The Master and the Midwife

by every1l1ttleth1ng

Summary

Though it is far beneath his station, the young master, Leopold Fitz, insists on fetching help when his steward’s wife suddenly and dramatically goes into labour. As a consequence he meets Miss Jemma Simmons, the young and beautiful local midwife. After the event, other than stolen glances across a crowded parish church, there seems to be no possible future for their budding friendship. But when his own beloved sister, Mrs Daisy Ward, arrives unexpectedly at the Fitz family estate, heavily pregnant and seeking refuge from her harsh and disinterested husband, the young master finds a new reason to call the midwife.

The Midwife!Jemma / LandedGentry!Fitz Regency Era AU you can barely conceive (ha!) of needing…

Notes

If you’re looking for an Austen tribute, this is probably a really poor substitute! Let's just call it Austen-Lite, hey? But as well as being a tribute to Austen and to our beloved FitzSimmons
and friends, it's also a tribute to the amazing midwives and doulas I've been privileged to have encountered in my life. Be aware that there will be some scenes depicting birth but they won't get too graphic. I'll warn you at the beginning of each chapter if there's going to be anything to worry about.

Thanks for the enthusiasm that has prompted me to keep working on this. Special thanks to recoveringrabbit, my fanfic hero, who has helped me out with the overarching plotting. There should still be a surprise or two for you along the way and I hope you can forgive me when I no doubt occasionally break the Regency rules...

Thanks also to atomicsupervillainess/0cicero who has pretty much set herself up as a one-woman cheer-squad for this fic from Day One. I hope it lives up to your high hopes, dude!

And memorizingthetdigitsofpi and her magnificent mutton-chopped manips. HAWT!

Alright, recoveringrabbit says the way to conquer a massive undertaking like this is a firm publishing schedule, so here we go! Fingers crossed you can expect a new chapter of this every Friday until Christmas and probably well beyond!!!

I hope you'll enjoy what's to come! Please let me know if you do!!!
Chapter 1

It is a truth universally acknowledged that the cottage of his father’s steward at the moment said steward’s wife finds her waters breaking is an extremely awkward location for the master’s son to be. Nevertheless, that is precisely where young Leopold Fitz found himself, deeply absorbed though he was in his just-back-from-university chess match against his childhood companion and the cottage-owner’s eldest son, Lance.

Lance knew his business, having seen this process begin many times before, and without so much as knocking over the chessboard, calmly hurried the rest of the expanding Hunter brood out to the hayloft where temporary bedding had been stowed for this long-anticipated occasion. By contrast, Young Master Fitz, not nearly so prepared nor so clear-headed, did a spectacular job of knocking over the chessboard, sending knights and queens flying in every which direction. From the floor, as he scrambled to gather the fallen pieces, he watched Hunter Senior take his wife’s hand and lead her calmly away from the vegetables she’d been preparing.

“The bairns have been arriving quicker and quicker these last years, love,” Hunter murmured. “I don’t think we can be too cautious.”

In reply, Mrs Hunter, his life-long friend’s very respectable and dignified mother, let out the sort of groan that Fitz knew with a deep and utter certainty he was not supposed to overhear.

“Hunter,” the young man urged, getting to his feet. “Give me an errand. What can I do?”

“Never mind, young Master,” Hunter replied, rubbing circles over his wife’s back. “You just return to the house. We’ll be alright.”

In that moment, Mrs Hunter emitted a sound so unnatural that even the seasoned steward visibly paled.

“Please, Hunter,” Fitz insisted. “I’m standing right here and Franklin is tethered outside your own front door. I can have the curricle harnessed at a moment’s notice. Isn’t there anyone I can fetch for you?”

“Miss Simmons,” moaned the labouring woman, apparently already far further gone than she felt comfortable with. “Please George, let the young master fetch Miss Simmons.”

Fitz looked to the steward uncertainly. He’d never heard of a Miss Simmons.

“The new midwife,” Hunter explained quietly, momentarily leaving his wife’s side to usher Fitz towards the door. “She’s training with Doctor Coulson and stopping at Battlesden House with his family.” He looked the younger man in the eye. “I would regard it as a great service to my family and me if you might fetch her for Harriet.”

“Shall I bring Doctor Coulson also?” Fitz asked, glancing over his shoulder at Mrs Hunter in concern.

Another cry, clearly out-of-character for his wife judging by the husband’s frightened expression, prevented his usual restraint.

“Bring anyone you can find, lad!” Hunter cried, almost pushing Fitz out the door.

Fitz didn’t need telling twice. He leapt up onto Franklin’s back, dug in his heels and left the cottage
at a gallop. He was hallooing Mack, the groom, from quite a distance so the big man was already wheeling out the curricle by the time Fitz yanked Franklin to a halt by the stables. Jumping down to harness the gig took but a moment with Mack’s deft assistance, and in almost no time, Fitz was off again, sharply encouraging Franklin with the reins to run full pelt towards the required Miss Simmons.

The doctor’s home was within his own father’s estate so it took him no more than ten minutes before he was swinging down from the gig and hammering on Coulson’s door. A flush-faced maid opened the door with an initial look of irritation, but when she recognised the interloper as the young master himself she fell to the floor in a deep curtsey.

“Is Coulson at home?” Fitz panted. “I’m sent to fetch Miss Simmons to attend to Mrs Hunter.”

“Dr Coulson is out on call, sir,” replied the maid, keeping her gaze deferentially low. “But Miss Simmons is stopping in the cottage on the hill there,” she pointed over his shoulder.

Fitz could just make out the outline of the little dwelling against the twilight sky.

“Thank you,” he called over his shoulder, hurling himself back into the curricle and flicking the reins. “Should the doctor return, please send him directly on to the Hunters’!”

When he went to hammer on the cottage door, he found it swung wide open at his knock. “Miss Simmons?” he called. “You’re needed urgently by Mrs Hunter. I’ve been sent to fetch you.”

“I’ll be one moment,” called a voice much younger-sounding than he had anticipated. While he waited, Fitz cast his glance around the dimly lit room. His eyes widened. One every surface there appeared to be the sort of scientific paraphernalia he had only ever seen in the laboratories at school. As a passionate scientist himself, he was intrigued to imagine what use this Miss Simmons might have for her bell jars and beakers, test tubes and flasks. He almost stepped in to look more closely until a whirling dervish of dark cloak and long chestnut curls flew past him and seated itself in the curricle.

Fitz swung around, somewhat staggered by her speed, and momentarily forgot the urgency of his errand. He looked up in order to greet his passenger but instead of announcing his name, he felt his jaw drop gormlessly open.

The midwife could be no older than himself and, lord, was she beautiful.

She blinked her amber eyes pointedly at him a few times before feeling it necessary to say, “Shouldn’t we away, sir?”

Her words snapped him to attention. “Leopold Fitz,” he gave a deep bow. “At your service, Miss Simmons.”

Was it his imagination or had the goddess above him coloured slightly at his introduction? He tore his eyes away so as to swing himself into the curricle beside her.

Though he had always been quite proud of the roomy little gig with its cunning red trim, he suddenly found it impossibly confined. At every joint, his body almost touched the body of this woman by his side, and though he worked to channel his concentration into willing instructions through the reins to Franklin, his head was oddly full of her.

“Mr Fitz,” she said in quiet surprise.

Fitz had to strain over the stamping of Franklin’s hooves to hear.
“I don’t mean to sound impertinent but I’m surprised to learn that someone of your consequence has been sent out to fetch the midwife.”

The mention of his passenger’s profession suddenly reminded Fitz that he was sadly not on a social call. He slapped the reins and Franklin took off with something of a jolt. Miss Simmons was momentarily thrown into his lap but recovered her composure admirably. By contrast, Fitz was left so discombobulated that he almost drove Franklin into a hedge.

“Hunter’s son, Lance, has been my playmate since infancy,” Fitz shouted by way of explanation. “I was in the house when Mrs Hunter, err… took ill and I insisted he give me an errand.”

“Mrs Hunter isn’t ill, you realise,” she pointed out. “Childbirth is not inherently dangerous.”

“Pardon me, Miss Simmons, but you did not hear her as I did,” Fitz replied. “Hunter looked beside himself.”

Next to him, Miss Simmons shook her head. “Posterior, as I told her earlier in the week.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“The baby is in a posterior position. That means its spine is aligned with hers rather than facing outward. It’s a less ideal presentation because the baby’s head applies less pressure to the cervix. Posterior births tend to be a little more erratic, a little more intense for the mother and a little more time-consuming.”

Fitz found his head suddenly feeling a bit light. “Perhaps I’m not the one to whom you should be divulging this information?”

Miss Simmons fixed him with a look he could feel even though his eyes were on the road ahead. “I don’t think it hurts for an illustrious personage and stalwart member of the community such as yourself to be informed about the intricacies of childbirth. Why should it remain simply women’s business? You never know, sir, when you might be called upon to deliver a baby.”

Fitz looked at her askance. “I pray that will never be the case!” he cried. “And perhaps I should point out that I have never before had quite such a disconcerting conversation with anyone!”

Miss Simmons huffed her dismissal of the young master’s prudery and resolved to further educate him against his will while they were both trapped in the curricle.

Poor Franklin had never been driven so hard as Fitz went to great lengths both to provide timely assistance for Mrs Hunter and to get this uncomfortably informative midwife well out of his earshot. Yet through the barrage of disturbingly specific anatomical terminology he couldn’t help but respect the passion with which she loved her chosen profession. With each brief glance across at her, he caught Miss Simmons’ eyes aglow with fervour for mothers and infants that managed to transcend even Fitz’s squeamishness and fire his admiration.

He had wanted to make a difference with his life, had wanted to pursue science and discovery, but as the heir to Manderston House and the vast Berwickshire estate attached to it, his father had made it clear that any difference he would make would be restricted to the lives of those in his immediate community. And he supposed the same was true of Miss Simmons. He wondered if their paths would cross often in the course of their careers and then remembered how many babies he’d seen delivered. A total of zero. And that was the way he liked it.

Franklin intuitively slowed as they approached Hunter’s home and Miss Simmons alighted and disappeared through the front door of the cottage before Fitz could even make it around to help her
down. He clenched and stretched out his hand by his side, surprised by the keenness of his
disappointment at her sudden absence. Had it not been a medical emergency, he might have felt
genuinely wounded.

Fitz ambled over to the hayloft to look in on Lance playing mother-hen to his brood of young sisters.
The scene that greeted him was endearing. Lance lay on his back in the hay, snoring loudly, with the
little girls all cuddled up around him. Clearly none of them were remotely perturbed by the
momentous event occurring in their home.

Too worked-up to go back to the house, Fitz paced around the cottage garden under the bright moon
and stars. Occasionally he heard a somewhat concerning sound from within but he took heart that the
panic of earlier seemed to have abated with Miss Simmons’ arrival.

It wasn’t very much longer before a lusty cry sounded in the night, accompanied by a joyful shout
from the new father.

The door of the cottage creaked open expelling his former passenger, flush-faced and beaming.

“Mr Fitz!” she exclaimed in quiet surprise, as he emerged from behind the hedge. “You are still
here!”

Unable to put his finger on an appropriate answer, Fitz thought best to focus on the patient. “I was
concerned for the Hunters – is all well inside?”

Miss Simmons’ smile grew broader still. “A perfect baby boy,” she sighed. “I’ll leave them alone a
moment so that they can begin to get to know one another.”

“And Mrs Hunter?”

“Harriet was quite the heroine once I reassured her and helped her to change her position.”

Fitz held up both hands as if to physically shield himself from any further information.

“Don’t worry yourself, Mr Fitz,” she laughed merrily. “I won’t torment you with the details.”

He couldn’t help but laugh along with her. “For that, I assure you, I am extremely grateful. But it is
lovely to hear news of a son. My friend Lance loves his many sisters, but a baby brother will be his
pride and joy.”

“Do you have any siblings, Mr Fitz?” she asked, rubbing some warmth into her upper arms as she
adjusted to the outdoor chill.

Fitz shrugged off his jacket and walked toward her, wrapping it gallantly around her shoulders and
failing to suppress a little smile at her wide eyes as he answered her question.

“I have only the one younger sister, Daisy, of whom I am extremely fond.”

“And does she also live at Manderston House with your family?” Miss Simmons enquired, after
thanking him.

“No longer,” Fitz sighed sadly. “She married early last year and lives in London with her husband,
Mr Grantham Ward.”

Fitz was surprised to see Miss Simmons’ look of recognition and – was it distress?

“You are familiar with that gentleman?” he asked.
She shook her head emphatically, but it seemed the first wrong note since they’d met.

“Well,” she said, entirely recovering her composure, “Now that I’ve assured you that all is satisfactory, you should return to the house, Mr Fitz, and take some rest. You must be exhausted.”

“Me?” Fitz replied. “I’ve merely wandered around the garden and admired the stars. You, Miss Simmons, are the one who has been doing all the work.”

“Not at all,” she contradicted, still almost glowing with the marvel she had just witnessed. “The work has all been done by Harriet and by the God who ensured her body was fearfully and wonderfully made for just such a task as this.”

Fitz contemplated Miss Simmons’ features in the moonlight, his forest green coat draped round her shoulders and the brightness of the moon causing her amber eyes to shine. Something bloomed in his chest for which he felt utterly unprepared.

“Are you required inside for much longer?” he asked, just managing to keep his voice steady.

She shook her head. “I’ll return in the morning. All they need now is rest.”

“Then, might I drive you home, Miss Simmons? It would be no trouble.” He wondered why this simple and obvious question felt imbued with all the nerves of asking for the first dance at a ball.

She smiled warmly at him. “Thank you, Mr Fitz. That would be most kind. I’ll gather my things.”

She slipped his coat off her shoulders and returned it to him with a grateful smile as she quietly stepped back into the cottage. Fitz put it back on, conscious of the fabric retaining a subtle and tantalising fragrance.

He wandered back to where Franklin was tethered and brought the curricle around the outside of the cottage garden to the front door.

As he walked, his eyes were drawn to some activity through the cottage window and he found himself gazing at Miss Simmons holding the sleeping infant cradled in her arms. She gazed down at the tiny boy with such tenderness, lifting him to her face to place a kiss on his brow.

Though he knew his staring was impolite, he couldn’t tear his eyes away. A warmth suffused his every inch as Miss Simmons lifted her gaze to his and something intangible and inexplicable seemed to be exchanged between them through the glass. For the first time in his life, Fitz caught a glimpse of a domestic situation that delighted rather than repelled him.

He was shaken from his reverie by the rhythmic sound of bells. Turning to look, he saw a horse and cart approaching just as Miss Simmons reappeared, wrapped in her cloak and accompanied by Hunter.

“Thank you, young master,” Hunter was saying to him. “Your bringing Miss Simmons made all the difference to Mrs Hunter and my little boy. We’ll always be grateful.”

Fitz waved away his thanks, unable to convey the depth of his own gratitude for the discovery that a creature like Miss Simmons not only existed but dwelt so very close.

The cart drew up and Dr Coulson hopped down with his weighty doctor’s bag in hand. “I came as soon as I heard,” he said, looking around at the relaxed faces. “Though I knew that Jemma probably had everything under control.”
Fitz turned the word over in his mind. It suited her.

Miss Simmons gave the older man an affectionate smile. “Thank you, Dr Coulson. Mrs Hunter and her new baby boy are doing very well.”

“Another boy!” Coulson exclaimed, clapping Hunter on the shoulder. “I’m sure young Lance will be delighted.”

Fitz felt Miss Simmons’ gaze and turned to find her smiling at him in Coulson’s echo of his earlier words.

“Well, Jemma,” Coulson said. “If you’re no longer needed here, shall I take you home?”

“Oh,” she sounded disappointed. “Of course. It will save Mr Fitz the trip, though he had ever so kindly offered.”

Coulson laughed. “We can’t have the young master traipsing across Berwickshire in the middle of the night. Thank you, though, for showing such kindness to my apprentice.”

“Of course,” Fitz replied as if it were a mere trifle, though he felt utterly bereft.

He at least ensured that it was his hand that helped Miss Simmons up into Coulson’s cart, and with his fingertips he sought to memorise the softness of her skin. She looked down at him from her perch on the cart, her bright eyes full.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “It was an honour to meet you, Mr Fitz.”

“No,” he shook his head, smiling sadly. “The honour has been all mine.”

Coulson flicked the reins and his horses moved on, bearing them both away.

Hunter silently shook Fitz’s hand and returned inside to his wife and new son.

Fitz lingered a moment, watching the cart rumbling off into the distance.

In the brightness of the moonlight, he saw Miss Simmons glance back at him.

He raised a hand in farewell and then she was gone.
Miss Jemma Simmons was barely surprised when she heard the large grandfather clock chime four. She could never sleep in the hours after ushering a new little life into the world and the privilege of supporting Harriet Hunter, a veritable master in the vastly under-celebrated art of childbirth, would inspire her for many months to come.

Those moments when she carefully placed a newborn babe into the arms of its exhausted mother – when she saw first-hand the way the mother’s flagging energy revived, her eyes brightening and limbs instantaneously regaining their strength – convinced her afresh that within woman dwelt a fierce and irrepressible spirit.

She had watched woman after woman face the initial onset of labour in fear. But then, armed with only brief instruction and fortified by Jemma’s own encouragement and support, she had seen birthing mothers transformed into roaring Samsons, not destructively bringing down temples, but heroically and powerfully bringing forth new life. The honour of educating these mothers, of advocating for them and then seeing them triumphant was her lifeblood and she intended never to allow herself even a moment’s distraction from her calling.

Yet, however hard she fought to focus on the memory of the alert and already-learning eyes gazing out of the tiny Hunter lad, born into her hands, she couldn’t help picturing the keen blue eyes of her unlikely chauffeur, the sort of man no one would ever believe had hammered on her door.

Up until that moment she had only ever heard of Mr Leopold Fitz. His appearance, wealth and character were generally gushed over in polite company; his absence while at university keenly felt by those in society. But she herself was rarely in society these days. Despite years of practice, she still had absolutely no idea what to say over whist in a drawing room, though she certainly knew what not to say. She wondered if she would ever live down the unfortunate incident in which she’d unthinkingly shared a workplace anecdote so inappropriately graphic that the hostess had fainted into the punch. Since then the ladies of Berwickshire had been more or less insistent on having her attend their births but preferably not their balls. Frankly, it was a relief. Though she realised that it meant she would probably never see Mr Fitz again.

She was quite surprised then to find herself seated directly in his line of sight not five days later at morning service within the cold stone confines of the little parish church. Perhaps in anticipation of his presence, the crowd seemed significantly swelled, the eligible young ladies especially well-coiffed.

As had become her custom at Sunday services, she had begun the morning taking her place in her preferred pew and quietly perusing a hymn book. Jemma had carefully chosen the spot on that first Sunday morning after taking up residence with the Coulsons, drawn to it because of the way that the light on a clear day pierced the stained-glass and broke into shards of bright colour in her lap. Though the words of the hymns were certainly moving, this glowing display playing across the open pages preached far more eloquently to her of the God who had spoken light into darkness.

Mr Koenig was in full swing in the pulpit before she had raised her gaze, her eyelids heavy after a late night delivering twins to young Donald and Callie Gill. Callie, fitter and hardier than many of the women Jemma attended due to her daily hard work on the farm, birthed her tiny sons with focus and determination. Disinclined to see the process as anything other than an honour and a privilege, Callie spent none of the usual energy bemoaning her loss of dignity. Jemma delighted in the young woman’s willingness to move about, to change position and to vocalise, and she thoroughly enjoyed seeing the evidence of an efficient and loving partnership between the relatively new husband and
wife. Nestling the tiny boys at their mother’s breasts, and observing the glow of pride in both new parents, Jemma felt certain she was witnessing the formation of an extremely happy rural family and her heart had swelled within her.

Of course, it wasn’t quite enough to quash the spectre of that one awful night, almost two years before, that would prevent her from ever taking a healthy mother and baby for granted. Jemma briefly closed her eyes in remembrance of the awful Foundling Hospital in London and particularly that one poor girl and her worn-out and disease-ravaged body which hadn’t even looked capable of surviving the birth. But survive she did, if only for a moment, to look into the eyes of her beautiful daughter whose conception had cost her everything. In the extent of her midwifery studies, that period at the Foundling Hospital in London had given Jemma a glimpse into hell. At least she had been able to entrust that orphaned daughter into the arms of loving parents – a man and woman desperate for a child of their own that had never seemed to come.

The child in question, little Beth Coulson, distracted Jemma from her reverie by climbing into her lap and knocking the open hymn book spine-first onto the flagstone beneath with a resounding thud. Mrs Coulson glanced over apologetically as Beth nestled into Jemma’s arms and started fiddling with the ribbon-closing of the burgundy spencer jacket Jemma had donned over her muslin morning dress. The tiny girl, almost two years old, with the fingers of one hand entangled in Jemma’s ribbon and the thumb of the other in her little red mouth, gazed unwittingly at the woman who had welcomed her into what could have otherwise been a dark and malevolent world.

Jemma lent down to retrieve the fallen hymnal and on straightening, found herself starting right into those same keen blue eyes. In her surprise, the rescued volume hit the flagstones once more and Jemma, her cheeks now flushed with mortification, allowed it so to remain. When she next let herself hazard raising her eyes, Mr Fitz’s gaze was assiduously focused elsewhere and she followed his example for the remainder of the service.

In the usual melee of conversation after the formal gathering, Jemma took the opportunity to greet the Hunters and have another cuddle with their newest addition, freshly named James. She was pleased but not at all surprised to see Mrs Hunter glowing with health and vigour and to notice that Lance was loathe to hand his little bundle of baby brother over to anyone.

While they exchanged pleasantries, she heard an *ahem* over her right shoulder. Turning she found herself applied to by Mr Koenig, accompanied at some distance by a man who drew the eye of almost every woman in the vicinity.

“Miss Simmons,” Mr Koenig began. “Mr Fitz asked me to enquire if you might permit an introduction.”

Jemma glanced around at the wide eyes of their audience, barely able to school her own features. Not sure she could trust her voice, she merely curtsied her acquiescence.

Fitz stepped forward.

“Miss Simmons, allow me to present Mr Leopold Fitz of Manderston,” Mr Koenig said solemnly.

Mr Fitz bowed deep and long enough to further raise the brows of the assembled onlookers and Jemma curtsied in such a way that she hoped would convey her sense of the honour bestowed.

Once again upright, Mr Fitz gestured towards the gardens surrounding the church and Jemma was too surprised to do anything other than obediently fall in step with him.

“Well, Miss Simmons,” he began, after they had moved out of earshot of the watching congregation.
“Now that we are properly acquainted, allow me to thank you for coming so quickly to Mrs Hunter’s aid during the week.”

Jemma found her amusement quickly overcame her nerves. “Is it a common occurrence that you find your entreaties for assistance denied, Mr Fitz?”

Fitz seemed uncertain as to how to proceed so remained silent a moment longer than Jemma found comfortable. When he spoke again, his voice sounded a little unsteady.

“No, I suppose it is not common that I am denied very much at all,” he allowed, and with a quick sideward glance, she caught an expression that might have been the beginning of playfulness.

Encouraged, she continued, her teasing tone unabated. “And with such liberal license granted, if it were entirely in your power, how would you choose to spend your days?”

Another surreptitious sideward glance saw his countenance grow wistful. “I would sequester myself in my library, order a constant supply of sandwiches and tea and do nothing but read through the pile of novels I have long desired the leisure to give my full attention.”

“You are a great reader then?” Jemma asked.

“I would be,” Fitz replied with a degree of passion, if only I were left to my own devices for more than half an hour at a time.”

“And what are these novels that call to you with their siren song?” Jemma enquired. “Allow me to guess. Does the work of Sir Walter Scott feature prominently in your library? I can imagine this pile of books without even needing to see it. Rob Roy, Ivanhoe and The Lady of the Lake all await you – am I correct?”

“You are, Miss Simmons. And now allow me to ask if your familiarity with these titles comes from your having read them ahead of me, in which case I admit to a deep sense of envy,” Mr Fitz replied.

Jemma laughed heartily. “Novels, sir?” she replied. “Do you not recall the lack of leisure you were earlier bemoaning?”

“Ah,” Fitz replied. “I suppose your… profession prevents you from finding much in the way of time to read.”

“No,” Jemma shook her head. “I assure you, sir, I most certainly do find the time to read and if I find it not, I make it.”

“I see,” Mr Fitz replied, nodding in amused understanding. “Labouring under the delusion that gentlemen should read better books, you have weighed my character and found me wanting. You read to improve your mind, to better equip yourself for your daily dance with life.” He bowed his head in her direction. “However, in my pursuit of novels, you believe I waste my time on mere trifles.”

“I said nothing of the sort,” Jemma replied, only very mildly affronted by his astuteness.

“You didn’t need to, Miss Simmons,” Fitz replied. “Your tone more than adequately conveyed your feelings on the matter. You believe that only medical books and the Bible are fit for edifying consumption and everything else is rubbish.”

“I deserve neither such praise nor such censure!” cried she, while secretly acknowledging herself quite deserving of both.
“I believe we best change the subject before we reveal the depths of our disagreement,” said Fitz. “In truth I think I prefer not to know the extent to which my admission has caused me to fall in your estimation.”

Instead, he went on to enquire as to the health of her parents.

Though quite used to such polite questions, Jemma was as yet unable to answer them without some small degree of pain. “My father sadly passed away not five years ago,” she replied. “And I never knew my mother. She died giving birth to me.”

Mr Fitz struggled to compose his features, so appalled was he at innocently stumbling across such sadness. “I am terribly sorry,” he said, and fell silent.

“It is little wonder then, that I have committed my own life to the care of birthing women,” she continued, with as much cheerfulness as she could feign. “And I am not quite alone in the world, you know. Before coming to the Coulsons’ I have lived all my life with two extraordinary aunts who, with no children of their own, devoted themselves to my care.”

Mr Fitz managed a polite nod but no more.

“And your parents?” Jemma asked in return. “Are they in good health?”

“I will be better able to answer you in a week or two when they make their return from Bath,” Mr Fitz replied. “They are there to take the air and enjoy the more varied society.”

“And do they find that it suits them?” Jemma asked.

“I suppose that it must suit them,” said he, “given that they spend the larger portion of every year there and only ever a few weeks at Manderston.”

Jemma smiled. “And do you find that their frequent absence suits you?”

Mr Fitz paused thoughtfully before speaking and Jemma could hear his own smile in his reply.

“Yes,” he replied eventually. “Yes, I rather think it does.”

By this point, their turn around the church-yard had brought them back to where the Hunter clan was just preparing to walk in the direction of home. Fitz joined them, bowing to take his leave of her.

Jemma farewelled them all, Harriet most fondly, briefly reminding her of their pre arranged appointment at the Hunters’ cottage the following morning.

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Later, over their usual Sunday lunch at Battlesden House, some pointed remarks were made about the honour paid to her by Mr Fitz after the service.

Jemma laughed, casting her eyes heavenwards. “Don’t insinuate anything untoward now, Audrey,” she scolded mildly. “As Philip will attest, like others of his status, obsessed with observing social custom, Mr Fitz was merely priggishly ensuring the propriety of our acquaintance. Now, if he is seen to exchange a word with me in the street, the entire parish must believe our relationship was conducted entirely correctly and never suspect that we met alone under the cover of darkness, as is the scandalous truth.”

Dr Coulson shook his head. “Jemma, do give the man some credit. I have never detected even a hint
of priggishness in Mr Fitz. His parents, however, have had their moments.”

“Really?” Jemma asked, intrigued. “What are they like?”

Philip sat back in his chair a moment to think. “Mr Calvin and Mrs Jiaying Fitz,” he mused. “How does one describe them?” He looked to Audrey for help.

“They are very grand,” she supplied. “And very fashionable. They make quite the handsome couple.”

“They sound like they’d please Aunt Victoria,” Jemma observed. “But perhaps they’d disgust Aunt Melinda.”

“Oh no,” Audrey shook her head. “I believe both your aunts would be quick to approve of them. They are both very learned and intelligent.” She cocked her head to one side as if carefully choosing her words. “And the four of them share a certain…”

“Eccentricity?” Jemma supplied. “You should feel no hesitation in describing my aunts as eccentric, Audrey. Do not forget, I have lived with them both almost all of my life.”

“And yet, behold,” Audrey replied, gesturing to Jemma with a theatrical air, “they have raised such a perfectly ordinary young lady who delights in simply doing exactly what everyone expects of her.”

Jemma laughed heartily along with her friend.

“You might meet the owners of Manderston soon,” Philip observed when the ladies had recovered their composure. “They’ve long been in the habit of holding a ball about this time of year on their brief return from Bath.”

“Who manages the estate in their absence?” Jemma enquired.

“From now on it will be the young master, of course,” Audrey replied. “But while he’s been away at university, it fell to Mr Hunter, Mr Fitz Senior’s steward.”

“Well, that explains it, I suppose,” Jemma sighed.

“Explains what?” Philip asked.

“His desperate need to do things properly,” Jemma said. “I suppose one can’t be caught in impropriety if one is master of the estate.”

“Perhaps. But don’t be too quick to judge, Jemma. I don’t believe young Mr Fitz cares any more for tedious social mores than you do.”

Jemma scoffed and passed him the potatoes. “Well, how else would you explain that unnecessary display this morning?” she asked.

Coulson and his wife exchanged a significant glance which Jemma could not fail to observe.

She gave an exasperated sigh. “Oh, heavens!” she exclaimed. “Please do refrain from marrying me off to the future master of Manderston! I have neither the time nor the inclination for that sort of silliness!”

“What, pray, is your objection to the gentleman?” Audrey enquired. “He’s certainly rich enough and well-admired by all. Do you not find him handsome?”
“Of course I find him handsome,” Jemma laughed. “Everyone finds him handsome! And that is just as well, for he has before him a lifetime of trying to make happy every last tenant in the parish. And, if he’s lucky, perhaps he might find an hour or two every now and then to hide in his handsome self away in his library and read novels.”

“Ahh,” Audrey nodded knowingly. “So that is your objection to him. He admitted to a penchant for novels.”

Jemma set to vigorous carving of her meat. “Why should I object to him at all?” she asked. “Mr Fitz can do whatever he pleases. I’ll likely never see him again.”

Audrey and Philip exchanged glances once more.

“Yes,” Philip replied, smiling into his dinner. “Very likely.”
Mr Leopold Fitz, mounted on his horse, remained partially concealed under the cover of sparse woodland separating the steward’s cottage from the extensive park that surrounded Manderston House. From this same vantage point he had earlier watched Miss Simmons arrive for her visit to Harriet Hunter, yet had not quite managed to find the courage to approach. Now he waited, desperately hoping he remained undetected, and summoned the courage that had earlier failed him for a second attempt.

He wanted to put his hesitation down to a lack of proper rest. Without regard for his exhaustion, the bright moon had continued to shine through the windows of his bedchamber six sleepless nights in a row while, for the first time in his life, Fitz found himself sentimental about sharing its reflected light with another.

But how was he supposed to sleep? He’d met plenty of pretty girls in drawing rooms and at balls but not a single one of them had offered more for discussion than lace, parasols and the latest inane antics of the local militia. He’d supposed, somewhere in the back of his mind, that one day he’d have to make one of them an offer and so begin a serene partnership that would satisfy his parents and the village. His own satisfaction had never really come into the equation.

But even in his brief encounters with Miss Simmons, a woman with so much spirit she practically blazed like a comet, he had become awakened to a new realm of possibilities. He couldn’t say he naturally warmed to her chosen topics of conversation but at least they concerned life and God and care of one’s fellow man and thus were imbued with an earthy gravitas that made him hunger for more of her.

Yet he barely even knew who she was. He knew exactly what his mother would want to know. Who had her parents been? Who were these extraordinary aunts? What were her connexions? What were her accomplishments?

The tiniest living and breathing member of the Hunter household, plus no doubt many other thriving local infants and their mothers, would be better proof of accomplishment than any painted table or netted purse, Fitz felt sure. And yet he didn’t quite think his mother would share his conviction.

He’d never before heard of a lady from good family having a profession. On top of that, it seemed she was living alone, even if she was under the auspices of Dr. Coulson. His mother would find it horrifying. So Fitz just had to make the most of his opportunities while they were absent.

At last the front door opened and Miss Simmons appeared, waving her farewell to Harriet and baby James. He watched with some interest and no small amount of admiration as she deftly mounted her bay mare, completely unassisted, and set off at a trot.

He waited until the cottage door closed and then dug his heels into Franklin’s flanks to catch up with her.

“Miss Simmons,” he called as he approached, noting with some gratification her obvious surprise. “A fine morning!”

“It is indeed, Mr Fitz,” she replied, pulling on her horse’s reins to allow him to draw level. “Though I
am very surprised to see you again so soon. I’ve just been paying a visit to Harriet Hunter, and little James, to ensure that all is well."

“I hope you found them both in good health,” he said, slightly trepidatious as to the detail of her reply.

“I thank you, yes,” she replied, smiling broadly. “They are both in excellent health.”

“Wonderful,” said he, relieved to find her response both positive and free from specifics. “And are you heading in the direction of Battlesden House? If you have no objection, perhaps I might accompany you.”

Miss Simmons contemplated him thoughtfully a moment before agreeing.

“That would be most kind,” she nodded. “And I wonder if, as we ride, you might tell me about your university studies. I’m particularly intrigued by the sciences myself. Has that been an area of interest for you?”

Fitz knew that by now he should no longer find himself astonished by Miss Simmons, but astonished he was. He’d met many a “well-educated” young lady, if one could be satisfied with merely a smattering of French, some pretty skill with a pencil and the ability to wow the room on the pianoforte.

“Yes, it has,” Fitz replied eagerly. “And I’m very grateful that you so kindly provide me with an opportunity to redeem myself after revealing such shocking intellectual and moral weakness yesterday.”

She tried to compose her features and look stern. “You do realise, Mr Fitz, that it may take some considerable effort on your part.”

Detecting her playfulness, Fitz bowed obsequiously before responding. “Well, Miss Simmons, I hope to start rebuilding your shattered impression of me by telling you that Science has been the major focus of my studies. I’ve taken every single class made available to me. My friend Triplett, who perhaps someday soon you shall meet, teases me mercilessly about my obsession with the Sciences. He studies Theology and likes to playfully suggest that God and Science are at odds.”

Jemma nodded sympathetically. “I can well imagine why he might try to provoke you. My aunts enjoy nothing more than to read me a vexing article on how some scientific controversy or other might threaten to disprove the existence of God and watch my complexion grow redder and redder as I argue against it.”

Fitz looked delighted. “Oh, I am so pleased to learn that I am not the only one whose patience is constantly tried by such balderdash. Triplett vexes me exceedingly but I know it is only because he enjoys plaguing me.”

“I hope I shall meet him then,” Jemma exclaimed. “It sounds as though he thoroughly needs putting in his place.”

“And I shall be delighted to provide you with a cheering audience as you do so,” Fitz laughed. “I’ve attended enough scientific presentations to know how it is done. Though I’ve learned to be suspicious of those charlatan Professors of Natural Philosophy that keep the crowds pouring into the Royal Institute. They’re performing what amounts to little more than magic shows.”

“However,” Miss Simmons countered, “while some might suggest that those conjurers are merely deceptive manipulators, one could argue that their demonstrations help to move forward scientific
exploration. It is certainly true, is it not, that they feed the public’s fascination for scientific pursuits?”

“I – I suppose,” Fitz stammered.

“Take the use of nitrous oxide for example,” she went on. “It was first demonstrated to the public in one of the very public lectures at which you scoff. Soon, many of these so-called “conjurers” incorporated a laughing gas performance into their act. But it was during one of those performances that an audience member, who happened to be a dentist, finally imagined an actual medical use for nitrous oxide. The very next day he performed the first painless tooth extraction with the use of the gas. If not for the inventiveness of these conjurers, the true power of nitrous oxide might never have been discovered. That has ramifications for my field as well, you understand.”

Fitz held up a hand. “I’m sure you are about to reveal all sorts of mysterious and wondrous potential uses for nitrous oxide in your profession, Miss Simmons,” he complained. “But if it’s all the same to you, I’d rather not…”

“Oh, never fear, Mr Fitz,” Jemma interrupted with a musical laugh. “I understand that you have reached your fill of intelligence regarding midwifery and childbirth. Let it suffice to simply say, there could well be a valuable place for nitrous oxide in my work.”

Fitz found himself laughing too. “I greatly appreciate your restraint, Miss Simmons.”

“I am grateful for the possibility, however it arose,” she continued somewhat reproachfully. “One can only imagine what other innovations of science and industry would have lay untouched or unmoved, if it were not for those charlatans as you call them.”

“Oh, but Miss Simmons!” Fitz cried with feeling. “The showmanship, the theatrics! There’s no need for it in the pure discipline of science. Doesn’t it drive you quite mad?”

Miss Simmons sighed. “I assume that it certainly would,” she replied, “were I and others of my sex permitted to attend.”

“Oh,” he replied sheepishly. “Of course. Forgive me.”

They rode side-by-side in silence for some distance until Fitz remembered something he knew would please her.

“Do you have any interest in astronomy?” he asked, somehow already certain that she did.

“Oh, yes,” Miss Simmons replied readily. “Haven’t William and John Herschel been making magnificent contributions to our comprehension of the heavens?”

He relished her well-informed and ready understanding. “Not only William and John,” he replied, causing her to turn her head toward him in interest. “Did you realise that William’s younger sister, Caroline, is also an astronomer and a mathematician?”

Miss Simmons observed him keenly, her bright eyes infusing him with enthusiasm for his subject.

He nodded eagerly. “She has discovered three nebulae and eight comets. The Prince Regent awarded her a salary of fifty pounds a year and she has begun cross-referencing and correcting the star catalogue developed by John Flamsteed, the first Astronomer Royal. It has been suggested that Caroline Herschel may even be extended membership to the Royal Society and the Royal Irish Academy.”

“Well, thank you, Mr Fitz,” Jemma replied sincerely. “I am thrilled to learn that information, both for
the advancement of science and the inherent advancement of womankind. It will come as no surprise to you, I am sure, that I yearn for the day when a woman’s intellectual contribution might be valued as much as a man’s.”

“Well,” Fitz replied, “let us pray that Caroline Herschel blazes a trail for many other women to follow.”

“Yes,” replied Miss Simmons with an intensity of feeling. “Let us pray that indeed.”

“You would like to see women afforded better educational opportunities would you not?” Fitz enquired, hoping to see more of this passion flashing behind her eyes.

He was not to be disappointed. “Oh, that every woman would have the opportunities that I have had and many more!” Jemma sighed. “Attending university has long been a dream of mine, but thankfully, in the absence of such a prospect, my father and my aunts acquired for me a wonderful governess, Miss Anne Weaver, and a range of tutors who sought to ensure that my education spanned as many facets as possible of a university education. In some ways, I suppose, some of them were disappointed when I grew tired of the merely theoretical and longed to apply my understanding in practical ways, by means within my reach.”

“Is this how you came into midwifery?”

She nodded, reaching forward to stroke the mane of her horse. “When I realised I had knowledge that could actually save lives, knowledge that could possibly have saved the life of my own mother, and that there was no objection based on my sex to prevent me from sharing it, I seized my chance with both hands. Initially I worked alongside midwives in London, observing and assisting wherever I could be useful. After the confidence I gained from those experiences and with the blessing of those who had trained me I attended more than a few births on my own. Then my aunts thought of Dr Coulson, with whom they had a prior connection, and we applied to him for the final stage of my apprenticeship as we like to call it.”

Battlesden House grew visible as the horses crested the hill and Fitz felt the pang of soon having to be parted from her once more.

“Is it proving to be a satisfactory arrangement?” he enquired as they steered their horses in the direction of her little home.

“More than satisfactory,” Jemma replied warmly. “It is a great privilege to serve the women of the community alongside him.”

“And do you enjoy living in the cottage?”

Jemma smiled. “Do I enjoy living alone, you mean? In such scandalous independence?”

“I ask you to remember, Miss Simmons, that those are your words, not mine,” laughed Fitz and she looked back at him in pleased surprise as she guided her mare towards the little house in question.

“I do enjoy it,” she replied emphatically. “Very much. I have grown quite selfish, you know, and I jealously guard my freedom. I doubt I shall ever be persuaded to share my living arrangements again.”

Fitz coloured slightly as he dismounted and walked around to offer her his hand, thoughtfully stroking the muzzle of her horse on the way. Though he knew full well that she didn’t need him to, that she possibly even resented his rigid observance of custom, she allowed him to assist her down from her horse.
As her feet touched the ground, her dainty hand in his and her form so close it was almost an embrace, words began dangerously forming themselves together in the turbulent swirling of his mind.

*You shall feel differently when you come to marry, I hope.*

But he couldn’t allow himself to say those words out loud, not when he knew they would fly out of him like a stopper and release the full torrent of emotion that he was only just realising this mysterious woman inspired in him.

As yet he had no idea of the depth of his own regard, let alone if the lady returned his keen interest. He had seen no symptom of particular interest, but then, he’d had no opportunity to observe her in a social situation conducive to learning such information - information that suddenly seemed deeply critical to his future happiness.

For fear of divulging too much, he found himself quite unable to speak, not even to bid her a polite *good-day*. He had never been more thankful for the conventional bow that allowed him to convey all that was proper and courteous and yet be back on his horse and away before Miss Simmons could pay any heed to the clench of his jaw or the mist of feeling in his eyes.

Jemma watched him gallop into the distance until she heard her name being called from somewhere behind her.

“What on earth did you do to Mr Fitz?” Audrey asked as she and little Beth slowly made their way up the hill towards her, the little girl stopping to observe every rock, flower and blade of grass along the way.

