stopped him and said, "Antony let's not go that way".

He didn't ask anything but let her pull him away. They retrieved in a corner, Antony whispered, "Will you tell me why we are to avoid that side?" he examined the place carefully like he was scanning to find someone is about to attack.

"Antony", Frances called. But he didn't respond, he had his hand clasped behind his back inside his jacket, Frances had a suspicion he held a pistol.

"Antony, It's really nothing", said Frances. He looked at her dubiously.

"Well If you must know, there is an item I have donated. I would rather not go that way". Antony relaxed.

"Why are you so jumpy today?" Frances asked.

"It's nothing, " replied Antony

Frances noticed Lady Matilda, daughter of the wealthiest merchant from Liverpool looking at them. Frances smiled at her. But she glared at Frances with such a vehemence, Frances was taken aback. Lady Matilda turned her back on them and walked away. Antony chuckled.

"What was that about?" asked Frances.

"Ho, Don't mind her, the glare was meant for me" said Antony.

"You know Lady Matilda?" asked Frances.

Antony just nodded and said, "Come on, I am curious to see what you donated".

"I would rather not come, I will wait here, " said Frances.

Marcus only managed to get a few glimpses of Frances as he was busy greeting guests. Frances had smiled radiantly, the few minutes he managed to see her. Marcus was left wondering whether she was alright.

Antony had kept her company, Marcus had meant to ask him to look after Frances. Antony knew him so well, when Marcus saw Frances next time Antony was accompanying her.

Antony came back exclaiming, "Frances that work is exquisite! where did you get it? It must have cost you dear".

Frances said in a small voice, "I made it, you don't have to lie to me. No one is going to bid it".

Antony replied "Frances! why would i lie, it's the best I saw so far".

Frances flushed at the compliment and said, "You should see my father's work, he is even better".

Each guest invitation had dinner seating information. Dinner was formal, so the seating was by ranking. Which meant Frances and Antony were in the far end of the hall.

All three guests in Frances' table were female. Frances noticed a nerve twitching in Antony's cheek when he walked her to the table. Antony helped Frances to her seat. He turned and walked out of the door, his posture emanating anger.

Frances was left wondering what had made Antony on edge today, he always was calm and under control.

Frances smiled at them warmly, all of them returned an identically curt smile and appraising stare as though sizing her up for a fight. Frances was taken aback, was something amiss with her hair or dress. Why the hell did everyone keep frowning at her.

Deciding she better check her reflection in the ladies room, she made to stand. Before she could move however, the lady next to her said, "We have never been introduced. I am Dowager Viscountess Davies",

"Hello, Am Miss.Frances Hill", said Frances.

The atmosphere around the table suddenly changed, the appraising stare turned downright cold.

Frances wanted to flee, but she couldn't move.

Lord Winston came in first, followed by Marcus escorting Lady Martha inside the dining room. Frances sat up straight in her chair, and everyone in the table followed suit.

Marcus' eye caught Frances, she smiled at him. But Marcus' face flushed red, his eyes flashed in her direction.

Frances shrank in her seat, she didn't know why Marcus was angry with her. Why everyone was angry with her. Marcus was angry, no he was furious. Frances could feel her finger trembling as he clutched at her dress.

Did she cause some offence? Was her dress offensive? Was it because of the item she submitted for the auction? Was he angry because she didn't meet him for the past two days?

Frances cursed herself, she should have listened to her mother. Marcus should have been embarrassed to learn, she had donated a wooden carving while others donated diamond jewellery and expensive painting.

Unbidden a voice inside her said, "Maybe it's because of your problem, Marcus must now come to believe you have a problem too".

Even though Frances didn't show it, she was hurt whenever her mother mentioned "Frances' problem". It was twice hard to think Marcus would think so too. Her vision was blurry due to the unshed tears and there was a numbing roar in her ear.

Antony walked back in, he was livid with anger. Antony had given Marcus his chance, Frances was Marcus' fiancée not his. If Marcus couldn't protect her, Marcus had no right marrying her.

Chapter 20: The Bet

Antony walked in determinedly towards Frances, planning to pull her out, damn with the gossip. However, when Antony called Frances, she seemed not to hear her, she looked miserable, her hands trembling violently.

