



THE SEASON

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absent

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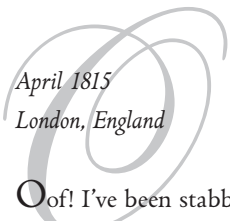
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London, England

Oof! I've been stabbed!"

The Duchess of Worthington did not look up from her needlepoint. "Perhaps that will teach you to fidget while at the hands of your dressmaker." She cast a sidelong glance in the direction of her youngest child. "Besides, I highly doubt that Madame Fernaud 'stabbed' you."

Lady Alexandra Stafford, only daughter of the Duke and Duchess of Worthington, heaved a sigh and rolled her eyes. She rubbed the spot at her waist that bore the mark of London's finest dressmaker's needle. "Perhaps not stabbed — but wounded nonetheless." Garnering no reaction from either her mother or the unflappable *modiste*, Alex slumped her shoulders and muttered, "I fail to understand why I must suffer this fitting anyway."

The duchess continued with her needlepoint. "Alexandra, there are plenty of young women who would happily assume

your position, standing on that platform, ‘suffering’ through a fitting for that dress.”

“May I suggest any one of them take my place?”

“No.”

Alex knew when she was fighting a losing battle. “I didn’t think so.”

The Duchess of Worthington had been waiting seventeen years for her daughter to be released, finally, into the social whirlwind of a London season. For the last three years, Alex’s daily lessons had been shortened to accommodate hours of ridiculous tutorials designed to make her most marketable to those unmarried men whom her mother deemed to be “good catches” — which is to say, titled, wealthy, and *thoroughly dull*.

Perfectly useful time in Alex’s days had been taken up with a rigorous schedule designed by her mother and her governess to break her of all her quirks, that is, anything about Alex that someone with a thimbleful of intelligence might find interesting. From “Poise and Posture,” a torturous half hour designed to keep Alex’s back straight and chin tilted just so, to “Proper Conversation,” a playacting session designed to help Alex understand what to say and what not to say to the various men she would be meeting over the course of her first season, to “The Subtlety of the Dance,” during which she learned the quadrille, the waltz, the cotillion . . . and any number of other dances that would give her a chance to try to “appear graceful and lovely” while practicing all she had learned about Proper Conversation, the lessons were a precious

waste of time as far as Alex was concerned. Unfortunately, she didn't imagine anything short of Napoleon's army marching straight through the drawing room of Worthington House would steer her mother from the course of marrying off her only daughter and, even then, she didn't put it past the duchess to question the Captain of the French Guard on his lineage and inheritance before surrendering.

After all, a carefully won marriage was far more important than affairs of state.

The lessons *had* taught Alex some of the rules of the London aristocracy, however. *Do*: pretend to be interested as men regale you with the boring details of horses, hunting, and themselves. *Don't*: reveal any amount of intelligence. Evidently, it scares eligible gentlemen off. Also, refrain from suggesting that there must be men who are looking for a woman who knows the difference between Greek and Latin. That particular remark sends governesses into hysterics.

Without considering the repercussions, Alex let out a deep, resigned sigh. And received a needle in the backside for it.

"Ouch!"

Madame Fernaud may have been considered the most renowned dressmaker in all of England, but Alex knew better. Clearly, the Frenchwoman was waging a quiet war against her British enemies by poking the young maidens of London to death.

This was the final fitting of the most important of Alex's new gowns — the one she would wear to her first ball

at Almack's in a little over a week's time. An appearance at Almack's was essential for any debutante. Here, London's most revered aristocrats — collectively referred to as the *ton* — were given a good look at the fresh young faces of the season. *Like livestock going to market*, Alex thought to herself, a single eyebrow rising in wry amusement as the corner of her mouth kicked up. The simile was too apt. Of course, most of the other girls who would join Alex for her coming-out had been dreaming of the moment their entire lives. Alas, there was simply no accounting for taste.

A quiet throat-clearing came from the door of the room and Alex, being careful not to move too much for fear of being skewered again, craned her head around to look at Eliza, her lady's maid.

"Excuse me, Your Grace," Eliza directed her words to the duchess while dropping into a quick curtsy. "Lady Alexandra has visitors . . . Lady Eleanor and Lady Vivian are in the downstairs sitting room."

"Thank goodness. I'm saved," Alex muttered under her breath and snapped her head around to send a pleading look at her mother. "Please? I've been standing here *forever*. The dress must be *perfect* by now."

Madame Fernaud stepped back from her work and spoke for the first time. "Perfect is right, Mademoiselle." She turned to the duchess and said, "*Et voilà*. Your Grace . . . she is a masterpiece . . . do you not think?"

Alex pounced on this statement. “A masterpiece, Mother. I rather think we shouldn’t fuss with such a tour de force, don’t you?”

The duchess, ever a perfectionist, stood and walked a slow circle around her daughter, casting a critical eye at a seam here, a detail there. After what seemed like an eternity, she raised her gaze to meet Alex’s. “You are lovely, Alexandra. You’re going to set the *ton* on its ear.”

Alex knew she’d won. Her face broke into a wide smile. “Well, with a mother like you, how could I not?”

The duchess chuckled at her daughter’s blatant flattery. “Rather excessive, Alexandra. Off with you.”

Alex clapped her hands and hopped down from the raised platform where she had been standing, throwing herself into the arms of her mother and planting a kiss on the duchess’s cheek. “Thank you, Mama!” Alex bolted for the door, tossing back a complimentary, “*Merci, Madame Fernaud!* The dress is just gorgeous! *Oui, c’est magnifique!* Thank you!”

Behind her, Her Grace spoke to no one in particular. “What am I going to do with that girl?” If Madame Fernaud hadn’t been caught up in her own indignant sputtering at the atrocious treatment her creation was suffering at the hands of Alexandra, she would have detected a hint of laughter in the duchess’s voice.