“I don’t know,” Jemma replied cheerily, though internally she nursed her suspicions. “He must have found himself late for some appointment or other.”

“Or perhaps he is rushing off to read one of his novels,” Audrey observed drily.

“I dare say he is,” Jemma agreed, rushing forwards to gather Beth up into her arms. “And what has little Miss Beth been up to this morning?” she asked.

“Picking yawbies,” the little girl replied, forcing Jemma to look to her mother for translation.

Audrey turned over one of Beth’s chubby little palms to show Jemma the sticky red strawberry stains between her stumpy fingers.

“Ahh,” Jemma nodded. “I see. Delicious!”

“*Dish-us!*” echoed Beth wriggling herself out of Jemma’s grasp and returning to her detailed exploration of the ground beneath her feet.

“So much for your never seeing him again,” Audrey continued, returning to the one subject Jemma sincerely wished she could move on from.

“Yes,” she sighed. “My previous experience has led me to expect illustrious personages like Mr Fitz to keep to his hunting parties and card tables, not to keep cropping up all over the village. I shan’t declare myself unlikely to see him again. I’ve quite learnt my lesson. Now that he’s returned from university, I shall just have to prepare myself to encounter him *everywhere*.”

“And shall you mind these encounters?” Audrey enquired playfully.
“Not at all,” Jemma replied airily. “So long as he doesn’t try and interfere with any of my birthing mothers, I shall meet him wherever he might pop up with perfect equanimity.”

“I’m not entirely sure that the same can be said for him,” Audrey replied. “He paid you another great honour accompanying you home like that.”

Jemma fixed her eyes on the wandering toddler and kept her tone light. “Perhaps he has just returned from university with a sort of chivalric bent, determined to allow no lady to travel alone in or around his estate.”

“Perhaps,” Audrey laughed. “But tell me, how did you find dear Harriet?”

Jemma had rarely been so relieved by a change of topic. She expounded the delights of sweet baby James and the health of his mother with a forceful enthusiasm that was not lost on her perceptive neighbour.

Chapter End Notes

Dudes, I am SO pleased that some of you have found your way back to this and that you’re liking it! I am resolved! New chapters every Monday and Friday! Yiiiiiiiiiiiiikes!

And as for the sciencing in this chapter, it is legit! I researched and everything! If you don’t believe me, here are my sources. Of course, I only looked at these websites and they could be dodgy. I didn't, like, leave the house and go to the library or anything. Research-lite.
http://www.reginascott.com/astronomy.html

Anyway, I SO hope you’re enjoying this!!! Please let me know if you are!!!
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Babies are born, suites are instigated, glances exchanged and evening activities anticipated...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Despite Jemma’s stated expectation of encountering Mr Fitz everywhere, he proved entirely elusive for the remainder of the week. He wasn’t even present at morning service the following Sunday.

However, the dying days of summer were upon them and in her capacity as midwife, Miss Simmons was so often occupied that she could barely spare the time for more than a fleeting contemplation of those keen blue eyes or a brief recollection of sparkling repartee.

So busy was she, that Jemma had been required to engage the services of Barbara Morse, an extremely capable local doula, to assist in managing her caseload. Between the pair of them, with the occasional assistance of Dr. Coulson, they somehow safely delivered eight babies in the space of a fortnight and efficiently and compassionately cared for their mothers.

One of these births, following hard upon another, had taken place inside an encampment of the local militia. It was not an ideal location for the wife of the highly esteemed General Talbot, to be labouring.

Poor Mrs Talbot, a woman of a highly anxious disposition, had not been at all happy about giving birth in a military tent but had equally refused to allow herself to be moved. Miss Simmons and Miss Morse had exchanged exasperated glances and then settled in to do what they could for her.

In the absence of the woman’s husband, Jemma had called for the assistance of the nearest man in a red coat and after he diligently cleared the area and solicitously enquired one too many times after the needs of the attending midwife and doula, she sent him off to inform General Talbot of the development.

Despite Jemma’s encouragement, Mrs Talbot refused to budge at all and, though she also refused to vocalise during contractions, she was extremely vocal in expressing her outrage at Barbara’s demonstration of some alternative and more conducive labouring positions. Worried that their patient would entirely wear herself out in her exclamations of horror, Jemma attempted to help her gain control of her breathing, if only to earn them some peace and quiet. The worst of it was the very apparent fact that Mrs Talbot was at such a high level of emotional upset that did not at all correlate with her early stage of labour. The midwife and doula sighed and settled themselves in for a long and difficult day ahead.

Nevertheless, despite early appearances, once she was able to calm her breathing and take in some of her attendants’ measured instruction and encouragement, Mrs Talbot far exceeded all of Miss Simmons’ and Miss Morse’s expectations. After eight hours of highly efficient labouring, Mrs Talbot gave a triumphant shout and slumped against Miss Morse’s shoulder in relief. Jemma held up for her her beautiful dark-haired son and the three women laughed together at the vigorous wail that
awakened the boy’s little lungs to the atmosphere.

As soon as the lusty cry sounded, the tent entrance burst open and in rushed General Talbot, all his masterful command reduced to teary emotion at the sight of his little son nuzzling at the breast of his beaming wife.

Miss Simmons and Miss Morse momentarily took their leave of the new parents and stepped blinking out into the late afternoon sun. The overly-considerate soldier from earlier in the day immediately appeared and greeted them, enquiring repeatedly as to the health of the mother and baby, and officiously offering his assistance with anything the midwife and doula might care to name.

“Thank you, sir,” said Jemma. “You have been most kind.”

“Jasper Sitwell at your service,” he announced with an ostentatious bow.

“Miss Barbara Morse and Miss Jemma Simmons at yours,” Jemma replied, unable to repress a tired laugh, until she saw something that looked like offence flit across the young soldier’s face.

“Forgive us, sir,” Miss Morse interceded. “Miss Simmons and I have had a long and eventful day and a long and eventful night preceding it. We are both quite silly with exhaustion.”

Young Sitwell nodded his understanding and after extracting a solemn promise that they would not move from the ground on which they stood, he rushed off, assuring them he’d imminently return with some refreshment.

Miss Morse and Miss Simmons collapsed into giggles and sprawled in a most undignified manner upon the grass precisely where Sitwell could expect to find them.

Before long, Mr Sitwell returned, ordering about a long-suffering manservant who was impressively balancing two cups of tea and a plateful of small cakes he had gathered from the officers’ mess. The two women fell voraciously upon the repast, thanking the embarrassed manservant profusely and repeatedly for coming to their aid. Mr Sitwell’s face coloured almost to the point of matching his military coat and he removed himself a number of paces in order to recover his composure.

Once refreshed, Miss Simmons farewelled Miss Morse, who went to enquire after the mother and baby they’d attended during the night, and returned once more to Mrs Talbot’s side.

She swaddled the tiny boy and handed him into the arms of his emotional father. She then saw to the needs of the mother who was still fuelled by those powerful birthing hormones for which Jemma had come to have a deep and abiding respect. Mrs Talbot, like many of the new mothers Jemma had had the privilege to know, looked to be one of those women who would be transformed by the life-shaping experience of giving birth. There was a new fire of achievement and satisfaction in her eyes that sat behind the patent adoration for her baby boy. Jemma liked to imagine that Mrs Talbot would go on to be a formidable lioness of a mother. Confident that mother and baby would be perfectly healthy until she was able to visit the following day, she took her leave of the Talbots, kissing the little forehead and wishing the boy well.

Emerging once more into the open, she was immediately accosted by Mr Sitwell who would brook no opposition to his intended plan to accompany her home.

Stopping just short in her refusals of actually insulting the self-important young man, she sighed her agreement and reluctantly allowed him to help her in mounting her horse.

The journey towards Battlesden could not possibly have been more different to the pleasant journey she’d experienced almost a fortnight earlier with Mr Fitz.
Mr Sitwell clearly fancied himself a scintillating conversationalist. He chattered on about any and every topic, imagining himself the authority on any subject she managed to get a word in to name.

After not very long, Miss Simmons resigned herself to pretty silence, which suited her quite well in her state of exhaustion. She did not at all struggle to provide the hums and exclamations that Mr Sitwell required of her to punctuate his eclectic monologue but by the end of the journey she was thankful for her assurance that he’d never have thought to ask for her opinion on any of his canvassed topics. She had not taken in a single word he’d said.

Unlike Mr Fitz, Mr Sitwell did not leap onto his horse and gallop off into the horizon the moment he’d helped her to the ground. Instead, he hovered awkwardly, as if hoping for an invitation inside, which she most certainly was not going to provide.

At last she was forced to be blunt.

“I am terribly sorry, Mr Sitwell, you must allow me to excuse myself. There are another three babies due at any moment and if I do not take this opportunity to rest, I may find myself working through another sleepless night.” She turned away to enter her cottage.

“You must yearn for the day when you will welcome your own precious babes into the world,” Mr Sitwell replied, clearly unwilling to accommodate her obvious attempt to take her leave.

“No, sir,” she replied seriously, turning to look him directly in the eye. “I have devoted myself to the care of women in childbirth. I have no intention of ever marrying or having children of my own.”

Mr Sitwell was clearly incensed. “Miss Simmons!” he cried. “You cannot be serious. What is a woman if not a wife and a mother? It is what you have been made for!”

Jemma met his eye as coolly as she could manage. She did not for a moment believe that Mr Sitwell actually wanted to hear her opinion and so she remained silent.

“Perhaps it is that your modesty precludes you from imagining you will ever have an offer of marriage made to you,” he went on, suddenly smiling in what he obviously believed was comprehension of the truth.

Too exhausted to engage with such ostensible stupidity, Jemma merely inclined her head and silently wished he would take his leave of her at last.

“Well,” he said with a self-satisfied smirk. “You may find yourself quite pleasantly surprised.”

“Perhaps,” Jemma replied, envisioning the sort of surprise in which the ground miraculously opened up and swallowed him, redcoat and all, “But it does not necessarily follow that I will find myself persuaded. Now, good evening, Mr Sitwell.”

“Good evening, Miss Simmons,” he replied, still smiling, and waggled his fingers in an unbecoming sort of a wave.

Even after she’d closed and bolted the door behind her she could see him hovering for some moments outside. When finally she heard the jangle of reins and the rhythmic crunching of horse’s hooves on the pebble drive, she allowed herself to exhale.

She hoped never to be required to exchange words with Mr Sitwell again.
By Saturday evening, Jemma had mediated between womb and breast for two of the three imminently anticipated babes. She had then risen with the sun and spent the early morning assisting a harried mother of seven nursing her newest infant. Consequently, Jemma arrived late to church and collapsed, exhausted, into the very last pew. Around her were assembled those who preferred not to have attention drawn to themselves, either before or after the service, perhaps because of their shabbier clothes or the lean angles of their children’s faces.

Despite the fact that her critical faculties were low, Jemma’s eye couldn’t help but be drawn by a lengthy peacock feather extending from the very front pew almost up into the spire of the church. Exceeding the height of headwear worn by any other female in the building, the young and exceedingly glamorous woman seated under it seemed to survey the congregation with a disapproving eye.

Mr Koenig was in full-flight exegeting the early verses of the second chapter of The Epistle of James. The irony was not lost on Miss Simmons.

To the left of the glamorous young lady sat an extremely dashing gentleman who, unlike his companion, seemed to look out at the world with an easy confidence and a readiness to be pleased. By the side of this gentleman, another tall and handsome man filled the pew, giving off a distinct air of boredom. The anxious glances cast at this uninterested fellow by the extremely pretty dark-haired lady close beside him led Jemma to deduce that perhaps they were husband and wife.

A tall farmer on the pew directly in front of Jemma leaned forward a moment to whisper to the child playing between his feet and suddenly revealed the three people seated to the right of the glamorous hat, slightly in its shade. As if he had been scanning the crowd for her, Mr Fitz’s blue eyes immediately lighted on her and his whole countenance brightened in recognition. For a moment she feared he might even throw up his hand in ill-advised mid-sermon acknowledgement.

Beside him and to his right, presided a couple that Jemma instantly understood to be Mr Fitz’s parents. Audrey’s assessment of them as being very grand, very fashionable and very handsome didn’t quite seem to do them justice. However, when she noticed that Mr Fitz Senior, though remaining impressively upright, had begun to gently snore, some of her initial intimidation faded away. Spotting the sharp elbow to his ribs applied by his mortified wife made them seem even less imposing. In fact, she decided, she felt quite inclined to like them, at least from a distance.

The minute the service drew to a close, the splendid visitors were first to their feet. From their vantage point behind the pulpit, facing the rest of the congregation, they were able to enjoy the full attention of their fellow worshippers as they strode up the centre aisle behind Mr Koenig and, after cursorily shaking his hand, out through the large oak doors. Mr Fitz followed alone behind the three couples that made up the rest of his party and cast a fleeting glance at her over the clergyman’s ample shoulder before he disappeared into the open air.

…

Given that the days were growing shorter and the end of summer was drawing nigh, Mrs Coulson proposed they abandon their usual Sunday Roast in favour of a picnic in the garden. Beth quickly established herself as the luncheon fairy and insisted that her devoted adherents were only permitted to eat provided that hers were the hands that fetched the fare from the depths of the now utterly jumbled picnic basket. Because the grass beneath them was soft, the sky so very blue and the light summer breeze so delicious, her parents felt inclined to indulge her.

Jemma dozed in the shade of the giant oak under which they sat, silently giving thanks for all of her many blessings - so many healthy newborns, such blessed independence, such a deep sense of calling and valued contribution.
She glanced over at Philip and Audrey who whispered and laughed together as they watched their little daughter arranging a trail of grapes across the rug. Domestic felicity, she knew, was hard to come by and, in this mortal realm, often fleeting. But rare couples like the Coulsons, whose esteem and respect for one another ran so very deep, did make matrimony appear attractive, provided one could be as fortunate in finding the right partner. She added to her prayers an entreaty that all those of her acquaintance who were married could have the same happiness as her dear friends.

The sound of a rider approaching caused Jemma to prop herself up on one elbow, watching with interest as Philip stood to accept the proffered letter.

“Well, my dears,” said he, after carefully tearing open the seal. “Just as I predicted. We have received an invitation to a ball.”

“Audrey, I do not recall Philip predicting any such thing, do you?” Jemma teased, watching the flanks of the horse as it disappeared over the hill.

“Well, he was up all night again poking about in his pigeon entrails,” Audrey replied, smirking. “It’s really quite off-putting.”

“You ladies might like to pause your merriment for one brief moment to learn from whom this honour is bestowed,” said Philip pointedly.

“Let me guess,” Audrey replied. “And it is a mere guess, mind you. Augury has never been for me.” She tapped a finger thoughtfully against her pursed lips. “The regiment?”

Coulson shook his head. “Not on this occasion.”

“My aunts?” Jemma offered, covering her mouth to hide a yawn. “They’ve been threatening to throw a ball for at least a decade now.”

“Not your aunts,” Coulson replied, “Though I imagine this ball won’t be less grand than anything Victoria would dream up.”

“Do tell us, Philip,” Audrey sighed. “Can’t you see that Jemma is in very great danger of swooning with the suspense?”

“As well she might” Philip declared playfully as Jemma collapsed back onto the ground with a groan, interlacing her fingers behind her head, “for her name features just as prominently on the invitation as does ours, my dear. I dare say, Miss Simmons, it is just as well that you are already reclining.”

“Philip,” Jemma cried exasperatedly, raising her head from its resting place. “Please tell me what you are obviously determined to divulge so that I might at last get back to my nap! As you well know, I’ve barely slept these last three weeks together!”

Before Coulson could make his announcement, Audrey snaked her hand around her husband’s neck and plucked the card from his grasp, dancing away with it.

She scanned the text and fixed Jemma with a pointed look.

“It is well that you prepared yourself for more sightings of that dashing young Mr Fitz, my dear Miss Simmons,” Audrey declared. “For come Thursday evening, we shall all be trussed up in our finery and heading to Manderston House to dance late into the night.”

Jemma made a show of counting on her fingers. “There’s a good chance the McLaughlin baby will
come that evening,” she said. “I may yet escape it.”

“Escape? How could you, Miss Simmons?” cried Audrey, playfully reproachful. “You cannot so callously leave Mr Fitz pining without a dance partner!”

“I dare say he shall have no shortage of willing dance partners,” Jemma retorted. “And given that my absence will almost certainly go unnoticed, even if there isn’t a birth, I might just stay home in the quiet and catch up on my rest.”

Audrey raised a quizzical eyebrow. “My dear,” she said firmly, though her smile was sweet. “You shall do nothing of the sort.”

“And what would you have me do?” Jemma enquired archly. “Dance four times in a row with the famous Mr Fitz, without so much as a hint of an engagement, and arouse the indignation of the entire neighbourhood?”

Audrey shook her head dismissively. “Oh, Miss Simmons,” she sighed. “We are thoroughly modern here, you know. You could dance every set with him and no one would so much as bat an eyelid.”

Jemma laughed. “I could better believe that if I hadn’t heard the two of you gossiping only last week about the uproar that young officer caused by soliciting the hand of the daughter of the host for a third.”

Philip and Audrey exchanged guilty glances.

“Alright then,” Jemma sighed. “If I’m not needed elsewhere, I suppose I shall have to attend.”

Audrey clapped her hands together in triumph and little Beth excitedly joined in.

“Beth,” her mother said, “Jemma is going to go to a ball. She’s going to get dressed up like a princess!”

Little Beth’s eyes widened. “Me too?”

Jemma gathered the little girl up into her arms. “Oh, please, Audrey,” she said laughing. “ Couldn’t we bring Beth along? She’d be the prettiest girl at the ball by far.”

Beth scrambled to her feet to demonstrate a precocious curtsey which ended in a giggly tumble back into Jemma’s lap.

Philip shook his head firmly. “Sorry, my darling,” he replied, patting the little girl fondly on the head. “Beth is far too beautiful to be attending any balls. The local young men might never recover and then I’d be run off my feet attending to marriage proposals and broken hearts as well as fevers and toothache.”

Jemma gazed thoughtfully into the boughs above. “I don’t know that it’s such a bad thing for a man to have his heart broken while he is young,” she mused. “Besides the extra work it might create for you, of course, Philip. It probably breeds in him a creditable compassion.”

“Oh, Lord.” Audrey cast her eyes to the heavens. “Poor Mr Fitz.”
Thanks so much for all of the lovely feedback peeps! Goodness this is fun!!!

Also, if you have seen 3x02 and you're looking for another thing to read, go back and read my Homecoming story. For this week only, it could TOTALLY be what happens next for our beloveds.

Tune in to Monday's chapter for the thrill of A BALL!!!
“You’ve become quite odd in my absence you realise, brother,” Daisy teased as she and Fitz took their first early morning ride together in over a year. “You would have had us all hover awkwardly outside church for hours yesterday, had Grantham not been quite so determined to make his escape. And then I watched you whip Mother into an absolute frenzy of invitation-sending for a ball she was contemplating forgoing, only to feign apathy about the entire event a moment after the cards were sent.”

Fitz scoffed. “Our mother? Forego her annual lording-it-over-the-neighbours ball? You can hardly believe that my interest one way or the other could have swayed her.”

“Yes!” cried Daisy. “I observed it all! You cannot now try to deny it.”

“I deny nothing,” said he, digging his heels into Franklin’s flanks and pulling slightly ahead of his sister’s palomino. “But you are quite mistaken if you perceived any particular interest of mine in the proceedings.”

“I am not mistaken,” Daisy insisted. “And you are much less covert than you give yourself credit, Leo. It was not at all difficult for me to learn who it is that inspires your attention.”

“Oh, yes?” Fitz enquired. “Pray tell, what was it that alerted you to my alleged dissembling?”

“B-a-t-t-l-e-d-e-n,” Daisy spelled out, deepening her voice and affecting a rather insultingly dim-sounding tone. “Yes, Mrs Hartley, it’s Dr. and Mrs Coulson and Miss Jemma Simmons, which I believe is spelled S-i-m-m-o-n-s.” She gave an exasperated sigh. “I ask you, brother, how else do you imagine poor long-suffering Mrs Hartley might have attempted to spell the name Simmons?”

Fitz looked chastened. “Oh dear,” he said sheepishly. “Do you think I should apologise?”

Daisy laughed. “I certainly would if I were you. As you and I have both learnt to our detriment, it is a terrible thing to be in Mrs Hartley’s bad books.”

Her brother nodded soberly. “Perhaps I should pick her some wild flowers.”

“That used to do the trick when you were seven years old and that pageboy haircut you had made you look sort of sweet,” Daisy observed. “I wonder how it would be received from a fully grown man with such luxuriant ginger whiskers. But we can puzzle that out on our ride back to the house. For now I am quite intrigued by this mysterious Miss Simmons! Do tell me all about her.”

Fitz sighed heavily. “I believe she is the daughter of a gentleman…” he began.

“Leo!” Daisy exclaimed. “That you feel the need to begin with that ambiguous observation makes me first want to remind you that I am not our mother, and second, most desirous to learn how on earth you managed to become infatuated with someone whose parentage you are not entirely certain of!”

“I suppose that she is a little unorthodox,” he allowed, smiling fondly.

“Why, this is quite scandalous!” his sister asserted, amused. “Where did you meet? Now, of course,
you must divulge every detail.”

“Mr Koenig introduced us after morning service,” Fitz replied.

“Aha!” she said triumphantly. “I knew you were up to something, loitering in that church yard. And to think, if only Grantham had been less agitated about departing, I could have observed you with her and learnt all of this first hand! But why did you not meet her parents on the occasion you met her?”

“She is in Berwickshire alone,” said he.

“You mean that she travels with friends?” Daisy asked. “Or with relatives?”

“No,” Fitz replied simply. “Alone.”

Daisy was quite unable to understand. “She lives at Battlesden House, you said, with the Coulsons.”

Fitz shook his head. “She lives in the cottage nearby.”

“She lives alone?” Daisy enquired. “But she is unmarried.”

“Daisy! I haven’t completely taken leave of my senses,” Fitz laughed. “I should hope she is unmarried. A husband might help to avoid scandal for her but he should certainly create some for me!”

“And you have obviously refrained from imparting any of this to our parents,” said she.

“We have barely exchanged words. From the very moment I alighted from the curricle in Bath I have been harried from one engagement to the next with nary a moment’s pause.”

“Though you certainly managed to raise the subject of the ball,” Daisy replied. “Mother is baffled by your newfound enthusiasm. Father was quite proud, you know. He thinks you’re shaping up to be a fine master of the estate and this is further evidence of your maturing commitment.”

Fitz shook his head. “Oh, dear. And what shall they say when they learn the real reason for my eagerness?”

“I am sure they will be terribly amused,” said Daisy. “You’ve never seemed even remotely interested in any of the young women they’ve so diligently introduced you to. Is she very pretty, this Miss Simmons?”

“Well, yes,” Fitz replied warmly, “but she is so much more than merely pretty.”

“Oh, heavens,” Daisy groaned. “Not a genius. Can’t you just fall in love with a woman of fashion like all the rest of your sex? I shall be quite terrified by the prospect of finding something to say to her.”

Fitz fixed his sister with a firm look. “Now Daisy,” he replied. “You know I’ve never understood why you pretend to be only interested in fashion and nonsense. I’ve even seen you feign incompetence at whist, when you and I both know you can rule any table in your sleep.”

“It is a rare man who finds it attractive to be trounced at cards,” Daisy observed dryly. “But now that I’ve caught myself one of those, you’ll be pleased to hear that I’ve returned to being a formidable opponent. So, is she a scientist, this Miss Simmons of yours?”

“She is!” Fitz nodded eagerly. “And she has found a way to put her knowledge to work – she is
living here with the Coulsons as the local midwife.” He leaned toward Daisy with a conspiratorial air. “In truth, sister, I really met her all alone, in the dead of night, when I fetched her to attend to Mrs Hunter.”

“Oh, Leo.” Daisy shook her head. “You were always one for gratuitous drama. Now I am not in the least surprised that you have fallen in love with her. And a scientist too. I suppose you shall not rest until you have her, whether you gain our parents’ approval or not!”

“Let us not get ahead of ourselves, dear sister. It yet remains for me to learn whether or not she might be inclined to have me!”

“And I suppose you hope this ball will provide you with the opportunity to stand terribly close to her and make awkward small talk while dancing.”

“My dear Daisy, I am utterly reliant on it,” he laughed. “And will you let me introduce you to her?”

“It is absolutely the only thing that I want from the evening. Other than the opportunity to wear my latest gown, of course. My brother! Courting!” she exclaimed. “Tell me, are you terribly obvious about it?”

“Not all young men who think themselves in love can affect your Ward’s dashing aloofness,” Fitz shrugged.

Daisy’s hands tightened in the reins. Her laugh turned bitter. “Oh, I have quite uncovered his secret, brother,” said she. “In order to appear indifferent while courting, one must simply be indifferent.”

Fitz turned sharply to observe her countenance and found barely a trace of the effervescent joyfulness that had always marked his sibling’s character.

“Oh, my dear Daisy!” said he, reaching over to take her gloved hand in his. “You are unhappy.”

Daisy took his hand and squeezed it before she raised her dark eyes to meet his. They were brimming with unmistakable emotion. “No,” she replied, vigorously shaking her head and forcing her cheeriest tone. “No, I am not unhappy, Leo. I suppose I just find myself often lonely while Ward is away.”

Fitz nodded in understanding. Daisy had always come alive in the company of others.

They rode on in silence for a time and he recalled, with no small sense of embarrassment, the early days of his friendship with his now brother-in-law. As a younger man with an elderly father, Fitz had always been attentive to the gentlemen of his acquaintance that modelled for him the man he might one day hope to become.

While away at university, Fitz had his friend, Triplett, to help him navigate the social obligations in which everyone expected the heir to Manderston to be utterly in his element. At home, meandering around his own estate, Fitz had relied upon Lance. In a Berwickshire ballroom without either of them, Fitz had held himself stiffly and hoped no one would approach.

The ball had been held in the home of Colonel John Garrett, Ward’s commanding officer. Daisy, who had been engaged almost the whole evening by eager young soldiers, returned to Fitz’s side just in time to be introduced to Mr Ward over the supper table and they each thought him immediately impressive. Though not of many words, Ward had won them both with his easy manners, his witty asides and his ability to make them each feel that there was no one else in the world with whom he’d rather converse.
Fitz had immediately felt his chest swell at the openness of this fine upstanding officer and he couldn’t help but notice Daisy’s pink cheeks and breathy exclamations of delight at every word the handsome gentleman uttered. It was not without a pang that he had released his hold on his sister’s arm and allowed Ward to sweep her onto the dance floor. But though he had found himself once more alone, he had secretly wished them both scintillating conversation, meaningful glances and affected hearts. As far as Fitz had been concerned, Ward far surpassed any of the other idiotic young men who’d thought his younger sister captivating.

The ensuing wedding had been a lavish affair with Mr and Mrs Fitz sparing no expense to celebrate their only daughter’s nuptials. And once the honeymoon was over, Ward deposited his new wife in the London home her parents had taken for them, returned to his regiment, and once more resumed his unswerving loyalty and commitment to his commanding officer, just as if he had never been married at all.

Jemma looked about her at the chaos in her bed chamber and slumped dejectedly onto the bed. Though she had been vocal in her opposition at the time, she was now grateful that her Aunt Victoria had insisted on packing some of her evening dresses from what seemed like a past life. Then, all her gratitude had been reserved for her Aunt Melinda who had very practically taken her to the sort of shops Aunt Victoria would have preferred to believe didn’t exist, and ordered her the trousseau that now made up her day-to-day working wear. Melinda had arranged for the most basic of shifts and stays, and practical rather than fashionable petticoats and pelisse coats for wearing over and under the simple and unadorned morning dresses Jemma thought best for her new career. She would be attending birthing women from all classes and wanted to ensure that her dress, as well as her manner, conveyed a no-nonsense professionalism and accomplishment that would serve to put all of her clients at ease.

It had taken some rummaging through her trunk to unearth the elegant satin gowns with their delicate and intricately embroidered sheer silk overdresses. The first she had uncovered had been so costly and so richly decorated that she had immediately laid it aside. Some of the upper-class women whose births she had attended would be forced to conclude that their humble midwife had been moonlighting in highway robbery.

The next two dresses, though not quite as opulent as the first, were similarly ornate and though she’d left behind a closet bursting with such gowns, they no longer felt like they belonged to her. She’d settled for the last of Aunt Victoria’s compulsory gowns, which could just as easily have been the very best that could be afforded by the daughter of a gentleman of small fortune.

“Miss Siimons,” called Audrey’s sing-song voice from the front door.

“In here, Audrey,” Jemma called back and, in a moment, the bedroom door swung open to reveal little Beth, clutching a posey of delicate white blooms. She held them out shyly.

“Beth picked these flowers for you to put in your hair for tonight,” Audrey explained. “And I’m sending Rose over to put it up for you and help you dress.”

Jemma went to argue but Audrey was already raising hands to silence her. “I know you think you manage to make yourself perfectly presentable for these rare evening engagements you actually agree to, but, my dear, you are quite mistaken. Please don’t take any offence.”

Jemma laughed. “I suppose I shall have to try not to!”
“Well, take heart that no one else would notice how far you fall short of your potential. It’s only that I have seen you in your natural habitat, you remember. You were quite the sight to behold in that glittering finery Victoria used to drape you in. I saw all those dashing men falling at your feet. Do you know, Philip and I found you genuinely terrifying that first night we met! We quite despaired for our birthing mothers.”

“Oh, Audrey, you do say some outlandish things,” Jemma chuckled. “But thank you for the reminder to be grateful. It is so wonderfully freeing not to be forced into playing the part of Aunt Victoria’s dress-up doll.”

“And the dashing men? Are you just as happy to be rid of them?”

“Oh, quite!” Jemma replied with feeling. “They were all so dull with their guns and their gigs and their asinine sonnets. My favourite part of all those dreadful evenings was getting in the carriage when it was all over and kicking off my shoes.” She smiled dreamily. “That and seeing what delicacies were arrayed on those groaning refreshment tables.”

“I can hardly imagine the Fitz family will let us down on the refreshments,” said Audrey.

“No,” Jemma replied, brightening. “I dare say you’re right.”

“And there’ll be at least one dashing young man in attendance who I would say is in very great danger of composing you a sonnet.”

“I cannot possibly imagine to whom you are referring,” Jemma replied primly.

“Can you not?” Audrey asked. “Well, regardless, Rose will be here in a minute so do let her do her work, won’t you, Jemma? Don’t try to distract her with your tomato crop like you did last time.”

“I shall be on my very best behaviour,” Jemma declared. “Rose can primp and preen me to her heart’s content.”

“Wonderful,” Audrey replied. “And we’ve ordered the carriage for nine.”

...
sprawled, snoring, on the lounge. “It seems like quite an exhausting prospect if one isn’t sure that the lady reciprocates one’s regard.”

“Exhausting? It’s exhilarating! I fall in love at least once at every ball,” Triplett laughed. “But I’m yet to find a woman who can hold my attention. I think I’ll contain my love affairs to the span of two dances and perhaps some conversation over a cup of punch. If someone manages to intrigue me beyond that, then I’ll start worrying about whether or not I am requited.”

“Sounds wise,” Fitz replied, draining the remaining contents of his glass.

“Wise?” interjected an amused voice from the doorway. “My brother? I very much doubt that to be the case.”

The two men turned to greet Miss Triplett whose extravagant flowered gown and costly jewels caused her to blindingly reflect the light as she made her entrance.

“Raina,” Fitz bowed. “You look exceptionally well this evening.”

Miss Triplett curtsied deeply, emerald green silk pooling on the floor at her feet.

“As do you, Mr Fitz,” she replied graciously. “But then I’ve never known you to appear otherwise.”

Behind her, Daisy stepped into the room in a flowing ivory gown accented with delicate gold embroidery. Her gleaming hair was piled atop her head and held in place with an intricate gold tiara.

Antoine seemed to forget himself a moment, leaving Fitz to be the first to greet his sister and shower her with the expected, but no less deserved compliments. After a pause, their friend found his voice and enthusiastically followed suit.

Fitz was annoyed to observe that Ward’s brooding remained undisturbed to the point of neglecting his wife. He offered Daisy his arm, she accepted it with a grateful smile and he escorted her to her husband’s side.

“Ward, I hope you’re planning on keeping Daisy engaged in dancing all evening,” said Fitz as jovially as he could manage. “If you do not, I’m afraid she’ll hustle all our guests at the card table, and you know how my mother feels about spreading victory around.”

Ward fixed his brother-in-law with a dispassionate glance and made no reply. Fitz found his ire increasing until Daisy laid a placating hand on his arm and then extended it towards her husband.

The dour soldier grudgingly took her arm which prompted a smile the sweetness of which Fitz felt was utterly unmerited. But before he could say something he’d live to regret, his mother elegantly swept into the room and all eyes turned to her.

“Shall we descend?” she shouted loudly into her husband’s ear, after the range of expected compliments had been paid, and Fitz’s father leapt to his feet with an athleticism that belied his years.

“Yes, my dear, let us indeed,” he enthused, gallantly offering her his arm and leading her out of the room.

Daisy and Ward followed after them, Fitz escorted Miss Triplett, and Antoine brought up the rear.

Mrs Fitz, always determined to receive her guests in good time; allowed herself a few minutes leisure to survey her rooms, to ascertain that everything was in proper order, and that there was nothing defective in any of her arrangements.
After assuring herself that the musicians were in position, that the ladies’ retiring room was in order, that the refreshments were abundant and that the arrangements of flowers reflected colours in harmony with the human complexion, Mrs. Fitz stationed herself near the entrance of the room and prepared for her friends to pay their respects, and receive their welcome.

Chapter End Notes

Scraping in with two minutes to spare to stick to my Monday posting!!!

Ok, sorry, it seems I sort of unfairly got your hopes up about the ball in this chapter. But as you can see, we're right on cue for the ball to be in full swing NEXT chapter! I hope you can forgive me and that you'll be able to tolerate the suspense?! Love to hear what you're thinking of the story so far and, if you're liking this story, comments feed it like sunshine and water feed Jemma's tomatoes! I was utterly floundering this afternoon until a last sparkly gift of a comment landed in my inbox and this chapter consequently bloomed and expanded by at least five hundred additional words. (I guess that means maybe don't review if you think this chapter is bloated, boring and in need of drastic editing!?)

Also, I just had to share my hilarious source for that bit at the end about the flowers. It's from "Domestic Duties; Or, Instructions To Young Married Ladies On The Management Of Their Households, And The Regulation Of Their Conduct In The Various Relations And Duties Of Married Life" by Mrs. William Parkes which is reproduced here: http://susannaives.com/wordpress/2012/06/on-morning-calls-and-hosting-dinner-parties-balls-and-routs-in-the-late-regency/#three Click through to the section on balls for some total hilarity though I'm sure all the rest of it is pretty funny too.

For those playing along at home, I've reproduced one of my favourite lines from the BBC P&P. It's only three words long. Ten gold stars to anyone who can pick it.

Lastly, here is gorgeous Recency Era Jemma courtesy of the amazing Manip Fu Master, memorizingthedigitsofpi
oh, and just in case you haven't seen him already, here is her amazingly handsome Bingley/Fitz!
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

“Speaking of the ball...” Audrey fell silent and the three of them gazed past the queue of carriages and across the large park to where Manderston House stood in all its stately glory, its large windows blazing with light and activity. The glow from the house reflected in the ornamental lake below, making the manor appear as a moated castle under the bright moon and stars.

At last they rumbled to a halt at the foot of the impressive sandstone staircase. A footman in livery opened the carriage door and the ladies alighted, enjoying the view of the beautiful edifice above.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Years had passed since Jemma was last required to surrender herself into the hands of a lady’s maid but she endured it as best she could. When at last she was permitted to survey the results in the glass, she found herself pleasantly surprised.

Jemma had had to insist that she really did intend for Beth’s tiny flowers to be incorporated into her coiffure. Though Rose was at first concerned her mistress might be displeased, given the formality of the occasion and the fact that Beth was just as likely to offer insects to adorn hair and rarely taken seriously, she was at last persuaded.

Her own reflection struck Jemma as refreshing. How freeing it was to attend a ball, even in the finest home in Berwickshire, dressed in such an unpretentious gown, her hair adorned with wildflowers picked by a little child. If she could have attended all those many previous balls in such relaxed comfort, she might not have felt such a keen yearning to leave it all behind her.

Philip helped her into the carriage and she received a nod of approval from Audrey.

“You’re not a patch on the fashion-plate you once were,” Audrey commented dryly. “But I suspect this gives you far more pleasure.”

Jemma leaned back against the seat with a contented sigh. “Do you know, Audrey, I think I might even enjoy myself this evening.”

Philip stepped up to take his place by his wife. “Not quite as hopeful as you were to be called away then?”

The carriage lurched and then began rumbling towards their destination.

“I did call on Mrs McLaughlin this morning just to be sure,” Jemma replied. “The baby’s head isn’t remotely engaged. I’ll be very surprised if the McLaughlins welcome this child within the week.”

“And what do you predict Shauna will have this time?” Audrey asked, adjusting the slim ropes of coral around her neck.
Jemma shook her head. “It is an extremely imprecise gauge, Audrey.”

“As you are so fond of saying,” Mrs Coulson replied. “But you still manage to have an almost impeccable record.”

“Well, so long as you promise not to reveal my hunch to Shauna, I think it will be another boy. That little one’s resting heart rate is positively leisurely.”

“Oh, dear,” Philip chuckled. “Is it not bad enough that Shauna has to tolerate Hamish and Angus in all their positive leisure without welcoming another indolent son?”

Miss Simmons sighed. “I am utterly reliant on my little Pinard horn, as the pair of you well know, but I merely use it to determine whether or not the baby’s heart rate is healthy. Speculating as to its sex is just a little game I entertain myself with.”

Her companions nodded dutifully.

“I fully expect to be proven wrong and see Shauna and Hamish welcoming the most vigorous and efficient daughter Berwickshire has ever seen.”

Audrey playfully took up the little beaded reticule that Jemma had laid on the seat beside her. Clicking open the clasp and reaching inside, she withdrew the wooden horn and held it to her ear.

“And are you anticipating the opportunity to perform medical examinations of many of the expectant guests attending this evening?” Audrey enquired teasingly.

“One never knows,” Jemma replied, firmly taking them back. “I find it best to be prepared.”

“And this is why we could not have hoped to find a better midwife,” said Philip, shaking his head. “She even attends balls with a willingness to work.”

“Speaking of the ball…” Audrey fell silent and the three of them gazed past the queue of carriages and across the large park to where Manderston House stood in all its stately glory, its large windows blazing with light and activity. The glow from the house reflected in the ornamental lake below, making the manor appear as a moated castle under the bright moon and stars.

At last they rolled to a halt at the foot of the impressive sandstone staircase. A footman in livery opened the carriage door and the ladies alighted, enjoying the view of the beautiful edifice above.

Before they had managed to set so much as a foot on the staircase, there was a bustling to their left and Jemma turned to find herself looking at the top of a man’s head, his face obscured by the depth of his bow.

At last when he straightened, she recognised the red coat and condescending expression of Mr Sitwell, who she began to suspect had been lying in wait for her.

“Miss Simmons,” said he, as she rose from her obligatory curtsey. “You are looking wonderfully well this evening.”

“I thank you, Mr Sitwell,” she replied. “Please, allow me to introduce you to Dr. Coulson and Mrs Coulson.”

Audrey and Philip dutifully greeted the young man and Jemma thought that while they exchanged pleasantries, she might manage to escape up the steps without further incident. She was quite mistaken.
“Miss Simmons,” Sitwell called after her. “I wonder if I might be so bold as to solicit your hand for the first two dances this evening.”

“You may, Mr Sitwell,” was all poor Jemma could bring herself to reply, though with all her heart she wished she could refuse him. At least once she’d agreed, she was permitted to walk away from him in the hope of finding some pleasant distraction in the meantime.

She ascended the stairs behind Philip and Audrey and was announced, and together they ran the gauntlet of greeting presided over by Mr and Mrs Fitz in all their finery. Jemma was curious to meet Mr Fitz Senior and his wife, and she gleaned from their brief moment of elegant chit-chat that they somehow knew of her, and seemed to have some interest in knowing her. She could only presume that Mr Hunter must have spoken of her, though it seemed an odd sort of a conversation to have taken place between a gentleman and his steward.

The steady stream of arrivals at the entrance soon squeezed them into the main body of the house and Jemma and Audrey took great pleasure in observing the dress and the attitude of the multitudes they seemed to pass on their path to the retiring room. Having deposited their shawls and Jemma’s tiny reticule, they re-emerged and managed to find three vacant chairs with a view of all the activity of the evening. Philip soon found them, carefully carrying the cups of punch he’d set out to fetch, and the three of them settled back in a moment of perfect ease and enjoyment.

They were laughing together over some of Beth’s earlier antics when they were approached by a man in a deep blue tailcoat. Jemma cast a quick glance at Audrey who wore a knowing smile.

“Miss Simmons, Dr. Coulson, Mrs Coulson,” said Mr Leopold Fitz with a bow.

The three of them stood to respond in kind.

“Mr Fitz,” Jemma replied. “I wondered if we would see you this evening or if you would be so caught up in entertaining your many guests that we’d miss one another entirely.”

Fitz’s blue eyes, intensified by the hue of his coat, quite clearly communicated the impossibility of her escaping his notice. “I have sought you out quite intentionally, Miss Simmons” he replied. “For, as you might recall, I expressed a wish to be allowed to introduce my friends to you. If Dr. and Mrs Coulson will excuse us, are you at leisure to meet them now?”