Someone was calling her and taping her hands, but Frances couldn't move. She couldn't look. The air, she was breathing was thicker than usual. She had a hard time inhaling.

Then, there was a strong hand helping her up, she obeyed it. Frances walked along, it was Marcus, he was leading her out of the dining room.

Antony followed them. Antony and Marcus were talking in low voices but it was unmistakably angry. It took Frances some time to realize they were arguing.

Frances shivered as they entered the garden. Marcus removed his coat and draped it on her. Marcus and Antony exchanged a few more words and Antony departed. Marcus led Frances to a bench, he made her sit while he remained standing.

Marcus was shaking with anger, he didn't know who he was angry at. How can his mother do this to Frances? Marcus was suspicious when his mother accepted that he had proposed to Frances without a fight, but he didn't dream she would insult Frances like that. She had invited Marcus' mistresses and made sure Frances sat with them. Marcus was not proud of his actions, but bringing Frances in, it was a blow below the belt.

Marcus was not angry with his mother, he was angry with himself. He had done what Antony had warned him not to do, he had shown Frances how cruel the world is.

Marcus' reason behind pursuing Frances was not innocent, but his feelings for her were true. As he watched, Frances looked miserable and trembling, he felt embarrassed of himself. His heart ached to watch Frances like this.

God! What kind of man was he to hurt the women he loved, not being able to protect her. Marcus just realized he loved Frances, he loved her with every being of his life. But he didn't deserve her. All he had given Frances was pain.

Marcus remembered Frances' teary face as she asked about his mistress, damn! Now he had made her sit with them like she was no different.

Frances couldn't bear the silence, she murmured "Marcus".

He looked up, his eyes still blazing. "Antony has gone to fetch you a carriage, you shouldn't be here" he replied without looking at her.

"I shouldn't be here" Frances repeated in a cocking voice.

"Lord Vandam" a man called Marcus turned, it was their butler.

"Yes Alfred," he replied.

"If you got a moment sir", Alfred asked.

Whatever Alfred wanted to say, he seemed to want to speak in private. Marcus nodded and followed Alfred a short distance away from Frances's ear shot.

"Fancy seeing you here Miss. Hill". Frances looked up to see Lord Waymound walking towards her. Frances didn't have strength to deal with him now, so she simply ignored him.

"Things seem to be going well for you", Lord Waymound said with a smirk.

Frances continued to ignore him.

"Tell me, How does it feel to be a, I don't know how to say it without insulting you?" he asked.

"What do you want?" asked Frances.

"What I want, I merely sort you to congratulate you. It's all thanks to me Lord Vandam is interested in you".

"What do you want?" snapped Frances.

"Don't tell me, You don't know" drolled Lord Waymound.

Frances' carriage rolled in and Antony climbed down. He narrowed his eyes seeing Lord Waymound with Frances. Antony walked towards them.

As Antony neared them, he could hear Lord Waymound say, "I challenged Lord Vandam, he could never have you even if he courted you for a year. Lord Vandam accepted the challenge telling all he needed was two weeks to make you willing in his arms. I must say, I have never been happy to lose a bet as I am now".

"You are lying", said Frances.

Lord Waymound said, "If you don't believe me, ask your Mr. Bennet, he knows too".

"Marcus would never do such a thing", spat Frances.

"Marcus ye! Believe what you want Miss. Hill" said Lord Waymound condescendingly as he left.

Frances turned to Antony and said, "He is lying, he doesn't know anything about Marcus".

Antony didn't reply, he avoided Frances' gaze. Antony knew about the bet. When Marcus took him to Nottingham for a week, Antony was suspicious. Marcus didn't go out of his way to pursue anyone. And when Antony warned Marcus to leave Frances alone, Marcus had said "And

that's what makes this all harder". It was an unsettling statement, what could make Marcus feel guilty.

So Antony did some digging around and got to know about the challenge. However, he let it pass. Marcus may have started things for the wrong reason, but he knew Marcus had fallen in love with Frances when they were in Nottingham.

Marcus followed Alfred. When they reached enough distance away from Frances and hidden from Frances' view, Alfred said, "Lady Martha requested your presence immediately at the dinner and she is displeased that you would leave".

"My mother can be displeased, she has herself to blame." replied Marcus.

Alfred looked uncomfortable and said "if I may be bold in adding, it might be unwise for the young lady's reputation as well".

Marcus let out a weary sigh and said, "I will come back once I safely see Miss. Frances off, it shouldn't take more than 10 minutes". Marcus heard horses hoof as the carriage came rolling in the drive.

Frances didn't believe Lord Waymound, even though Marcus had never said he loved her. Frances assumed he did. If Marcus didn't love her why would he propose marriage to her.

When Frances looked at Antony's reaction she knew what Lord Waymound said was true. Now it all made sense, Marcus had won the challenge, he had said "you shouldn't be here".

Frances looked at Antony and said "You knew".

It was a statement not a question. Antony didn't know what to tell.

Frances stood up, she removed Marcus' coat and handed it to Antony.

"Please thank Lord Vandam for inviting me to this party and everything else."

She walked and climbed into the carriage. Antony offered his hands to help, she declined .

“Thanks for accompanying me, it's most appreciated Mr. Bennet” with that Frances left.

Marcus came to see Frances, climb into the carriage and leave.

Frances didn't cry, she should cry, she tried but not even a single tear would come. When she saw Marcus look at her angrily, her eyes welled up with tears, but it was dry now.

Frances loved Marcus, she was his. She can never love another man. She had believed Marcus loved her, but it seems it was all an act for a bet and she was the prize.

As Lord Waymound had put it, she had willed in his arms and it had not taken Marcus even a week. She had asked him to kiss her. The first time they kissed, she had asked him to kiss.

Marcus didn't do anything without her consent, he had asked “Do you want me to stop?” and she had asked him, No! she begged him not to stop.

What Marcus had done to her was appalling, but she was equally appalled by herself. She had been a wanton.

Now to think of it, Marcus had always apologized to her, every letter he penned had “Am sorry”. He was sorry for her, sorry that he had to pretend to love her. He must have proposed to marry her because he felt sorry for her.

Suddenly the engagement ring in her fingers grew heavier, she removed it. She had to return it to Marcus, she kicked herself mentally. She should return it to Lord Vandam.

Lord Vandam shouldn't marry her because he felt sorry for her.

Chapter 21: Liverpool, England

Marcus received a letter from Frances the next morning. It read.

Lord Vandam,

Regret to inform you, I am calling off our engagement. Am also returning the engagement ring.

Yours sincerely,

Miss. Hill

Marcus knew he had blundered badly, what women would want to marry him. He had hurt Frances enough, he supposed he should be glad that she called off, but he was not.

He was dejected, the irony was killing him. He loved Frances, and he knew Frances loved him too. There could be no one for him as Frances, but he had gone and ruined any chance with her.

Frances wanted to leave London, she wanted to go home. Frances was surprised that her parents accepted that they must leave for Liverpool. She didn't tell them about calling off the engagement.

Frances grew silent and was not her usual self. Mrs.Hill was happy that her daughter finally grown up and learned the way of a lady.

George came to visit Frances, the day they arrived at Liverpool. She tried to act normal, but she was sure George knew something was amiss.

Next day George arrived with Sanah in tow. Sanah requested Mrs. Sophia, Frances stays with

them for a week because she wanted a female company as she was nearing her due.

The reason why George came with Sanah became apparent, once they got inside the carriage.

George took Frances' hands and asked, "What is wrong?".

Frances didn't know how George knew anything was wrong, even her mother didn't know.

Frances didn't cry, she didn't feel sad, the truth was she didn't feel anything. Her heart felt empty. Frances replied, "Nothing is wrong".

George didn't look convinced, "Did Van.." he started but stopped and started again "Did someone hurt you?",

Frances replied "No".

Sanah placed an arm on George's shoulder, he stopped interrogating her.

Every night Frances lay in bed trying not to think of Marcus, No he was Lord Vandam, he could never be Marcus to her. However, when she closed her eyes all she could see was Marcus. She ought to cry, she could never have Marcus in her life. But she didn't cry, no she couldn't cry.

George didn't talk about Marcus or London, but he talked about all the other things. Frances knew she had not fooled George even a bit, he knew her well and must have deduced she and Marcus had a falling out. She couldn't bring herself to tell him yet.

Antony came to visit Marcus at Brent Castle, as Marcus rarely left his study after he received Frances' letter. Antony set about packing Marcus' belongings, he pulled him on to a carriage.