As if by design, the musicians chose that very moment to strike up the opening dance.

In her expression, Jemma tried to convey all of her disappointment at having failed to avoid Mr Sitwell. “Unfortunately, Mr Fitz, I have already been engaged for the first two dances.”

Mr Sitwell approached to claim her hand but, sighting the host, merely hovered awkwardly behind her.

“Of course you have,” replied Fitz. “Then, perhaps, you would do me the honour of reserving the two dances before supper?”

Jemma curtsied in agreement and Mr Sitwell took his chance to swoop in and seize her, bowing curtly to her companions before hurrying her to the floor.

Jemma glanced back to find Mr Fitz watching as Sitwell led her away. She smiled sweetly at him over her shoulder, grateful in the sudden realisation that by claiming her for two dances and supper, Mr Fitz had freed her from any further interference from Sitwell for at least two hours together. For that valuable service alone, Leopold Fitz was elevated in her esteem to the level of knight of the realm.
The two first dances, however, brought a return of distress; they were dances of mortification. Mr. Sitwell, arrogant and officious, philosophising instead of attending, and often moving wrong without being aware of it, gave her all the shame and misery which a disagreeable partner for a couple of dances can give. The moment of her release from him was ecstasy and she thanked the staid etiquette of the day that he could apply to her no more now that their two dances were thus executed.

All Jemma wanted to do was to slip back to her seat with the Coulsons and return to the enjoyable role of observer. However, it seemed that Mr Fitz was simultaneously leaving the dance floor with one of the dark-haired beauties she’d spotted in church on his arm.

Having noticed his approach, she could hardly turn and flee so she waited for him and his partner to draw near.

“Miss Simmons,” said Fitz. “Please allow me to introduce to you my sister, Mrs Daisy Ward.”

Mrs Ward smiled at her so warmly that Jemma felt instantly inclined to like her. She suspected that the two of them must be of a similar age.

“I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Mrs Ward,” said Jemma.

“And I yours, Miss Simmons,” the dark-haired woman replied. “My brother has told me so much about you.”

Jemma glanced over at Fitz to find him noticeably colouring.

“I am quite frightened to think what he might have told you,” Jemma laughed. “In our brief conversations, your brother and I have not always seen eye-to-eye.”

“He did tell me that you teased him quite mercilessly about his novels,” said Mrs Ward. “And I was delighted to hear it. To my mind these novels, many of them written by men, mind you, make out our sex to be fickle, intransient and dishonest. Do you not agree, Miss Simmons?”

Jemma found herself utterly charmed. “I’m sure I would agree if I had your degree of familiarity with them, Mrs Ward,” she replied. “But I shall have to rely on you to supply the specific details of the argument. To own the truth, my rejection of novels has mainly been to do with an inability to prioritise reading them over completing my work.”

“While the two of you concur over the weaknesses of my character,” Fitz interjected, “I might see if I can locate Triplet. Miss Simmons, it’s clear that you are in fine form this evening and it seems as good a time as any to help me put him in his place. If you’ll excuse me.”

Jemma nodded in amused acknowledgement and, the moment he was gone, turned back to her new acquaintance with interest. “You look very well. How many months along are you?” she asked eagerly.

Mrs Ward’s eyes widened with shock.

Jemma immediately flushed in chagrin. “Oh, Mrs Ward,” she gasped, and then dropped her voice to an urgent whisper. “Please forgive me. I’m sure your brother told you of my occupation, if he has told you anything. Sometimes I absolutely forget where I am. I won’t ask you anything else. I am so terribly sorry.”

Mrs Ward laid a hand on Jemma’s arm. “No,” she replied, maintaining Jemma’s whisper. “Please do not apologise. It is almost a relief to at last have one other person who is aware of my secret.”
Jemma looked at her uncertainly. “You have not yet told your husband or your family?”

Mrs Ward shook her head. “Not yet.”

“You are lucky to be able to conceal it – your frame is so slight.”

“And I am also indebted to these French fashions. The empire line has been an unexpectedly practical boon.”

“If I were to hazard a guess,” Jemma mused, “I would say you are mid-way through your second trimester. Am I correct?”

She looked back at Jemma in confusion.

“Has it been about five months?”

Mrs Ward nodded, tenderly placing a hand on her abdomen.

“And have you been in good health?”

“I have,” Mrs Ward replied. “Apart from my anxiety as to how Grantham might receive the news.”

It wasn’t until Mrs Ward’s mention of his given name that Jemma recalled that first late-night conversation with Fitz and her distressing knowledge of her new acquaintance’s husband. So many late-nights between that night and this had quite wiped the fact from her memory.

She reflected it was perhaps just as well that she’d accidentally stepped into her professional persona. In her work Jemma daily took in worrying information while maintaining a façade of absolute serenity. She had learned to keep any concerns well-concealed so as not to unduly frighten a birthing mother. In so many cases, with just a little more vigilance in her monitoring, the initial trepidation proved to be of no consequence. What she knew of Grantham Ward would not resolve itself quite so easily, but she was certainly not going to impart that information to his wife in the middle of a ball in her parents’ home.

Jemma was just about to ask Daisy why she feared her husband’s reaction when Fitz returned to her side with a broad smile. Accompanying him was the other handsome pair she had spotted at the front of the church.

The formalities of introduction aside, Mr Triplett confessed that because Fitz held her intellect in such high esteem, he felt quite nervous about entering into conversation with her.

Daisy laughed and placed her hand once more on Jemma’s arm. “I had felt quite the same, Mr Triplett, but Miss Simmons and I have been conversing for some minutes now and as yet I have found no very great cause for alarm.” She smiled warmly. “In fact, Miss Simmons, I hope we shall be very good friends, you and I.”

Jemma covered Mrs Ward’s hand with her own and injected her response with utter sincerity. “Oh, I do hope so.”

Mr Fitz watched the pair of them interact with no small degree of pleasure.

The last member of their little party felt a pressing need to make her voice heard.

“I am not at all frightened of you, Miss Simmons,” the lady interjected boldly. “You look perfectly benign to me.”
Mr Fitz shook his head. “No, benign is not at all right, Miss Triplett. Benign implies bland and non-threatening.”

The look Miss Triplett gave him in return made it clear he’d understood her perfectly well.

“I think Miss Simmons has very sharp teeth,” he continued, turning his blue eyes upon her, “but perhaps her use of them is merely tempered by exemplary self-control.”

Jemma found herself quite delighted by this assessment of her character. Her eyes searched Fitz’s face for a moment but she detected no hint of ridicule.

She smiled. “I can assure you all that for now, at least, I do not intend you any harm.”

“I cannot hope to find the words to do justice to my relief,” Miss Triplett replied dryly, resting her hand lightly over the sparkling jewels that ornamented her décolletage. “Tell me, Miss Simmons, does your family live near to Manderston?”

“Do you not recall, Raina?” her brother asked incredulously. “I am surprised if you do not for Mr Fitz has spoken of little else. Miss Simmons is the scientist and the-”

Miss Triplett’s eyebrow hid itself momentarily under the curls that cascaded stylishly from her hairline. “Oh, do not concern yourself, Miss Simmons,” said she, brushing her hand over Fitz’s forearm and fluttering her eyelashes at him. “My brother was not present for the hours upon hours Mr Fitz and I whiled away in pleasant conversation. Your name was not mentioned once. But now I comprehend perfectly.” She cast a disdainful glance at Beth’s little flowers in Jemma’s hair. “You are the midwife.”

“Yes, that is right,” Jemma replied, smiling. “I reside within the parish, in a cottage near the home of the local physician. My family – two aunts – live in London, when they are not travelling further afield that is.”

“Fancy that,” Miss Triplett replied. “I suppose there must be a first for everything.”

Jemma looked back at her confused. “I am certainly not the first of the midwives,” she laughed. “If anything I carry on a rather long and proud tradition.”

“A tradition of which I am, of course, perfectly aware,” affirmed Miss Triplett. “I simply meant, this is the first time that I have ever met a person who holds a profession.”


“How silly of me,” said Miss Triplett. “Perhaps I should have said, this is the first time I have met one at a private ball.”

Jemma smiled. “Well, when their work allows it, I imagine that plenty of professional people attend balls.”

“Just not usually the same balls as I,” declared Miss Triplett.

Her brother, who had been observing this exchange with growing trepidation, now felt it incumbent upon him to intervene. Fortunately, a cotillion was just coming to an end and the ladies were being led from the floor.

“Miss Simmons, I know that Fitz has engaged you for a dance later in the evening but I wonder if I might have the honour of your hand in the meantime,” said Triplett.
Jemma tried to gauge the reaction of Miss Triplett who was making quite a display of plucking out her fan and fluttering it in front of her face. From behind it she was eyeing Fitz as if he were a particularly delicious-looking blancmange.

“I would be delighted. Thank you, Mr Triplett,” said Jemma, placing her gloved hand on the one he offered.

With Daisy declaring a desire to sit a while and heading off in search of their mother, Fitz was left with little other option but to similarly engage Miss Triplett. He guided his partner quite carefully through the rows and Jemma found the glamorous woman taking her place in the set by her side with Mr Fitz appearing diagonally opposite.

Dancing with Mr Triplett was a vastly more satisfactory experience than her earlier humiliation with Mr Sitwell. Triplett was all ease and charm, his mastery of the steps impeccable, his conversation witty and diverting. However, the dance was not without tension. A quadrille had been called, which, more often than not, threw Miss Simmons and her partner together with Miss Triplett and hers.

It was quite apparent that Miss Triplett’s remarks were intended for the ears of Mr Fitz alone, but Mr Fitz seemed intent to thwart her, continually opening their private conversation to participation from the other pair with whom they danced, perhaps particularly Miss Simmons. His blue eyes seemed never to leave her face, his gloved hand just as often brushing against hers as his own partner’s.

Raina refused to accept defeat and so followed her partner’s example, at last turning her attention to the other lady in their foursome. “You dance very well for someone unaccustomed to this sort of engagement, Miss Simmons,” she acknowledged grudgingly.

Jemma laughed. “Oh, I am not unaccustomed to dancing, Miss Triplett,” she replied, but deigned to further explain herself.

“Then you must have attended your fair share of public assemblies,” Miss Triplett replied, her dark eyes flashing, “and danced with scores of young soldiers, like the one I observed you with earlier. Is he a particular favourite of yours? Or are you similarly acquainted with the entire militia?”

Jemma was quite at a loss as to how to answer her, but Mr Fitz, somewhat red in the face, pointedly ignored his partner’s momentary lapse of judgement and asked a question of his own.

“Have you saved many more lives this month, Miss Simmons? Mr Hunter still speaks of you as some kind of miracle worker.”

For the total contrast in sentiment provided, Jemma bestowed upon Fitz the warmest of smiles, even as she shook her head. “Little James Hunter and his mother were never in a moment’s danger, Mr Fitz, as I believe I have already explained to you.”

“That you have,” he admitted. “Though I confess, I took in not a single word. However, if the lady’s own husband declares you to be her saviour, who am I to argue with him?”

“Have you seen much of James?” Jemma enquired.

Fitz laughed. “Lance rarely leaves the house without him. I believe that for such a tiny being, James Hunter has seen an extraordinary amount of world about him.”

Chastened, Miss Triplett had remained silent for what remained of the quadrille but looked greatly cheered when the next dance required the two couples to move to quite separate parts of the dance floor.
Of course, it did not stop Mr Fitz from seeking the eyes of another.

Miss Triplett observed that Miss Simmons’ attention was entirely reserved for her own partner. It brought her little comfort.

Chapter End Notes

Ball Part II is in the works! If it’s fun to write, who knows? Maybe there’ll even be a Ball Part III! I’ll certainly need to allow enough time for Miss Triplett’s no-doubt toxic post-ball debrief!

I hope you can all forgive me for that decent-sized chunk I totally plagiarised from Austen… It just seemed fitting.

I confess, the Pinard horn wasn’t quite invented in time for Jemma to be reliant on one. Nearly, but not quite. Anyway, they’re super cute and many midwives still use them today, finding them more reliable than the doppler. Also, doulas totally existed but no one called them doulas. I apologise for the odd glaring anachronism – I’m hoping you’re taking them in the spirit of fun that I intend them!

And to all four of my faithful readers: though I’ll be giving it a red hot go, Monday’s chapter may not quite make it by Monday. Big few days ahead! Though, of course, that’s #straya time, so you may be utterly unaffected, unless I totally drop the ball (ha! get it? Drop the ball? Ok, I know. Go home, everyl1ttleth1ng).

Or is it that I possibly have MORE than four faithful readers? A comment from you would be a sure-fire way of helping me keep all these balls (ha!) in the air!? It's true, I confess, occasionally I stoop to a bit of comment grubbing here and there. I know it's unattractive but c'est la vie...
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Fitz felt that if Dr. Coulson were to take it upon himself to perform a thorough medical examination at this inconvenient moment, the esteemed physician might find a number of troubling symptoms. For one, his mouth was utterly dry. He wanted to attribute it to the exertion of the energetic reel he’d just led Miss Simmons through, but he suspected that perhaps it was more to do with her ready smile and musical laugh as they frolicked their way down the set. Either way, when the musicians, in their infinite wisdom, chose a much quieter piece for the supper dance, Fitz feared his partner might be able to hear his heartbeat thundering in his chest.

He’d learnt the steps to this fashionable Parisian country-dance at least a year before and executed them times beyond number with young women all over the kingdom. However, he had never before noticed the exquisite intimacy of the lady’s arm across his back and hand tantalisingly placed at his neck as they whirled one another about, the weave of her delicate lace gloves so loose he could feel her warm skin barely pressing against his flesh. As a consequence, he felt like everything in him was racing towards some unknown destination.

Miss Simmons’ attention to her partner could not be faulted, though he wished she’d been a little less dedicated in reserving her gaze so entirely for Triplett during the dances before. It was a sad state of affairs to have angered one lady, a guest in his home no less, without the satisfaction of even once catching the other lady’s eye. He hoped that Raina would forgive him for his rudeness. They were going to be spending an awful lot of time together.

But while Miss Simmons was in his arms, her honey-coloured eyes gazing exclusively into his, every other thought went completely out of his head. He was thankful that he had prepared in advanced some conversational topics with which he hoped to please her and that it was the sight of these very shining eyes that had been before him during all of those careful hours of study.

He swallowed hard and hoped it would suffice to steady his voice even in the extreme excitement induced by the sensation of her dainty hand in his own.

“I hope you will allow me to return to a previous subject of ours, Miss Simmons,” Fitz ventured. “I had the opportunity of conducting some research since our last conversation and I wondered if you might be interested in my findings.”

The look Miss Simmons gave him in that moment, gazing up at him with a mix of curiosity and gratitude, made his every effort seem vastly worthwhile.

“I thank you, Mr Fitz,” she replied with sincerity, just at the moment where they turned once more to face one another, her hand releasing his for a beat only to snake around her back for him to capture once more in his own. “I would be very interested to hear what you have learned.”

As she spoke, her other hand rose again to his face, the heel of her palm hovering just at his collarbone, her fingers brushing lightly through his whiskers and making him shiver. At the sensation, Fitz’s eyes flickered closed for an instant and when at last he forced them open, it was to find her lovely face, watching him expectantly, mere inches from his own.

With a pang he heard himself croak out his well-rehearsed opening sentence, but it couldn’t be helped. It would take a much stronger man than he to maintain his composure with Miss Simmons in
his arms.

“You recall we were talking of Caroline Herschel and her invaluable contributions to the field of Astronomy.”

“I do,” she acknowledged with a graceful incline of her head that showed him a perfect constellation of tiny white flowers dotted through her gleaming hair.

“Well, I took the liberty of obtaining for you a book that I believe will bring you no little pleasure.”

She turned her face towards him, her eyes wide in pleased surprise.

“It reminded me of your excellent point about the ways in which those somewhat more theatrical elements of presentations at the Royal Institute might actually be a contribution to Science rather than a distraction from it.”

Jemma gave him a sly smile. “Do you mean to say, Mr Fitz, that you have been converted to my way of thinking?”

“I have,” Fitz replied. “You were perfectly correct to praise the outcome of increased desire for scientific knowledge amongst the general public. It does further the cause of Science and increase resources available to those who are engaged in pure discovery. I hope you will be able to overlook my myopic adherence to one narrow notion of propriety.”

“You are quite forgiven, sir,” Jemma laughed. “But please do not be too hard on yourself. Remember, my knowledge of what takes place in the Royal Institute cannot be from an observer’s perspective.”

“And that is why I think you will enjoy this book. It is quite a wonderful example of exactly that brand of inspirationally popular and yet rigorous Science and it is written by a woman – Jane Marcet, whose husband, Alexander, is a Fellow of the Royal Society.”

“How wonderful, Mr Fitz,” Jemma replied warmly as they sashayed side-by-side along the set, hands clasped between them. “I really am so very gratified that you would think of me.”

Fitz wanted to tell her that he thought of little else. He wanted to tell her that just the knowledge of her existence brightened his every waking moment and illuminated his dreams. He wanted to paint her paintings and compose her poetry and play her symphonies. Instead, he restricted his comments to the pure discipline of Science.

“Please, Miss Simmons,” said he, shaking his head. “It is a mere trifle. The book is entitled Conversations in Chemistry, in which the elements of that science are familiarly explained and illustrated by Experiments and it is proving extremely popular. So popular, in fact, that I understand Mrs Marcet is planning to write similar conversation-style guides to physiology, botany, natural philosophy and other scientific topics.”

At this point in the dance, both man and woman raised their arms to twirl one another about. While the lady placed her hands upon her partner’s shoulders, he encircled her arms with his own, resting his hands gently around her upper arms. How Fitz had never before noticed or felt the aching intimacy of his partner’s proximity was a mystery to him.

“It is deeply encouraging to me, Mr Fitz,” said Jemma quietly, “to find you to be such an ally to woman’s intellectual pursuit. I cannot quite convey how much it means to me to find a friend of the male sex who takes me seriously, even, dare I say, regards me as an equal, without so much as a hint of condescension.”
When the dancers completed their turn, they surrendered one another ever so briefly into the arms of the neighbouring pair and then came back together, hands resting ever so lightly in the sensitive crook of one another’s arms. As if to inoculate herself from the dizzying movement, Miss Simmons fixed her gaze unswervingly upon him, her light eyes sparkling under the merry blaze of the chandeliers. Fitz could no more have looked away than transported himself to another planet.

“I had always believed that in finding Philip Coulson, I had found the only man of his ilk,” she continued warmly. “To similarly enjoy your friendship and your esteem, Mr Fitz, is an utterly unanticipated blessing and I thank you most sincerely.”

Custom at that moment forced the gentleman to stand still, but Fitz quivered, while the lady circled behind her partner’s back, so close that he could feel her warm breath on his neck. The young master could not help but follow Miss Simmons with his eyes, failing to resist the temptation to turn his head until he lost sight of her and she instantly reappeared at his other side, slipping her hand once more into his.

When at last he found his voice, Mr Fitz could only say, “Oh no, Miss Simmons, not at all. Truly, it is I that am indebted to you.”

The musicians ended the piece with a flourish and the dancers stepped away from their partners to applaud heartily. Jemma glanced around in an attempt to sight the Coulsons but before she located them, the gentlemen were once more offering their arm to the ladies and leading them in to supper.

Over white soup and wine, Fitz, accompanied by his extremely pretty reinforcement, at last found his chance to bait his friend.

“Triplett, please do tell Miss Simmons your concerns regarding Geology,” Fitz began innocuously enough. “I’m sure she would be fascinated to hear the particulars of our debate.”

Mr Triplett laughed and shook his head. “You are quite proud of yourself, Fitz, I can easily tell. But do not for a moment let yourself believe that I have not seen through your gambit.” He turned to Jemma. “Please, Miss Simmons, I must make clear why it is that I take the coward’s way out and refuse my friend’s request. I will not dwell on your beauty, though that alone certainly makes you a formidable opponent in any intellectual argument. Rather, I defer on the grounds that Mr Leopold Fitz, the most intelligent man I have ever met, himself Dux of Trinity College, Cambridge, is quite in awe of your intellect. That is more than enough to warn me that to engage with you in a debate is to lose in a humiliating fashion.”

Fitz’s good-natured amusement easily conquered his frustration. “Another time, perhaps, we will lure him, Miss Simmons,” he laughed.

“Perchance when his defences are low,” she agreed.

“I for one am quite relieved that we shall not lose the whole evening to dull academia,” Miss Triplett announced. “Do you not feel the same, Daisy?”

But Mrs Ward was distracted, her eyes searching the room in some earnestness. “Oh, yes,” she mumbled. “Quite so.”

Jemma, seated by Mrs Ward’s side, waited for Miss Triplett to once more demand the attention of the men and surreptitiously took the lady’s hand in her own.

“Are you quite alright, Mrs Ward?” she asked quietly. “Do tell me if there is anything at all I can do for you.”
Mrs Ward met the eye of her new acquaintance in quiet gratitude. “Thank you, Miss Simmons, but please do not concern yourself. I am quite well.”

“Is it your husband that you seek?” Jemma asked and Daisy nodded. “Perhaps someone could be sent to seek him for you.”

“Oh, no,” Mrs Ward replied hastily, her eyes wide with panic. “I do not wish to disturb him.”

“Of course,” Jemma replied soothingly. “Then you and I shall just sit and have a little talk together.”

While Raina prattled on about the ill-advised shade of a neighbouring baroness’ gown and the unbecoming hairstyle of the lady’s newly-debuted daughter, Fitz leaned back in his chair and once more observed the warm confidence blooming between Miss Simmons and his sister. It was not lost on him that Daisy’s mood had changed from one of trepidation to one of calm comfort in the few moments the two women had conversed. He wished with all his heart that he might one day be allowed to at last give Daisy the sister she had always longed for.

…

It was not until the lights of Manderston were quite out of sight that it occurred to Jemma she had not yet kicked off her dainty slippers.

Audrey and Philip sat opposite her in the carriage with similarly knowing expressions.

“Alright,” said Jemma at last. “I can see that the two of you are absolutely bursting to comment. Do go on so that we can all get it out of our systems.”

Audrey immediately shed her eloquent silence in exchange for incredulous denial. “What on earth could she be implying, Philip?” she asked her husband, her face the very picture of innocence.

“I am at a loss,” Philip replied, shaking his head. “Perhaps being reunited with the very cream of society has made those of us beneath her quite dull.”

Jemma took up her reticule and thwacked him soundly across the knee. “Oh, do stop being stupid, Philip,” she ordered. “You two really can be quite childish at times.”

Audrey and Philip fell about laughing.

“Poor Mr Fitz,” Audrey sighed. “Should we warn him that his intended is easily whipped into violent frenzies?”

Jemma raised one eyebrow. “Intended?”

“I only use the term because the dear man’s eyes danced with you at every occasion that his body could not,” replied Mrs Coulson. “And, oh, when his body was allowed?” She plucked out her fan and fanned herself theatrically.

“Audrey very nearly swooned at the sight,” Philip went on, his grin infuriating. “We re-lived our youth vicariously through Jemma and the young master, didn’t we, my dear?”

“Oh, yes,” she breathed but suddenly seemed to come to herself. “Except, where Mr Fitz owns most of Berwickshire and has who-knows-how-many thousand pounds a year, Mr Coulson is the highly-esteemed-but-worked-off-his-feet physician with only as much money to live on each month as the rare bills that actually get paid.”
“I apologise once again, my dear, for the humble status of my birth,” Philip said good-naturedly.

“You are utterly forgiven, my love,” Audrey replied. “Though I will thoroughly enjoy getting to see how the other half live when the happy day arrives.”

Jemma yawned and settled in to being the subject of their sport for the remaining miles until home.

…

The last guests had long ago left the house resounding with the dying echoes of laughter and music and on the horizon, an orange blush was beginning to delineate the distant hills against the sky.

Daisy and their parents had only recently retired and he had kissed his mother’s faded cheek with heartfelt gratitude for the gift the evening had been.

Fitz leaned his weight against the white marble mantle piece and gazed into the flickering embers of the fire. In his mind’s eye he was whirling once more around the dance floor, Miss Simmons a vision of loveliness in his arms. He wasn’t sure that he’d ever recover from holding her so near, from observing at such close range the dappled hazel of her irises, the long dark camber of her lashes, the plump pink softness of her lips.

“Well, Mr Fitz,” a voice sliced into his reverie. “I do not think much of your Miss Simmons.”

“Oh?” he murmured, smiling into the fire at the thought of her being his, of him being hers.

“Not at all,” Miss Triplett continued. “What an impertinent know-it-all!”

“Raina!” her brother scolded. “Surely you cannot mean that.”

“Be assured, my brother,” said she. “I most certainly do. I mean, that dress for a start.”

Fitz called Miss Simmons to mind as some sort of Grecian goddess, the swathes of her elegant ivory gown pooling around her feet.

“And her hair! Those disgusting little weeds stuck all through it. I mean, what was she thinking? I don’t recall reading the word *Masque* on the invitation, do you, brother? Perhaps she thought she might come disguised as a scarecrow.”

Triplett silently shook his head at her but Fitz was lost in recalling the detail of the delicate wild-flowers that adorned her beautiful hair.”

“Did you notice, brother, how she danced?”

“Yes, I did,” replied Triplett firmly. “I managed to closely observe her manner of dancing from my unique perspective as her dance partner and I absolutely cannot fault her.”

Raina scoffed. “I doubt she has ever attended a private ball before. I suppose we should pity her for simply failing to grasp the sophistication of a superior social set.”

Fitz was reliving the sensation of her hand framing his face, her shapely form in his grasp. He remembered the look in her eye when she called him her ally and her friend and he genuinely felt that if being those things to her was the only contribution he made to the new century, that would be more than enough.

Fitz looked up at last, smiling broadly at his friends. “I’m so very glad you approve of her, Raina,” he said warmly, squeezing her hand. “And you Triplett. I am hopeful you shall both get to spend
much more time with her in the future.”

Raina opened and closed her mouth but no words were forthcoming.

“I think I’ll retire,” Fitz announced, sauntering towards the door. “Goodnight.”

Raina glanced across to her where her brother sat shaking with silent laughter.

“Oh, do grow up, Antoine,” she snapped, and swished out of the room.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, so it's 12:11am, and I have to work all day tomorrow, but because of all of that amazing commenting love, I could not rest until this chapter was complete and posted! Eeeek! I hope you like it?!?!?! I'm a bit worried that my brain is no longer functional and therefore it might lack in the editing department... if so, a thousand apologies! This is me right now:

The "science" - as in the characters I mention and that book title are all legit! I'll post a link to my source once I've finished milking the glorious article of all of its Regency Sciency goodness for future (err, past!?) vintage FitzSimmonsing.

Also, as for the dancing, if it feels off to you, you could always watch this bit of ball footage from Mansfield Park (skip the Emma bit, unless you want to appreciate a very graceful Jeremy Northam in full pomp-mode) which, to my mind, is tres sexy. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6n5iwfAeLSs

Here's a still to whet your appetite:

□
Now that the arrival of Shauna McLaughlin’s baby had long relinquished the possibility of being described as punctual and was trespassing into the realm of overdue, Miss Simmons took the opportunity to make a quick stop in the village and replenish her supplies.

When it came to childbirth, laws were scarce but theories (most of them hogswallop) abounded. As a scientist, Jemma was engaged in perpetual experimentation to learn what factors secured the best experience and outcome for her birthing mothers. She had filled countless journals with notes and observations and, though she had made some headway, her most repeated finding was that all mothers and all births are unique.

Physical fitness obviously played some part. Healthy, well-nourished women, free from illness and infection unsurprisingly gave birth with fewer complications. And even those healthy women could be further assisted by simple things like hot poultices placed on their lower abdomen and back, freedom of movement and a quiet environment in which to labour.

When she had the leisure, Jemma assisted her charges pre-labour in gaining the mental discipline and courageous outlook that she knew could make an enormous difference. Yet even when she did not have that luxury, she knew that the constant presence of a trustworthy and supportive birth attendant could do the rest.

She had seen more than enough cases where women came into their labouring so full of fear, their bodies so tense with terror and their wider circumstances so bleak that Jemma could do little to assist. Those cases caused her a great deal of pain and left her utterly drained. But it was in those instances that she chose action instead of despair. It was for those women that she had a saddle bag full of clary sage and raspberry leaf and sweet almond oil and anything she had ever heard of being useful to anyone. She would declare her own findings in time.

And so it was that she found herself, arms full of cumbersome packages from the apothecary and the haberdashery, being heartily hailed across the village square. She turned towards the sound of the voice, but was so heavily burdened by purchases that her sight was obscured. In an instant she felt her parcels being lifted out of her arms until she was quite unencumbered.

Before her stood Mr Leopold Fitz, his larger arms doing a remarkably better job at managing her parcels. Beside him stood his sister, smiling warmly.

“Miss Simmons,” said Mrs Ward. “I really am so very pleased to see you again.”

“And I you, Mrs Ward, Mr Fitz,” Jemma replied with a curtsey. “But please, Mr Fitz, do not trouble yourself with my packages.”

“Not at all,” he replied genially. “But do allow me to ask, how far is it that you are required to carry them? Perhaps I might be able to offer myself to you… Err, that is, perhaps I could be of some assistance to you.”

Jemma laughed. “You are very kind, sir, but Xochi is tethered just here under these trees and she has remarkably capacious saddlebags. I believe she is more than up to the task.”

“Xochi?” Mr Fitz repeated. “Even as horse names go, that one is unusual.”
“It is short for Xochiquetzal but even I have to admit, it is quite a mouthful. I hope you don’t think it too irreligious of me to have named my horse after an Aztec goddess.”

“Not at all,” Mr Fitz replied. “Mine is named for the father of invention. But what is this goddess of yours meant to have presided over?”

Jemma raised her eyebrows. “Are you quite sure you wish to know?”

Mrs Ward laughed. “Is it terribly scandalous?”

“That very much depends on the audience, I suppose. Xochiquetzal was associated with beauty, fertility and female sexual power.”

Mrs Ward managed to contain her response to a knowing smile. Mr Fitz, however, was taken by a sudden coughing fit that almost saw him lose his grip on Jemma’s packages.

“She was meant to serve as a protector of young mothers and a patroness of pregnancy, childbirth, and women’s’ crafts,” Jemma went on calmly. “Personally, I can give or take the weaving and embroidery but for many of my mothers, it is their life blood.”

When at last Fitz recovered his composure, he managed to hand the packages one at a time to Jemma who loaded them into Xochi’s saddlebags. He studiously avoided meeting her eye.

“Perhaps I shall fetch Triplett and his sister,” he muttered. “They would like to pay their respects to you, Miss Simmons, I am sure.” He quickly excused himself.

Miss Simmons and Mrs Ward meandered after him in the direction of the milliner’s shop, where Jemma supposed the others must have been engaged.

“Miss Simmons,” Mrs Ward began, linking her arm through Jemma’s. “It is quite fortuitous that we should meet this morning. I have been longing to speak with you.”

Jemma looked at her new acquaintance with interest.

“As I mentioned the other evening, you are the only one who knows of my… condition. I very much hoped, Miss Simmons, that you might agree to come and take tea with me at your convenience, and perhaps we could talk further.” She allowed a vulnerability to show in her expression that Jemma had not yet seen. “I am in extremely sore need of a confidant, you see.”

“I would be delighted to come,” said Jemma sincerely. “You expressed a hope the other night that you and I might become very good friends. I want to assure you again, Mrs Ward, that I share that hope.”

The other lady’s smile was warm and appreciative. “I thank you, Miss Simmons. You are very kind. As it happens, I shall be quite alone when you call. My parents have already returned to Bath, Mr Ward will be with Colonel Garrett and his regiment, and my brother and his friends leave later this evening to pursue some sport at Mr Triplett’s family estate in Shropshire.”

“Then we shall have all the cucumber sandwiches to ourselves,” said Jemma. “And no one to judge if we should add an unfashionable amount of sugar to our tea.”

Mrs Ward laughed. “I can’t imagine you indulging in an unfashionable amount of sugar, Miss Simmons, but you have quite seen through me. Perhaps I shall get very carried away and, though there be only the two of us, order a cake as well.”
“You simply seemed the sweet-tea sort,” said Jemma. “You are right to guess that I cannot abide sugar in tea, but fashion has nothing whatsoever to do with it. Cake, however, I am very partial to.”

“Then cake you shall have. Plate after plate of it,” Mrs Ward enthused. “Oh, Miss Simmons, simply anticipating your coming has put me quite at my ease. I cannot tell you how grateful I feel.”

Jemma grinned. “Say it with cake, then. Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow will be wonderful.”

“The one potential hurdle is that I await the arrival of an increasingly tardy infant, expected well over a week ago,” said Jemma. “If it is that I am called to deliver in the morning, I shall notify you as early as I possibly can.”

“I think I shall survive a day without you,” said Mrs Ward bravely, then she smiled. “Especially if left unsupervised with a whole cake.”

“And when I get to you at last I shall be prepared to go without,” Jemma laughed.

“What is it that Miss Simmons will be going without, Daisy?” enquired Mr Triplett who had wandered up to join them. Mr Fitz, still pink-cheeked, loitered just behind him.

“The pleasure of your company, of course,” Mrs Ward replied, casting a pleading glance at Jemma. “I have just explained to her that you leave this evening for Shropshire.”

“I hope you have wonderful weather for your sport, Mr Triplett,” said Jemma, looking back at Daisy reassuringly. “I take it you enjoy hunting.”

“I do,” Triplett laughed. “But do say a prayer for poor Fitz, won’t you, Miss Simmons.”

“Shall I beseech the Almighty for a bounty of foxes? Or is it starling you go out to shoot?”

Fitz sighed. “Simply pray, Miss Simmons, that I shall endure the ordeal without complaining, that I shall carry myself like a man in the face of unnecessary cruelty and bloodshed and that there will be excellent dinners to compensate me for having to splash about in mud all the day long.”

“I really don’t know, Mr Fitz, if I’m convinced that hunting is your sport,” Miss Simmons observed. “Perhaps you should take up ornithology. I understand it is very soothing.”

Triplett laughed. “At our house, we hunt. If Fitz wants to watch the birds, he can do it in his dressing gown from the serenity of his own conservatory.”

“My brother is terrible at choosing his friends, you see, Miss Simmons,” Mrs Ward declared. “He needs to find himself some more bookish types who prefer stimulating conversation to muskets, and eating cake to pursuing sport.”

“Do not make yourself uneasy, Mr Fitz,” said a female voice from behind Jemma. “I shall sit and make conversation with you and you shall eat all the cake you like. We shall be quite cosy by the fire, you and I.”

The little party turned to find Miss Triplett, in all her splendour, on the arm of an imposing gentleman. Jemma knew him immediately, though she had never before seen the man.

“Miss Simmons,” said Mrs Ward, “This is my husband, Mr Grantham Ward.”

Ward looked her over dismissively and his bow in response to her tremulous curtsey was half-
hearted at most.

The others were talking, it seemed all at once, but Jemma felt a pressing need to get as far as she could away from those terribly familiar dark eyes.

“If you’ll excuse me,” she announced hurriedly, stepping backwards in the direction of where Xochi was tethered. “I realise I’ve lost track of the time. I really must be getting away.”

Fitz instinctively went to follow her. “It might be some weeks before we see one another again,” said he. “Perhaps even months. I do hope we shall find you well on our return.”

“I very much plan to be well,” she called over her shoulder, knowing she was being rude but finding herself quite unable to help it. “I do hope you will enjoy your sport.”

With one hand already on the reins, the last thing she expected was to find her other hand caught in a firm grasp. She turned to find herself gazing into the eyes of Mr Fitz who sought either to assist her escape or further detain her, she had no way to tell.

“I had hoped to bring that book to you before I left, Miss Simmons,” said he, “but, alas, our plans have changed and I have quite run out of time.”

“It is of no matter, Mr Fitz,” she replied curtly, wishing he would release her. “I am sure I shall be too busy to read it just now in any case.”

Hurt flashed in his blue eyes. “Then perhaps I shall simply send it on, in case you should find yourself with the leisure and inclination,” said he. “It is only that I think you might find it diverting.”

Jemma immediately repented, not of her haste, but of her callous treatment of her friend. “I am quite sure that I shall, Mr Fitz,” she said earnestly. “And you are very kind to send it. My only fear now is that I shall choose to read it instead of attending to pressing responsibilities.”

“You could not be irresponsible, Miss Simmons,” Fitz shook his head. “I have only known you a short time, but I feel a deep certainty of that.”

He manuevered his hand so as to help her mount her horse and she repaid him with a grateful smile.

“Until you return, then, Mr Fitz,” she said, looking down at him from her mount. She glanced uneasily over to where Ward stood, his back to her and his attention focused elsewhere. Mrs Ward caught her eye and smiled and waved. She returned the gesture with as much enthusiasm as she could muster.

Fitz raised his top hat and inclined his head. “Until then, Miss Simmons.”

He watched as she rode away, his flesh seeming to blaze where the touch of her hand had seared him. He wandered, distracted, back to his party of friends, utterly uncertain as to how to interpret her sudden departure.

Ward had stalked off on his own somewhere, so Triplett took Daisy’s arm and turned to escort her back in the direction they’d come.

“Well,” said Miss Triplett quietly, extending her hand to Fitz as he drew near enough to take it. “It seemed Miss Simmons couldn’t get away from you quick enough, Mr Fitz. You must have said or done something positively dreadful.”

Fitz eyes snapped up to meet hers, finding her observation confirmed all his fears.
“I hope not,” he replied with fervour.

“If I am mistaken,” said Raina breezily, “then I am forced to return to my previous conclusion. Miss Simmons is simply unaccustomed to moving in such rarefied society and longs to flee from intimidating people like us with everything in her being. Though the poor thing has to tolerate your attention, of course, for fear of jeopardising her position in the community.”

Fitz tested this theory against his treasured memories of Miss Simmons’ ready warmth and wit. It didn’t seem to ring true but he knew he could barely trust himself when it came to Miss Simmons. He worried that these new and overwhelming desires to win her good opinion were colouring his judgement.

Miss Triplett leaned closer with a conspiratorial air. “As for her preference, I saw the way Miss Simmons looked at that soldier she danced with for the first two dances at Manderston. I imagine she is quite smitten with him. He seems to be on just the right societal rung for a midwife with no connections of which to speak. Perhaps when we return, if she is very lucky, we might hear that the two of them have become engaged. Will not that be a wonderful surprise?”

“Wonderful,” Fitz muttered from between clenched teeth. For the first time in his life he was thankful to be going hunting. He had never felt more like shooting something.

Jemma woke late the following morning. It was a relief to know that having at last welcomed Cameron McLaughlin into the world the previous evening, she was free to dress without rush. She was also looking forward to spending the morning with Mrs Ward, safe in the knowledge that Mr Ward would be out of sight and, hopefully, out of mind.

While she gathered the items she would need for her return visit to the McLaughlins’ later that afternoon, there was a rapping at her door. The messenger held out to her a wrapped parcel with an envelope tucked under the twine. After fishing for some coins and paying the man, Jemma took her mail back to her cluttered dining table and sat down to deal with it.

The envelope was addressed in a dainty hand. She took up her blade to open it and settled back in her chair to read.

My dear Miss Simmons,

I am more disappointed than I can possibly convey to tell you that we will not be able to enjoy our tea together today. My husband roused me in the dark this morning, insistent that Colonel Garrett requires his presence in town and so, to town we go. The cake I have ordered will go quite to waste. Though I am very sorry to deprive you of cake and cucumber sandwiches, I feel much sorrier for myself. The thought of at last being able confide in someone I trust had quite lightened my heart in the hours since we met yesterday and now I feel utterly bereft. I attempted to convince my husband that my travelling with him was unnecessary but he would have none of it.

I do so hope that I will somehow find another opportunity to converse with you before the significant day approaches. Please do remember me in your prayers, Miss Simmons. I shall certainly remember you in mine and always be thankful for your kindness.

Daisy Ward
Jemma found herself feeling terribly sad. How a wonderful woman like Mrs Ward could have allowed herself to be so deceived by Grantham Ward was a puzzle. But the deception was not of his wife alone. The entire family must have found themselves in his thrall. What a tragic life it seemed her friend was condemned to, to trail obediently after a man who married her, it must be supposed, for her fortune alone. And such a clever, effervescent, engaging woman as Daisy. Ward would suck the life out of her. She would most certainly do as Daisy asked and pray, though she was thankful that finding actual solutions was in the hands of the Almighty.

Her eye was drawn to the rest of her mail, lying on the table top in front of her. Jemma took up the brown package, turning it in her hands. She used her blade to slice the twine and folded back the paper to reveal a pristine leather-bound copy of *Conversations in Chemistry, in which the elements of that science are familiarly explained and illustrated by Experiments* by Mrs Jane Marcet. When she opened the front cover, another envelope slipped out, falling into her lap. This one was addressed with a much more spidery scrawl.

*Do not for a moment suspect, Miss Simmons, that I send this to you for your instruction. There can be nothing in this volume over which you do not already have absolute mastery. I simply send it for your entertainment and encouragement and, perhaps, as something for you to remember me by, hopefully fondly, while I am away.*

As you must have gleaned during our conversation, I am not anticipating this journey with much in the way of enthusiasm. I shall enjoy the company of my friends, of course, but I shall often be longing for home.

*I don’t suppose… No, I probably ask too much to request that I might be allowed to write to you during my absence? I suppose in return you would send me gratuitously detailed accounts of births and I might find myself just as badly off as with a dead stag. Not, of course, that I mean to compare childbirth to the gruesome death of an animal in any way.*

*Oh dear, if I weren’t this moment being summoned in haste to the carriage, I would undertake to begin this letter again but it is far too late for that.*

*Forgive me, Miss Simmons, for this strange epistle. I realise, of course, that you cannot now allow me to write for fear of receiving another one.*

*God bless you.*

*Leopold Fitz*
Dudes, the fact that so many of you are enjoying this is THE MOST AWESOME THING. Thank you thank you thank you!!! :D

Hope you enjoy this chapter – please let me know if you do!!! And then remember to tune in next chapter to find out whether or not correspondence blooms between our beloveds despite Fitz’s doubts!

For your enjoyment (or, more accurately, for MY enjoyment) here is the AWESOME manip that I totally asked memorizingthedigitsofpi to make for me and she very kindly obliged and put it on this authentic looking background of pretty ceramic. This makes me unreasonably happy. Thank you, Pi!!!

and here’s me hiding a little note at the bottom to say I am totally committed to getting a chapter up on Monday but sort of know I probably won't manage it. hedging my bets. i both love and hate the discipline of the two chapter a week posting-schedule.
“Fitz!”

“Fitz!” hissed Triplett.

The man in question peered out from beneath the dank fallen log providing him meagre shelter from the ubiquitous drizzle.

“One would think that a man so attached to a letter would be less inclined to pore over it in such inclement weather,” his friend sighed. “But on my soul, Fitz, if you do not pocket it this instant, I shall be more than a little aggravated. At this rate we’ll never track that stag.”

Fitz cast his eyes to the heavens.

“Which means, my friend, it will be considerably longer before you get to return to your warm fire and enjoy your precious dinner.”

Fitz sighed, folded the damp letter along its well-worn creases and tucked it carefully into the inside breast pocket of his greatcoat. It was almost a month into their hunting expedition and while he had been uninspired from the outset, he was now thoroughly fed up. At least Miss Simmons must have applied to the throne of heaven on his behalf, because the dinners had been excellent. As long as the stupid animal remained conveniently elusive, he was at any moment anticipating the call to retire for another excellent dinner and, after that, he intended at last to summon the courage to sit down and write his long-planned reply.

The blare of a trumpet, muted though it was by the moisture and mist, elicited a frustrated grunt from Triplett and a hastily swallowed whoop of delight from Fitz.

“It seems you get your way again,” Triplett grumbled as the two of them mounted their horses and set off in the direction of the house.

“Your idea of me getting my way is vastly different to mine, dear fellow,” Fitz replied, utterly unable to suppress the cheeriness he felt. “But you must at least acknowledge that I become better company after a long bath and a good dinner.”

Triplett snorted. “That is a fact over which I simply cannot argue.”

…

Though it had been several weeks since he’d last been lost in their depths, Fitz could not escape the memory of Miss Simmons’ shining eyes. He even somehow managed to recall the precise weight of her dainty hand in his and the particular expression on her face when he said or did something that seemed to please her. He relaxed into the steaming heat of his freshly drawn bath, throwing his head back and losing himself in the pleasure of recollection.

In an instant she was before him, in the simple but elegant gown she had worn to his family’s ball, her hair bedecked with pure white blossoms. Fitz knew how to conjure her now, compelling evidence in support of the old adage that practice makes perfect. He’d learned how to envisage her presence so well he could practically hear her voice and feel her form in his arms in the close
proximity of a dance. But while, in his mind’s eye, she gazed at him in the utter adoration with which he knew he must gaze at her, he was aware that reality was less kind.

He took up a cake of soap and began scrubbing at the flecks of viscous mud that had somehow splattered everywhere – beneath his high collar and cravat, under his hat and through his hair. Fitz could only hope that the mounting collection of antlers on the wall in Triplet’s study was bringing him satisfaction. At least all that tramping about gave Fitz plenty of time alone with his mostly enjoyable thoughts.

Even if it had occurred to him that he should dwell on other matters, Miss Triplet, for some reason, seemed almost as preoccupied by Miss Simmons as he, but was unable to mention her name without reference to this fellow Sitwell, of whom Fitz was growing thoroughly sick. There was also the unavoidable truth that Miss Simmons had some knowledge of his brother-in-law that would most likely do the man no credit. But regardless of the obstacle or objection, Fitz was no longer free to veer from the path he had wholeheartedly embarked upon.

That Miss Simmons might have come across information that revealed unpleasant truths about Ward’s character was not entirely surprising. Ward’s recent behaviour towards his family, and especially his sister, had made Fitz distinctly uneasy. Anyone could see that Daisy was suffering, but Fitz felt it acutely. Again he recalled the early days of their acquaintance, and Ward’s interest, not only in Daisy’s virtues, but also in her income. With the power of hindsight, it was abundantly clear to her brother which had always held the greater appeal.

His manservant knocked in forewarning then entered at his master’s summons with a jug of heated water to pour over Fitz’s head and rinse off the suds. The deluge was invigorating but Fitz vaguely wished it also had the power to wash away his unpleasant sense of disquiet. He had long begun to feel that he was liable for acting the part of champion to a man who would go on to destroy his sister’s happiness. He knew that he could not take all of the responsibility upon himself. Daisy had quickly become besotted. His parents had been similarly swift to give their consent. But if he had been more discerning, been less inclined to allow looks and charisma and the appearance of honour to blind him, perhaps then he could have been a friend to Daisy as well as her brother. He could have tried to dissuade her, could have protected her in her vulnerability to the man’s charming bombardments rather than playing his part in lowering the drawbridge and letting Ward saunter in.

His man reappeared holding out his robe. Fitz lolled in the warmth a moment longer before he finally stood, water cascading from his curls and running in rivulets down his pale back and torso. He stepped out of the tub, let his man assist him into his robe and, deftly knotting the cord about his waist, moved to dry himself near the fire. He took up the towel that had been warming in front of the grate and rubbed at his hair, absentmindedly gazing into the roaring flames. His current melancholy provided a sharp contrast to his near-euphoria of earlier after finally being allowed in out of the rain. He’d have to do better for the sake of his hosts.

Fitz knew of only one remedy for his despondence, only one tonic for his flagging spirits, only one solution that would enable him to arrive at dinner in tolerably cheerful spirits. Still drying his hair with the towel, he walked through the luxurious apartment in which he had been accommodated and crossed the room to the imposing mahogany dresser. Spread across its surface were the pages of his most treasured possession, now almost entirely dried after its brief encounter with the elements, her perfect copperplate somehow surviving un-smudged.

Letting the towel hang loosely round his neck, he leant against the window casement with a smile of anticipation to once more read the words he had long since committed to memory.
Dear Mr Fitz,

You must have quite given up hope of receiving a response from me given the weeks that have passed since the delivery of your generous gift. Please allow me to thank you once more for your thoughtfulness toward me. The parcel arrived at a most fortuitous moment, when a happily-anticipated engagement had fallen through and left me melancholy. However, instead of feeling sorry for myself, I opened your package and eagerly poured over that wonderful volume. I hope you yourself have read it, Mr Fitz, for I am about to expend no small amount of ink in extolling its virtues.

I delighted in Mrs Marcet’s premise – how wonderful to convey knowledge through such a compelling series of imaginary scientific lessons! Do you imagine that "Mrs B" is based on Margaret Bryan, the author of a Compendious System of Astronomy? I cannot help but wonder.

I similarly adored her two young pupils! I was enchanted by Emily, observant and rather serious, and Caroline, mischievous but inventive. One must admit, their virtues and foibles are rather useful qualities for young scientists! That Caroline continually tempts Mrs B into the more imaginative aspects of science is just one of the many triumphs of Mrs Marcet’s exemplary narrative.

I hope you will forgive me for relating my favourite extract of the text, though I am afraid you might be shocked. Do you recall the discussion on the composition of water? Mrs B points out that oxygen has "greater affinity" for other elements than hydrogen. Caroline instantly grasps the romantic possibilities of this: "Hydrogen, I see, is like nitrogen, a poor dependent friend of oxygen, which is continually forsaken for greater favourites." Mrs B starts to reply — "The connection or friendship as you choose to call it is much more intimate between oxygen and hydrogen in the state of water" — then sees where this is going and hastily breaks off: "But this is foreign to our purpose."

With a suppressed giggle, Caroline has discovered "sexual chemistry" and the reader will remember forever the composition of a water molecule: two hydrogen atoms in unrequited love with an oxygen atom (H₂O). Caroline adds suggestively: "I should extremely like to see water decomposed…"

Oh, Mr Fitz, the memory alone of that section of the text has made me smile during more than one inappropriate moment.

And, while I’m in the realm of the inappropriate, I suppose I must now do my part to continue your education and regale you with the birth-related anecdote you specifically mentioned dreading. I shall try to keep the gratuitous details to a minimum. Perhaps if you feel queasy, Mr Fitz, you can simply lay my letter aside and have a nice lie down.

This week I had my very first experience of delivering a set of twins with a footling breech presentation. Despite the fact that head-down is the ideal presentation (because of the helpful pressure it places on the cervix and the fact that the birth attendant is able to quickly ensure that the babe is in no danger from the wiles of the umbilical cord) many babies still seem to want to arrive in the world feet first. Ewen and Elspeth Donaldson are among them!

It is perhaps the sweetest thing I have experienced, to have assisted in the safe delivery of one little person by his feet and then to look up and see a second little set of feet, slender ankles and knobbly knees, dangling from between their mother’s thighs. In case you are wondering (though I am certain you are not) about the role gravity played in this birth, Mr Fitz, Ainsley Donaldson was on her feet throughout the entire labour. This use of the natural force of gravity helped to counteract that lack of pressure from the head and enabled Ainsley to move through her contractions, keeping her hips and pelvis loose. I can attest that the lady has a strong grip – my arm still bears the bruise. And when, in self-preservation, I gently transferred her grasp to a large brass ring that had been installed for the handy storage of coils of rope and similar, the meek and slender mother ripped it clean away from
the wall! Even with that one minor injury to their home Mrs Donaldson performed wonderfully, always focused and confident.

I often take my mothers to the 139th Psalm as we prepare together, you see, Mr Fitz:

For thou hast possessed my reins: thou hast covered me in my mother's womb.

I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well.

My substance was not hid from thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth.

Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect; and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them.

How precious also are thy thoughts unto me, O God! how great is the sum of them!

We discuss what it means for the baby we are yet to meet to be covered by the Almighty; to have been fearfully and wonderfully made by an all-powerful Creator who only makes marvellous works. We rejoice together in the fact that no stage of the baby’s development, though hidden to us, is outside of the care and notice of the Father of All. And just as I see my mother-to-be begin to comprehend the enormity of the sovereignty of God over the life of her child, I remind her that she too has been formed by this wonderful and attentive Creator-God, who looked at all he had made and saw that it was very good.

What comfort and strength there is to be found in knowing one’s own self, one’s own body, to itself be a masterpiece. We are so quick, are we not, Mr Fitz, to find fault with ourselves. Our face is too thin, our complexion has no brilliancy, our features are not at all handsome, our nose wants character, our teeth are merely tolerable, our eyes are sharp and shrewish, and on and on we go in the most ridiculous effusions of vanity. However, when we lay that vanity aside, what a wonder is the female of the human species! Not only muscle and sinew, brain and soul. Not only the intricacy and magic of the human eye and the perfect physics of the human foot. The female body is a vessel that can sustain and nurture life, that can bring that life forth into the world and then nourish and nurture it! The female body is not a mere canvas in a gallery to be admired or criticised at the caprice of the beholder. Rather, it is a powerhouse of vigour and might. Oh, Mr Fitz, if a side-effect of my work with these women could be that they go forth from their birth enamoured of their own bodies, freshly awed by what those bodies can achieve, not only in procreation but in all the areas of life – what a victory I would feel myself to have achieved! But I digress.

I then teach her about the wondrous muscular structure that is the uterus. (Brace yourself, Mr Fitz!) It is an extraordinarily elegant and complex design that can create enough force within itself to deliver a baby. In the second stage of labour, the uterus exerts the primary effort; the mother the secondary effort. Perhaps, if you have an interest I could show you a rather evocative knitted replica lovingly made for me by an elderly midwife with whom I briefly studied.

Do you know that, as yet, other than the requirement of a fully-developed baby, we have no understanding of what actually prompts the uterus to begin the process of labour? Much more is needed in the way of rigorous scientific study. While there are those who concentrate their effort on cadavers, I prefer to conduct my research on the living, breathing, birthing woman in all her God-given beauty and power.

But I suppose you have heard quite enough, Mr Fitz, so I shall conclude... for now!
I wonder about the progress of your debate with Mr Triplett. I suppose you are both familiar with the work of Blaise Pascal. I have just been re-reading his Pensées in bed of an evening. As Charles Perrault said of the work, "Everything is there—purity of language, nobility of thought, solidity in reasoning, finesse in raillery, and throughout an agrément not to be found anywhere else.” Besides, reading in French makes my eyelids so heavy I am quickly forced to extinguish the candle.

I wish you sublime weather, divine dinners and may God bless you also, Mr Fitz.

Jemma Simmons

He had had to have a nice lie down mid-way through his first reading. This was partially on account of the way his heart quickened when the letter he had long given up anticipating was suddenly somehow resting in his hand. Another portion of the blame could perhaps be attributed to the seductive curl of her handwriting and the delirium induced by the fact that the heavenly Miss Simmons had sat and spent some considerable time curling these characters by hand just for him. But it also seemed that Miss Simmons took up her quill with a determination to scandalise. At first she quite succeeded. However, continued gradual exposure – paragraph by paragraph, page by page – slowly bred in him composure. He hoped one day to be able to withstand being in the presence of Miss Simmons while she loudly pronounced the word “Uterus!” without him so much as blushing, though he knew, as yet, that day was quite a way off. Miss Simmons’ presence and loud pronouncement of anything at all was such a pleasing prospect that he quite returned to his previous high spirits. Fitz whistled as he hastily dressed for dinner and when he made his way out onto the landing to head in the direction of the dining room, he even contemplated sliding down the bannister.

The sight of Miss Triplett appearing from within her apartment somewhat stifled his frolicking.

“Good evening, Mr Fitz,” said she, holding out her hand for him to take. “Do give me a thorough report of today’s activity, won’t you.”

Fitz feigned a look of thoughtfulness as they descended the grand staircase. “We stood about in the rain,” he replied. “Then we rode about in the rain for a little while. Then we found some mud which seemed to quite delight your brother so we stood about in that for some hours. Then there was some more rain and then, at last, the blessed trumpet sounded and home we came.”

“Oh, dear, Mr Fitz.” Raina shook her head. “Will Antoine be terribly despondent over dinner?”

Fitz laughed. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen Triplett despondent,” said he. “Besides, he is quite in his element out there in the wilderness.”

“Is “wilderness” an appropriate description for the Shropshire countryside, do you think, Mr Fitz?” Miss Triplett enquired.

“It is funny you should make that remark,” Fitz replied. “I was just trying to think how I might describe it in a letter I hope to write this evening. How would you describe the Shropshire countryside, Miss Triplett?”

“Oh, no, Mr Fitz,” said she, shaking her head, her eyes wide. “I would not dream of putting forward an opinion. Not in front of someone as learned and experienced as yourself. I shall be quite led by you and your greater understanding of these matters.”

Fitz sighed. Much more of this deferential equivocating from Raina and he’d be in danger of actually falling asleep on her.
“Go on, Miss Triplett,” he urged. “I really would like to hear your view.”

She tilted her chin down so that she could look up at him, exhibiting her long, dark eyelashes to their best advantage. “You value my opinion then, Mr Fitz?”

“Well,” he huffed, “It is your family estate, Miss Triplett. Few would be in a better position to describe it than yourself.”

“Describe what?” Triplett asked, appearing just as the heavy doors to the dining room were pulled open by invisible attendants, summoning them to be seated.

In an armchair by the fire, an elegantly-dressed elderly lady sat in an attitude of quiet meditation. Triplett crouched before her.

“Grandmamma!” he whispered, gently shaking her arm.

She woke with a start. Finding her grandson kneeling before her, she took up her golden trumpet and held it to her ear. “What is it you say, Antoine?” she squawked.

“Might I accompany you in to dinner, Grandmamma?” Triplett offered his elbow and the old lady took hold of it, anchoring her feet firmly on the ground and allowing her grandson to gallantly pull her to her feet.

Fitz followed after his friend and led Miss Triplett into the hall behind her grandmother, escorting her to her chair.

After Triplett had seated his elderly relative, he repeated his earlier question.

“I was just asking your sister how she would describe the Shropshire countryside. She took exception to my use of the word ‘wilderness’.”

“Mr Fitz!” Miss Triplett gasped, a horrified hand clasped to her heaving bosom. “I would never take exception to any of your opinions! I was simply seeking to elicit yours. You are, of course, my most learned acquaintance and I respect your judgement more than anyone’s.”

Fitz chuckled, taking his own seat across from her. “My dear Miss Triplett,” he sighed. “I am not learned in any way that actually means anything.”

“Self-deprecation, Fitz?” Triplett laughed. “I expect that from some men of my acquaintance but not from you.”

“What good will all my learning do me, Triplett?” Fitz asked, not without a hint of desperation. “I can’t actually use it to achieve anything meaningful.”

“Ahhh,” Triplett shook his head. “I know where this is coming from. Fitz, I think you must’ve read that letter one time too many.”

“What letter?” Raina enquired angrily. “Who could possibly be sending you criticism, Mr Fitz? You who are beyond reproach!”

“I am far from being beyond reproach, Miss Triplett, but though I regularly deserve it, no one is criticising me. It is only that now I have held out for me a shining example of what it really looks like to use one’s learning for the purpose of assisting one’s fellow man. Any criticism comes from within.” Fitz sighed. “From my correspondent I gain only longed-for inspiration.”
The old lady started in her chair. “Who longs for consummation!?” cried she, raising the trumpet once more to her ear.

Raina reached over and gently patted the old lady’s hand with her own. “Never mind, Grandmamma,” she shouted into the horn. “Mr Fitz was just talking about feeling inspired.”

“And who, pray tell, is the lucky gel that he desired!?” she asked, her heavily-lined eyes alight with excitement as she peered short-sightedly around the table.

“No, no, Grandmamma!” Raina replied loudly. “Someone who motivates him!”

Fitz smiled, nodding to himself.

“Eh?” the old lady cried.

“Invigorates him!” Raina shouted.

Fitz tilted his head to one side and nodded again.

“Pardon?” asked the aged Mrs Triplett.


“Quite right,” Fitz muttered, catching Triplett’s eye. The two grown men collapsed into giggles.

The elderly woman turned her bright beady eyes upon Fitz. “Well, Mr Fitz!” she declared, her quavering voice strident. “I understand congratulations are in order. When shall we expect the happy day?”

Chapter End Notes

In which the role of Triplett’s grandmother is played by the Dowager Queen from “The Slipper and the Rose”. She looks a bit like this:
DUDES, I love that so many of you are into this! I am having a ridiculous amount of fun with it! Thank you thank you thank you for all of your encouragement!!!

Tune in on Friday to see if Fitz manages to write that reply he's psyching himself up to. What will Audrey have to say about it?
This was a task that would require significant finesse. Fitz was in love with her, there were no two ways about it. However, he felt strongly that the way to convey that information to the lady in question, was almost certainly not by means of a letter. He had never believed himself to be a particularly debonair correspondent.

Given Raina’s singular unhelpfulness in the composition of a poetic description of the Shropshire countryside, he found himself quite on his own. Miss Simmons’ wonderful and confronting epistle had ended with a charming benediction over his weather and his dinners, so he could possibly start there. Any more detail about their daily traipsing about might induce in him a state of nausea and in her a state of unconsciousness and neither of those outcomes would do at all, given that the gentleman was at pains to recommend himself.

Raina’s lengthy after-dinner performance on the pianoforte at least allowed him an opportunity to gather his thoughts. He let the sonata wash over him as he nursed his sherry. It occurred to him to wonder if he should ever hear Miss Simmons perform on the pianoforte. In all likelihood, she regarded such an occupation as frivolity next to her meaningful work. Yet he recalled glimpsing a compact upright piano that night, so many months ago, on which he had first looked through the front door of her cottage.

He let out a low sigh that went undetected by his companions under the volume of the piano. What was the use of wondering? What would be the occasion on which he could attempt to induce her to play? There were no ladies in his home that he could persuade to offer her an invitation to visit. For now he would have to focus his efforts on letter-writing.

A second sherry, intended to fortify his courage and steady his hand, just lasted Fitz to the end of Miss Triplett’s recital. He joined the lady’s brother in the rapturous applause that failed to elicit so much as a stir from the ancient grandmother and then got to his feet to take his place at the elegant writing desk that had once belonged to Triplett’s beloved father. Triplett settled himself on the lounge with a heavy book of theology.

Parchment before him and quill in hand, Fitz was poised to address the letter when Miss Triplett suddenly appeared at his elbow.

“Are you writing a letter, Mr Fitz?” she asked.

“I am hoping to, Miss Triplett,” replied Fitz politely.

“Then fear not, Mr Fitz,” said Miss Triplett in a theatrical whisper. “I shall be as quiet as a mouse.”

Fitz inclined his head in thanks and turned to dip his quill in the ink.

The sudden sharp scrape of wood against wood quite startled him. He turned back to find Miss Triplett seated immediately beside him, no doubt much nearer than her chaperone would have allowed, had the aged lady been awake.

“To whom do you write, sir?” Raina enquired, in direct contradiction of her previous assurances.

“A relatively recent acquaintance,” replied Fitz, hesitating in putting quill to paper while she hovered...
“Is it a man to whom you write?” Miss Triplett queried. “Or a lady? I hope for your sake it is not a lady. Writing to a person of the opposite sex requires a great deal of tact and care. I find it quite exhausting.”

“Oh?” Fitz enquired, his interest piqued. “As it happens, it is a lady to whom I write. I don’t suppose you could advise me how best to go about it.”

Miss Triplett’s sudden smile forcibly reminded Fitz of the detailed colour illustration of a grey nurse shark he had in a book in the library at Manderston.

“Well, Mr Fitz,” she laughed. “I shall have to know who the lady is, of course. One cannot provide sound advice when one is has so little information with which to work.”

Fitz wavered a moment.

Miss Triplett gazed patiently up at him from under her lashes.

Fitz steeled himself. “I am writing a letter to Miss Simmons.”

“Oh?” Miss Triplett sat back in her chair, looking intently at the intricate beading on her gown. Fitz suspected she had heard precisely the answer she anticipated though it seemed to give her little pleasure. “I didn’t hear that she’d become engaged. I presume you must only write in order to congratulate her?”

“Miss Triplett,” Fitz sighed. “To the best of my knowledge Miss Simmons is utterly unattached.”

The lady went to some lengths to make her confusion obvious. “Then why on earth, Mr Fitz, would you have a need to write to her?”

“I asked her permission to write to her,” Fitz replied. “I hope to improve our acquaintance.”

Raina fixed him with a look of concern. “Forgive me, Mr Fitz, but I think I must misunderstand. Is not Miss Simmons the parish midwife?” The contempt with which Miss Triplett spat out the last word was not lost on Fitz. “And if I am correct in my assumption, Mr Fitz, might I ask if you genuinely believe it behoves a gentleman such as yourself, a man of your unimpeachable character and standing, to pursue an improved acquaintance with such a person?”

“Miss Triplett,” Fitz laughed. “You sound as if you believe Miss Simmons to be quite dangerous. Are you concerned for her reputation? Or mine?”

Antoine looked up from his book with amused interest. “Worrying about Fitz’s reputation, Raina?” he asked. “You should worry about it if the news of his attitude to our respectable masculine pastime were to become the subject of local gossip.”

“It is much worse, Antoine,” said the lady conspiratorially. “Mr Fitz is corresponding with an unmarried midwife!”

Triplett laughed. “No, Mr Fitz is trying to correspond with an unmarried midwife. You look like you are quite in his way.”

Raina looked affronted.

“Come now, Raina,” her brother gently scolded. “Come away and let the poor man tie himself in
knots in peace. Would you like to thrash me at cards again? It’s been a little while, I think my ego might be up to it.”

Fitz shot a grateful glance at his friend as the lady reluctantly stood and moved her chair away.

Dipping his quill once more, he settled down to write, throwing Raina’s notions of caution to the wind.

Dear Miss Simmons,

I think I am at last recovered enough from your letter to venture composing a reply. I beg you to remember, though I do not for one moment believe you forgot, that my study of the Sciences has been purely theoretical – forces, chemicals, equations. The distance between myself and the hands-on practice of my discipline is approximately the distance from Shropshire to the sun.

So, when I attempt to write that I was “charmed” by your anecdotes, that I was “edified” or “enlightened”, you might like to substitute those words with the ones that best describe the reaction you anticipated your letter would provoke. I quite see through you, you understand, Miss Simmons.

Rather than engage with any of the topics you raised, I will simply say that I’m pleased you enjoyed the book and hope you will forgive me (even if you do so with a knowing smile) for using my absolute power over the quill in my hand to introduce entirely different subjects of my own.

Before I do, though, let me congratulate you on your choice of reading material. As you anticipate, Triplett and I cite Pascal at one another all the time. For some weeks before you mentioned his Pensées in your letter I have actually been thinking of something Pascal said with regard to you, Miss Simmons. I am a little trepidatious to transcribe it for fear that you might misunderstand my intentions but I shall have to trust that you are able to attribute to me a generosity of spirit, and it is in that generosity that I quote: Small minds are concerned with the extraordinary, great minds with the ordinary.

My anxiety, of course, stems from a firm belief that you perceive childbirth to be far beyond the ordinary. I only mean ordinary to imply that birth is an everyday occurrence. I do not for one moment mean to quibble with your beautiful images of the Divine at work in female form. The Apostle Paul tells us that in Him we live, and move, and have our being – what better evidence of that than what you see every day in the miracles of both mother and child. More than that, though I admit I abhor the details, I mean to say I very much admire your passion for the work you do. Should I ever be acquainted with a woman anticipating the birth of her child, I shall do all in my power to enable the lady to have you by her side.

Fitz laid down his quill a moment and realised that, now unoccupied, his hands were quite shaky. As if she sensed his pause, Raina neglected her brother and their card game to seat herself once more at the pianoforte. She immediately broke into one of those Scottish airs that seemed perennially popular among genteel ladies.

How it was that young women were encouraged to sing of topics franker than the topics those same ladies were allowed to conduct in polite conversation was always a source of bafflement to Fitz. Scored for a soprano voice, these popular ditties spoke of love and pursuit, sexual invitation, and people declaring their love openly in a variety of less-than-socially-appropriate ways.
What probably caused Fitz to take more notice than many of the young men he’d met at university, was the tendency of these young unmarried ladies to sing these songs in contrived accents. Many a chaste lady sang a bawdy song while impersonating a Scottish girl, with no one thinking the worst of her. Fitz was all for freedom of expression and he bore no beef against the dramatic arts, but now that every single one of the many eligible girls his parents had paraded through the house had attempted this precise scheme on him, he had built up quite an immunity. In fact, the suggestive Scottish air intended to woo provoked in him precisely the opposite effect.

He sighed and returned to his letter.

…

Jemma Simmons had been awake all through the night and could see no rest on the horizon of the day that followed. A little flaxen-haired girl, who had seemed initially reluctant to leave the safety and warmth of her cocoon, was at last sleeping in her exhausted mother’s arms and Jemma was hoping soon to be asleep herself.

She all but fell off her horse around two in the afternoon and after entrusting Xochi into the hands of the Coulson’s squire, stumbled up the slight incline to her cottage. On her front step sat Audrey and Beth reading a book of nursery rhymes.

“Letter! Letter! Letter!” announced Beth, shoving the book off her mother’s lap and leaping to her feet.

“Hullo, Beth,” said Jemma fondly as the little girl threw her chubby arms around her skirts.

“As you have probably gleaned, we have a letter for you,” confirmed Audrey, holding the envelope out to Jemma as she approached.

Jemma immediately recognised the spidery scrawl.

“That is one rather impressive seal, don’t you think, Miss Simmons?” said Audrey slyly. “As I always say, if one must have a family crest passed down through the ages, one should ensure that it’s a really showy affair like that, do you not agree?”

The addressee elected not to engage.

“And think of the wax he must consume!” Mrs Coulson continued. “Well, I suppose he can afford it. At least he got the full benefit of his expense, by the thickness I’d estimate that his polite enquiries regarding your health extend as far as a third page.”

Jemma sighed and held out her hand for the letter.

“I am sorry, my dear,” said Audrey, handing it over with a sympathetic glance at the dark circles under Jemma’s eyes. “You’ve been up all night again, haven’t you? I should know better than to tease you when you’ve had no sleep, but it isn’t every day that a young woman under my own roof—”

Her tenant raised a tired eyebrow at the exaggeration.

“- is wooed by the future master of the entire estate! Philip and I find it all most diverting.”

“Audrey,” said Jemma flatly. “I can see that you are thoroughly enjoying yourself, but is there a way I could make you go away without being terribly insulting? I shall be so much more pleasant when I’ve had a few hours sleep.”
Audrey laughed. “I note that you didn’t contradict my choice of the word ‘wooed’.”

“Take heart that I shall contradict you at length, Audrey, when I’m better able to stand unassisted,” said Jemma firmly. “I shall even let you read the letter as proof of how mistaken you are.”

Audrey shook her head, her eyes twinkling. “Do not make promises you cannot keep, Jemma. I recommend you read it yourself first to be sure that he isn’t wooing you. Then, if you manage to find a paragraph or two in which he doesn’t wax lyrical about your beauty and your charms, perhaps you could read those aloud when you come and eat with us tonight.”

“Really?” Jemma asked gratefully.

“Of course,” Audrey insisted. “But be assured I am acting entirely in my own self-interest. If I leave you to cook for yourself in this state, you’ll probably burn our little cottage quite to the ground.”

Jemma laughed. “I am sure you are right.”

“Remind me when you arrive that we also have to reply to the invitation we received from the Talbots,” said Audrey. “You love a good night of sitting about making small talk with the local people of fashion, don’t you, Jemma?”

“As the midwife who delivered their baby I believe I can excuse myself from the small talk and hide myself away in the nursery with little Sidney. The two of us have important matters to discuss.” In truth, she was quite looking forward to it.

Audrey and Beth took their leave and Jemma let herself in to her little house, unceremoniously stripping off her clothes on her way to her bed chamber. At the last moment before collapsing on the mattress, she hesitated, returned to the kitchen table and took up the letter and her blade, carrying them back to bed with her. Perhaps reading Mr Fitz’s letter would have the same soporific effect as reading in French.

His seal was magnificent. She resolved to pay particular notice to the ring next time she saw him. A rampant lion shadowed the form of the F surrounded by intricate filigree. It was almost a shame to take the blade to it.

Suddenly enlivened, Jemma sat up against the pillows to read. He addressed himself to her in writing in quite the same way he spoke. She smiled to herself over his amusing reaction to the details of her correspondence but then found herself reading his reflection on Pascal over and over.

How lovely it was, and what a pleasing surprise, to find in her friendship with Mr Fitz such a meeting of minds! And that he, with his excellent education and his depth of understanding could look at her, a midwife in the parish, and not cast her aside as someone of no importance, but apply to her no less than Pascal’s inspiring phrase! And that even after such a compliment, express concern that she might rather find it an insult because he not only knew but perhaps even seemed to understand the flashes of the divine that she felt she encountered in her daily work. And that he would express such confidence in her that he would even anticipate the labour of his own future wife with a certainty that it would be Jemma he would desire for her to have by her side. This was generosity itself.

Feeling utterly reinvigorated, Jemma eagerly read on.

*I must admit, Miss Simmons, that something you said to me, when I had the pleasure of riding with you, has been playing on my mind and I eagerly anticipate our next meeting. I cannot help but feel
you will have much to teach me. You mentioned nitrous oxide and the possibilities it might hold for assisting in your work. Despite my natural aversion to all things medical, I found myself thinking, quite against my will, of the class of organic compounds known as ethers.

Lower ethers, as you know, are highly volatile and flammable, especially in conjunction with oxygen but, consider, Miss Simmons, what is known of the Diethyl ether. Combined with alcohol and administered as an inhalant, could it not have a use in anaesthetic dosage? I assume your enthusiasm for nitrous oxide is the potential for the patient to remain conscious yet be distracted from pain. However, with a therapeutic dose of Diethyl ether, one would lose consciousness before dangerous levels of dissolved ether in the blood would be reached.

I would imagine there could be side-effects, possibly highly unpleasant ones. The strong, dense smell would most likely cause irritation to the respiratory mucosa. I would imagine that body weight and physical condition would provide significant variables. But what an exciting development it could be for the medical profession. War-time amputations, surgery and other extremely unpleasant things from which my mind seeks to skitter away could be carried out without the trauma of extreme pain for the patient. Even, perhaps, of most interest to you, emergency birth by Caesarean-section. I am simultaneously eager to learn your thoughts on the matter, Miss Simmons, and terrified as to the sort of detailed medical scenarios you might be forced to describe to me in the course of our conversation.

Jemma looked up from Mr Fitz’s letter, eyes wide with anticipation. Oh, how long must it be before she could see him again? She had her own make-shift laboratory established on her dining table, perhaps they could find an opportunity to work together in practice as well as in theory. At the thought – picturing their heads bowed close together over a heating flask, imagining their combined notes hastily scribbled on the one parchment in two vastly different hands, practically hearing their excited conversation – Jemma was suddenly struck by the impossibility of her fantasy becoming reality. Though Mr Fitz expressed a desire to theorise with her, no doubt in a stilted but terribly appropriate drawing room under the watchful eye of supervisors and chaperones, he would never allow himself to be alone with her in her little cottage just as she would never be permitted access to the established laboratories in which he could work.

She shook her head as if to dispel the mist of her overreaching ambition. It was enough to find someone who talked to her as an intellectual equal. It would have to be enough.

She returned to his letter, conscious of her exhaustion rushing back in on her.

I suppose I could use the otherwise wasted time following Triplett about in the mud to attempt to engender the necessary mental discipline. Prepare yourself, Miss Simmons. I managed to read your letter, even if I cannot claim I did it with perfect equanimity. Perhaps when we see one another again you will be able to say all sorts of similar things to me without me batting so much as an eyelid.

If only I had any sense that the occasion on which my eyelids might be tested would be remotely soon. Triplett will insist upon investigating every murky nook and every dirty cranny of his vast estate for signs of life that he can kill before we will be allowed to leave.

I have thought about feigning the call of urgent business in town but he would see right through my charade. I don’t suppose you could turn your mind to devising a parish emergency that must summon me home, Miss Simmons? It would have to be convincing. I trust you to think of something.
Yours in some desperation,

Leopold Fitz

Jemma smiled to herself as she laid the letter aside. She was smiling still when sleep came at last to claim her.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay, peeps. I know the fandom is reeling but I'm still here for this. Let's try and keep spoilers out of the comments if poss. I know at least one of my readers hasn't got to Season 3 yet! I wrote a post 4,722 Hours thing called Ship of Fools - that would be a fine place for spoilers in the comments if you've got stuff to get off your chest!

BUT - I've realised my life is about to get pretty full of IRL responsibility in the next few weeks and I AM stealing time from important activities and people in order to get this thing published. SO, super apologies but I'm dropping back to one chapter a week - next time you'll hear from me will be Monday 9th. I humbly beg your forgiveness!

Anyway, I'd better hurry up and post this while it's still Friday in some parts of the world!!!

Ok, as for this chapter:

- apparently that stuff about the bawdy songs sung in Scottish accents is legit. Here's the source that I admit I directly plagiarised: https://janeaustensworld.wordpress.com/2010/07/12/jane-austen-and-music/ As soon as I read that I thought, gee whiz, poor Fitz! So, yeah, it had to be Raina.

- so, the use of ether (and shortly after that, chloroform) in medical procedures is JUST about to be discovered at this point in history. I don't know if it's very convincing but I liked the idea of it occurring to Fitz a decade or so earlier. this is fanfic so, heck, why not? Perhaps it can be the dendrotoxin/icer of this AU.

- and I forgot to say in my last chapter, yes, apparently that chemistry book did legit exist and, yes, that was an accurate description of its contents - classic! Here's the frontispiece and title page of a later edition:
Conversations of Chemistry
In which the Elements of that Science are familiarly explained and illustrated
by Experiments and Plates.

To which are added
Some late Discoveries on the Subject of the
Fixed Alkalies,
by Mr. Gay, Esq.
Of the Royal Society.

A Description and Plan of the
Pneumatic Cistern
at the College
and
A short Account of
Artificial Mineral Waters
in the United States.

With an Appendix,
Consisting of Treatises on
Dyeing, Tanning and Currying.

From Ewer's Press.
1805.
Her welcome to the Talbot home a few weeks later had been more than gracious. It almost rivalled the welcome she had been accustomed to expecting in that bygone era when Miss Jemma Simmons was the belle of every ball. She appreciated the fact that this welcome had been earned by more than an expensive gown displayed on a pleasing figure.

In those days she could never have found a plausible-enough excuse to have forsaken the ubiquitous queue of young men desperate to dance with her. Now, dressed in her unassuming gown, after a warm embrace the hostess led her away from the festivities and through to the darkened quiet of the nursery. Already honoured, Jemma’s gratitude increased all the more when she caught a glimpse of Mr Sitwell across the crowded parlour, already having consumed enough wine for his nose to match the colour of his splendid red coat. She hoped against hope to hide herself away for the rest of the night.

Little Sidney Talbot’s shock of dark hair against the pale sheets gave him the appearance of a rumbled raven. His little face, wrinkled into a disgruntled expression in sleep, was among the sweetest Jemma had seen. The proud mother stroked his tiny brow and accepted all her compliments in pleased consensus.

This had been an initially unexpected part of her role as an increasingly established presence in the parish. She not only attended the mother and child during birth and in the few weeks that followed, but Jemma often also found opportunities, if not pleading invitations, for her to return and admire the little one as it grew. Together with Dr Coulson she saw to the ongoing health and well-being of mother and child long beyond the newborn stage. This continuity of relationship gave her great satisfaction and she thought with pride of the families for whom she had been able to deliver more than one child. What a welcome she now found in those homes, and what inclusion that welcome now provided her as she moved about the community.

Given that small Sidney was steadfastly asleep, Jemma’s stated hopes of hiding with him in the nursery were not going to come to fruition. Mrs Talbot was soon eager to return to her guests and kindly insistent that Jemma accompany her.

She was half-relief, half-distress to see that the rug had been rolled back, the most accomplished pianist prevailed upon, and that dancing had commenced. In the middle of the set, stepping on toes as he went, was Mr Sitwell, nattering away to some poor young lady who had not the strength to resist him. Audrey was already out on the floor, dancing with an elderly patient of Philip’s and, it seemed, shouting to make herself heard.

Dr Coulson appeared at her side. “Shall you and I have a jig, Jemma?” he asked. “We cannot let Audrey show us both up.”

She smiled back at him. “Yes, that would be lovely. That way I can enjoy myself for a little while before I shall have to insist to a certain gentleman that I have no further intention of dancing. You shall have to make a show of wearing me out, Philip. Do you think you are up to the task?”

“Miss Simmons!” Philip replied, intrigued. “Which of these poor young men is going to have his heart broken this evening? I shall be sure to be on hand with a tonic.”
Jemma shook her head as he led her toward the set. “You shall not learn that information from me, sir. But I do hope you have that promised tonic with you. It may well be me that comes in search of it.” She looked around the room as she and Philip awaited their turn and spotted an older man she had not seen before, watching her with some interest.

“Who is that gentleman?” she asked Philip quietly when the dance provided them with an opportunity to draw near to one another.

Philip seemed to know precisely whom she meant without even having to look. He sighed heavily. “He is the reason I was so eager to get out on the dance floor myself. That gentleman is Mr Robert Gonzales. A man of extreme melancholy and a highly specific line of questioning. I found myself feeling quite interrogated by him.”

“I am sorry to hear it,” Jemma replied laughing. “Surely he has learnt by now to leave his melancholy and his questions at home when he steps out into society. I certainly have, and I do not even approach his years and experience.”

Philip chuckled. “She who packs her Pinard horn when dressing for a ball. I imagine you’ve asked some very specific and impertinent questions in inappropriate places in your time.”

Jemma sighed and thought of Daisy on the night of the Manderston ball. “Oh, Philip. You are right, I am dreadful. There is nothing for it. You shall have to introduce me to this Mr Gonzales. It seems he and I quite deserve one another.”

“Perhaps,” Philip acknowledged smiling, “but for your sake, let us put it off for as long as we can.”

After two dances with Philip, Jemma was forced to relinquish him into the arms of his wife. She had not stepped far from the floor when General Talbot drew near to her with two gentlemen by his side. The older man gave her a charming smile, the younger kept his face impolitely averted, seemingly distracted by the guests seated around card tables at the far end of the room.

“Miss Simmons,” Talbot hailed her heartily, perhaps under the influence of an excessive amount of his wife’s excellent plum wine. “Might I be allowed to introduce to you two of my colleagues in the military?”

“Oh, of course, General Talbot,” she replied. “I should be honoured to make their acquaintance.”

“This is General John Garret,” he said, indicating the older man. “And this,” Talbot turned, grasping the elbow of the younger man to catch his wandering attention, “is Mr Grantham Ward.”

Jemma quickly composed her features as the younger man turned his face towards her. “Miss Simmons and I have met,” said he, bowing curtly. “I believe you are acquainted with my brother-in-law. He seems to have a good deal to say about you.”

Jemma found herself colouring under Ward’s scrutiny but could not manage a reply.