Only when the carriage was rolling out of London, Marcus asked. "Where are we going?".

Antony replied, "We are going out to the seaside for a week".

Marcus didn't tell anything, he knew Antony was trying to help. He didn't know he would ever be normal, he was pining for Frances.

They travelled for three days, rain thickened as they rolled and made their journey difficult. It suited Marcus' mode.

They checked into an inn at night. Marcus had gotten drunk, the ale in the inn was bad, but anything which will make him forget the pain will do.

The next morning Marcus got up with his head pounding. He felt a bit of fresh air would do him good. He got up, dressed and headed out for a walk.

The beach was not far from the inn. He took a walk in the beach, thick black clouds were hovering over promising heavy rain. He thought of Frances and only Frances.

Marcus headed back towards the inn, when he noticed the sign board "The Slippery Snail, Liverpool"

Marcus' breath caught, Antony had brought him to Liverpool. He didn't need further explanation, Antony was trying to mend the breach. But didn't Antony realise, he would make a bad husband for Frances, he thought of all the time he hurt her. He didn't deserve her. There was no meaning in pursuing her. So he went back with every intention of packing his bag and leaving.

Marcus met Antony as he entered the inn. "Am leaving, there is nothing to do, I won't hurt Frances any further" said Marcus without preamble.

Antony said, "Ho! I didn't bring you here to meet Frances, I need your assistance with my personal business and your title will be of great help". Marcus looked at him dubiously.

Antony added, "But if you want to meet with her, I will not stop you. Her parents' house is not far from here".

True to his words, Antony left after breakfast to carry out his business. Marcus spent the better part of the morning debating whether he should go and visit Frances or not? At last he decided he would go to her house, all he wanted was to catch a glimpse of her.

As he neared though, he saw Anne. Anne was Frances in miniature, he never really appreciated how breathtakingly beautiful Frances was. He soon found himself welcomed into Frances's house The Shell cottage. Shell cottage was a small but cosy house.

Mrs. Sophia was so overcome that Marcus would travel all the way to Liverpool to meet Frances. She informed Frances is staying in Lord Kenworthy's house assisting his pregnant wife.

Marcus stopped Mrs. Sophia from summoning Frances. "No please, Frances mentioned earlier she wanted to help Mrs. Kenworthy".

Mrs. Sophia gave Lord Kenworthy's address. Mr. Harry invited Marcus to stay in Shell Cottage for his duration of stay in Liverpool. He refused saying he was travelling with a friend on business.

Judging by Frances' parents' reaction, he deduced Frances had not yet told her parents. He didn't tell his parents either. Hell! he didn't speak to his parents after that day, he had avoided them completely.

Marcus wanted to see Frances, wanted to see for himself how she was doing. He headed back to the inn to find Antony waiting for him. Antony didn't have to convince him long, they both rode to Lord Kenworthy's house unmindful of the rain.

It has been raining continuously for weeks. If this keeps on, many of the fields were in danger of flooding. George was busy planning for such an eventuality. He was in his study, when his butler came and knocked on his open door.

George without looking up asked "Yes, Miles".

"Callers for Miss. Frances, sir" replied his butler.

"I believe she is with Lady Sanah in the rose salon", replied George.

"Am aware of that sir" replied the butler.

George looked up, Miles had worked for his family for a long time from the time George was a young boy. If Miles came to him first, he better check who the caller is. George held out his hand for the card. It was Lord Vandam.

George immediately stood up and followed Miles to their living room, he was livid with anger. That vermin after hurting Frances had the audacity to come to his house.

George had many friends in London both from his time in school and college. He had written to a few trusted friends to look after Frances. After Frances arrival he had got to know how Vandam's family had insulted her in their house party.

Marcus was apprehensive, how would Frances react to his arrival? Will she punch him as she did last time, well he deserved it. There were heavy foot falls which didn't sound like Frances. It was the butler who had received him followed by a man, he could only be George.

Frances had spoken so much about George, it almost felt as though they had met before. Marcus smiled at him, but before he could say anything George punched him in the face.

Marcus was stunned, he was expecting a punch, but not from George. Before he could catch his breath, George had pulled him gruffly by his collar yelling "You bastard" and landed another punch.

Antony jumped to Marcus' aid, he tried to pull George away from Marcus. George tried to hit Antony too.

Butler joined the frenzy. Butler tried to pull Antony away from George, while Antony tried to pull George from Marcus. The four of them were rolling and knocking things.

Two women came running inside,

"What the hell?" roared a voice. "George, Miles stop it, Now!" commanded a female voice.

To Antony's amazement, they both did.

The woman commanding must be Lady Sanah, she was pregnant and her belly was huge. She was not from England, no native English woman had dark skin like her, thought Antony.

Lady Sanah turned to the butler and said "Mr. Miles, please arrange a tea tray". The butler left the room, but with a dubious expression.

She turned to Marcus, "You must be the infamous Mr. Marcus".

Marcus had eyes only for Frances. Frances on the other hand appeared nonchalant.

George bristled when Lady Sanah mentioned Marcus' name. She shot a warning look at her husband.

Turning to Marcus, Lady Sanah said, "I suppose you came to visit Frances, if Frances approves you may do so and we shall wait outside" she looked pointedly at George.

Frances said "No need to wait outside Sanah".

She turned to Marcus and curtsied deeply saying, "Lord Vandam"

Marcus winced, Frances' formal salutation hurt more than being punched. Marcus preferred punch to this cold indifference.

"Is there anything your Lordship wants to tell me?" asked Frances.

Marcus could only stare at her. She curtsied again and left the room. Marcus stood looking at her retrieving form. Antony pulled Marcus outside. It was worse than what Antony had expected.

Marcus and Antony didn't visit Frances for the next two days. Marcus was drunk the whole time, he must have drunk gallons of ale, but it still did not erase pain of seeing Frances' cold indifferent face. He had not slipped into blissful oblivion.

He had done that to her, he had hurt her. Finally he gave up the idea of getting drunk, which

didn't help him even a bit, not to mention the pain of pounding head in addition to his heart.

Marcus was determined, he would beg Frances on his knees if he had to. His life was meaningless without Frances. So Marcus left to see Frances.

It was pouring like hell was let loose. Antony insisted he accompany Marcus. Marcus didn't protest, they both left to Lord Kenworthy's house. They rode instead of taking carriage, the wheels were surely to get stuck on the muddy road.

Chapter 22: Master Kenworthy

Marcus and Antony reached Lord Kenworthy's house. A maid answered the door instead of the butler. She assured them to the living room.

Lady Sanah and Frances were sitting on a couch. Marcus walked in, Lady Sanah looked at Frances questioningly, Frances nodded. Lady Sanah motioned them to sit, they sat on the opposite couch. She requested the maid to bring them towels to dry and a tea tray.

Maid arrived with a tea tray, Lady Sanah turned to Frances and said, "Frances terribly sorry, can you please prepare the tea".

Frances nodded and set about preparing the tea. She handed Marcus his tea, she had prepared it the way he took. They were silent for a long time.

Lady Sanah was holding a paper and pencil, she viewed the clock every 10 minutes and took notes, she winced now and then.

Lady Sanah stood up and said "Excuse me". she gulped some water and walked to and fro in the room. She winced again, took her pencil and paper and took notes.

Marcus couldn't bear the silence, "Frances I need to speak to you".

Frances looked at Marcus as though waiting for him to speak. He slipped out of his couch, sat in haunches and took Frances' hands, she didn't pull her hand out, she didn't react in any way.

"Frances, please am sorry, " said Marcus.

"You have done nothing that needs an apology lord, In fact I should thank you for teaching me a valuable lesson" replied Frances.

"Frances please don't be like this, I know you are angry with me".

Marcus was cut off as Frances replied "Lord am not angry with you, I was a fool and". But Frances was cut off when Lady Sanah let out a loud painful gasp and sat down.

"Frances I think I'm going into Labour" said Lady Sanah.

Frances stood up and was on Sanah's side in an instance. "Are you sure?" Frances enquired.

"Yes, my contractions are getting closer" said Sanah pointing to the notes she was taking.

Antony marvelled at the note, Sanah has meticulously written the duration of each contraction and the intervals between each contraction in a neat table.

"We need to inform George and the physician too," said Frances.

Antony asked, "Where is Lord Kenworthy?"