“Fitz?” Garrett enquired, laughing. “He has a good deal to say about everything. That book worm is all words and no action.”

Ward laughed along with him. “Though occasionally he does play with his chemistry set.”

Jemma felt affronted on behalf of her friend. “Perhaps in order to give his utmost to his intellectual pursuits, Mr Ward, Mr Fitz has felt it best for his attention to remain undivided.”

“I’m sure you are right, Miss Simmons,” Garrett replied soothingly, though the expression he
directed at Ward conveyed his contempt. “What a shame it would be if anything distracted Fitz from the careful cultivation of his library.”

Quite agreeing that it would be a shame for Mr Fitz to be distracted from such a noble pursuit, his novels notwithstanding, Jemma considered her options for escape. She felt quite desperate enough to trample over all societal codes to get away from such close proximity to Ward. In the corner of her eye she caught sight of Mr Gonzales, once more watching her solemnly from his corner.

“If you’ll excuse me, gentlemen,” she said with a little curtsey, “I have neglected a new acquaintance of mine. Good evening, Mr Ward, Mr Garrett.” The two men bowed disinterestedly.

She hurried over to where Gonzales sat moodily nursing his glass of wine. “Mr Gonzales,” she declared. “I know this is very untoward, but I hoped you might allow me to introduce myself to you. My name is Jemma Simmons.”

“I know of you,” he replied, his voice unexpectedly gravelly. “You are the parish midwife.”

“I am,” she replied, thankful for the way in which his lack of social grace complimented her own. They would be the only two people in the room who would speak directly and without obfuscation.

“I had hoped to speak with you this evening,” he went on. “For I think you might be able to help me piece together a story that I am pursuing.”

“And are you constructing this story for pleasure?” Jemma asked politely, already expecting to be contradicted.

“No, Miss Simmons,” Gonzales replied. “It cannot possibly bring me pleasure. It pertains to the loss of my beloved daughter.”

“Sir,” said Jemma, chastened. “I am terribly sorry to hear of it.”

“Then perhaps you will not mind,” said he, “if I ask you a few simple questions?”

Jemma shook her head. “I will not mind at all.”

“My daughter was very beautiful, Miss Simmons,” Gonzales began gruffly. “Very beautiful but very broken. She had lost her mother as a young child and, though I will never forgive myself, I must own responsibility for the fact that I entrusted her care into the hands of a woman in whose character I was very much deceived.”

He paused to take a long draft of his wine.

“I believed that my daughter was in London being educated, taking advantage of the Masters and pursuing every opportunity that London society afforded her. Instead, I was to learn too late that her head was being filled with vanity and nonsense and that she was daily being placed in the way of men of ill repute.”

Jemma did not speak but sympathetically laid her hand on the grieving father’s arm.

“I am working to ascertain the name of the person in question but it seems that for a time she was taken into the care of a gentleman. It cannot be said that this gentleman’s intentions were honourable, but the governess made no effort to protect my daughter from him or to inform me as her employer. She simply continued receiving the money I sent for my daughter’s care and, so far as I can tell, kept it for herself.”
“Mr Gonzales,” Jemma whispered. “I cannot begin to imagine what you have suffered.”

“I am desperate to learn the events of the last days of her life,” said he. “All I have of her is a simple unmarked gravestone and the rumour of a child.”

“A child?” Jemma enquired, her interest further piqued.

“Yes, Miss Simmons. The minister of the little church in whose graveyard she lies seems to think my daughter died giving birth to a daughter of her own. And so far as I can ascertain, the little girl survived.”

The peace of the room and the orderly precision of the dancers was suddenly interrupted by a scuffle at the door which Jemma could only hope distracted the grieving man from the way her eyes involuntarily flew to where Grantham Ward stood, hulking behind his mentor.

“Miss Simmons!”

Jemma stood to see who it was that cried her name in such desperation. Dr Coulson and Mr Sitwell seemed to have flown from their opposite corners of the room to be by her side.

Under the ornate archway between parlour and hall, hat in hand but eyes wild, stood Mr Thomas Nash, the older husband of a simple girl who had already birthed him nine babies. Jemma herself had delivered the latest two arrivals.

“It’s my Sally, Miss!” the poor man cried. “We’d only just realised she was once more with child but the pains are upon her already!”

The society ladies hid their shocked faces behind fluttering fans as if to shield themselves from such earthy reality.

“Never fear, Miss Simmons,” declared Mr Sitwell boldly. “I offer myself as your escort.”

Jemma shot a pleading look at Philip who immediately made the necessary connection with the gallant gentleman and their earlier conversation.

“Thank you but that won’t be necessary, sir,” Coulson replied. “Miss Simmons and I will follow Mr Nash in our carriage. Come, Audrey.”

But his wife required no summons. She was already at his elbow ready to depart.

Miss Simmons cast a last glance at Gonzales who stared back at her in patent suspicion. “I am sorry to leave you, Mr Gonzales. I hope we shall meet again.”

The shattered man got slowly to his feet and bowed in farewell.

Mr Sitwell stood to one side, looking distinctly put out as the Coulsons and Jemma quickly took leave of their hosts and followed the desperate man out of the house.

The property was not far from the Talbot’s home and in almost no time, Philip was ascertaining the health of the mother while Jemma did the same for the child.

“Sally!” Jemma asked after a cursory examination. “How far along do you suspect yourself to be?”

Sally looked back at her wild-eyed. “I’m still feeding Nathanael! It never occurred to me that I could be with child so soon.”
“But don’t you remember this exact thing happening with Silas’ birth?”

A look of recognition dawned over Sally’s broad face. “Oh, yes!” But the recognition was soon replaced by the blank-faced concentration she required to ride through her building contractions.

Philip sat back on his haunches for a whispered consultation with his colleague. “Sally seems healthy in herself, but she is most certainly in the throes of labour. How premature is the arrival of the child?”

“That’s just the thing,” Jemma whispered back. “The first of Sally’s births that I attended started exactly like this. Never have I met a woman less in tune with her own body. There’s no concern about the size of the child. She’s carried it to full-term without even realising. Silas was the same.”

“So we’re about to welcome the tenth Nash of this generation into the world,” Philip observed dryly. “Let us hope that they all have a little more sense than their parents.”

“Indeed,” Jemma nodded. “But I have no reason to suspect that this will be a complicated birth. She may not have the faintest idea about how to read her body during pregnancy but if the last two occasions are anything to go by, she is a highly efficient birther. Take Audrey home. I’ll more than likely be here until dawn anyway.”

“You’re certain?” Philip asked.

“I’ll send Nash for you if I feel there’s any need,” she replied.

Coulson got to his feet and went to assist Audrey who was settling the eldest of the other nine children into their beds.

“Alright, Mrs Nash,” said Jemma, positioning herself more comfortably at the lady’s side. “Let’s see if God has a daughter in mind for you at last.”

…

Fitz had developed a cunning strategy of drawing out breakfast for as long as he could. Triplett might have been satisfied with a mere tankard of ale but his friend was an entirely different beast. Aided and abetted by the kitchen staff, Fitz would consume, in leisurely fashion, as many plates of eggs, smoked bacon, toasted bread and any other delicacies of the chef’s devising as he could possibly manage before allowing himself to be harangued into the great outdoors.

Triplett was simultaneously exasperated and reluctantly impressed. “If I attempted to put away as much food as you, my dear fellow,” he cried, “I’d be off to London every month to be fitted for a new pair of breeches!”

Raina shook her head with a little smile that made Fitz quite uncomfortable. “Now, Antoine,” she soothed, allowing her eyes to travel appraisingly over their guest’s physique, “we cannot all expect to maintain such an excellent figure as Mr Fitz now, can we?”

Fitz nearly choked on a flake of pastry while Antoine begrudgingly agreed with her.

But beyond the significant advantages of early-morning feasting and the opportunity for prolonging the inevitable traipsing out into the mud, Fitz had found a third incentive to linger longer over the first meal of the day. As at Manderston, Triplett’s butler would have a footman appear with any letters, bearing them solemnly to their addressee on shiny little silver platters. And seeing as Fitz existed day-by-day on the hope of just such a delivery, extending the breakfast period enabled him to fully experience and appreciate the delicious agony of another day passing with no word from Miss Simmons, which surely brought the day on which he would hear from her ever closer.
At last, a pimply footman, carefully balancing a disappointingly anaemic-looking envelope on his little silver salver, was making his way directly across the dining room towards Fitz. Before the boy had crossed even half of the room, the gentleman’s heart was in his throat and his fingers were trembling with the anticipation of tearing into a fresh parcel of her presence, a paper-bound magic spell conjured in her looping hand – an enchantment that could invoke her for him though she was so many miles away.

But when at last he held the longed-for letter in his hand, he took one glance at the hastily scrawled direction and immediately the spell was broken. This was not the work of Miss Simmons’ steady hand. This was from Daisy, and he could tell by a mere glance at the uncharacteristically trembling lettering, that this was Daisy in distress.

He tore open the envelope and found his hunch confirmed by the splash and smudge of tear-stains across the page.

My dearest Leo,

I have deferred interrupting your time with the Tripletts but I am afraid I can postpone the inevitable no longer. Here is just one of the truths I have hidden from you, brother: Grantham is a gambler. From almost the very day of our marriage, he has worked like a man possessed to wager our fortune on any and every card game he could join.

He is away from home, which is nothing unusual, but this time, when I say he has left me in alone in an empty house, I mean it perfectly literally. The staff have had to be dismissed because we cannot pay them their wages, the furniture has been claimed and carried off by those to whom he is in debt, and I am utterly on my own with no one and nothing but a shell of a house and only that because of Father. I have not been able to bring myself to write to our parents and tell them the truth. I am so ashamed.

Thankfully, I have one remaining ally. You may recall that knowing our parents would be in Bath and that you would be in Shropshire for some months, faithful Mack offered his services to me in London as my squire. I am so thankful to him for he has kept the carriage and horses as far from the name of Ward as he has been able and consequently he is here to drive me home. We leave for Berwickshire tomorrow.

I do not wish to break up your party but I do not think I could stand to stay at Manderston all on my own. Is it too much to ask for you to come home with me, my brother? There is more news that you do not yet know but trust me when I tell you that at this stage no words from me will be required for you to learn it all.

I am so sorry again, Leo, for the inconvenience and disappointment this must cause you, but I do so yearn to seeing a friendly face.

God bless you,

Daisy

Fitz had not even finished reading the letter before he was on his feet, shouting orders for his horse to be made ready. He hastily instructed his man to pack his things, bid a rapid and apologetic farewell to Antoine and Raina and galloped off into the mist.
I cannot believe I gave myself so much extra time and am still posting at 11:58pm on Monday night...

Aaaaanyway, next chapter we'll have our beloveds back in the same parish! Woot woo!!!
Hello! Welcome back! You might notice the sudden introduction of setting in this chapter. That's coz all this talk of Perthshire reminded me that I had chosen Berwickshire for its cliff-edge sea side location and then totally forgotten to make the most of it. I'll have to go back and re-write some setting into my previous chapters but here we go, welcome to Berwickshire!

Hope you enjoy this chapter - love to hear what you all think so make sure you let me know and please try to keep your S3 comments nice and vague coz I have at least one reader who hasn't gotten into S3 yet - but for those of you who are up-to-date EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEK for Tuesday night!!!!!!!!!!!! :D

Jemma emerged at last from the cottage and stepped bleary-eyed into what should have been the ruckus of the seven eldest Nash boys scampering about the garden in the late-afternoon light. She could hear the sound of waves crashing against the nearby cliffs, but no other signs of life. The garden was deserted.
“Miss Simmons!”

Jemma looked about her as best she could, but she could see no one.

“Miss Simmons!”

In confusion, she looked up. Dangling from the lower boughs of the great oak above her were seven pairs of bare feet in varying states of grubbiness.

“Has Father done somethin’ terribly bad?” one of the bigger boys whispered loudly, clambering down a branch or two to make himself heard over the sound of the ocean.

Jemma did her best to mentally re-trace her steps back to her arrival at the cottage the previous evening. “Not anything that I’m aware of,” she whispered back. “Why do you ask?”

“There’s a soldier watchin’ the house,” another boy replied. “He keeps comin’ and goin’. We’ve been spyin’ on him all day.”

“Wha’ was it that he called Robbie?” the bigger boy asked.

“Interferin’” the second boy whispered from higher up in the tree.

“And he called me Ignant,” cried a smaller boy. “When everyone knows’ m’ name’s Charlie!”

“No’ Ignant,” the bigger boy laughed. “He was tellin’ you tha’ you’re ignorant. Tha’ just means you’re stupid.”

“Oi!” the little one shouted. “I’m tellin’ Mam you said I was stupid!”

“I didn’ say it,” his brother chortled. “That snoopin’ soldier said it! I’m jus’ repeatin’ wha’ I heard him say!”

“Now, now, gentlemen,” Jemma interjected. “None of you are to go and bother your mother. She needs to rest, you understand?”

“Yeah,” replied the little one, letting himself fall backward so that he just held purchase of the branch with the backs of his knees. “We know all abou’ it, Miss. Don’ go near Mam. No’ unless you wan’ a fierce scoldin’.”

“Look,” hissed the elder boy, scrambling higher up into the tree. “The soldier’s back!”

Jemma looked down the cliff road with interest.

“Nah,” another boy argued. “Tha’s no’ the soldier. The soldier has a red coat and rides ever so slow. This one’s in a blue coat and drivin’ his horse like a madman.”

They watched with interest as this new blue-clad rider charged up the hill and streaked past the cottage gate.

The one driving his horse like a madman was unmistakeably Mr Fitz, his head down and his body low to the animal, galloping swiftly in the direction of Manderston. Jemma was so taken-aback that she almost cried out to him. But before she’d had time to process the appearance of her friend, before the thunder of Franklin’s hooves had died down, the boys were once more chirping away in their perch above her.

“Here he comes!” the littlest was shouting. “Ever so slow, like Jeremiah said.”
“And if this one’s coat hadn’ been red,” added Charlie, “how would we have even known he was a soldier?”

The logic was hard to argue with but the sight was no less unwelcome. Up the hill, just nudging his horse into a gentle canter, rode Mr Sitwell. There could only have been one reason why this soldier had spent the day haunting the Nash property and trading insults with the Nash children. He was anticipating the emergence of the Nash midwife.

Without the independence her horse provided her, Jemma steeled herself for the long and weary walk home along the cliffs with her unwelcome companion.

“Miss Simmons!” Sitwell called, feigning surprise. “What a coincidence!”

A sudden shower of small boys thudded out of the oak and surrounded her like a phalanx of warriors. If only they could have raised her aloft and borne her home on their bony shoulders.

Sitwell fixed the squalid rabble with a menacing glare before alighting from his horse. “Will you allow me the honour of accompanying you home, Miss Simmons?” he enquired politely, but whatever sheen might have remained on his chivalry was all the more diminished by the fact that Jemma could see no possible way to refuse him.

“Certainly, Mr Sitwell,” she sighed, resigning herself to her fate. Two miles worth of tedious conversation when they’d already canvassed the traditional subjects for small talk – if only she had forgotten herself, hitched up her skirts and run to the road to hail Mr Fitz.

When all of the health of all of her family members he’d never heard of or met had been positively ascertained and while Jemma inwardly cursed him for leading his horse as he dawdled along beside her instead of letting her leap into the saddle and gallop off into the sunset, Mr Sitwell gradually unfolded his true purpose.

“It is extremely fortuitous that I should happen upon you this afternoon, Miss Simmons,” Sitwell began, and Jemma had to turn her face towards the ocean so that he might not see her maddened expression. “For I have long desired to raise with you a topic of no small importance to myself or to you.”

Jemma trudged along silently, her eyes on the white gulls as they whirled above the slate grey sea.

“I know, Miss Simmons, that you live with a humble and unpretentious vision of what your future might hold, and that you restrict your vision prudently, in order to protect yourself against yearning for things that your circumstances will prevent you from seizing hold of.”

Intrigued by this description of a woman who sounded so utterly unlike herself, Miss Simmons turned to meet his eye.

“I am not sure that I follow, Mr Sitwell,” she replied.

He chuckled to himself. “Come now, Miss Simmons,” said he, shaking his head. “Let us not dissemble. You and I have already broached the subject of your tragic resignation to your fate – childless and alone.”

“I must beg your pardon, sir,” cried Jemma. “But you are putting words into my mouth!”

He nodded condescendingly. “Of course, Miss Simmons. You would never describe your plight in a way that maligned the façade of independence you seek to project. It is a professional necessity, I have no doubt. But I see your heart, Miss Simmons. And I know with certainty that, just like every
other specimen of your sex, you long for more than to simply usher other women’s children into the world. No, you must be a wife and a mother yourself!”

Jemma was deeply angered by his impertinence but she held her tongue. Mr Sitwell interpreted her silence as a swelling of emotion at being so intimately understood.

“You can lay your secret fears to rest, Miss Simmons,” he urged her. “You are trapped atop a tower of self-imposed yet tragic celibacy, but I shall be your knight in shining armour! I shall be your prince, who slays the dragon and comes to claim you for himself! You shall be my wife, Miss Simmons! And I shall be the one to give you the gift of children of your own.”

The lady forced herself to take several deep breaths before composing herself to reply. “Mr Sitwell, doesn’t tradition insist upon a proposal of marriage taking the form of a question rather than a declaration?”

“We need not stand upon ceremony, you and I, Miss Simmons,” he whispered.

“No sir,” she replied stiffly. “I think we must. In fact, I quite insist.”

“Very well,” he laughed. “But, my dear, you’ll forgive me for not lowering myself onto one knee. The recent rain would quite ruin my breeches.”

She nodded her agreement.

“Miss Simmons,” said he, with the smile of a man who knew the answer before he asked the question. “Would you do me the honour of agreeing to become my wife and allowing me to bestow upon you the wifely and motherly duties that will ensure your happiness for the rest of your days?”

Struggling as she was to even begin to fathom the depths of Sitwell’s tediousness, somehow she managed to formulate a civil response. “Sir, please do accept my thanks for the compliment you pay me. I am very sensible to the honour of your proposals, but it is impossible for me to do other than decline them.”

Sitwell’s grin grew broader still. “You are very wise, Miss Simmons,” he replied with a bow. “For what sort of a courtship do we undertake if you do not at first refuse me? Certainly not the courtship of the women of fashion you no doubt aspire to move among.”

“Sir, you quite misunderstand me.”

“No, no, Miss Simmons, I understand you perfectly,” the gentleman replied with a wave of his hand. “I flatter myself in believing that I accurately drew your character on the occasion of our very first meeting. So, my dear, save yourself the energy of refusing me a second time and instead, direct me to the most appropriate man to whom I can apply for permission for your hand.”

“You had better ascertain my permission first, Mr Sitwell,” she said firmly. “I think you’d best prepare yourself to receive quite a shock.”

“Go ahead, Miss Simmons,” he laughed. “I am ready for anything.”

She took in as deep a breath as her constitution would allow. “I have not, Mr Sitwell, nor will I ever aspire to move amongst women of fashion. I regard my self-imposed celibacy not, in the way you do, as tragic, but rather as blessed freedom in which I might live and serve as I choose. I need no dragons slayed, nor do I require the services of any knights or princes, regardless of the state of their armour. The sheer number of things you do not know about me, sir, stack themselves up in contradiction of your confidence in a tower that may well reach itself quite sacrilegiously to the
heavens and, as evidence of that, Mr Sitwell, I take exception to your description of my vision for the future as humble and restricted. To my mind, sir, my vision of the future quite encapsulates the entire world!”

Mr Sitwell stood opening and closing his mouth, but no sound issued forth.

“In short,” the lady continued, “I thank you again for the honour you have done me in your proposals, but to accept them is absolutely impossible. My feelings in every respect forbid it. I could not make you happy and I am convinced that you are the last man in the world who would make me so.”

The gentleman huffed a moment, pacing back and forth to the increasing confusion of his steed. He went again to speak but seemed still unable to produce sound. His face grew increasingly red, his manner more agitated until, at last, in utter denial of the chivalric code that had first rendered him incapable of leaving a lady to walk unaccompanied, Sitwell leapt into his saddle and, with a look of burning hatred in place of speech, galloped back along the cliffs in the direction whence he had come.

…

Fitz could not remember a time he had felt more relieved to guide his horse onto the broad drive that led toward Manderston House. Though frantic to see his poor sister, he was thankful to be returning at least a little before Mack. He was quite afraid of the scolding the big man would give him if he saw the state of poor Franklin’s hooves after two days of hard riding. However, in this instance, he at least had hope that the squire’s long-established affection for Daisy would enable him to overlook Fitz’s neglect of his animal. At his call, the reticent stable-boy, Lincoln, appeared from the shadows of the barn and readily enough agreed to look after Franklin. Fitz just had to hope his work would be up to Mack’s high standards.

“Mrs Hartley!” he called running through the house and, poking his head into each of the rooms in which she could possibly be found.

“Mr Fitz?” The reply echoed down the hallway from the kitchens. “Is that you home already?” She appeared in the hall with a bustle of skirts, her eyes wide. “We had no idea of expecting you, sir!”

“I know, Mrs Hartley, and I’m terribly sorry, only I rode faster from Triplett’s than any messenger could have done.” He stopped a moment to catch his breath.

“What on earth is the matter, sir?” Mrs Hartley asked, drawing near in concern. “Can I fetch you a cup of tea?”

Practically hallucinating a teapot and a plate of scones, Fitz managed to focus on the essential business first.

“I’m afraid it’s Daisy, Mrs Hartley.” Unable to divulge to her all of his fears and concerns, he simply told her the little he knew. “She has had to leave London at quite short notice and makes her way to Manderston even now. I expect her arrival at any moment. I know this is terribly inconsiderate of us but, Mrs Hartley, do you think you could give orders for our chambers to be prepared? I expect we shall be home for some weeks at least.”

Half-expecting a scolding, Fitz was startled to see Mrs Hartley smile. “At once, sir,” she replied warmly. “It’ll be lovely to have some family in the house. We have all been quite lonely without you.”
The unmistakeable sound of carriage wheels crunching on the pebble drive heralded Daisy’s arrival. Mrs Hartley bustled off to attend to her expanded responsibilities and Fitz jogged through the house and down the front steps to greet his sister.

He nodded to Mack who sat on the perch of the carriage gently tugging the horses to a standstill, and ran forward to open the carriage door for Daisy.

The first thing that caught his eye was his sister’s tear-stained cheeks, the second, the fact that she was unmistakeably and, by the looks of things, imminently expecting a child.

“Leo!” she cried, holding out her arms to him. He clambered into the carriage and sat himself beside her on the bench seat, gathering his sister into an embrace.

“My poor Daisy,” he whispered. “What on earth has happened?”

“I am so sorry, Leo,” she sobbed into his shoulder. “I should have told you everything when I was last home.”

“Why did you not?” he asked, still trying to comprehend the enormity of her plight. “Did you think I would have been anything other than sympathetic?”

But Daisy was too overwrought to reply with anything but tears.

“Come inside,” Fitz urged her. “I’m only just home myself and we’ve thrown Mrs Hartley into a frenzy so I cannot guarantee you buttered muffins by the fire.”

“The companionship of my brother is all the comfort I need for the moment,” she replied, bravely dashing away the fresh tears that fell.

“And you shall have it exclusively,” he declared. “In fact, I predict that before the day is out you shall be quite sick of the sight of me.”

Daisy shook her head. “That could never be.”

“We shall see,” Fitz shrugged, smiling sadly. “But I suppose Mack will tire of us quite quickly if we attempt to set up camp here in the carriage.” He clambered down and then turned and held out his hand to assist her. It was a shock to see her so altered. Her movements, usually so elegant and graceful, were significantly hampered by her new-found girth and her face, still stained with tears, appeared gaunt and haggard in the fading light. Within him a knot of rage began to form. How could Ward betray them so entirely? It was one thing for the man to turn his back on his bookish brother-in-law once his desired prize had been won, hurtful though it had been. It was another thing entirely to desert Daisy, his affectionate wife, who had wanted nothing more than to be by his side and to love him.

Daisy’s grip on his arm as he escorted her into the house was firm and her step was steady. Without particularly thinking, he walked his well-trod path through the house until brother and sister found themselves in the library. Mrs Hartley had obviously anticipated the movements of the pair she’d known since their infancy as two scullery maids scuttled passed them having hastily removed the furniture covers, thrown open the curtains and expertly laid a fire that already roared merrily in the grate.

Before the cushions of their favourite fire-side armchairs had fully taken their weight, Mrs Hartley herself appeared with a well-laden tea tray. Fitz pondered, not for the first time, whether the housekeeper might have descended from a long and noble lineage of fairy godmothers.
Though an expert at keeping her opinions well concealed, Mrs Hartley could not hide her shocked reaction to Daisy’s obviously altered state.

“Daisy!” she cried, then slapped her hand over her mouth. “I am very sorry, Mrs Ward,” she said hurriedly, the minute she’d gathered her wits. “Please forgive my impertinence.”

Daisy eased herself out of her chair and in two strides crossed the floor and threw her arms around the waist of the woman who had, in many ways, raised both her and her brother. “Mrs Hartley!” said she, her tears falling afresh. “There is no impertinence to forgive! I have never wanted to be Mrs Ward to you. I have always been and shall always want you to think of me as Daisy!” She drew back to look into the older woman’s face. “Though is it terrible that here am I, about to have a child of my own, and all I want is to return to the freedom and simplicity of childhood myself?” The thought brought on a new rush of emotion and Daisy buried her face in the housekeeper’s shoulder. Mrs Hartley hesitated a moment, her hands fluttering at Daisy’s shoulders, but then she abandoned her sense of propriety and embraced the younger woman fully.

“Shhh, Daisy,” Mrs Hartley soothed. “There’s a good girl. We’ll have some tea and a little talk and you can tell Leo and I all about it. Pour the tea won’t you, Leo my lad?”

Fitz couldn’t help but smile to himself. There was something comforting about being mothered by someone who actually seemed to have a portion of natural maternal instinct.

When Daisy had unfolded the sorry tale of Ward’s neglect and the hidden vices that seemed to be well ingrained before the couple had even met, the three of them sat nursing their teacups in sober silence.

“When does Ward know about the child?” Fitz asked at last.

Daisy nodded. “I know now that Grantham married me for my fortune and my fortune alone. All his loyalty, all his devotion is to that wicked Garrett. He seemed interested enough in me for the first few months of our marriage,” she wryly indicated her swollen belly. “But when I refused to write to Father and ask for more money, he ceased all pretence. Gambling away every last stick of furniture was, I suppose, his way of intimidating me into relenting, and eventually I shall have to acquiesce. He must imagine that the anticipation of a child will force me to call upon Father at last. It’s not unreasonable for me to require at least a bed to sleep in. But how shall I explain…” Poor Daisy, collapsed again into tears and Fitz crossed the room to kneel at her feet, grasping both her hands in his.

“You shall not bear the burden of explaining anything, dear sister,” he declared. “You are utterly without fault in this terrible set of circumstances.”

“Of course I am at fault, Leo,” Daisy sighed. “I agreed to marry the man!”

“And you did so with all of our blessing!” Fitz replied angrily. “We who should have protected you from predators like Ward. We were all charmed by him, Daisy. We were all fools!”

Somehow, Daisy seemed to find comfort in this thought. She took up the teapot with a determined attitude and poured fresh tea for the three of them, then sat back in her chair with her dainty cup and saucer. “Let us speak no more of Grantham Ward,” she said firmly. “He left me alone in our house in London and when he returns he shall find it empty. I cannot imagine it will take him long to seek me out here, but, until he does, I resolve to be free of him. Leo, you and I shall play house here with Mrs Hartley and I shall, for the first time in months, sleep soundly, eat well and look forward to the birth of my own sweet babe. If my husband refuses to provide for me, I shall have to make do for myself.”
Mrs Hartley, quite moved by Daisy’s speech, held up her teacup as if in a toast to her once young charge. Fitz followed her example and the three of them fell back into companionable silence, partaking of the excellent muffins.

“Oh, Mrs Hartley,” Daisy said at last. “Do you recall that cake I asked Cook to make for me ever so long ago?”

“I think so,” replied the housekeeper in vague recollection. “You were hoping to entertain a local lady friend, is that correct?”

Fitz looked over at his sister in some puzzlement.

“That’s right, Mrs Hartley,” Daisy nodded. “Please ask Cook to make it again. I shall re-issue my invitation as soon as possible.”
Chapter 13

Daisy’s cheerfulness, powered by pure bloody-minded resolve, lasted well into the final course of dinner when the cracks inevitably began to show. The siblings had insisted (though the housekeeper repeatedly reminded them that it flew in the face of all-hallowed and long-observed societal expectation) that Mrs Hartley join them for the repast and it was she who first noted the brittleness of her grown charge’s smile. The lady’s brother was not far behind in detecting her uncharacteristic flatness of tone as the meal wore on.

Within half-an-hour, Mrs Hartley was perfecting the closest she could come to hospital corners on the chaise lounge across the room from Daisy’s bed where she had tearfully pleaded for her brother to pass the night. Fitz had been surprised, but willing to do whatever his sister required of him. Mrs Hartley was flooded with memories of the days long gone in which the patient elder brother had overcome his natural squeamishness and threaded worm after worm onto his sister’s hook, refusing to leave the river bank, even at risk of missing his precious dinner, until she had triumphed over her very own carp. She recalled the many times he had helped Daisy limp home after a fall from horse or tree, even, memorably, once carrying the sobbing girl in his arms when the shock of an impact had been particularly great. She also remembered gathering after gathering of Daisy piling her usually modest plate high when her brother had been scolded for his greediness at parties and smuggling the contraband food onto his plate. Mrs Hartley was inundated by images of fraternal affection: the little girl, ensconced in an armchair by a roaring nursery fire, bent over the holes in her brothers’ stockings which she insisted upon darning herself with a sigh of motherly exasperation and, not-so-many-years later, the same little girl with the same sighs of motherly exasperation insisting her brother learn to darn his own tattered stockings and all of hers along with them.

Had Mrs Hartley had children of her own, she doubted if she could have loved them as much as her Leo and Daisy. Her heart swelled when Daisy clung to her in the sort of goodnight embrace they hadn’t shared since the lady was a girl and it was with a tender heart that she closed the bed chamber door behind her, noting the look of concern with which Leo watched his sister as she tossed and turned.

…

Fitz stumbled bleary-eyed to breakfast the next morning after finding Daisy’s bed already empty when he woke. It had been a horrible night. When she wasn’t wakeful and weeping she had been besieged by terrible nightmares. Fitz couldn’t even be sure if she was more haunted by the prospect of being without Ward or the prospect of being with him. He couldn’t fathom how he would ever be able to face his brother-in-law with any sort of composure.

But somehow, perhaps in the couple of hours just before dawn when Fitz descended into the sleep of the dead, Daisy must have managed to find enough rest to be refreshed for when he slumped into his chair, she greeted him with a fresh cup of tea and the sunniest of smiles.

“Leo, shall we fetch Lance and talk a walk to the copse this morning?” she asked eagerly. “I do so long to see how big our trees have grown.”

Fitz had almost forgotten about the hawthorn trees Mr Hunter had helped the three of them plant when they were tiny children. “Are you certain, Daisy?” he asked, his eyes involuntarily dropping to her unwieldy circumference. “It is at least an hour’s walk from the house.”
Daisy made a sweeping gesture towards the large windows with her piece of toast. “Of course I am certain. It is my beloved season of mist and mellow fruitfulness, Leo! We must be out amongst it, appreciating the rare autumnal beauty of Manderston. The horse chestnuts were planted along the drive precisely for the display they give at this time of year, as you certainly recall Hunter telling us when he caught us climbing them for their fruit. Besides,” she added in a tone that would brook no argument. “It is incumbent upon you to introduce your nephew or niece to his or her heritage and family estate.”

Fitz yawned and nodded, resigning himself to the long pilgrimage. At least he wouldn’t be required to pretend to shoot at anything.

Before he’d had quite enough time to enjoy the leisurely breakfast to which he’d become accustomed in Shropshire, Daisy had harried him away from the table and into his boots and the two of them made their way to the steward’s cottage. His sister appeared surprisingly energetic and sprightly for one so under-slept and so heavy-laden and Fitz found he was enjoying the walk despite himself. It only took a moment to convince Lance to leave little James with his mother and the three of them crunched through the fallen leaves, their cheeks glowing red in the dappled sunlight shining through the claret-coloured canopy above.

“I cannot believe you spent months hunting in Shropshire with the fabled Antoine Triplett and all you have to reminisce over are the dinners,” Lance laughed bitterly.

“You sound exactly like him,” Fitz muttered.

“I can very well believe it!” Daisy cried. “If his stomach hadn’t been well-catered for, my dear brother might not have survived it at all.”

“Wealth and position are wasted on you, mate,” Lance shook his head. “You need to find a way to take me with you next time. Then you can bring a book and I’ll take charge of your musket. I shan’t even make a fuss if they mount my stag with a little plaque that bears the name of Fitz.”

Fitz looked thoughtful. “Let me give it some consideration,” he replied. “There must be a way to ensure that only those actually attracted by the prospect are forced into the wild.”

“Besides, my brother would much rather devote his energy to correspondence,” Daisy added cheekily and Fitz flashed her a playful look of warning.

“There’s a story there, I can see,” Lance observed dryly. “And I shall learn it before long. Never you fear, Fitz.”

Daisy insisted that the three of them hop the stile and traipse through the paddocks of hairy highland cattle, her skirts gathered in one hand, dissolving into raptures over the sweet faces of the calves that had just been born in the preceding spring. Fitz remembered her as a child scandalizing their mother during calving season as the siblings and Lance trailed after Mr Hunter and arrived home coated in the inevitable mud and grime. According to their mother, a young lady was only supposed to own the daintiest of shoes, so Fitz would keep for her his too-small riding boots to wear. He smiled to observe that she wore them even still.

The copse of hawthorn trees rose before them, ablaze with their scarlet berries. Daisy almost skipped towards them, unearthing from the tiny purse that hung across her body a pocket-knife that Fitz has been given and had passed onto her long ago, knowing that no adult of their acquaintance would ever give his sister one of her own. He’d then reported his lost, been mildly scolded and immediately furnished with a new one – the accessory that no small boy should be without.
Lance collapsed at the foot of the trees, leaning back on his elbows to gaze into the branches above. Fitz stroked his hand over the height marks carved deep into the trunk of each child’s tree by Hunter as the three of them had grown. Daisy deftly brandished her knife against the low hanging sprays of berries and within minutes, had crafted for herself a Puckish crown. With the crimson garland adorning her brow, her long dark tresses tumbling loose, the bountiful swell of her belly and her skirts gathered above her riding boots, she evoked for Fitz the goddess Demeter, surveying her domain. As if perfectly inhabiting that character, she suddenly cried out, clasped her hands to her abdomen and sunk onto her knees in the fallen leaves, her face contorted.

“Daisy!” he cried, dropping to the ground beside her. “What on earth is the matter? What can I do?”

She was panting heavily, clutching her sides. “I-it must be the pains!” she gasped. “I s-suppose the b-babe is ready to be born!”

In the sudden grip of fear, his mind went utterly blank. “But what can I do for you?”

Even in the midst of her own trepidation, Daisy fixed him with a look.

“What is it?”

“Leo!” she gasped, sinking forward as another wave of sensation came over her. “Lance must f-fetch Miss Simmons!”

The brother turned desperate eyes on their friend, who was already scrambling to his feet. “Take Franklin!”

“Hold on, Daisy!” cried Lance over his shoulder as he sprinted off in the direction of the house and stables. “I’ll bring help as soon as I can!”

Jemma was fondly farewelling the crowd of Nash boys at the gate of their cottage, extracting solemn promises from each of them to continue to care for their new little sister, Mathilde, and their mother, when yet another rider appeared along the cliff road in a thunder of hooves.

“Is it tha’ nosy soldier again?” asked Charlie, now known to his brothers exclusively as Ignant.

“He hasn’ go’ a red coat, has he, Ignant?” Robbie shot back.

“An’ he hasn’ go’ a blue one neither!” added little Jeremiah, who’d scampered up the tree as look out.

Jemma stepped out towards the road in interest, untethering Xochi from where the mare stood contentedly munching at the unkempt lawn.

“Miss Simmons!” the approaching figure was yelling, his cry barely discernable over the sound of the crashing waves below. “I found you! You’re needed at Manderston!”

She threw herself into the saddle and with a wave of farewell to the boys, spurred Xochi forward to meet the rider she now recognised as Lance Hunter. Franklin reared as Lance fought to turn back in the direction they’d come but he quickly regained control of the animal and the two of them set off at a gallop.

Conversation was impossible over the clamour of hoofbeats and the roar of the ocean until they left the cliff road and turned inland toward Manderston.
“Are we headed to one of the cottages on the estate?” Jemma shouted, trying to imagine which of the pregnant women she was caring for could be labouring. Perhaps someone in the parish was entertaining visitors.

Lance shook his head. “It’s the great house, Miss Simmons,” he shouted back.

Jemma’s face eloquently conveyed her confusion.

“Mrs Ward.”

Jemma did a quick calculation in her head, then leant close to Xochi’s mane and vigorously spurred her on, leaving Lance momentarily in her wake.

If she were surprised when Lance led her away from the house and across the paddocks, she gave no indication. He guided her towards the copse of hawthorn trees until she could at last see her patient leaning against a tree trunk and looking for all the world like she were about to perform in some sort of pageant of classical mythology. Beside her, offering his arm for support, stood Mr Fitz, his face a mask of concern.

Jemma swung down from her saddle and rushed to the lady’s side, shooting a reassuring smile at her brother who tried his very best to smile back.

“Mrs Ward,” she said warmly as she took Daisy’s wrist to surreptitiously measure her racing pulse. “How lovely it is to see you again!”

“And you, Miss Simmons,” Daisy replied, looking back at her a little sheepishly. “Only I am afraid that you have been summoned here on false information.”

Jemma smiled. “Do you mean to say that Lance brought me here prematurely?”

Mrs Ward nodded her head. “Allow me to pretend, Miss Simmons. Let us say instead that it is just that I have finally had a new cake prepared for us and I couldn’t face all the bother of having to write an invitation. This way just seemed more expedient.”

Fitz made a satisfied little noise of understanding, but his eyes were still full of apprehension.

“Perhaps I might examine you before we partake of tea and sweets, Mrs Ward?”

“If you must, Miss Simmons, though as I rule I prefer to give the priority to tea.”

Mrs Ward’s brave face was impressive, and Jemma smiled along, but she could read in the tell-tale trembling of her hands and the fragility of her smile that it would not hold up for long.

“Mr Hunter, Mr Fitz, do you think you gentlemen might be able to assist Mrs Ward up onto my horse to ride side-saddle?” She turned to Daisy. “Xochi’s a very gentle creature and you look as though you’ve had a bit of a scare. Perhaps a placid ride back to the house might do you good.”

Daisy nodded obediently and though it could not be described as an elegant mounting of the horse, it was effective.

“I’ll take Franklin back to the stable,” Lance announced. “Mack said he’d have my head if I kept him out too long.”

Fitz nodded his agreement and took up Xochi’s reigns to lead his sister back toward the house. He offered his other arm to Jemma and she took it, falling into step beside him. While Daisy gazed
impassively out over the paddocks and the orchard, Jemma conducted a whispered interview of the lady’s elder brother.

“Might I enquire as to what happened, Mr Fitz?” she murmured, noting as she looked up at his face that he still looked white as a sheet.

He turned his blue eyes upon her, vestiges of his earlier panic still apparent. “She wanted to walk out to our copse of hawthorns. We planted them as children, you see.” His hushed tone turned urgent. “I can assure you, Miss Simmons, that she was absolutely well when we left the house. In fact, she was the very picture of health until we had been resting under the trees for some time.”

“Mr Fitz,” Jemma replied, bringing her other hand up to place over his consolingly. “You have done nothing wrong. I am not at all concerned for Daisy’s health. Be comforted, Mr Fitz, I have nothing to scold you for.”

“Well, that brings me considerable relief, Miss Simmons. Truthfully, I hadn’t taken into account the likelihood of a scolding. I was terrified that my actions might have endangered the health of my sister or her child!”

“Not at all, Mr Fitz,” Jemma whispered, shaking her head. “Exercise and fresh air is excellent for the expectant mother, even at this late stage of her pregnancy.”

“Late stage?” he repeated, the hint of panic returning to his voice.

“Well, suddenly she made the most terrible sound, not at all unlike the sounds you and I heard Mrs Hunter making the night that I first was sent to fetch you. Daisy suspected that perhaps it was time for the child to be born, and I saw and heard nothing to contradict her suspicion. Lance rushed off to fetch you and I just held her hand and tried my best to reassure her when, inside, I myself was pure terror.” He turned to find her eyes. “Daisy did at least take great comfort in the knowledge that she would soon be seeing you, Miss Simmons. Allow me to thank you, on behalf of both of us, for making your way in such haste, even though it seems you were not as urgently needed as it at first appeared.”

“Mr Fitz,” she laughed quietly. “It has been no trouble at all. And now, I am reliably informed, there shall be cake. I am quite partial to cake. I am pleased to learn that Manderston is not one of those self-satisfied fashionable houses that stopped serving cake and only offers bread and butter.”

“I shall never understand fashion as it applies to cake,” Fitz replied in hushed tones. “Bread and butter is all very well, I suppose, but in a house over which I have any sort of authority, cake shall always be the order of the day.”

She liked the way his smile lightened his whole countenance, entirely banishing the shadows of fear. She couldn’t help but smile in response. “I most heartily agree with you, sir.”

“I suspect I shall regret asking this, Miss Simmons, but is it a common occurrence, this appearance of birth pains that then fade away as quickly as they came on?”

“There is no cause for regret, Mr Fitz,” Jemma whispered back, amused. “I can assure you that it is the most garden-variety of experiences in the realm of expectant mothers. I shall not be at all surprised if you witness many more of these false alarms before the real labour begins. But I am happy to say that I am not anticipating many babies from other mothers in the next few weeks, so, if you are at all concerned, do not hesitate in sending for me. I am very fond of your sister, you know,
and shall happily set other tasks aside to see to her.”

“She is very fond of you also, Miss Simmons,” Mr Fitz replied warmly. “And I am ever so grateful to think that she shall have your support.”

“I can hear you murmuring to Miss Simmons about me down there, you realise, Leo,” Daisy interjected from her perch, high upon Xochi’s saddle.

“Oh dear.” Jemma raised her voice to a conversational volume, casting a quick wink in Fitz’s direction. “Is it as I fear? Has Mr Fitz perjured himself most profoundly with this aberrant claim of his that you’re fond of me, Mrs Ward?”

“Is that what he has been whispering in your ear, Miss Simmons? Well, he has committed no perjury there. I am terribly fond of you as you know. Yet I accuse him of a sin of omission which I shall rectify immediately on his behalf. My brother is terribly fond of you also.”

Jemma turned to her friend with a beaming smile of accord only to find him looking quite flushed and awkward.

“Oh, dear, Mr Fitz,” she sighed. “Your expression is just how I imagined it would be if I’d uttered aloud something unforgivable like uterus in your presence.”

He laughed in spite of himself. “You should be quite proud of me, Miss Simmons. Ordinarily you wouldn’t see my face at all after such an outburst. I’d be far too busy running for the hills.”

Jemma turned to look up at Daisy. “Your brother is coming along quite nicely, isn’t he, Mrs Ward? I have terribly high hopes for him as the second-most enlightened male of my acquaintance.”

Daisy laughed.

“Only the second?” Fitz echoed, injured.

“You have some way to go before you attain to the heights of Philip Coulson, Mr Fitz. Now there is a man who can not only loudly exclaim the word uterus, but discuss its functions and mysteries with reverence and respect.”

“Of all the unrealistic expectations I feel are held out for me in life, Miss Simmons, I had never anticipated calm discussion of the uterus to be a hurdle I should have to face.”

“Well done, Mr Fitz!” Jemma replied, squeezing his arm in a manner that he found delightfully distracting. “Naming it so loudly is an excellent step in the right direction. If he were here, Philip would shake your hand.”

“Miss Simmons,” Daisy called from on high now that they approached the house. “I know that you were so terribly keen to examine me as you call it before the partaking of tea, but is there any reason why it couldn’t occur all at once?”

“No reason at all, so long as Mr Fitz has no objections.”

Fitz shrugged his shoulders in resignation.

Daisy’s expression briefly revealed the vulnerability her tone belied. “He shrugs because my poor long-suffering brother has not really been allowed to leave my side since my return home. I am sure I shall become less reliant on him in time but for now…”
“I totally understand, Mrs Ward. Your brother is your chosen support person. Not many a man is up to the task but I am certain Mr Fitz shall serve you wonderfully.”

Fitz face was half-trepidation, half-delight at Miss Simmons’ confidence in him. Exactly for what, he was as yet unsure.

An enormous man appeared and gently helped Daisy down from the saddle.

“Shall I take your horse back to the stables, Miss? I am caring for Mr Fitz’s poor horse at the moment,” he said with a sidelong glance at his young master, “so it will be no trouble to see to yours also.”

"That'll do, Mack," said Fitz with a laugh.

“Thank you,” Jemma replied. “I would be most grateful. Just allow me to fetch some supplies from my saddle bags.”

The spread of food that awaited them in the library was beyond magnificent. It seemed that the kitchen was powered on the novelty of once more having family for whom to cater after a long absence. Daisy presided over the teapot and Fitz passed a steady succession of buttered muffins, cucumber sandwiches and cake, all the while avoiding the eyes of the two women as the conversation flowed in and out of subjects that he felt he should not be party to. It was quite the education.

When Daisy’s girth had been measured and recorded, Jemma produced her faithful little Pinard horn. The unfamiliarity of the object caused Daisy some alarm.

“There is nothing to be afraid of, Mrs Ward,” Jemma assured her. “I am simply going to listen for your baby’s heartbeat. See?” she said, turning to Fitz. “I shall demonstrate on your brother. Will you come and sit by me, Mr Fitz?”

Fitz clambered out of his single armchair and took his assigned place beside Miss Simmons on the tastefully upholstered love seat.

“Now, if you wouldn’t mind unbuttoning your waistcoat and unfastening your cravat,” she said matter-of-factly, as if she hadn’t just asked him to engage in public indecency.

Fitz somehow managed to unbutton and open his waistcoat but his hands then hovered uncertainly about the tightly-wrapped cotton worn high at his neck.


He had no choice but to obey. He dutifully unwound the cravat until it lay coiled up in his hands, his throat quite scandalously exposed.

“And perhaps just a few buttons as well, Mr Fitz?” Jemma asked, her eyes on the thin fabric of his shirt. “I shall need access to your bare chest.”

Fitz took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and one-by-one, slipped each button through its passage with trembling fingers.

When he opened his eyes, Miss Simmons sat directly before him, an uncharacteristic but tell-tale flush blooming on her cheeks.

“I-I must admit,” she said quietly, voice quavering, “I have never before performed this kind of
medical examination on a man.”

“I am sure you will find it no different,” Fitz replied, willing his voice into confident fullness.

Jemma gave him a grateful look. “No, of course, you are right.” But her hands still fluttered uncertainly at the opening of his shirt.

“Shall I…?” he asked, grasping the fabric and tentatively exposing the flesh above his heart.

“Y-yes, Mr Fitz,” she stammered, her composure growing increasingly frayed. “Thank you.” Jemma timidly placed her hand on his chest and his eyes flew involuntarily to hers. She had gasped in a breath and he could see she was still holding it as she raised the little horn to his breast.

He watched as she forced herself to slowly exhale before pressing the horn to his flesh and lowering her head after it in order to listen.

“See, Mrs Ward?” she said falteringly. “I shall simply press my little device against your stomach, like this, and, with its help, I shall be able to detect your little one’s heartbeat.”

Fitz’s perspective had considerably narrowed. He could sense the heat of her fingers pressing intimately against skin that was perpetually hidden by his clothing. He could feel the warmth of her breath ghosting across his chest and raising gooseflesh. So he was not, therefore, at all surprised when she looked up at him in some concern, though it did not in any way prepare him for the close proximity of her visage.

“Are you feeling unwell, Mr Fitz?” Miss Simmons enquired, wearing a touching expression of concern. “Your heartbeat seems quite rapid and erratic.”

Fitz looked over at his sister who smiled sweetly back at him.

“Perhaps I just need another cup of tea?” he responded weakly, ducking away from the pressure of the horn and quickly closing his open shirt over his exposed skin. “I have been led to understand it has significant medicinal properties.”

He noticed Jemma surreptitiously placing two fingers across the junction of veins on her own wrist and closing her eyes in concentration. After a moment she spoke.

“Perhaps I should take another cup also,” said she.

Chapter End Notes

eeek! I am excited to hear what you guys think of that chapter!!!

Daisy and Fitz as children are sort of inspired by Daisy and Demi Brook from Louisa May Alcott's "Little Men". Especially the stocking darning...

The scandalous bit at the end of this one was for notapepper who said in an earlier comment on the ball scene:

SHE BROUGHT HER LITTLE HEARTBEAT MONITOR (gah I so want her to use that on Fitz now, maybe just to show him how it works or something, and then she'll be like 'bro, your heartbeat is ridick' and he's just blushy blush blush).
Hope you approve, dude! :D I thought I'd share the blushy blush blush and ridick heartbeats around!

Also, people, I'm sorry that it sometimes takes me a while to write back to your lovely feedback. Please believe me that every nice thing you say totally powers the next chapter (and appears to grow each following chapter by 500 to 1000 words!). I just LOVE reading what you think so please don't think that I don't enjoy reading what you wrote if I haven't written back quickly. I'm usually just desperately trying to find the time to do my IRL things and start the next chapter! thank you thank you thank you to all those reading and commenting - you guys are seriously making this SO fun!!! ok, better post this while it's still Monday in my part of the world!
“Are you shivering, Miss Simmons?” Daisy enquired, once Fitz had assisted them to her bedchamber and then excused himself to better enable Miss Simmons’ examination. “Perhaps I should ring for someone to stoke up the fire?”

“I am shivering, Mrs Ward,” Jemma admitted. “Though I cannot for the life of me imagine why. It is you who has removed your gown, I am perfectly well-covered and it is not even as though I feel particularly chilled. Besides, we need not ring for anyone. I am perfectly capable of stoking up the fire should it be required.”

“You did seem a little affected by your demonstration on my brother earlier. As you said, it must be terribly unusual to come into such intimate contact with a man, even if you do the same every day with women.”

“Yes,” Jemma replied, nodding vigorously from where she knelt on the floor, attempting to summon the required level of composure and concentration with which to listen to the baby’s heartbeat. “Yes, you are right, Mrs Ward. The male form is so utterly different to the female. So firm,” she muttered, lifting her head from her task, her eyes glassy. “So firm and so unyielding…” She took a moment to fan herself with her notebook.

“Do you think you are quite well, Miss Simmons?” Daisy asked in concern. “One moment you seem to be shivering, the next you look quite unseasonably flushed. Is there anything I might order to be fetched for your present relief?”

Jemma pushed herself up off the floor and slid into Daisy’s compact armchair, digging into the neckline of her gown to yank out her fichu and taking up the notebook to fan herself with renewed force.

“I am sure I shall recover in time, Mrs Ward,” she assured her charge.

“I shall ring for more tea,” Daisy insisted. “Though perhaps we had better get my gown back on first.”

This seemed to snap Jemma out of her discombobulation. “No, no, Mrs Ward,” she insisted, sliding back onto the floor and once more taking up her little horn. “Let us complete your examination first. I am perfectly well.”

This time, when she held the horn to the lady’s belly she managed to maintain excellent focus.

“Mmm, Mrs Ward, it seems that my estimation of five months progression when we first met was a little modest,” Jemma murmured from the floor.

“Oh, Miss Simmons,” Daisy replied. “Here am I, entirely exposed before you while you listen for the heartbeat of my child. I think we have been through quite enough to call ourselves friends, have we not, you and I? From now on, you really must address me as Daisy.”

Jemma smiled up at her friend from where she knelt by her feet. “And you, Daisy, must call me Jemma,” she offered in reply.
Daisy held out her hand and Jemma grasped it in her own, exchanging the warm smiles of returned affection and fellow-feeling.

“And as for my recalcitrant babe?” the lady asked.

Jemma laughed. “No! Not recalcitrant! Or, at least, if it is recalcitrant, it is far too early to tell.”

“I was a terror as a child,” Daisy confided in an amused whisper. “I am confident that I shall have my work cut out for me.”

Jemma continued her examination with a smile. “You were certainly further along on that night we first met. Judging by the odd angle at which I have to seek for the heartbeat, which is healthy and strong you’ll be pleased to learn, I would imagine that you must have a retroverted uterus. That is absolutely nothing to concern yourself about, but it is often a reason why a lady might not show obvious signs of a pregnancy until it is quite advanced.”

“So how close do you imagine I am to delivery?” Daisy enquired.

“Very close, Daisy,” said the midwife. “I would imagine that you are very close indeed.” She looked up to find her friend’s face wet with sudden tears. “Oh, my dear Daisy! You are distressed.”

The lady nodded. “Do not for a moment imagine that I am grieved over this little life I carry, my dear Jemma. The connection I feel to this precious baby is absolutely what drives me on. It is just that the circumstances into which I bring my child are considerably less than ideal.”

Jemma got to her feet and crossed the room to where an elaborately embroidered dressing gown lay over the chaise lounge. She brought it back to Daisy and wrapped it about the lady’s shoulders.

“Would you like to tell me about it, Daisy? I am your friend and, as such, of course I am utterly on your side.”

Daisy reached to grasp Jemma’s hand once more. “You recall I mentioned to you when we met, that I had not yet told my husband or family of my condition?”

Jemma nodded.

“It seems that we, that is my family and I, were all greatly deceived in the character of Grantham Ward.”

Jemma carefully schooled her features.

“He has not been the husband that I would have hoped him to be. In fact…” Daisy was no longer able to suppress the sobs that had long threatened to burst out of her.

In an instant Jemma was at her side, enfolding the weeping woman into her arms.

…

Fitz had insisted upon removing himself from the room before Daisy had removed so much as a ribbon from her clothing. It was a great relief to have such a gentlemanly excuse.

How would he ever recover from his undoing at Miss Simmons’ gentle touch? And Daisy had observed it all. She would never let it pass quietly into the vault of memory.

He half-jogged to his bedchamber, still in his scandalous state of undress, his neck-cloth wound into a tangle around his hand. The door slammed behind him and he collapsed against it breathing
heavily.

All the etiquette of the day seemed intended to ensure that no such familiarity between a man and a woman be initiated under any other circumstances outside of the bounds of matrimony. And yet now that he knew the searing brush of her fingers against his bare skin, he doubted he could ever be satisfied again. Unless, perhaps, he could, by the provision of extreme and utterly unmerited divine favour, one day actually be permitted to enjoy her intimate touch as the privilege afforded to her husband.

He shook his head sharply. To dwell on the details of such a scenario would be utterly inappropriate. He needed to get out. He re-dressed hastily, quickly checking himself in the glass to ensure that he didn’t look as addled and overwrought as he felt, and strode determinedly out of the house.

As expected, he found Mack precisely where he’d imagined he would, rumbling soothing words into Franklin’s flickering ear as he carefully groomed the stallion’s glossy mane.

“Afternoon, sir,” said the big man, unceremoniously handing him a brush as if he sensed his need for distraction.

Fitz shrugged off his coat and laid it carefully over the half-gate of a nearby stall before rolling his sleeves back to the elbow and taking the proffered brush.

The two worked in silence, side-by-side, and Fitz felt some of the tension ease out of his back and shoulders as he applied stroke after mesmerizing stroke of the brush to Franklin’s silvery coat. Occasionally he felt Mack’s eyes on him, but none of the reproach of the morning remained.

“Feel like getting your hands dirty?” the groom asked when Franklin was back in his stall, contentedly munching on fresh oats. Fitz shrugged and nodded, stroking the animal’s muzzle and feeling a blast of hot air from the velvet nostrils against his bare wrist.

“Come on, then. There’s something I want to show you.”

Fitz trailed obediently in Mack’s wake to the area behind the stables where the various carriages were kept. He felt almost restored to his usual composure, so much so that he was able to focus enough for realisation to dawn.

“Have you finished your secret project at last?” he asked eagerly as the big man led him to a large structure covered over with a paint-splattered drop cloth.

Mack nodded, yanking at a corner of the material. It slipped to the floor to reveal a fabulously modern-looking carriage.

Fitz gave a low whistle. “Mack, what a magnificent vehicle!” He ran his hand reverently over the frame. “How ever did you conceive of the design?”

The groom humbly lowered his head in response to his young master’s praise. “To my way of thinking, the excessive decoration of carriages has diverted attention from solid and necessary improvements in lightness, safety, ease and durability.”

Fitz nodded. “Though no-one would look at this and accuse you of sacrificing aesthetics!”

Mack chuckled, pleased. “I’m looking, not at novelty, but at real utility. No perch, wings, axle-tree beds, transom-beds or plates.”

“You must have drastically reduced the weight!” Fitz exclaimed.
“That’s the idea – sparing the horses from unnecessary toil and labour,” said Mack.

“And you’ve placed the boot on the same springs with the body?”

“It’s more compact now. It’ll turn in a smaller compass which should ensure it’s less liable to overturn. Want to grease the axle-bearings for me while I ready the horses? We can take her out a while – see how she travels.”

Fitz extended his hand to congratulate Mack on his triumph, and watched in amusement as it disappeared into the groom’s enormous palm. He then took up the grease and an appropriately filthy rag and set to work, just as Mack had taught him when he’d first come to work at Manderston and proved to cheerfully tolerate the young master’s curious presence.

By the time Mack had harnessed the four geldings to the carriage and taken his place on the perch, Fitz was practically elbow-deep in the black axle grease. He took up a new rag to clean his hands but unwittingly wiped the perspiration from his brow with his blackened forearm, leaving a smudge of grease on his face. He clambered up beside Mack and the two of them whooped in delight at the speed, lightness and noticeably improved suspension of Mack’s design.

Manoeuvring the horses out onto the broad drive that wound round the edge of Manderston’s ornamental lake, the big man winked at Fitz perched by his side.

“Shall we see what she can do?”

Fitz nodded eagerly, a boy again in his anticipation.

Mack’s connection with the animals was such that he could issue commands more effectively with his deep voice than any whip. With nothing more than a “Ho!” from their groom, the horses broke into a gallop and Fitz felt the force pushing him backwards as they surged ahead.

The wind in his face, the clamour of galloping hooves and the triumphant shouts of his friend beside him entirely blasted away the fluster that had earlier forced Fitz out of the house. When Mack handed him the reins he quickly concluded that the carriage design was indeed a great success. It handled better than any other he’d driven, even perhaps his beloved little curricle. He wondered, as the pair of them sped around the edge of the lake and up the road in the direction of the village, if Mack might agree to help him adjust his own little gig in accordance with these new specifications.

It was coming on lunch-time by the time Fitz and Mack had unbridled the horses, checked their hooves and painstakingly brushed them down to the groom’s satisfaction. It wasn’t until he led the last of the geldings into its stall that he realised Xochi stood calmly tethered alongside Franklin, munching oats from the same feed box.

Something about seeing the stallion and mare side-by-side warmed him, and he leaned himself against the half-gate of Franklin’s stall to stroke the bay mare’s elegant muzzle.

“Oh!” A woman’s voice sounded at the door of the stable.

He turned find Miss Simmons, looking as though she were trying to catch her breath.

“Mr Fitz! I didn’t expect to find you here.” Her eyes raked over his face, taking in the smudge of grease on his brow, his missing coat and the unexpected sight of his exposed forearms. He was in almost as much of a state of undress as earlier but somehow, now, he seemed not to notice.

“I-if you don’t require Xochi for anything else this morning, perhaps I might take her home?”
“You are not leaving already, Miss Simmons?” Fitz asked, taking a step toward her. “I am exceedingly sorry to hear it!”

She smiled, her cheeks pink. “Well, you shall not be required to maintain your sorrow for long, Mr Fitz. Your sister has insisted that I return to dine with you both this evening.”

Precious Daisy, Fitz thought to himself. “I am very pleased to hear it,” he said aloud, then recalled a subject that had piqued his curiosity in Shropshire. The fresh air must have permeated the part of his body in which he stored his courage for the instant he thought of it, he spoke. “And I am also extremely hopeful that you shall prove to be musical, Miss Simmons. I cannot imagine a more pleasant prospect than hearing you play and sing for us, if you are willing.”

The lady looked back at him, surprised. “It has been a good while since anyone has required me to perform in public,” she replied. “Though I do while away a little time, now and again, playing for myself.”

“Daisy and I are hardly public, are we, Miss Simmons?” Fitz asked, his grin rakish.

She bestowed upon him a little smile. “As long as you can cheerfully forego those Scottish airs that seem to have become so popular these days, Mr Fitz.”

“You may play whatever you fancy. My sister and I are very easily amused.”

“I imagine that you have often felt quite insulted on behalf of your country-women when a performer insists on taking on such a persona.”

Fitz almost laughed aloud. “It seems that you understand me very well, Miss Simmons. I struggle to find the words to convey how much I detest that particular fashion.”

“Then we shall get along quite well this evening, I imagine.”

His blue gaze grew serious. “If I might enquire as to how you found my sister, Miss Simmons?”

“She is very well in her body, Mr Fitz,” Jemma replied. “But I am quite concerned for her in every other way. We had a long conversation just now in which she unfolded to me all of the concerns of her heart. The circumstances of her life just now are not those from which she can draw the strength, comfort and security required to fortify herself for the birth.”

“Our mother is not a particularly affectionate woman,” Fitz divulged. “Daisy has always yearned for a sister in whom she can confide but she has had to make do with me.”

“She loves you dearly, Mr Fitz,” said Jemma. “You are and, it seems, have always been, a wonderful brother to her. In fact, it was only when our conversation turned to you and your many good qualities that she was able to be restored to her prior cheerfulness and good spirits, which is how I have just left her.”

“I am terribly grateful she has you, Miss Simmons,” the gentleman declared earnestly. “She will draw great strength and comfort from you.”

“And, as I say, from you, Mr Fitz,” she said solemnly. “You and I must prepare ourselves to support her through what might be quite an arduous experience.”

Fitz focused on untethering Xochi and leading her out into the midday sun. “I am confident I can be what Daisy needs with you by my side, Miss Simmons,” he said quietly. He stopped himself from adding I believe I could do almost anything with you by my side.
With a firm arm Fitz assisted Miss Simmons up onto her horse, unable to resist taking in the sight of her dainty hand in his own. He was appalled to see the blackened state of his fingernails and the smudges of grease that remained on his exposed arms. The moment she loosed her grip of his hand, he guiltily tucked both arms behind his back.

“Until this evening, Miss Simmons.”

It took her a moment to reply while she fanned at her face with her free hand. Fitz was surprised. If anything the late-autumn day had quite a crisp feel to it.

At last she gathered herself enough to goad Xochi into motion. “Until then, Mr Fitz.”

…

Beth and her mother were hard at work “sorting” through Audrey’s sewing box when there was an urgent knocking at the door. Jemma appeared a moment later, her face a mask of concern.

“Is Philip about, Audrey?” she asked, holding the back of her hand to her brow.

“He’s not, I’m afraid,” Audrey replied, getting to her feet in concern. “Are you quite well, dear?”

Beth rushed to her aid with a long stretch of cloth. “Bandage?” the little girl offered, firmly grasping Jemma’s arm and tugging her into a chair before she could refuse.

Jemma smiled indulgently as the little girl wound the strip of fabric artlessly around her wrist.

“I hope I am well,” Jemma replied uncertainly. “It’s just that I’ve had some odd symptoms this morning. I thought I might get Philip to look me over.”

“It would be terrible to pass anything on to Mrs Ward at this stage. Let me have a look at you for the moment.” Audrey held her own hand to Jemma’s brow for a second opinion. “What sort of symptoms have you been experiencing? Your forehead feels perfectly cool.”

“It was the strangest thing, Audrey,” Jemma began. “I was at Manderston House with Daisy Ward and her brother and she confessed to being a little bit nervous about my Pinard horn. So I offered to demonstrate it on Mr Fitz.”

Audrey raised a single eyebrow. “Oh. I see.”

“He dutifully removed his waistcoat and cravat and unbuttoned his shirt to expose his chest when—”

Her friend’s composure was clearly under serious threat.

“What on earth is it, Audrey?”

“Do go on, dear,” Audrey gasped. “I simply must hear it all!”

“Well, I’m not sure if it was the novelty of my encounter with the male form or if I might actually be falling ill, because I came over all hot and all cold at the same time. Mr Fitz seemed to be undergoing some sort of turn of his own because his heart-rate was terribly high and then, when I secretly measured my own pulse, it was racing worse than his!” Jemma sighed. “And now you are laughing at me. Honestly, Audrey, I am quite concerned for my health and all you can do is giggle.”

Audrey bit down on her handkerchief to try and stifle her laughter but it was to no avail.

Jemma cast her eyes to the heavens, exasperated by Audrey’s lack of focus, but she soldiered on
while Beth continued to diligently wrap her wrist. “After some time, once Mr Fitz had left the room, I was able to gather myself together, and then I felt fine for a time. However, when I went to fetch Xochi in order to return home, there was Mr Fitz again in the stables, but this time he had his sleeves all drawn back and he was covered in a dark sort of grease, as if he’d been at some physical labour, working with his hands.” She fell into a momentary reverie. “It really gave quite a wonderful impression of his veins, sinews and knuckles. I should very much have liked to have had access to my charcoal, Audrey, it would have made quite a striking sketch.”

Her friend composed herself as best she could. “You contemplated sketching his grease-covered hands. And you can think of no other explanation for these symptoms you experienced?” she asked, incredulous.

“I cannot imagine what on earth you mean, Audrey,” Jemma replied in irritation. “I am concerned that I might pass some disease onto a heavily pregnant woman and all you can do is laugh at me. I have been invited back to dine with them this evening and I shall need to know whether it will be safe for me to attend.”

“Oh, Jemma, I can assure you, where diseases are concerned, there is absolutely no danger.”

Jemma eyed Audrey suspiciously. “But you perceive some other potential danger?”

Audrey shook her head innocently. “Only the danger that you might not allow yourself enough time for Rose to do your hair.”

“This is no ball, Audrey, I have spent the morning with them, traipsing about the fields and examining Daisy. I shall hardly need to bother with having Rose do my hair.”

“Nonsense,” Audrey replied. “I won’t hear another word about it. And tonight you must wear one of the gowns your Aunt Victoria packed for you, there won’t be any of your mothers to embarrass. Mrs Ward’s wardrobe is probably comparable to the one you used to dress from.”

Given that Audrey had taken her most authoritative tone, Jemma knew arguing to be a waste of energy.

“Very well,” she sighed. “Allow me an hour to draw myself a bath and then send Rose over to do her worst.”

Audrey smiled sweetly. “Very wise, my dear Jemma. Very wise. And what do you think you shall discuss this evening, the three of you all cozy about the dining table?”

Her young friend beamed. “They are delightful company, the both of them,” she enthused. “I have not known a moment’s lapse in conversation with either. Though Mr Fitz did expressly ask if I might play and sing for them.”

“He did, did he?” echoed Audrey, the knowing smile returning to her face. “Well, that should be lovely. I very well recall you on show in your aunts’ magnificent drawing room. Your voice and your playing were quite the toast of society once upon a time, my dear.”

Jemma shook her head. “I am very out of practice, Audrey. I shall be lucky to fudge and slur my way through the very simplest of folk tunes.”

“Well,” said Audrey consolingly. “I imagine that Mr Fitz and Mrs Ward will be an extremely indulgent audience.”

“Yes,” smiled Jemma. “I imagine you are right.”
Chapter End Notes

And I thought I wouldn’t get it done! But here it is! By the skin of my teeth! Still even Monday in my own country!
For further information on the fichu that Jemma rips from her throat:

For my source on Regency Era carriage technology developments:
Note particularly Elliot’s Patent Eccentric Landaulet, or Chariot. I mean seriously, who doesn’t want to drive a vehicle that describes itself as eccentric?

And, look, the grease thing? What can I say? I mean, I know how swoon-worthy mechanic!Fitz fics can be – just think of atomicsupervillainess’s “The Guns of Brixton” or Mech-Bull’s “Rebel” (Both highly worth looking up on AO3 but both have sections that are NSFW!) Anyway, this was my little nod to mechanic!Fitz. A highly appealing prospect. And we have to have SOME scenes in which Fitz and Mack tinker away at something amirite? I don’t even know what an axle is let alone what axle grease is for so I have zero idea as to whether they would exist on Mack’s carriage OR need greasing but it is what it is… As if we can blame Jemma for being a bit of a hot mess!

I LOVE your comments, my darlings! I swim in them and splash them all over the place and run them through my sprinkler and dance about on the back lawn in the spray. (This might be behaviour peculiar to those that dwell south of the equator, perhaps even unique to those that dwell in Icehouse’s Great Southern Land.) Thank you, people! You are all SO delightful!!! Looking forward to hearing what you think of this one!!!
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Audrey had won many battles with her young tenant that afternoon but she could only sigh and shrug her shoulders at the sight of the girl, in all her finery, eschewing the available carriage and determinedly mounting her horse. She insisted upon independent travel in case her help was needed at short notice elsewhere in the parish. At least Audrey could take some comfort in the fact that Jemma had resigned herself to riding side-saddle. Her Aunt Victoria’s seamstress had certainly not been accustomed to allowing enough fabric in her skirts for horse-back riding.

Jemma had long been out of the habit of dressing for dinner but she remembered the custom well and knew it to be observed at Manderston, as in every other home of consequence. It was not that she disapproved of the way Rose had piled her chestnut hair atop her head in abundant gleaming curls. It was not that she didn’t appreciate the way the silver thread in the intricate embroidery of her gown caught the late-afternoon sun. It was not that she didn’t enjoy slipping her stockinged feet into her dainty satin dress shoes. It was just that Daisy and Mr Fitz were her friends, and she felt no need to try and impress them. But Rose had enjoyed herself, Beth had told her she looked like a fairy, and Audrey had clapped her hands in delight when Jemma had emerged from her bed chamber, which, she had to admit, was gratifying.

Similarly gratifying was the wide-eyed surprise with which Daisy greeted her once she was shown into the drawing room at Manderston. Her friend pulled herself inelegantly to her feet and crossed the room to take both Jemma’s hands in her own.

“My dear Jemma, you are a picture!” Daisy cried happily. “I was so hoping you wouldn’t leave Leo and I all trussed up in our evening wear alone, and you have far exceeded my expectations. That gown is magnificent!”

Jemma was performing a playful little curtsey when her eyes fell on Mr Fitz who seemed to have stuttered to a halt in the doorway.

“Good evening, Mr Fitz,” she said warmly, taking in his high white collar, his cream-coloured waistcoat and his inky black tailcoat and trousers. “It seems that all of us are playing at dress-ups this evening.”

He bowed low from his trunk, but his blue eyes did not leave her face. “And playing them very well,” he observed, his glance at last flickering to Daisy who gave him a knowing smile.

“Would you allow me, Miss Simmons, to escort you into dinner?”

Jemma gratefully inclined her head as he drew near and rested her hand lightly on his extended forearm. She smiled as she felt his eyes on her, finding herself surprisingly grateful for Audrey’s insistence. It would be nice, just among these newly treasured friends, to be able to show herself their equal, to embrace, just for the evening, all of the quirks of her privileged upbringing amid people who bore no resentment towards it, who gave not even a second thought to the elaborate formalities and protocols of her youth.

Taking her place at the table, Jemma found herself thoroughly, though somewhat unexpectedly at home, surrounded though she was by an intimidating armoury of gleaming cutlery. Her aunts, particularly Aunt Victoria, had trained her so well, from such a young age, that she knew the correct
implement for each course without even glancing at it. Apart from her refreshing refusal to settle for the inanities of polite small talk, Daisy and Leo might just as well have been entertaining a young protégé of their parents from Bath.

“Now Daisy,” said Jemma, over the soup, “If you will have me back tomorrow morning, we shall have to begin some birth preparation in earnest. I don’t want to find you caught up in the throes of labour without any sense of what to expect.”

Daisy laughed and nodded toward her sibling. “Leo has never before been at dinner when the topic of child birth has been broached, have you, brother?”

“Oh, but Mr Fitz has proved himself wonderfully willing to learn, Daisy. I am quite impressed with him.” Jemma turned her gaze upon the gentleman who smiled bashfully back at her. “Do you recall, Mr Fitz, the conversation we had upon our first meeting? I half feared you might have me thrown from your curricle! But just this morning, you heard him, Daisy, did you not? Loudly pronouncing the word uterus? A most adaptable and open-minded gentleman, if ever I have had the pleasure of knowing one.”

“Then perhaps we should simply undertake the birth preparation lessons now, Jemma?” Daisy enquired, taking up her glass. “Perhaps you might be unavailable when the pains first come upon me and Leo might be the only living soul near by. That was, after all, very nearly what happened this morning.”

Jemma laid down her soup spoon and addressed Mr Fitz. “What do you say, sir? If I select my words carefully, you might be able to tolerate our discussion in relative comfort.”

Fitz nodded. “I never imagined myself willing to be present for such a conversation, Miss Simmons, but you have quite converted me. It is not only a subject with a pressing practical application, as Daisy suggests, but it has become one of intellectual fascination for me also. Our speculation about the medical use of ether is still a topic that captures no small amount of my attention.”

“Very well,” Jemma declared, taking a dainty sip from her glass. “Let us begin. First, let me ask you, Daisy, what do you anticipate the experience of child-birth will be like?”

Daisy cast an apologetic glance at her brother. “Are you quite sure you are happy for us to discuss this now, Leo?”

He glanced over at where Miss Simmons smiled fondly at him and quickly weighed his options. Her passions were infectious. He longed to know her world, to understand her triumphs and her challenges. Yet he was wading into water that he did not know the depth of. He was undoubtedly going to blush and stutter his way through the meal. The spark of respect in her honey-coloured eyes decided him.

“I am perfectly content, Daisy,” he nodded. “Though you must both forgive me if I occasionally fail to restrain the outward evidence of my discomfort.”

Jemma beamed at him. “I say again, Mr Fitz, you are quite the most enlightened gentleman of my acquaintance.”

“After Dr Coulson, of course,” he added, measuring her approval.

“Dr Coulson is a highly impressive gentleman,” Jemma agreed. She turned her head to one side, and contemplated Fitz with a degree of pride. “But let us simply say that it remains to be seen.”

Fitz dropped his eyes to his plate. A pleasant tension in his jaw told him he would have to wait some
moments if he hoped to speak without his voice crackling with emotion. He could still feel her smiling eyes on him. It was almost too much pleasure to bear.

Fitz would not have owned it aloud, but, earlier in the day, after learning he would hear Miss Simmons perform that evening, he had ventured into the empty music room and, after much hopping from sofa to armchair, selected the settee from which he could ensure the best possible vantage point to admire her visage and figure as she sat at the pianoforte. He had borne the highly educational dinner conversation with relative tranquillity, and now, as if he were being lavishly rewarded, he sat comfortably ensconced in soft gold brocade cushions while the music of angels swelled around him.

All conscious thought flew from his mind. He was simply a vessel of responsiveness. Every vocal trill amazed him, every subtle touch of the piano bewitched him. He could do nothing more than stare. With his senses full of her, he was thankful for the notion of performance, though he had previously found it odd. Performance not only permitted, but required Miss Simmons to exhibit and, consequently, not only permitted, but required him to give her his devoted attention, to closely watch her every movement. While she was seated at the instrument, while her fingers flew expertly across the keys, while she lifted her beautiful voice in the sweetest of melodies, Fitz was granted every opportunity to gaze upon her beauty, to admire her, to adore her. This was a privilege bestowed by divine grace, he felt certain he could never have earned such a prize.

His brain dimly registered the dying strains of the aria and he immediately began hunting through his memory, as he vigorously applauded, for the name of another piece, any piece he could request to prolong this exquisite experience.

“My dear Jemma,” Daisy exclaimed, over her own applause. “Mother once took me to see one of those self-important celebrated pianists and vocalists in Bath. She played and sang very nicely but it is plain to me that your talent far exceeds hers.”

Miss Simmons, beamed at her friend. “Daisy, you are too kind. I cannot possibly deserve such high praise.” She glanced over at Fitz but he was utterly unable to speak. He hoped that the beatific smile on his face would suffice to convey his appreciation. She smiled back at him and he felt for all the world as though his chest might burst.

Daisy levered herself out of her chair. “Now, Jemma, you shall not deny the dearest wish of your heavily expectant charge, shall you?”

“How could I deny you anything, Daisy?” Jemma laughed.

“And you, Leo? Will you allow me a very great favour?”

Fitz sighed. “I have always indulged you, Daisy, as you very well know and use to your advantage. I am quite powerless against you.”

“That is precisely what I hoped you would say,” replied Daisy, moving herself slowly toward the piano. “Then you shall allow me to play, and the two of you will have a little dance. I did enjoy watching you together all those months ago at the ball and it may be some time before I shall be attending another such occasion.”

Before he had quite processed his sister’s words, Jemma had kindly helped Daisy to get comfortable
at the piano and was walking towards him, her golden eyes shining with mirth at Daisy’s mischief. She stopped in the centre of the rug and waited patiently for him to join her.

Fitz crossed the floor in a single stride, as Daisy struck up the familiar tune, the same Parisian country-dance the pair had danced to all those months before. He held out his arms and the lady stepped into his embrace, gazing up at him with a warmth and respect that he could barely imagine deserving from such a luminous creature.

In any other circumstances, Fitz would have felt irritated by Daisy’s scheme. She was well aware that he avoided dancing, except for those occasions that demanded it. But now his heart bloomed with nothing but love and affection for both women. The lady at the piano knew him far too well to think she was doing him anything other than a service. The lady in his arms could not possibly know the depths of emotion he felt for her, but perhaps he would one day work up the courage to speak of it.

Though the last time they had moved through these steps together, Fitz had come armed with topics to ward off any awkward silence, this time his throat was too thick for words. Last time, her dress had been simple, almost innocent. This time, it was cut quite low in accordance with the fashion of the day. Last time, they had arrived for the ball with the requisite gloves. This time, no such preparation had been made.

Instead of conversation, the silence between them seemed to him to thrum with a passionate intensity. When her gaze became overwhelming and he attempted to lower his eyes, he was confronted with the milky bounty of her physical perfection, dotted here and there with golden constellations of freckles. When the lady’s uncovered hand hovered at his neck, and brushed tantalisingly against his bare skin, it evoked for him all of the trembling ecstasy of the morning. As he turned her into the spin, their arms dropping to closely encircle one another’s waists, he felt his mouth drop open and his breathing grow laboured. He could only wish he had the power to compose his expression. If she were remotely looking for it in his eyes, she would be able to see his heart.

They came face to face with one another again. In an attempt to find a middle ground between the swell of her bosom and the overwhelming attentiveness of her gaze, Fitz’s eyes fell upon the pink bloom of Jemma’s lips. They turned upwards in a little smile meant just for him.

In the moment, he cursed Triplett’s penchant for poetry. His friend’s oft-recited favourite work, Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Love’s Philosophy*, swum unbidden into his consciousness:

*The fountains mingle with the river*

*And the rivers with the ocean,*

*The winds of heaven mix for ever*

*With a sweet emotion;*

*Nothing in the world is single;*

*All things by a law divine*

*In one spirit meet and mingle.*

*Why not I with thine?*—
See the mountains kiss high heaven
    And the waves clasp one another;
No sister-flower would be forgiven
    If it disdained its brother;
And the sunlight clasps the earth
    And the moonbeams kiss the sea:
What is all this sweet work worth
    If thou kiss not me?

It was a catchy little ditty, which went some way to explaining both Triplett’s constant repetition of it and the fact that it was inextricably lodged in his own memory. But what was he to know of kissing? He could not even envisage the mechanics. And yet here he was, in full view of his mischievous sister, his glance involuntarily flickering between Miss Simmons’ honey gaze and her full, soft-looking lips.

He would have to prove himself master of his impulses. Daisy would be horrified. Miss Simmons would most likely slap him. He let his eyes slip closed a moment in order to better take hold of himself.

The silence was immediately shattered by a cry of sudden pain and the resounding crack of the piano lid hitting home. Daisy, overcome by an unanticipated and forceful contraction, had grasped hold of the wooden ledge and unwittingly brought it crashing down.

Miss Simmons flew out of his arms and to his sister’s side, leaving him momentarily blinking in shock. His body underwent a rapid transition from the yearning pulse of desire to the much more forceful thunder of fear.

“What can I do, Miss Simmons?” he urged. “Please, give me a task.”

She looked back at him, her features calm. “Do not be anxious, Mr Fitz,” she replied, momentarily releasing one arm’s hold of his sister to grasp and squeeze his hand reassuringly. “Daisy has you and I beside her. If this does prove to be the beginning of labour, she is well provided for. Between the two of us, and by the grace of God, she has everything she needs.” She released her grip of him and returned her attention to Daisy, carefully measuring her pulse.

He managed to nod earnestly at her words, dropping to his knees by Daisy’s side and recalling what Miss Simmons had told them both earlier. He offered his sister his hand to hold and she took it gratefully, casting a worried glance in his direction.

“Remember how you took control of your breathing at dinner, Daisy,” he whispered. “You can do it again, I know you can. I shall count for you if you like.”

His sister nodded and together they began to count her long steady breaths, in and out.

Jemma kneeled before her, seeking her eyes. “What you are doing is perfect, Daisy. I’m going to
place my hands on your lower stomach now and I want you to do what we discussed. I want you to imagine that with your breath you are filling the whole area around your baby, that you are lifting my hands away from your centre, remember?”

Daisy nodded and Fitz felt the difference as each breath grew longer, steadier, deeper. Occasionally, his sister would let out a little moan as she exhaled, which was met with Jemma’s warm encouragement.

“That’s right, Daisy,” she urged. “Allowing yourself to vocalise as you exhale can help you maintain the right focus on your breathing.”

Daisy nodded.

Jemma looked pointedly at Fitz as she addressed his sister, motioning for him to get to his feet. “Alright, Daisy. You’re doing wonderfully well. We’re going to walk you to your bed chamber now. We’ll go very slowly. You set the pace, and your brother and I will be on either side of you as we move so if you feel you need to rest, you just stop walking. We’ll be right beside you, supporting you all the way.”

It was slow going but Fitz was terribly impressed by the way that Miss Simmons both reassured Daisy in her anxiety and coached her through the physical movement that she was obviously loathe to undertake.

Fitz stepped ahead of them as they approached Daisy’s chamber, opening the door and holding it for them as Miss Simmons assisted Daisy inside. She led his sister, not toward the bed itself, but toward one of the solid bedposts and transferred Daisy’s grip from herself to the firm wooden structure.

“Remember how we talked about keeping your joints loose, Daisy. Rolling your hips, rocking back and forth, keeping yourself from stiffening up.”