Sanah's face became worried, "George left to help move the grains, the safe house will be flooded if this downpour continues for a day and he has taken all the staff with him. How are we going to inform him?".

Antony said, "Don't worry, we both will leave immediately and bring Lord Kenworthy and Physician".

Sanah gave another gasp, her dress became wet. "My water has broken".

"We will leave now," said Antony.

"No!" Sanah gasped, "One of you must stay. I can't walk".

Antony nodded to Marcus and took off.

Marcus took Lady Sanah in his arms and carried her, Frances led them both to a room which was kept ready for delivery. Sanah gave instructions to the maid to bring the delivery basket. Marcus saw the delivery basket Lady Sanah asked contained a dress which turned out to be nothing more than a night coat and pile of rags.

"Help me undress," Lady Sanah told Frances. Marcus was still holding Lady Sanah, he gently placed her on her feet.

"I shall wait outside," mumbled Marcus awkwardly.

Sanah gasped again, this time Marcus felt the contraction as she was leaning heavily on him.

"There is no place for maidenly modesty in the Labour ward, just stay" shouted Lady Sanah, as Frances fumbled with the buttons.

Sanah gasped again in pain, "Just tear it" she said through gritted teeth. They quickly changed her clothes, Marcus carried Sanah and laid her on bed.

"Can you check how much centimeter" Sanah gasped loudly "my cervix is dilated" her speech was laboured.

Both Marcus and Frances looked confusedly at her.

She spoke with exaggerated patience as though explaining one plus one equals two, "You need to check how long my uterus has opened to deliver the baby".

She explained making an O with her hand, "this is my uterus, insert two fingers and measure how big it has opened." she expanded her finger mimicking a scissor.

Marcus looked at Frances, but she looked as though she would faint of fear. Marcus squared his shoulders and bent down to check, he held up his hand. "It's just 4 centimeters".

Sanah gasps grew nearer and with greater pain. She shouted words Marcus didn't understand. Water was pouring out of her now and then, the maid was cleaning it with a rug, Sanah had

instructed the maid to inform her if she spotted any blood.

Marcus was now scared, he wondered loudly "Is this normal? why is she in so much pain, where is the physician and Antony?".

Sanah, who Marcus noticed to be bossy was down right unpleasant, she was snapping and looked as though ready to bite.

"It's supposed to hurt, you bloody" she didn't finish her sentence as she gasped with pain.

"Am just gasping now, only when i start screaming baby is ready to come out" as she said she screamed.

Sanah was breathing heavily, "Check how much it's dilated now".

Marcus checked and showed, this time he had to use three of his fingers to measure.

"It's nearing 10 cm," said Sanah.

"I should start aahhh! pushing, Vandam, I want you to help me to push aahhh! , Frances once the baby aahhh! comes out, puncture the embryonic sac, aahhh! Once out hold the baby upside aahhh! down by leg for a few seconds." She screamed with pain every few seconds as she said it.

"There will be an umbilical cord, a pipe connecting from the baby's belly button, aahhh! tie it with this thread tightly and cut it".

Sanah pushed, it was rather like the abdominal crunching exercise Marcus did. Marcus held Sanah's one hand while with his other hand he supported her shoulder, Partially carrying her as she tried to pull her body for each push.

The maid said, "I could see the head mam, just a few more pushes".

Sanah was panting, she looked exhausted but she kept pushing, Marcus marvelled Sanah. Is this how child birth was, he found new respect for women.

Pop and a gush as the baby gushed out. The baby was covered by a transparent sac, Sanah fell back in relief. Frances quickly set about carrying out Sanah's instruction.

"It's a boy," said Frances in a choked voice, she had tears in her eyes. Marcus felt something wet rolling in his eye and found he had tears too.

The boy started crying, and Frances quickly took him to the hot water tub to give him a bath.

Thankfully Antony arrived with George and the physician. George came running straight to Sanah, he was crying too. George bent down and kissed her brow.

Frances handed him the baby, he was wrapped in a white cotton cloth.

"He looks like you," said George and handed him to Sanah.

Marcus and Frances left the room, as the physician instructed Sanah to nurse the baby.

Marcus hugged Frances, they both were crying. Marcus lifted Frances' face and kissed her, he put all the emotions he couldn't express in words. Frances had been kissed by Marcus before, but this kiss humbled her. They didn't break apart for several minutes.