Daisy did her best to do as instructed.

“Loose jaw, loose throat, loose shoulders,” Fitz recited calmly, like Miss Simmons had taught him earlier, and was immediately rewarded with a beaming smile.

“Mr Fitz,” said she, “Would you please duck out to the stables and fetch my saddle bags from Xochi? Mack has tethered her right alongside Franklin there, just like this morning.”

With a nod, he was out in the freedom of the corridors, a heady mix of elation and terror. His long stride took him quickly to the stables where he set to work unfastening Miss Simmons’ saddle bags. On his return journey he ducked his head into the kitchen where Mrs Hartley was sitting and planning meals with Cook over a pot of tea.

“Mrs Hartley it seems as though everything might have begun for Daisy.”

The housekeeper leapt to her feet. “Is she alright, Leo? What can I do?”

“Miss Simmons is with her,” he quickly assured her. “Daisy is in the best possible hands.”

Mrs Hartley nodded. “Perhaps I might come up to see her?”

“I think that would be welcome, Mrs Hartley, but why don’t you walk up with me now and I can quickly check that Daisy is happy to have another body in the room before you go in.”

He disappeared out of the doorway leaving Cook and Mrs Hartley to exchange an amused glance
while the housekeeper hurriedly gathered her things. Rarely had either of them seen men do anything other than flee a birth room, even when those men were the fathers of the babies in question.

…

While Fitz was out of the room, Jemma assisted Daisy out of her elaborate gown and into a loose fitting cotton nightdress.

“Do you think it will prove to be the real thing this time, Jemma?” Daisy asked, once she’d calmed her breathing enough to take advantage of the breaks between contractions.

“Truthfully, I’m not convinced that it will just now, Daisy. I believe you are experiencing false labour which, as I said this morning, is extremely common towards the end of a pregnancy. You are feeling frequent cramps, and they are quite strong, but so far this evening they have proved to be extremely irregular. Also, if you noticed, as we moved through the house, you walked slowly but you rarely seemed to need to stop. If this were real labour, no amount of movement or physical exercise would hold those contractions at bay.”

“So we have sent my brother out into the cold for nothing?” Daisy laughed, though her laughter immediately faded as she felt another powerful sensation overtake her.

“Now use this, Daisy,” Jemma urged her. “Try to memorise this sensation, even though real labour will be vastly more intense.”

“More intense?” Daisy moaned.

“Yes, but the beauty of the growing intensity is that each of these contractions draws you closer to the moment that you will meet your baby.”

The mother-to-be nodded vigorously, moved by her midwife’s words.

“If you can do it, Daisy, the ideal would be not to shrink away in fear as each contraction comes on you, but to try to welcome it, to urge it on, to dare it to grow more and more in intensity. It takes a good deal of bravery to do that, but I know with certainty that you are a woman of fierce strength and heart.”

Daisy squeezed her hand in reply and seemed to ready herself, loosening her limbs and joints to meet the next wave.

“That is it, my dear Daisy!” Jemma encouraged her. “The more you embrace the sensation, the easier the process of birthing your baby will be. There is a power that comes to women when they give birth. They do not ask for it, it simply invades them. It accumulates like clouds on the horizon and passes through them, ultimately carrying the child with it. Believe me, Daisy, the hardest part of giving birth is not letting yourself get in the way of what your body instinctively knows how to do.”

…
After the evening’s bout of false labour had come to an end, Jemma and Mrs Hartley settled Daisy comfortably into her bed.

Fitz knelt by her side. “Daisy,” he whispered. “Mrs Hartley is going to sleep here on the chaise for a while so I can accompany Jemma home. It is far too late for her to ride alone.”

Jemma went to protest but Daisy grabbed her hand. “I will be needing you, Jemma! If not tomorrow, sometime very soon, so I will not hear of your travelling alone. Let Leo go with you. Mrs Hartley and I will be very cosy here, won’t we?”

“Of course, Mrs Ward,” the housekeeper responded fondly.

Jemma sighed her acquiescence and bent down to kiss her friend’s brow. “You were spectacular this evening, Daisy,” she said. “I am so thankful for how quickly you’ve embraced all that you’ve learnt. I can see already that you’re going to be one of my favourite women to attend in birth.”

“You are an odd woman, Jemma,” Daisy replied. “But an odd woman that I am deeply grateful to know.”

The midwife laughed and went to join Fitz who hovered for her at the bedchamber door, her re-packed saddlebags slung over his shoulder.

“Goodnight, Daisy,” Jemma whispered, wiggling her fingers in a wave before she followed him out into the wide hall. He pulled the door closed behind them.

The hallway was flooded with the white light of the full moon, luminescent in her cloudless sky.

“Mr Fitz-” Jemma began earnestly, the minute they were far enough from Daisy’s room for their voices not to carry.

“I know what you are about to say, Miss Simmons,” he interrupted, “And I shall not hear of you riding home alone so you might as well save your breath for more charming topics with which you might entertain me on the road.”

Jemma laughed. “Very well, Mr Fitz, I shall endeavour to be as charming as possible.”

“I cannot imagine you will find it terribly challenging,” said Fitz as she took the arm he shyly offered her.

“At least we shall have no trouble finding our way. It is quite as bright as day out there.”

“Well, I am relieved,” said he. “I would prove a terrible failure as your gallant escort if I went and got us lost.”

Jemma patted his hand condescendingly. “You concentrate on being gallant then, Mr Fitz, and leave the navigation to me.”

Chapter End Notes
BIG LOVE to the glorious and amazing recoveringrabbit who is just generally awesome AND very generous with her time and encouragement. She helped me to ensure the appropriate level of swoon-worthiness in this chapter. I hope it meets your swooning requirements!

So, here’s an out-of-the-blue announcement. Depending on how carried away I get, the ratings and warnings might undergo a sudden change just before I publish next week’s chapter. I’ll leave you to muse on those possibilities. Is life in Manderston suddenly about to get NSFW in a sexy way? (hint. probably not. sorry!) Oh, and, never fear! The ratings change has NOTHING to do with a birth scene!

Also, while we’re on the topic of childbirth, not everyone’s births are the same. I’ve had three – all vastly different (a water birth, a non-emergency Caesarean-section and a drug-free VBAC that I had to FIGHT for) – but weirdly, I really enjoyed them all and that was mainly thanks to the midwives and doulas that assisted me. I know I have at least one pregnant reader and it seems I recently acquired a former doula (eeeek!) so I’m throwing in SOME truth, but this is still Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. fanfic so obvs it’s not a guide to natural childbirth (even if I sometimes like to think of it that way in my head!). Anyway, Jemma’s motivational quote about birth came mostly from Sheryl Feldman who sounds like exactly the sort of hippy-calmbirth-drug-free-attachment-parenting-water-birth-natural-birth-Ina-May-Gaskin-quoting guru that I utterly embraced the wisdom of. It totally worked for me though I know it’s not everyone’s thing!!! As for the suddenness with which Daisy finds herself hit with Braxton-Hicks contractions (which is what these false-labour things are called these days), I think it’s probably rare that they hit with such force, but they can certainly take a mama by surprise!

Can’t wait to see what state we’re all in after the season finale!!!! At least there’s always fanfic, right guys!?

As always, LOVE to hear what you guys think of this chapter!!! :D
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Just a heads-up beloved readers – this chapter contains canon-typical violence, character death and some mentions and descriptions of blood and injury. I’ve shifted the rating up to “Teen And Up Audiences” as a result. (Be assured, it’s not related to birth. Also, some of you were frightened that in my notes after last chapter I was teasing a non-consensual situation – trust me, I am not and I pretty much never will in any of my fics. If I ever did (and I won’t!) I would definitely use the archive warnings.)

If you REALLY don’t like violence, maybe skip this chapter and I’ll throw in a little summary of what happens at the beginning of the next one so you won’t miss any crucial details. However, I’m pretty sure that if you’re watching Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., you’ll cope just fine with what you’re about to read.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Fitz wanted to pinch himself. He could not help but contemplate the romantic potential of such a late-night moonlit horseback ride through the countryside, all alone with his beloved, utterly unchaperoned. Riding side-saddle in the dark wool cloak she’d unearthed from the depths of her saddle bags, the fabric of her elegant gown exposed beneath, she was almost facing him as they rode, enabling him to best appreciate the way the moon illuminated the silver thread in her dress, the milky white of her skin and the shine of her honey-coloured eyes.

“It is obvious that you are very experienced at what you do, Miss Simmons, but I suspect you did not always plan to work as a midwife,” Fitz observed, as Franklin and Xochi picked their way carefully up the drive under the cover of the avenue of horse-chestnuts.

The darkness under the canopy hid her expression from him, though by her tone, it must have been quizzical. “What makes you say that, Mr Fitz?”

“Had my mother been present to observe your exemplary conduct over dinner, Miss Simmons, Daisy would have heard nothing but the singing of your praises, and the cataloguing of her comparative failures for weeks to come.”

“Your mother approves of anatomical descriptions of the placenta over the soup course then, Mr Fitz?”

He laughed aloud at the thought. “The topic of your conversation aside of course, Miss Simmons,” he replied. “Mother only converses around the safe edges of important things.”

“Ah,” she replied.

“But everything else about your manner and behaviour seems so very familiar to me, that I cannot help but believe that we are survivors of similarly punishing regimes. And I have never heard anyone play and sing as you did this evening,” he went on warmly. “There could not be another lady who is nearly so accomplished as you, Miss Simmons. I would have to see her with my own eyes to believe
in her existence, and I think I have already met every such eligible lady in the nation. It has been my parent’s singular ambition to introduce me to all of your nearest contenders.”

His companion did not immediately reply.

“I do not mean to be impertinent, Miss Simmons,” he added quickly. “It is merely my very clumsy way of saying that I suspect your childhood was, in many ways, extremely similar to that of my sister and myself, though you seem to be of far greater credit to your relations.”

“I am not entirely sure that they would be so very quick to agree with you. But do you mean to suggest, Mr Fitz, that my table manners and my performance on the pianoforte hint at a secret identity concealed beneath the homely midwife persona that I daily assume?” Miss Simmons asked, and he was relieved to hear the mirth in her tone.

“If it is that you are trying to cultivate the persona of a ‘homely midwife’, Miss Simmons, I am sorry to tell you that you have utterly failed. You are easily the most captivating woman in the parish!” Mr Fitz declared, momentarily forgetting himself in the emboldening darkness.

“I suppose I should thank you for that generous assessment, Mr Fitz,” said Miss Simmons quietly. “Though it has certainly never been my intention to captivate anyone.”

“You simply cannot help it, Miss Simmons. Or perhaps I should say I cannot help but find you cap-”

“Mr Fitz!” she interrupted. “Look! A rider approaches through the orchard on the road above us! It is odd, is it not, to see a member of the militia riding alone so late at night? And we have barely left the house behind us. We shan’t reach the bounds of your family property for some time yet, shall we?”

Fitz hastily swallowed the torrent of sentiment that had been about to burst forth, damming it up once more with a mix of disappointment and relief. He looked in the direction that he could vaguely make out her hand guiding him to. Though under the closely planted avenue of trees it was almost too dark to even see her outstretched arm, on the road running perpendicular through the extensive Fitz orchard above them, the moonlight illuminated the entire landscape. The decrepit groundskeeper’s shed gleamed as if it had been freshly painted and the autumnal colours of the leaves, though muted, were clearly discernible, as was the pure white of the rider’s horse, the crimson wool of his military coat and the silvery gleam of his sword.

“Ward,” Fitz breathed. “He must be on his way to the house for Daisy.”

“Are you quite sure it is Mr Ward?” Jemma whispered. “How is it that you can be so certain?”

“He is excessively proud of that horse for a start,” Fitz whispered back. “And I could tell his cockily perfect military bearing anywhere. That is undoubtedly my brother-in-law.”

“Then what can we do, Mr Fitz?” asked Jemma urgently. “We must dissuade him from going to Daisy. She needs rest and peace at least until her child is born. He will only bring her disquiet.”

Fitz nodded in the darkness. “Let us both ride to the top of the avenue. You can sequester yourself out of sight in the orchard and I will approach him alone. Surely I can make him see sense.”

“I am certain you can, Mr Fitz,” Jemma assured him. “And I am certain you must.”

They led their horses some distance up the avenue in silence, their eyes following the progress of Ward as he drew nearer.

A sudden crash of wood against stone cut through the moonlit silence. The door of the ramshackle
groundskeeper’s shed had been flung open and another figure lumbered into view.

Jemma gasped.

Fitz instinctively moved his horse in front of hers.

The second man was an utterly dishevelled but still recognisable Robert Gonzales. He appeared to be brandishing an ancient sword.

“You must answer for my daughter, Mr Ward!” the older man cried, staggering onto the road to block Ward’s path.

The look of disdain on Ward’s face was obvious, even at the distance from which Fitz and Jemma observed him.

“Men are responsible for their own daughters, are they not?” Ward sneered. “I cannot be held accountable for yours.”

“I will hear you confess what you know of my Kara,” Gonzales replied, hefting the sword in his hand. “And once you have confessed, know that I have been lying in wait for you, Mr Ward, preparing myself to play the part of your judge and executioner.”

Ward slowed his horse to a halt and sighed in resignation. “You’ll get no satisfaction from me, old man. Not if you are planning to try and kill me.”

Jemma moved as if to edge her horse forward but Fitz caught the reins to halt her advance.

“You insinuated yourself into my daughter’s affections!” Gonzales seethed. “You took advantage of her naïveté! You took from her her innocence!”

Ward laughed, dismounting from his horse with a leisurely nonchalance. “Kara was your daughter?” He walked directly up to Gonzales, taking in the old man’s trembling. “I took nothing from her that she did not freely… shall we say wantonly, give to me.”

“Then you do not deny that you knew her?” asked Gonzales, taking a bold step closer.

“Oh, I knew her alright,” Ward replied scornfully. “You’re a religious man, are you not, sir? You would not be so distressed about your daughter’s illicit pleasures if you were otherwise. Then you’ll catch my meaning when I say that we knew one another as Abraham knew Hagar, as Judah knew Tamar, as David knew Bathsheba.”

Now it was Jemma’s turn to lay a restraining hand on Fitz’s arm, just managing to hold him back from charging into the fray.

Gonzales raised his sword. “There was a child!” he screamed. “A daughter! Do you know how long I have searched for her?”

Both Fitz and Jemma watched as Ward visibly paled. “A daughter?”

“A daughter, you heartless monster! My granddaughter! And I come to avenge her mother’s death! To make you pay for your crimes!”

Perhaps it was the shock of Gonzales’ revelation, perhaps it was simply his nature, but in one swift movement, Ward drew his blade, lifting it high above his head. He hovered a moment, as if in indecision.
Fitz and Jemma held their respective breath, each teetering on the brink of spurring on their horse to intervene.

The slash was sudden. Brutal.

A crimson blot bloomed large across Gonzales’ white shirt. The old man fell to his knees clutching at his chest.

Before Fitz could prevent her, Xochi bolted at Jemma’s urging. He took off in pursuit of her, thundering up the avenue in her wake.

Ward turned on his heel, and stalked back to where his white horse stood yanking up the grass on the side of the road. He deftly reclaimed his mount, taking only a moment to glance down at Gonzales, whose life-blood ran in rivulets, soaking the clay beneath.

A moment was all that Gonzales required. With his last strength he reached into his great coat, withdrawing the pistol he’d concealed within in its folds.

The crack of the gun shot caused Xochi to rear up in terror but Jemma clung on, desperately trying to soothe the animal. Franklin surged ahead of her.

Fitz could only watch as the bullet tore through Ward’s flesh, the impact hurling him to the ground. He charged forward as Ward’s white horse bolted, swinging himself to the ground and dropping to his brother-in-law’s side.

Ward’s shirt was already soaked with blood. The old man’s aim had been true – the path of the bullet straight through his enemy’s heart.

The soldier’s eyes stared vacantly into the starry sky above. Fitz staggered to his feet and retched into the grass where Grantham’s white horse had grazed peacefully only moments before.

“Mr Fitz!” Jemma was shouting. “You must fetch Coulson! Mr Gonzales still lives!”

Fitz turned to look at her, his hands braced against his knees.

She had ripped off her cloak and was pressing it to the old man’s chest. How she knew her patient’s name was beyond Fitz’s ken. Her hands and the white of her gown were now stained with the same gore that poured out of the two men in the dirt.

Fitz heaved himself to standing. “Miss Simmons!” he panted. “I cannot abandon you on your own with a dying man and a corpse!”

“If you do not leave immediately to fetch Coulson we will have two corpses for company! Will that ameliorate your conscience, Mr Fitz?”

“But you are all alone!”

Her eyes flashed. “I will not hear another of your ridiculous assertions, Mr Fitz! A man’s life hangs in the balance! You must fetch Dr Coulson at once!”

Fitz could see there would be nothing gained by arguing with her. He ran for Franklin, flinging himself into the saddle, and galloped at break-neck pace for Battlesden House.

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Jemma watched him go, catching the concerned glance he threw over his shoulder as he reluctantly
left her on the open road.

A sudden wheeze sounded from the body beneath her hands. She continued to apply pressure to Gonzales’ wounds but, looking to his face, she caught a strangled laugh.

“You are just like my Kara… as a little girl… Miss Simmons,” he gasped.

“Utterly intolerant of nonsense?” Jemma supplied, the shakiness of her voice belying her light tone.

“Precisely.” His voice rattled with pain.

“Mr Gonzales,” she said. “Will you at last allow me to tell you the truth you have been seeking?”

His eyes eloquently conveyed his eagerness.

“I was among the last people to see your Kara alive,” Jemma whispered. “When she was brought to me, almost two years ago now, she was so undernourished as to be almost a ghost. I was completing my midwifery training in London before I came to Berwickshire. The woman with whom I initially studied occasionally worked at The Foundlings Hospital providing aid for those poor, wretched souls who found themselves cast on its scant charity. When Kara was brought in she was heavy with child but from the moment I saw her I knew she would not survive the birth. She had nothing left for which to live.”

A single tear escaped the bereaved father’s eye and rolled down his heavily weathered cheek.

“She had been told that her father was dead, Mr Gonzales,” Jemma continued urgently. “She believed herself to be utterly alone in the world. Even in our very first meeting she mourned for you as the loving and forgiving father to whom she wished she could have been restored.”

“She… believed me dead?” he managed to ask, hopeful in the tragedy of it all.

“This is why I did not immediately divulge the truth to you when we met at the Talbots,’” Jemma replied, her own tears now falling freely. “You did not mention Kara’s name and I believed Kara’s father to have passed away.”

“But you looked to Ward,” Gonzales insisted, setting off a hacking cough that wracked his frame. “I watched your eyes flicker to him that night as we spoke… It was your glance that gave me the lead I followed and every path along which I traced my Kara led me back to him. Once I was certain, I hid myself in that shed. I barely ate nor slept. I have lain in wait for him, poised for just such a moment. And now it is done.”

“I did know that the man who had misused Kara was Grantham Ward,” she replied through her tears. “Hearing your tale and watching him while you spoke that night forcefully reminded me of what I knew of him. If only I had known your connection to Kara, I might have been able to restore your granddaughter to you that very night.”

Gonzales’ hand found her wrist and gripped it with surprising strength. “You know the fate of the child? Does she live?”

Jemma gave him a watery smile. “She does live, sir. And she is beautiful and healthy. And if it is the will of God, before this night is out, you shall see her and learn for yourself how she thrives.”

Gonzales’ brow creased in confusion. “She is nearby?”

A distant jingle of bells announced the imminent arrival of Coulson.
“A mere cart-ride away, Mr Gonzales. You must promise me you will stay awake until you have met her.”

He nodded, his jaw clenched with new-found determination.

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Fitz’s relief at seeing Jemma safe as the cart crested the hill was almost overwhelming. He had never done anything as ungentlemanly as deserting a young woman in the dead of night but he consoled himself with the fact that until he’d been drawn into Miss Simmons’ orbit, he’d never had anything like the opportunity.

He yanked on the reins to slow the cart, keeping a cautious watch as Coulson prepared to leap to the ground.

Coulson first rushed to where Jemma tended to Gonzales. Seeing that the old man was as stable as could be expected, he scrambled back past the cart and over to Ward’s prone form, feeling his neck for a pulse.

“Ward is dead,” Fitz croaked, feeling Jemma’s eyes fly to him. The mix of sympathy and relief in her face was balm to his own confused heart.

Coulson nodded, getting to his feet and clapping a sympathetic hand on Fitz’s shoulder as he dashed back to Jemma’s side to see to Gonzales. He and his apprentice held a quick whispered consultation.

“Might I beg your assistance, Mr Fitz?” Coulson asked as he knelt on one side of the patient. Fitz climbed down without hesitation and joined him, taking his place beside Jemma.

“What’s happened to her…” Gonzales huffed, the erratic rise and fall of his chest beneath her hands conveying his deepening struggle to draw breath.

Fitz turned his eyes briefly from the road to shoot her a sad smile, trying to impart to her what little remaining strength he had. He could barely process what he’d seen and heard. He couldn’t tell if it were wrong for him to be working beside Miss Simmons in bringing comfort to the man who had slain Grantham Ward on the road to Manderston and would die himself because of it. If it were wrong, he couldn’t bring himself to care.

“I did everything I could for your Kara, sir, I assure you,” Jemma was saying. “But she had no strength left with which to fight. When at last her beautiful daughter was born, she lived only long enough to hold her for a moment. With her last breath, Kara named her daughter Bethany.”

“As her mother,” Gonzales sobbed. “My dear late wife.”

Fitz stole a glance behind him to see the tears streaming unchecked down Jemma’s lovely face as she watched over the dying man and spoke of his long-dead daughter.
“Mr Gonzales,” she went on, doing her best to keep her voice steady. “May I introduce you to Dr Philip Coulson. The man who now tends your wounds, sir, is the same man who, together with his wife, Audrey, has welcomed your granddaughter, Bethany, into his home as if she were a child of his very own.”

Fitz saw Coulson raise his head, his wide enquiring eyes on Jemma’s face.

“Philip, this is Bethany’s grandfather, Mr Robert Gonzales. I hope that, if we are able to make him comfortable enough at Battlesden, Mr Gonzales might be able to see his granddaughter at last before he closes his eyes to sleep.”

“Let us not fool ourselves… Miss Simmons,” Gonzales gasped. “This will be no ordinary sleep.”

“All the more reason that you must meet my precious Beth, Mr Gonzales,” Coulson urged him.

Fitz drew the cart to a halt as close to the front door as he possibly could and clambered over the perch to assist Coulson in moving Gonzales inside. Audrey, hearing the noise of the cart returning, threw open the front door for them and led them with candlelight through to Coulson’s surgery where they settled Gonzales on the long couch that had been pre-prepared with multiple layers of white sheeting.

Once the old man had been made as comfortable as possible, Coulson took Audrey to one side and hastily whispered to her what he had learnt on the journey from Manderston. Audrey hastened forward and knelt by Gonzales’ side, pressing a kiss to his craggy cheek before getting up to rush to the nursery.

Fitz assisted Jemma and Coulson as they covered the broken body in clean white sheets, tucking the fabric under Gonzales’ chin, and stood aside to let Audrey draw near with a sleepy Bethany who clutched a little rag-doll in her arms.

Jemma stepped back to grant them access, standing beside Fitz who immediately took her trembling hand in both of his. She raised her tear-stained face to give him a tremulous smile.

“Bethany, my love,” Philip whispered, gently stroking the little girl’s shoulder. “We have a visitor for you to meet.”

Little Beth loved visitors and, even in her drowsy state, found herself compelled to investigate.

“This is Mr Gonzales, Bethie,” Audrey explained.

“Robert…” the old man breathed. “Please… Robert.”

“Hello, Robert,” said little Beth, rubbing at her eyes. “M tired.”

The old man’s smile completely transformed his face. “I am very tired also, my little Beth,” he managed, his voice seeming to grow strong at her presence.

“Dolly?” she enquired innocently, holding out her toy.

He wheezed a laugh. “I haven’t a doll of my own,” he replied. “But I am very glad that you have one.”

Beth sweetly cuddled the little doll to her chest, squeezing it tightly and rocking it from side to side with a cheeky little smile.
“When I am asleep, Beth,” Gonzales went on, “I hope that your parents might have a chance to look in the pocket of my coat.” He took in a shuddering breath. “In there… they will find a little envelope for you, little Bethany, though I did not know your beautiful name when I addressed it…” He cast his eyes about the room until he focused on Jemma. “I hope that Miss Simmons and her gentleman friend might agree to sign their names to it, to witness that you are the little girl whom I have long sought.”

Fitz saw Coulson squeeze Audrey’s hand.

“I hope that it might be a blessing to your family,” Gonzales’s looked from Coulson to Audrey. “It can do no more for me or for my Kara”

The old man remained silent a moment.

“Perhaps… I might be permitted… to say goodnight… to little Beth,” he croaked, clearly struggling to inhale. “And we can let her… return to her bed.”

Audrey brought the little girl close to his face and, just as her mother had done, Beth kissed his whiskery cheek. “Bye, Robert,” she whispered. “Sleep well.”

“You too… my precious… little girl,” he gasped, his tears flowing once more.

Audrey smiled through her own tears and then turned to carry Bethany back to the nursery.

Gonzales’ eyes looked wildly around the room. “I wonder if the three of you… might hear my confession.” His chest heaved with the strain of his words but he seemed compelled to go on. “I killed a man tonight… I ignored the word… of the Lord… I failed to believe Him when he said… that vengeance… would be His… and I took it upon myself.” He searched Fitz’s face. “You knew the man… did you not, sir?”

Fitz nodded. “Grantham Ward was my sister Daisy’s husband,” he said quietly.

Gonzales let out a strangled cry. “Then I have widowed a lady, orphaned her children. I am no better than Ward…” He kept his eyes on Fitz. “As you see, sir, I shall not escape unpunished.”

Gonzales looked back to Coulson, his breathing becoming increasingly laboured. “Might I ask, sir, that you find it in your heart to do something… to provide for my victim’s wife and children… out of Bethany’s gift? It should not be difficult to find… the means to provide generously for her… if you are willing.”

“Of course, sir,” Coulson assured him.

“Miss Simmons?” Gonzales cried, his eyes growing glassy and his voice distressed. “Please, Miss Simmons?”

“I am here, Mr Gonzales,” she assured him calmly, and Fitz released her so she could take the dying man’s hand in hers.

“I must thank you, Miss Simmons, for your care of my daughter and my granddaughter… and for your care of me in reconciling me to the truth of their circumstances.” He paused to summon the strength to continue. “I am thankful… that you have found this good man, Miss Simmons.” He raised his hand ever so slightly to indicate Fitz, who hovered wide-eyed and uncertain behind her. “Never take a good man for granted, Miss Simmons. The events of this evening… demonstrate that they are extremely… hard to come by.”
Mr Gonzales laboured breathing degenerated into an erratic rattle and the elderly man’s eyes flickered closed.

Coulson moved closer to see if he could make his patient any more comfortable, leaving Fitz watching uncertainly on.

Jemma suddenly tore her eyes from Gonzales’ face, looking to Coulson for confirmation of what she must have sensed.

“He’s gone,” said Coulson quietly.

In a moment, Audrey returned from the nursery, brushing away tears with the back of her hand. She stopped beside Fitz, watching with him as Jemma and Philip pulled the sheet over the dead man’s face.

“What will you do, Mr Fitz?” she asked quietly.

And the weight of the world descended upon his shoulders.

Chapter End Notes

SPOILER ALERT: Perhaps don't read these end notes if you haven't watched 3x10!!!
It's really just me thanking recoveringrabbit anyway.

Posting a bit early this week - it might even still be Sunday in some parts of the world!? Yay me!!!

Yet again, I am indebted to recoveringrabbit for so much sage advice in the editing process. I didn’t make her re-read the whole re-done thing before I posted it, though, so any mistakes or weirdnesses are entirely on me.

recoveringrabbit, you are so awesome.

Two Ward deaths in the space of one week, hey FitzSimmons shippers! :D Oh, man. HOW is Daisy gonna be? She seemed alright in canon but this is a bit of a different beast…
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

In the previous chapter, just in case you chose not to read it, Fitz was escorting Jemma home after nightfall when they saw Ward approaching Manderston House. They were tucked out of sight in the avenue of closely planted trees but they watched in horror as Mr Robert Gonzales appeared out of hiding and accused Ward of seducing his late daughter, Kara, swearing to have his revenge.

Ward callously cut Gonzales down with his sword but Gonzales pulled out a pistol and shot Ward dead. Jemma and Fitz fetched help for a dying Gonzales and took him to the Coulson's home where he was at last reunited with the granddaughter he'd been searching for - little Beth. He met her just before he died and asked Jemma and Fitz to witness his will in which he left all his fortune to Beth and her new family.

We pick up the action just after the events of the last chapter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Though he could not account for how it had all transpired, somehow it had been decided that Miss Simmons would return with Fitz to Manderston so that together they could break the tragic news to Daisy when she woke the next day.

While Jemma had returned to her cottage to wash and change into something vastly more practical, Fitz had travelled with Coulson back along the road he now once more traversed by her side, in order to fetch Ward’s ruined body.

Though on his return he too had thoroughly washed, his hands still felt as though they were coated with his brother-in-law’s congealing blood. It didn’t help that any sadness he felt was for Daisy and Daisy alone. After hearing Ward’s callous words and watching his brutality towards Gonzales, Fitz couldn’t muster up any grief at all for the cretinous man himself.

But how to break the terrible news to Ward’s sudden widow? His sister had not been given even a short-lived opportunity to be a happy bride. But to receive the news that her husband of only a year, the father of her unborn child, had been shot dead on her own family estate? And under the damning circumstances in which he died? It was a terrible burden to bear. He was ever so thankful not to bear it alone.

How was it that he had come to find this treasure riding silently beside him? He wanted to tell Miss Simmons how much he valued her but the only words that swam into his head were words that traditionally pertained to one’s wife - she is worth far more than rubies.

He wondered if it would even be possible for him to speak of the depths of his admiration for her without taking it to its furthest extreme and outright proposing marriage on the most obviously inappropriate occasion of them all.
So he rode in silence beside this heroic woman, wanting to say so much, but finding himself utterly unable to say anything at all. Making matters worse, he was inwardly wrestling to suppress an untimely elation at the knowledge that she had packed with the intention of staying some days at Manderston House. He would simply have to get his emotions in check.

From his many surreptitious glances at Miss Simmons as they travelled, Fitz could see that her posture was determined, that her eyes remained dry but that she continuously gnawed at her bottom lip. He resolved to lift as many concerns from her shoulders as he could, protectively nudging Franklin ever-so-slightly ahead of her as they approached the scene.

Nothing remained of the dramatic tableaux Fitz had come upon when he’d first returned in the cart with Coulson. No bodies lay strewn on the hard clay road, no blood-stained blades glittered in the moonlight. Aside from the landmark of the looming shed, they might never have known the place again.

Jemma drew her horse to a sudden halt and dismounted without explanation. Fitz followed her lead, confused. She drifted towards the groundskeeper’s shed.

Fitz was right at her shoulder when she splayed her palm against the rough palings of the rickety door and pushed it open. Moonlight flooded into the dingy room, both from the doorway and the smashed window opposite.

On the floor at their feet lay a tangle of worn blankets. Miss Simmons stooped to gather them up, industriously bundling them neatly together as if seeking an occupation for her hands. They both heard the dull clank as something slipped from the folds.

Fitz crouched close to the dirt floor, carefully picking up an open locket. He stood and held it out to Miss Simmons who absent-mindedly handed him the bundle of blankets in exchange.

She tipped the locket toward the light. “This is Kara’s portrait,” she whispered, shattering the eerie silence. “She is much younger than when I knew her, but it is unmistakeably her.”

Fitz stepped closer as she held it out for him to see, bending his head over Miss Simmons’ shoulder to admire the intricate detail of the handiwork.

“I can see little Bethany’s likeness in her features,” he observed, and she turned her face to him to gratefully acknowledge his remark with a small smile.

He couldn’t help but take note of her proximity and the way it evoked an untimely reminiscence of their dancing together earlier.

“You can!” Miss Simmons nodded eagerly. “This will be a precious, though poignant keepsake for Beth.” She turned the locket in her hands so that the opposite frame was illuminated by the moonlight and studied it more closely. “There is so much strong family resemblance between these two women. I suppose this must be Kara’s mother.”

“Bethany’s name-sake,” said Fitz.

“That is right, Mr Fitz” Jemma nodded in remembrance, shooting another sad yet grateful smile at him.

It went straight to his heart.

She gently closed the locket and turned discreetly away from Fitz to tuck it into the folds of the deep neckline of her gown.
His imagination threatened to follow her slender fingers so he coughed loudly, leaning expressively
toward the shattered window in order to demonstrate how very little attention he was paying.

“Shall we get on, Mr Fitz?” she enquired.

He turned back to face her, internally scolding himself for his flightiness and composing his features
into an expression of sad support before gesturing for her to walk ahead of him. He pulled the door
closed behind them.

They stepped together out onto the road to find a third animal standing together with Xochi and
Franklin.

Ward’s pure white horse, its mane stained with a ghastly crimson streak, pawed at the dirt
uncertainly.

The sight of the familiar creature stunned him. “I suppose…” Fitz’s voice crackled with emotion. He
took a deep breath to calm himself.

Miss Simmons laid her hand sympathetically on his arm. “We shall return his horse to Daisy, Mr
Fitz.”

“Then at least the blackguard can leave her and the child one lovely thing to remember him by,” he
remarked bitterly.

Jemma moved steadily towards the animal, her hand outstretched. Its black eyes rolled as she
approached and its pawing at the earth grew increasingly frantic.

“You’ve had quite an ordeal tonight, haven’t you?” she whispered, slowly raising her flattened palm
to the horse’s flared nostrils.

“So have you, Miss Simmons,” said Fitz softly as he watched her.

“And you, sir,” she agreed, glancing back at Fitz over her shoulder in satisfaction as Ward’s animal
sniffed cautiously at her hand then resigned himself to her stroking his muzzle. Her face fell.
“Whatever shall we say to Daisy?”

“She must know the truth,” Fitz heard himself say with surprising resolve. “But I must break it to her
as gently as I can.”

“You will not be alone, Mr Fitz. I am here to be of service to Mrs Ward and to yourself in any way
that you might think to need me,” Jemma replied.

He ignored the thundering of his heart, cautiously taking up the reins of Ward’s horse and tethering
them securely to Franklin’s bridle while Jemma prepared to mount Xochi. He drew near once more
to offer the assistance he knew she had no need of. Fitz thought it kind of her that she took his hand
nonetheless and that, once seated, she smiled down at him as if his help had been utterly necessary.

“I know, Miss Simmons,” said Fitz warmly, momentarily delaying the release of her hand. “And
words cannot begin to convey the extent of my gratitude. Your friendship has become as essential to
me as oxygen.”

She replied with a squeeze of his hand that presented itself, in Fitz’s addled brain, as a gesture with a
hundred possible connotations. He forced himself to be content with the simple truths that she was
happy to be his friend and she was willing to assist him in his time of trial.
They rode together back down the avenue, Fitz leading Ward’s docile steed on his left with Jemma on his right.

“How do you imagine Daisy will take the news, Mr Fitz?” she asked quietly.

“I hope you will not think me a coward, Miss Simmons, but I am too frightened to even imagine it,” he replied. “What words shall I use to speak of such a heinous scene?”

She contemplated the question until they came to the end of the dark avenue and emerged onto the manicured lawns of the great house’s immediate gardens and grounds. The night sky was reflected on the tranquil surface of the ornamental lake and he could once more make out Jemma’s lovely features.

“I trust you, Mr Fitz,” she said simply. “You are a man of wisdom and tact and you are deeply devoted to your sister. I have faith that you shall know exactly what to say to her.”

“And if I fail, Miss Simmons?” he asked quietly. “Will you be beside me to correct the situation if I upset my poor Daisy?”

“Daisy will be upset, Mr Fitz, you must prepare yourself. But her distress shall be no fault of yours,” Miss Simmons assured him. “It is a terrible thing to be the bearer of such ill tidings, but she will ultimately grieve the news itself, not the manner in which it is told her by a gentle and compassionate brother whom she loves so dearly.”

“Thank you, Miss Simmons,” he whispered. “I hope I can one day be that man you have been describing.”

She cast her eyes eloquently to the heavens in response as they drew near to the stables.

“I shan’t wake Mack,” said Fitz as he dismounted and drew near once more to needlessly help Miss Simmons down from her horse. How he loved the excuse to place his hands about her dainty waist and to feel the light pressure of her hands on his shoulders.

“If you’ll wait here,” he somehow managed despite her nearness, “I’ll quickly stable the horses and Mack can tend to them in the morning.”

“I’d best assist you, Mr Fitz,” said she, retaining her hold on Xochi’s reins. “I can’t have you facing Mack’s ire again tomorrow. Besides,” she went on, “It’ll be far more efficient with the two of us and I would appreciate the distraction.”

Together they made quick work of removing bridles and saddles, of brushing down and blanketing the horses and leading them into their stalls. Jemma carefully washed the red-brown streak out of the white horse’s mane, brushing any residue entirely clear.

Fitz stepped back, satisfied that Mack would be appeased. He offered Miss Simmons his arm to lead her into the house and she took it with a comfortable familiarity that thrilled him. If it weren’t that he were leading her away from a terrible double-murder, his imagination would have made far more of it.

He poked his head into Daisy’s room to find Daisy sound asleep but Mrs Hartley awake. She snuck out of the bedchamber, quietly pulling the door closed behind her and ushered Fitz and Miss Simmons some way down the corridor out of earshot.

“She has only just fallen back asleep, poor love,” confided Mrs Hartley. “She’s been up fretting and weeping for some hours now after a terrible nightmare earlier.”
Fitz and Miss Simmons exchanged meaningful glances.

“But you are returned to us, Miss Simmons,” Mrs Hartley suddenly noticed. “Was everything alright on the road?”

…

Mrs Hartley had been horrified by the tale they’d had to tell. She’d embraced Mr Fitz repeatedly, and Jemma too, and shed a tear for poor Daisy, asserting repeatedly, and in no uncertain terms, that she had never liked or trusted that Grantham Ward.

As it happened, being a woman after Miss Simmons’ own heart, Mrs Hartley had already prepared a room adjacent to Daisy’s just in case Jemma would have need of it.

Clad in the nightgown she had brought from home, Jemma lay cocooned in the luxurious Manderston bed linen. She’d deferred blowing out her candle, telling herself that the light allowed her to best admire the long-unaccustomed opulence of the furnishing. In actuality, she was terrified of what her memory might conjure for her in the darkness.

Eventually, she could toss and turn no longer. Shrugging on the dressing gown that Mrs Hartley had thoughtfully provided for her, Jemma took up the candle from beside where she had carefully placed the locket, and padded out of her bed chamber on silent feet.

The stark light of the full moon continued to pour through the windows, making the very early hours of the morning through which she moved seem bright as day. Having assisted Daisy to her room from the library the previous morning, she at least knew how to find her way there. She wondered if perhaps her increasingly pressing need for distraction might enable her to find some justification for the existence of Mr Fitz’s beloved novels.

Oddly, what had contributed most to the restlessness that had set her exploring was the memory of what she had seen in the glass in the few moments she had stood alone in her cottage before once more embarking for Manderston.

Her hair had come loose from Rose’s elaborate styling and fell in wisps around her face. Her face had been marked with grime. But her elegant gown was utterly ruined, stained with the blood of two men whose deaths she had intimately witnessed.

Jemma had worn that particular gown on only a handful of prior occasions, so spoiled for choice had she been in her aunts’ home, yet they had all been occasions of frivolity. She had perhaps selected it more frequently than many of her others, simply because she had once vainly admired the way it clung to her body, draping her lovely figure to best advantage. Then she could never have imagined the gory shroud to which it would be reduced.

She had found herself flooded, as she lay surrounded by all the familiar trappings of her childhood home, by images of her previous life. Learning drawing, singing, playing from men known as masters of their talent. Casually speaking perfect conversational French with her aunts over tea. Touring Europe and finding herself just as much a triumph abroad as she was noted to be at home. She had been utterly bored by it all, but she had at least been safe, surrounded as she was by the perimeter established by wealth and class, by accomplishment and connections. Manderston forcibly reminded her of all of it.

Yet it was within the very grounds of this extensive estate that she had endured her most trying ordeal, and with Daisy as yet oblivious to what had taken place, it was far from over.
Pushing open the door to the library, she was surprised and yet gratified to find a fire burning merrily in the grate. Rather than dwell on the bookshelves looming over her in the shadowy darkness round the edges of the large room, she drew near to the fire, carefully placing her candle-stick on the mantelpiece and extending her hands to the blaze in order to feel the radiating heat.

As she stood and warmed herself, her eye was drawn to the large windows on the north side of the room, brilliantly illuminated by the moon. She drew her dressing gown more tightly around herself and left the orange circle of the hearth to move towards them.

Each window had within it a cushioned seat and she clambered into the closest one, drawing her feet up under her and tucking them into the folds of her nightdress.

Jemma gazed out over the park and, without any warning, burst into violent tears. The force of her gasping sobs wracked her frame, causing her whole body to shudder with overwhelming waves of emotion. She curled in on herself, subsumed by the torrent of weeping, oblivious to everything but the frantic pain within.

Someone firmly gripped her hand, and when she made no response she felt strong arms around her, heard a deep voice speaking softly – a familiar lilt – but she was powerless to take it in. She collapsed helplessly into the warmth of the embrace and vaguely sensed herself being lifted from her seat and securely carried.