Marcus whispered, "I love you Frances, am sorry that I ever hurt you, I promise I will devote my life just to make you happy. Please be my wife".

"Yes", replied Frances.

Marcus smiled, but gasped "Ahaw!" as she punched him in the gut saying "But am still angry with you".

Marcus was grinning broadly, as he said "I can live with that".

When they turned, Marcus saw Antony and the enter workers of House Kenworthy staring at them. Marcus held Frances' arm and walked out. Hot bath was prepared for everyone as they were all soaked and shivering, in the case of Marcus and Frances they were dirty.

George had lent his clothes both to Marcus and Antony and invited them to stay for dinner.

Sanah was exhausted from the child birth and was confined to her bed. Sensing George's desire to stay with Sanah, Frances suggested they all had dinner with Sanah in the nursery.

The Master Kenworthy, now called Chundu, was sleeping in a crib next to Sanah. Frances already loved him.

Sanah was sitting propped with some pillows, George was sitting in the bed next to Sanah and feeding her porridge, while the rest ate in the table near the bed.

George looked at Marcus and said, "Thanks, Thanks for helping Sanah during the difficult time".

Marcus waved him off telling, "It was my pleasure helping Master Chundu".

Marcus held Frances hand.

George narrowed his eyes a little and said, "Am still upset the way you insulted Frances in your house".

Marcus said, "Am not proud of what was done, They are no longer my mistresses. I will never hurt Frances, I promise".

Frances gasped, "the ladies at my table! they were.. they were your mistress, all three of them".

Marcus said "Frances" in the most patronising way.

Smach! Marcus howled with pain, Frances had punched his nose, he clutched his nose.

He called "Frances" again, Smach! This time she had blackened his eye.

Frances stood and left the room.

Marcus stood up to follow, cursing in pain.

George said with a smirk "Don't follow her if you value your life". However, Marcus did.

"10 on Frances giving him another blackened eye" said Antony,

"20 on Frances breaking his legs" said George.

"30 on Frances blackening his eye and then kissing him" said Sanah as she lied down.

Marcus thought Sanah was most likely to win the bet as he caught up with Frances.

Epilogue

"Did she have the baby?" asked Sanah. "No not yet," said Marcus excitedly.

One would think it was their first, but Frances was giving birth to their fourth baby. His sons Antony, Elliot, Isaac (6, 4 and 2) were playing with George in the garden.

Frances wanted a girl, Marcus didn't mind at first but having three boys in a row, he was looking forward to a girl too.

Marcus wanted to move out of Brent Castle after marriage, but Frances insisted they stay with his parents. Lady Martha was cold toward them both, but Frances didn't mind, they had dinner with parents daily.

Dinner which Marcus hated became enjoyable. Lord Winston loved Frances. Frances talked and joked, Marcus caught Lady Martha smiling despite herself a few times.

The arrival of their first son Antony made more difference. They moved to the large wing as they couldn't set up a nursery in the small wing. Frances refused to be apart from Antony and insisted they set up a nursery next to their bedchamber.

No one could refuse Antony, not even Lady Martha. Frances insisted the children should join them for dinner everyday.

Lady Martha admonished the suggestion saying, "I will not take my dinner in the nursery". However, she was the first to arrive for dinner each day.

"Do you have any name planned?" enquired Sanah.

"Yes, Olivia" said Marcus.

"Shouldn't you be in with her?" asked Sanah teasingly.

Marcus had accompanied Frances during their first son Antony's delivery. When he told Frances it's alright and the baby will come soon as she lay gasping and moaning. Frances had bitten Marcus, quite literally. The same had repeated during Elliot's birth too. So Marcus decided to stay well away from the delivery ward then on.

Lady Martha came out of the delivery room and said, "it's a boy".

Marcus rushed in, Frances was nursing the baby. Marcus kissed Frances's cheeks.

She pouted and said "It's not Olivia".

Marcus laughed and said "we can call him Oliver".

She was still pouting, Marcus kissed her again.

She squared her shoulders and said "Next one will definitely be a girl".

Afterword

Thank you for giving me the most precious gift, your time. Hope you liked the book. Please leave a review, this will mean a lot to me.

Goodreads:

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/57595283-the-bet>