Then she was once more still, wrapped so entirely in the steady and solid form of her companion that she began to feel somewhat calmed. She grew conscious of the heat of the fire playing once more upon her face and hands and against the skin of her exposed feet and ankles. She remained ensconced in the hold of firm arms, lulled by the unintelligible hum of soft words whispered against her temple, until her sobs began at last to subside.

The thin fabric beneath her face was wet with her tears. She drew up a hand to wipe at her cheeks and, in doing so, brushed her knuckles against the bristly throat of her protector. She drew away a little and the encircling arms slackened to enable her movement, but did not let her go.

In the glow of the fire, she found herself wrapped in the warm embrace of Mr Fitz who smiled sadly down at her, his blue eyes shining green-gold in the light. It did not seem to immediately occur to either of them, in the intensity of the moment, that he should release her or that she should extricate herself from his lap.

…

Mr Fitz had watched in unaccustomed trepidation as the library door had silently opened.

What took place in his heart when he recognised the figure to be that of Miss Simmons was not precisely a calming. Rather, it was a reassurance, knowing that his thundering pulse was prompted for the first time that evening by something other than fear.

He stood in the shadowy corner of the library, where he had gone directly after stoking up a merry blaze in the hearth, seeking after his well-thumbed copy of *Ivanhoe*. He waited for her to see him there but, obviously expecting solitude, she went straight to the fireplace and turned her back to him in order to warm herself.

He had tried to speak, but, in his surprise, no sound had been forthcoming. He could only watch as she wandered towards the windows, settling herself into his own favourite spot in such a way that she would have had to crane her neck to see him.
Fitz was frantically trying to work out how he could alert her to his presence without causing unnecessary alarm when the fit of weeping had overcome her.

At first he had called her name from where he stood.

She had given no indication of hearing him.

He had tried again repeatedly as he approached her but it was all to no avail. On arriving at her side he had gone so far as to drop to his knees, gently taking her hand in his, but she had been so overwrought that she did not even seem to notice.

Utterly unfamiliar with such all-encompassing displays of emotion, Fitz had grown increasingly concerned. This precious woman seemed to be shattering in front of him and none of the politely acceptable attempts he had made to comfort her were proving to be vaguely effectual.

At last he had tossed all caution and notions of respectability to the wind and done what his entire being was crying out for him to do. He had taken her into his arms, murmuring bold endearments into her hair, somehow confident she could not take them in. She had raged and sobbed unabated.

Feeling the violent degree to which her whole body trembled against him had unsettled him even further. He did not consciously think before he’d lifted her easily into his arms, he had simply reacted, though he had been conscious enough to gasp at the way she nestled into him, her fists gripping at the flimsy fabric of the night-shirt he had loosely tucked into his breeches.

Fitz had carried her back to the fireside and carefully lowered them both onto the nearest sofa, settling himself back against the soft cushions and ensuring her comfort as best he could. While she remained oblivious, lost in her fervent weeping, he had enumerated to her the manifold reasons for his ardent admiration of her and whispered to her of all the deepest yearnings of his heart.

Even as she calmed, pressed securely against his chest, the bright moon continued to shine upon them in such a way that she could not hide from him the tears she regularly brushed aside. How he longed to gently take her face in his hands and kiss each of her silvery tears away. After much wrestling with his tenuous self-control, all he allowed himself was the liberty of pressing the softest of kisses to her hairline as she yielded to his embrace.

“Mr Fitz,” she had sighed at last, her voice raw from weeping. “You have already endured enough tonight. This burden should not have fallen to you also.”

“I cannot assure you heartily enough, Miss Simmons, that you are no burden at all,” said he in earnest. “I am honoured to be able to provide whatever assistance I can to you. You who do so much for others… who does so much for me.”

“How shall I ever forgive myself for what has transpired?” she whispered despairingly, half to herself.

Fitz bent his head so as to look directly into her amber eyes. “How can you even ask such a thing, Miss Simmons? How can you possibly blame yourself?”

“I am the one who unwittingly lead Gonzales to Ward. I am the one who brought such destruction upon your house, such terrible tragedy upon Daisy and her child.”

“Daisy’s marriage to Grantham Ward was a tragedy in itself, Miss Simmons,” Fitz said firmly. “I have held myself responsible for that ever since Ward revealed his true nature. As her family, we should have seen through him. I should have protected her from his treachery.”
“I notice you do not go so far as to say that Gonzales has freed Daisy from her ugly circumstances.”

“Not now,” he replied earnestly. “Not quite this night. But I shall say it in time. And you shall see, Miss Simmons. I do not imagine it will be terribly long before Daisy herself is able to declare the same.”

“An avenging angel,” she said wryly.

“Though Gonzales brought swift justice upon Ward, and died confessing his rashness, he was perhaps an unwitting instrument of mercy for Daisy,” mused Fitz. “That is how I shall always remember him. Privately at least.”

“Poor sweet little Beth,” Jemma went on, her tears falling afresh. “How shall she endure this new level of scandal brought into her ancestry?”

“Miss Simmons,” Fitz gently scolded her. “Do you not rejoice in your own adoption?”

She looked up at him, confused.

“I am not speaking of your aunts, of course. I speak of your adoption by the Father of All. That is your identity now, and it far surpasses whatever lofty heights your earthly lineage might attain. Beth will not shed many tears mourning her parentage. Instead, she will rejoice in the affection and stability of the family you have lovingly placed her in. You saved that little girl, Miss Simmons. Where would she now be had you not taken responsibility for her care?”

Jemma shook her head. He imagined she did not need to take much of a flight of fancy to conjure Beth’s alternative future. Miss Simmons had seen those places. She knew more than most what those unwanted women must go through to claw for survival.

“And what of the Coulsons?” Fitz continued softly. “I am only newly acquainted with them, but it was not difficult to see the way in which the addition of Beth has wonderfully enriched their lives.”

He caught the hint of a smile playing on her lips at the thought and it spurred him on.

“Perhaps Beth shall have a little playmate in Daisy’s child. And perhaps, should it seem right, the two children might one day know of their link to one another, might love one another as the siblings they are.”

Her hint of a smile grew unexpectedly broad. “I should love for Beth to know the affection of a sibling,” she whispered. “You and Daisy are a delightful advertisement for the state, Mr Fitz. At times, I have felt quite envious of the fondness you so patently have for one another.”

“It is impossible not to love Daisy,” he said warmly. “And I know that you agree with me, Miss Simmons, for I have seen your solicitous care of her. You love my sister too. And how could you not?”

“She might argue the same about you, Mr Fitz,” she replied, stifling a yawn.

Fitz sucked in a sudden breath, desperately wondering if he could turn their playful conversation into an opportunity to repeat aloud all that he had earlier whispered into her hair. But his frantic silence drew on a moment too long and he felt her form grow slack against him, her breathing deepening into the unmistakeable steadiness of sleep.

And so it was that he awoke hours later to the wide eyes of a startled scullery maid with Miss Simmons peacefully asleep in his lap.
So this lands about fourteen hours earlier than usual due to imminent life-related craziness! It IS actually Monday in my part of the world but it may not yet be in yours. As always, LOVE to hear what you think!!!

Apparently, I have been spelling reins like what the Queen does. Excruciating embarrassment. Someone pointed it out on FF.net and I have spent all week shaking my fists and yelling “Reins! Reigns!” at the unsympathetic sky. I haven’t even changed it yet if you want to go back and laugh at me. I’d like to think they only noticed it coz it’s the time of year when we’re singing about reindeer? I’m gonna comfort myself with that fiction.

You might find this next revelation a little bit harder to forgive me for: I’ve realised that I’m imminently going away on holidays and I don’t expect to have much in the way of internet access. I posted what I’m semi-optimistically calling “Part I” of my Hipster Christmas AU “Let Men Their Songs Employ” last night, I’m gonna post my Secret Santa fic just after Christmas, but then I think it might be as late as Monday 11th Jan before I get to post the next chapter of this unwieldy thing. At least I’ve sort of left them in an unexpectedly fluffy place, right? Sorry!!!

Have a wonderful Christmas all, if you’re into that sort of thing. Let me leave you, for now, with my favourite ever carol:

O Holy Night! The stars are brightly shining,
It is the night of the dear Saviour's birth.
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.
Fall on your knees! Oh, hear the angel voices!
O night divine, the night when Christ was born;
O night, O Holy Night, O night divine!
O night, O Holy Night, O night divine!

Led by the light of faith serenely beaming,
With glowing hearts by His cradle we stand.
O'er the world a star is sweetly gleaming,
Now come the wise men from Orient land.
The King of kings lain thus in lowly manger;
In all our trials born to be our friend.
He knows our need, our weakness is no stranger,
Behold your King! Before him lowly bend!
Behold your King! Before him lowly bend!

Truly He taught us to love one another,
His law is love and His gospel is peace.
Chains he shall break, for the slave is our brother.
And in his name all oppression shall cease.
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we,
Let all within us praise His holy name.
Christ is the Lord! Then ever, ever praise we,
His power and glory ever more proclaim!
His power and glory ever more proclaim!

And may you all have the happiest of New Years! The midwife and I (and heart-eyes landedgentry! Fitz, of course) will be back in 2016! Thank you for all of your delightfulness in your enjoyment of this thing. You guys are THE BEST!!! :D
Jemma drifted back into consciousness slowly and then all at once, the horror of the previous night and her subsequent impropriety rushing back in on her. She leapt out of Mr Fitz’s arms, yanking her borrowed dressing gown tightly about her body.

She was appalled by the flood of memory, by her own lack of self-control and by the awkward responsibility that had fallen to such a kind gentleman in the wake of her humiliating failure to maintain her composure.

Remembering that the gentleman in question remained where she had only just left him, she took a deep breath and turned to begin her extensive repentant apology.

Instead of finding Mr Fitz still seated, as she expected, on the sofa behind her, it took her a moment to orient herself to the pale triangle of flesh – his exposed throat, clavicle and sternum – in her direct line of sight. She raised her eyes to his, her cheeks flushed with mortification, ready to pour forth a torrent of regret.

However, before she could so much as open her mouth, Mr Fitz began stammering what seemed to be a deeply heartfelt and anguished apology of his own.

“How can you ever forgive me, Miss Simmons,” he was saying, “for the shameful liberties I have taken? I acknowledge that I have behaved in an utterly unseemly and ungentleman-like manner. I shall grieve it heartily but I shall of course understand if you must ask me to take my leave of you and deny me the pleasure of your future company.”

So surprised was Miss Simmons by his words that it took until the moment he stepped backwards and away from her, his eyes roving somewhat desperately over her face, as if committing her features to memory, before she could gather her wits to reply.

Without thinking, she reached out and caught his retreating hand in hers as he turned for the door, causing Fitz to swing wildly back to her, his eyes seeking her own with tentative anticipation.

“Mr Fitz!” she cried. “Please do not so distress yourself. The indecorous behaviour was all on my part. You are utterly blameless.”

Fitz looked back at her with such a mix of penitence and hope that she barely managed to find the words to continue. “I assure you, sir, you could not have been more compassionate a friend to me in my hour of need. I only wish that I had been more capable of controlling my feelings in such a way that you might not have been forced into such an awkward position.”

Her friend shook his head in earnest, a muscle twitching in his jaw. “Miss Simmons, please. You need not concern yourself on my behalf. I am only overcome with gratitude to learn that you are not angry with me, though you have every right to be.”

“Quite the contrary, Mr Fitz,” Jemma replied, trying to give him the warmest smile she could muster. “I am thankful for you and your willingness to help me shoulder my burdens.”

He laughed wildly, his relief palpable. “Miss Simmons, let me remind you that it is you who are helping me shoulder my burdens. It is my brother-in-law who has proved himself to be such a cad,
and he has paid for his crimes with his life. Without you here, Miss Simmons, I would be facing poor
Daisy this morning alone.”

She squeezed his hand. “You shall not be alone, Mr Fitz. Let us quickly return to our chambers and
dress so that we might prepare ourselves for the day ahead.”

“I know it seems a terrible time to think of one’s stomach,” Fitz said ruefully, “but do you think we
might undertake that preparation over breakfast?”

Jemma nodded, giving him a sad smile. “Let us hope that Daisy might sleep a little late this morning
to recover from her broken rest last night. Perhaps Mrs Hartley might also have some sound advice.”

He nodded, seeming to take comfort from the promise of imminent sustenance and wise counsel.
“You go before me, Miss Simmons,” he suggested. “I have some books to return to the shelves.”

She glanced around in surprise, not having noticed a single book out of place, but, assuming he
knew his business, gave him another grateful smile and left the library, pulling the door closed
behind her. It was early enough that a young scullery maid still laboured under the weight of an
enormous basket of firewood, slowly making her way along the otherwise deserted corridor.

Jemma turned back to open the library door for the encumbered girl but her eyes widened under her
frilled cap and she shook her head vigorously, indicating with an exaggerated nod of her head that
the firewood was destined for further along the lengthy hallway.

Jemma smiled in understanding then quickly returned to her room, looking in vain for Mr Fitz
making his way along the corridor behind her as she turned the door handle and slipped inside.

…

Back in the library, Mr Fitz collapsed again into the squishy sofa where not long before he had sat
with the prone form of Miss Simmons cradled tenderly against his breast. The circumstances cried
out against his savouring of the moment and yet he could not help but dwell, just for an instant, on
the memory of the weight of her against him, on all the points where their bodies had been
connected, on all of the tiny burning places where her bare skin had brushed against his.

He recalled the way that the firelight and then the early morning sun had caused her lustrous chestnut
hair, tumbling in soft curls over her shoulders, to gleam in the reflected glow. He treasured the
sensation of those same curls against his throat, remembering how it had felt to stroke his fingers
soothingly through her soft tresses as she’d wept in his arms.

He stretched out the hand that only a moment before she had held in her own, her amber eyes so full
of sincerity as she assured him repeatedly that he had done no wrong, that she had been grateful
for his illicit display of affection.

He doubted that he would ever recover from the tumult of emotion he’d experienced since waking to
that frightened scullery maid, let alone the new extremes his heart had traversed since the moment he
first met Miss Simmons. But now that she’d assured him that his affection was not repulsive to her,
he looked forward with quiet almost-confidence to the day when he might hold her like that as a
matter of course, and express aloud to her, in full expectation of her comprehension and appreciation,
all of the depths of his feelings for her.

How he would steel himself to be steady and patient through Daisy’s anticipated period of mourning
he couldn’t tell, but the brightened prospect of Miss Simmons’ acceptance of his future offer buoyed
him with a joy that he knew could fuel him through whatever further trials came before. He would be
the man that Miss Simmons described, he would be the brother that Daisy needed and deserved, and when the worst of the squall had passed and Daisy had found her way to some equilibrium, he would do all he could to secure his sister’s further happiness, and, of course, his own, by drawing Miss Simmons formally into their family – a loving sister to Daisy, aunty to the imminent babe and (he could barely allow himself to form the precious word in the raging quiet of his own mind) his very own wife.

He pushed himself to his feet, suppressing his giddy delight with only one moment’s contemplation of the morning’s tasks. Striding out of the library and down the hall to his room, the one pause he allowed himself was a brief lingering outside the door of Miss Simmons’ chamber for the lightest brush of his fingertips over the walnut barrier between them.

…

Mrs Hartley had advised the heavily burdened pair to retire from the dining room and allow Daisy to take some refreshment before they broke their terrible news. She ushered them up to the library, of all places, providing tea and scones and advised them to await the arrival of the unwitting widow.

Fitz paced nervously back and forth under the windows while Miss Simmons sat calmly on the very sofa they had both awakened on only hours before.

“Come, sit by me, Mr Fitz,” she urged. “And we shall take some moments to commit this calamity into the hands of the One who loves Daisy more than you or I ever could.”

He hesitated a moment, having spent all morning doing just that in the quiet of his own mind.

“You are right, of course, Miss Simmons,” he replied, making his way across the room to join her once more on the sofa.

She surprised him by taking his hand in hers, even as she bowed her head to pray. Yet again his mind jumped ahead to a future where the two of them would daily join hands to commit all things together into the sovereignty of their God.

“Loving Heavenly Father,” she began, “Lord over the living and the dead, Give us the wisdom and the words we need with which to inform and comfort Daisy. Give her the capacity and the serenity to be able to understand the extent of what has taken place. And somehow, Father, over and above all, give her the strength and the tenacity to embrace her imminent labour in safety and trust. Protect her and the little child she carries. Use Mr Fitz and myself for her comfort and for your perfect purposes, Amen.”

So intently did the two of them have their heads bowed over their clasped hands that it wasn’t until Daisy had opened the library door, come some way into the room and then stopped, recognising that she was interrupting something, that they looked up and noticed her.

“Do come and sit down, Daisy,” Jemma called to her, vacating the seat next to Fitz and taking an empty chair opposite. He wondered why it was that Daisy’s glance flicked between him and their friend with such a gleeful anticipation.

“We have something to tell you, dear,” Fitz began as Jemma busied herself pouring the tea.

“Then why do you seem so grave about it?” Daisy asked eagerly. “You can’t possibly imagine I shall be anything other than thrilled!”

Fitz looked to Miss Simmons confused. She answered him with a little shrug of her shoulders.
“Daisy,” he said solemnly, taking his sister’s hands in his own.

Her merry expression immediately sobered at his tone.

“Last night, as I escorted Miss Simmons home to Battlesden, we witnessed a terrible crime. Let me first tell you the tragic conclusion and then we shall endeavour to provide you with the best explanation we can.” Fitz took a deep breath. “Last night, Daisy, I am so sorry to say, your husband was murdered.”

Daisy’s hand flew to her mouth, her eyes flitting once more between Jemma’s face and her brother’s.

“This is what you had to tell me?” she asked.

“Yes, dear one,” he nodded. “And I am terribly sorry to be the bearer of such horrific news.”

Her eyes flickered back to Jemma. “You witnessed his death?” she whispered.

Jemma nodded sadly.

“Then I am sorry for you,” Daisy said unexpectedly. “What a horror you must have endured!”

“Daisy,” Fitz interrupted. “Perhaps we should tell you what we know.”

Daisy suddenly got to her feet and Jemma leapt up to assist her, holding her arm tightly as Daisy wandered towards the window.

“Where did he die? Right here?” she asked. “Within the grounds of Manderston?”

Fitz looked to Miss Simmons for instruction.

She glanced back at him over her shoulder, nodding tentatively.

“Near the groundskeeper’s shed, in the orchard, at the top of the avenue.”

Daisy made an indecipherable noise in response. “And who was it that struck him down?” she asked with an almost casual interest.

“A gentleman with whom you would not be familiar, dearest,” Jemma continued. “A Mr Robert Gonzales.”

Daisy gave an unexpected snort of derision. “Someone to whom Grantham owed money, no doubt.”

Fitz shook his head sadly. “No, Daisy. Ward did not invite the attack by means of his gambling.”

“A cuckolded husband then?” she asked quietly, and Fitz could see her trembling.

He looked to Jemma, her face a mirror of what he felt his to be in the horror of taking in the extent of Daisy’s suffering. “You had reason to suspect—”

“I was well past suspecting, Leo,” she snapped. “He had even begun to parade his women in front of me, the longer I refused to write to Father for money.”

Fitz shook his head, struggling to take in this awful revelation. “You never said—”

“Leo, I was so ashamed!” Daisy pleaded. “How could I have told you of such awful things? You would probably have tried to go after Ward yourself, to challenge him, and he would have killed you
without giving it a second thought.”

The flood of all-consuming anger Fitz felt rising with the bile in his breast, together with the crime they had witnessed in the night, more than proved Daisy’s theory.

“I prayed so long,” Daisy whispered, “for another glimpse of the Grantham that you and I first met. Do you recall, Leo?”

Fitz nodded, the flood of remembrance overwhelming.

“I earnestly prayed that I might see a return of that man who seemed so convincingly to love me,” she went on. “I prayed that I might win his heart again, for I became convinced that I had somehow failed him. I even held onto a sliver of hope, Jemma, that when I told him of our child, that he might turn to me again in affection, that I might prove myself at least a fruitful, if not a worthy wife.”

Jemma slid her arm around Daisy’s trembling shoulders, drawing her close. For a moment she was still.

“After he met my announcement with scorn, my supplications began to change. I no longer prayed for Grantham’s redemption.” Her voice hardened. “Instead, I prayed for my own deliverance.”

She shook herself free of Jemma’s embrace, her jaw set determinedly as she turned to face Fitz. “You need not worry for me, Leo. Whomever this Mr Robert Gonzales is, I am indebted to him. He has been the Lord’s instrument of mercy to me. He has set me and this babe within me free.”

Miss Simmons sought Fitz’s eyes at the echo of their own speculation.

“I am not saying that I shall not grieve for Ward,” she added quietly. “I most likely will, though I won’t easily explain it to myself, but until now all my grieving had been for my inability to find a way out, my reluctant acceptance of my lot.” She stayed quiet a moment. When she spoke again her eyes were ablaze. “I am free of him,” she repeated. “Thank the Lord Almighty, Grantham Ward has no power over me now.”

Fitz exchanged further looks of disbelieving relief with Miss Simmons. It would be difficult for Daisy to be alone, of course, but perhaps so much less difficult than living her life alongside such a hard and mercenary husband.

A twinge of pain showed on Daisy’s face and suddenly Miss Simmons appeared to be holding her weight.

“Daisy!” she cried, stumbling and falling to her knees with his sister.

Daisy collapsed onto all fours emitting a groan that seemed to come from deep within her. Jemma glanced up at Fitz in concern and he rushed to Daisy’s other side, dropping to his knees beside her.

“Has she fainted?” he asked, fighting to keep the panic from his voice.

“Daisy?” Jemma repeated, wrapping her arm around the lady’s wrist to measure her pulse. “Can you hear me?”

The lady nodded, though seemed unable to raise her head. “I think it is beginning,” she rasped. Fitz felt palpably relieved to hear his sister’s voice but startled by her announcement.

“A shock the like of which Daisy has just had can be enough to bring on labour,” Jemma informed
him calmly. “Do you have any further reason to suspect, Daisy?” she asked quietly.

“Just after you and Leo left last night,” Daisy whispered, her breathing laboured, “I had the show. It was just as you described.”

Fitz looked over Daisy’s head at Jemma, seeking insight.

“A plug of bloody mucus stops up the cervix,” Miss Simmons explained. “Many women lose the plug in the day or two before real labour begins. It’s a sign that the cervix is ripening and widening, ready for birth.”

He felt a little as though he might faint himself, before he looked down to see his sister rock forward on her knees, resting her head onto her forearms. He reached to grasp hold of her fingers and she gripped onto him with a desperate strength.

“Leo,” Daisy whispered. “Please don’t leave me.”

He cast about for something concrete to cling on to in the face of the unwieldy unknown. “Is the library the best place-”

“We shall be led entirely by Daisy,” Miss Simmons interrupted, a steel to her voice that quickly silenced him. “You claim to have always indulged your sister, Mr Fitz. Now is the time to accept that in the course of the next several hours you shall indulge her every whim, regardless of how preposterous it might seem. You gave me the impression that you were diligently preparing to assist Daisy in her labour. Now, sir, is the time to put that preparation to good use.”

He was too frightened by her tone to do anything but nod. “Of course I shall stay, if you want me here, Daisy,” he assured her.

“Let us help her back onto the lounge,” Miss Simmons suggested and, thankful for the occupation, Fitz readily obliged.

He was equally thankful to be given the precise and all-consuming task of timing Daisy’s contractions. She seemed frighteningly quiet to Fitz given the morning she’d had but, as Miss Simmons had gently instructed her, each time a contraction began, she dutifully squeezed her brother’s hand and he noted down the interval since the start of the one before.

…

Jemma watched over Daisy with concern as the minutes ticked into hours. It was one thing to go into spontaneous labour, it was another thing entirely to do so prompted by such a shock. The lady had remained silent since the first contraction began but Jemma anticipated they would see further impact of the appalling revelation as the morning wore on.

She motioned with a jerk of her head to Mr Fitz who took up his pencil to note down the latest interval, gently patted his sister on the knee, and crossed the room to stand beside her.

“I am anxious for Daisy,” she admitted quietly, taking the notebook from him. “Beginning labour under such emotional distress does not bode well for a complication-free delivery. We must watch her very carefully, Mr Fitz. Please let me know if you have the slightest concern.”

“Then I must let you know that I am tied in knots of concern!” he replied earnestly. “How am I to perceive what sounds like normal birth and what sounds abnormal? What sort of signs should I be looking for? As you well know, Miss Simmons, I have no experience in this area at all!”
“No, Mr Fitz,” she acknowledged. “But you know your sister and she trusts you. You shall recognise when she is in need.”

He nodded uncertainly and returned to Daisy’s side, seeming a little lost without his time-keeping to keep him occupied. He gently brushed the escaped wisps of dark hair out of his sister’s eyes and then took each of her hands in his own.

“You just squeeze my hands if you need to, dear,” he encouraged her and Jemma smiled her approval.

Thanks to his diligent presiding over his pocket watch and pencil, they could be certain that contractions were now regular and increasing in frequency.

Mrs Hartley brought a tray of refreshments on the dot of eleven which seemed to Jemma both jarringly incongruous and perfectly appropriate. The housekeeper also had the foresight to supply a generous pile of towels and blankets. Given that Daisy showed absolutely no desire to be moved, this would be Jemma’s first delivery in the library of a stately home. At least she would no longer have to worry about the condition of the furniture. And they might as well partake of tea and sandwiches. Daisy would need to keep her strength up after all.

Mr Fitz for one seemed eager for the distraction.

“Perhaps Mr Fitz, you might busy yourself pouring the tea and I might take the opportunity to cover the lounges and the floor, and ascertain Daisy’s progress,” Jemma suggested.

Mr Fitz looked back at her with keen interest. “And how will you measure the progress of labour, Miss Simmons?” he enquired curiously.

“If Daisy is willing, I shall attempt to insert my fingers into the cervix and measure the degree to which the cervix has receded around the foetal head.”

“Oh,” replied Mr Fitz, the colour draining from his face. “Oh, I see.” He took out a handkerchief and mopped helplessly at his brow, seemingly regretting his inquisitiveness. “Yes, I shall concentrate on pouring the tea then,” he said, turning his back on the proceedings.

Daisy watched Jemma warily as she approached, laying towels and blankets on her way.

“You have had quite significant breaks between contractions so far have you not, Daisy?” she asked as she worked.

“I have,” the lady replied, the first words she had spoken for some hours. Jemma glanced over to Mr Fitz to share her relief but he kept his eyes studiously averted. “Once a contraction ends I feel quite back to myself for the minutes until the next one begins.”

“Well, seeing as you have just seen a contraction through, shall we see where you are up to? Be sure that you are in real labour?”

“After all these hours there still remains the possibility that I am not yet in real labour?” Daisy asked incredulously.

“I’m afraid so,” Jemma replied. “Let us hope that, as I suspect, you are at two fingers dilation already. Then we can declare your labour officially established.”

“Shouldn’t I have seen my waters break by now?” Daisy asked in order to distract herself as she leaned back against the blanketed lounge cushions, allowing her friend access uninhibited by her
skirts.

“I am unsure as to why so many women anticipate their waters will break before labour,” Jemma replied. “Brace yourself for an odd sensation now, Daisy. The waters come about because of the rupture of the amniotic sac-

Daisy gasped.

“-which protects and cushions the baby inside the uterus. Often a birthing mother won’t see the waters breaking until she enters the second stage of labour. Some babies are even born with the sac intact.” She pulled Daisy’s skirts back over her legs and helped her to sit up. “It’s all over now,” Jemma said soothingly. “And yes you are at a comfortable two fingers dilation. Congratulations, Daisy. You are officially in the process of giving birth to your child.”

“I am very glad to hear it!” Daisy replied. “I should hate to think I’d have to endure this all over ag-

And she doubled over once more.

“Mr Fitz,” Jemma called. “It is quite safe to turn around now.”

Mr Fitz peeked cautiously over his shoulder at Daisy as if not quite able to believe her assertion. On ascertaining the truth of her words, he turned his body fully towards them.

“Do you think you might assist Daisy with her breathing while I go and wash my hands?” she asked him.

Mr Fitz nodded nervously. “But you shall not be away long, Miss Simmons?”

“I shall return at once,” she assured him smiling. “And once this contraction has passed it is perfectly safe for Daisy to take some tea and a little something to keep up her strength. I very much plan to partake alongside her so you may be certain that I won’t be gone long.”

She was halfway to the door when she heard Mr Fitz begin his now-familiar encouragement of his sister. “You are doing so marvellously well, Daisy,” he said quietly. “Shall I count to three for you to help you slow your breathing?”

As she slipped out of the library she saw Daisy nod, gripping her brother’s hand tightly in her own.

“One cucumber sandwich,” he was saying, his eyes on the tea tray. “Two cucumber sandwiches, Three cucumber sandwiches.”

...

Some moments after Miss Simmons left the library, Fitz found himself seized upon by a desperate Daisy.

“You must tell me, Leo,” she panted, the minute the contraction subsided. “Why did this Mr Gonzales attack Grantham? Was it for the seduction of his wife that he came to seek justice?”

Fitz looked desperately towards the door, willing the return of the one person he trusted to divulge just the right information and no more, but she had only just departed and the nearest washroom was some distance down the hall.

He nervously shook his head.

“Then who?” Daisy demanded, her eyes wild. “Tell me, Leo!”
Miss Simmons had instructed him in no uncertain terms to indulge his sister’s every whim. “Kara was his daughter,” Fitz ventured.

“Was?” Daisy repeated. “She no longer lives?”

“Sh- she died in childbirth,” he stammered, immediately regretting his thoughtless disclosure. “But perhaps we could wait for Miss Sim-”

His sister’s face suddenly drained of all its colour.

“Daisy?”

She would not, or could not, answer him.

“Daisy! Speak to me!” Fitz exclaimed, grabbing the newspaper off the nearest sideboard and frantically fanning at her face.

She remained utterly unresponsive.

It felt like an eternity had passed by the time he finally heard movement at the library door.

“Miss Simmons!” he cried. “Daisy has taken ill!”

In an instant Miss Simmons was at his side but the concern written across her features as she examined Daisy did little to calm his shattered nerves.

She thrust a bottle of smelling salts into his hand, issuing a clipped command. “I trust you know how to administer these, Mr Fitz?”

He nodded.

“And while you do,” she informed him resolutely, “you shall tell me everything that transpired in my absence.”

Chapter End Notes

Welcome back, dear friends!!!

It is seven minutes from midnight on Monday in my part of the world! Phew! Just made it!!!

Hope you've all had a lovely Christmas and New Years!!!

This chapter was entirely finished and then almost entirely re-written because the first attempt was ALL WRONG!!!

Tune in next Monday to find out what happens to this labouring trio!!!

(I have GOT to do something about this obsession with exclamation marks...)
Love to hear what you think, my lovelies!!!
It was four hours after Fitz’s ill-thought-through disclosure when Miss Simmons emerged from a second examination of Daisy and, in hushed tones, declared her labour to be stalled. He did not feel entirely confident that he imagined the mildly accusatory tone.

He had listened carefully as the midwife addressed what they at first imagined fuelled his sister’s fears.

“My dear Daisy,” she had urged, “You need not be afraid that Miss Gonzales’ fate will be your own. You are a perfectly healthy, well-nourished, mentally strong woman. Your own reaction to our terrible news just this morning is more than proof of that. Kara had been neglected for the months of her pregnancy. When they brought her into the Foundlings Hospital she showed symptoms of consumption, she was half-starved and she was in utter despair, believing herself to be friendless and alone. Surely you can see no parallel between your circumstances and hers, Daisy. You have suffered a shock, to be sure, but you need not fear what is about to transpire. Your body is more than ready for the wonders it will imminently perform.”

But Daisy had not responded, and the progress of her labour showed little sign of resuming. Miss Simmons had helped her to find a comfortable position in which to lie down and rest. It seemed important that she reclined on her left side, that her feet were raised and that she had one cushion under her protruding belly and another between her thighs. Fitz was thankful he had no such requirements to take into consideration when he went to bed. In his life before meeting Miss Simmons, most nights he’d be lucky not to fall asleep with a hot cup of tea in his hands.

He found himself yanked to his feet by a firm grip around his upper arm as Miss Simmons dragged him from his chair and towards the door, well out of Daisy’s earshot.

“I have witnessed some rare cases,” she confided to him in a whisper, “and heard of others, in which it has been supposed that a degree of emotional distress hindered the progress of labour. I admit,
there is not a great deal of firm science behind the supposition. After all, if necessary, a woman will give birth in a warzone. However, perhaps given the circumstances of her pregnancy and the events of the last twenty-four hours, we might take these cases into account. I believe Daisy shall need further reassurance, Mr Fitz, but this is not the sort of birth-related reassurance that I can provide. I wonder if you might speak to her, in ways that only a family-member can, about the circumstances of her life in general. I wonder if you might help her to imagine a positive reality into which she can bring her baby, speak to her of what her life may look like now that she is free of Ward. Her care shall revert back to her father and family, shall it not?"

“It shall,” he replied. “Especially given that Ward leaves her no fortune with which to live independently. But, Miss Simmons, I made such a terrible gaffe earlier. Are you sure that you trust me to speak words of comfort to her?”

“Allow me to speak some words of reassurance to you, Mr Fitz,” she said with a little smile. “Daisy loves you and trusts you implicitly. She is in no danger of being abandoned, is she? Rather, I suspect that you quite like the idea of having her return home.”

His inability to resist returning her smile was only partly because of the way Miss Simmons’ own lit up her features. He delighted in finding himself so known and understood. To Fitz, life at Manderston without Daisy was an absolute bore.

“Then tell her so. Your love for your sister and your heartfelt desire to see her thrive cannot help but resound in your words. Tell her about what her life at Manderston shall be like. Help her to imagine a happy future here with you for herself and for her baby.”

Fitz nodded, feeling empowered by her words, her smile and her unfaltering faith in him. He intended to always work hard to prove himself worthy of the high opinion of him she seemed to hold.

Miss Simmons beamed at him, her hand finding the doorknob. “Do not mind me,” she added quietly over her shoulder. “I shall just be popping in and out to fetch some items that may be of assistance to Daisy.”

And she was gone.

Fitz took a deep breath and gamely rolled back his shoulders. Daisy needed him. Miss Simmons believed in him. Therefore he would have to give it a try.

He walked slowly across the library, back to where his sister lay curled up on the sofa.

“Daisy?” he whispered, kneeling on the rug beside her.

She opened her eyes and looked at him expectantly.

“You know you shall always have a home here at Manderston, don’t you?” he began. “You know that I shall be thrilled to have you here and to welcome your little one under our roof, do you not, dear one?”

Something in the way her hand found his as he spoke urged him on.

“And though I struggle to imagine myself as an example to anyone, I should hope I might be able to be at least a doting uncle to your child, if not a sort of father figure, should you approve, of course. I want you to know how much you and your baby are loved, Daisy. I want you to know with certainty that unless you should find somewhere you prefer, Manderston and all her resources are yours to command.”
“Where else shall I go, Leo?” she murmured. “Who else should have me?”

Fitz gave her a look. “Every friend of mine seems to fall in love with you, Daisy, as you are well aware. I imagine that if you did take it upon yourself to look for another situation, you should have no trouble at all.”

Daisy managed a little laugh.

“But please do not leave for a long while yet,” he begged. “In the meantime, Lance can come over every day and bring little James and the five of us shall be very cosy and content together.”

“The five of us?” Daisy repeated. “But what of Miss Simmons?”

Fitz cast an anxious glance towards the doorway where he expected the lady in question to appear at any moment.

“I must admit, Leo,” Daisy went on, “when I first came into the library this morning, I was sure you were proposing. You said you had something to tell me and I thought you were about to announce your engagement!”

Fitz felt the heat rush over his face. He took a moment to compose himself before speaking.

“And should you have liked that news, Daisy?”

“Liked it?” said Daisy. “I should have been beside myself with glee!”

He allowed himself another quick check of the door before speaking. “Then you must know, Daisy,” he whispered, “that I am determined to make Miss Simmons an offer of marriage as soon as ever I can.”

“Do not wait too long, brother,” Daisy urged him, “or you will see her snapped up by another!”

Fitz went to reply, but Daisy suddenly shut her eyes tight and curled in on herself, exerting an extraordinary pressure on his hand.

“Daisy?” he cried. “Are you alright?”

“Mr Fitz!” he heard from the doorway. “Help her to sit up if she’ll let you!”

He jumped to obey.

Fitz sighed internally. If he was to ever have the bliss of marrying Miss Simmons and he was also to enjoy the ongoing presence of his widowed sister, Manderston would be a home in which he would yield little influence. But between Miss Simmons’ encouraging smile and Daisy’s beleaguered moan, he found he had nothing about which he could complain.

…

In not so very long, Daisy was sitting up, calmly drinking tea and eating crumpets with her brother as if it were any old afternoon spread. Jemma had encouraged her to take full advantage of the dwindling breaks between contractions to build up her strength and as she was now better accustomed to the pattern of sensation, Daisy was eager to acquiesce.

“How was that last contraction, Daisy?” Jemma enquired, taking up her own cup.

“They’re getting closer together again,” Fitz offered, allowing his sister to finish her tea.
Daisy nodded her agreement, gently laying down her cup and bracing herself, both hands gripping the cushions on either side of her. The noises she made sounded suddenly throatier and less as though she had any control over her reactions.

“I think, Mr Fitz, that Daisy is moving into the transition stage at last,” Jemma whispered. “She shall need our support now more than ever.”

He gave her a determined nod.

“Daisy,” Jemma said, sitting down beside her and taking her hand. “Your brother and I are so very proud of you. You are coming closer and closer to the moment when you shall meet your precious child. Your body is going to feel this process quite intensely now as your cervix opens wide enough to allow your baby’s head to crown. I think it might be a good time to shift position, perhaps pull your knees up onto the sofa under you and lean over the back. Harnessing gravity to assist you might help your cervix to respond to the pressure of the baby’s head.”

Daisy could only respond with a whimper.

“Mr Fitz?” Jemma asked calmly. “Do you think you could assist me in helping Daisy manoeuvre herself onto her knees?”

Daisy wordlessly held out her hands for them to grasp and with what remaining strength she had, she pulled herself up, turning her body as she moved so that she repositioned herself as Jemma suggested. The very moment she ceased her movement and settled, she cried out in surprise.

“Ah,” Jemma said, her tone calm and reassuring. “That was your waters breaking, Daisy. Everything is coming along nicely.” She looked to the lady’s brother. “Mr Fitz, I’m going to help Daisy into her nightgown to get her out of these wet clothes and to give her more freedom of movement. Do you think you could pop down to the kitchens and trouble Mrs Hartley for the hot water bladders she’s been preparing for us?”

His wide blue eyes as he hurriedly backed out of the library made Jemma laugh while she helped Daisy out of her wet clothes. “Would you be more comfortable bare, Daisy? Many of the women I attend choose to forgo clothing entirely whilst in labour.”

Daisy relaxed as the contraction ended. “I think a choice to forgo clothing would also be a choice to forgo my brother’s presence, wouldn’t you agree, Jemma?”

Jemma chuckled as she helped Daisy ease her nightgown over her arms and head. “I suppose you are right. He has been wonderful though, hasn’t he? I have rarely seen even a lady’s husband be as willing to offer support as Mr Fitz has been to you.”

Daisy gave her a tight smile as the next contraction began to build. “He is the best man I shall ever know,” she managed through gritted teeth.

A hesitant knock sounded at the library door heralding the gentleman’s return. “Is it safe to enter?” he called from the hall.

“You are most welcome, Mr Fitz,” Jemma called, greeting him with a smile the warmth of which she intended to convey both her and Daisy’s appreciation.

He seemed to falter just inside the room, even looking over his shoulder to see if there were someone else to whom her smile might be directed.

Jemma reached out for the bladders of hot water he offered as he drew near, placing them carefully
on Daisy’s lower back and eliciting a moan of relief.

“We were just discussing, Mr Fitz, how well you are holding up in support of Daisy,” she said, by way of explanation. “And Daisy would no doubt repeat to you, if she were able, her assertion that you are the best man she shall ever know.”

“So that’s why you smiled at me as though I were the conquering hero,” he laughed happily, “when all the time it has been Daisy here, soldiering bravely away.”

“Further evidence of your claim, is it not, Daisy?” Jemma asked playfully. “We try to pay him a compliment and he immediately deflects it, too humble to accept the praise he deserves.”

Another contraction passed and Daisy relaxed once more, picking up her friend’s teasing tone. “I can only hope that one day some lovely girl shall recognise my brother for the eligible prospect he is. I shall be quick to tell her how wonderful he shall be by her side at the birth of their children.”

“And I shall be quick to testify in support of your claim should the lady remain in any doubt,” Jemma laughed. “Never fear, Mr Fitz. Between us, Daisy and I shall ensure you are known to be quite the catch.”

She wasn’t entirely sure why Mr Fitz didn’t seem at all amused by the joke. She idly wondered if he might have found their jesting to be humiliating and resolved to apologise later for any hurt she may have caused. In the meantime she felt Daisy’s body tensing up in fear as the contractions gained more power.

“Daisy,” she urged, pressing gently against the lady’s sacrum where she held the hot bladders in place. “You must not fight against the waves, remember? Do you recall what we discussed? That your body has been fearfully and wonderfully made? That you have been equipped by the Creator of the rolling spheres for just such a time as this?”

“Remember, Daisy,” interposed Mr Fitz, his deep voice soothing and firm. “As Miss Simmons has said, the baby we are yet to meet is covered by the Almighty; your child has been fearfully and wonderfully made by an all-powerful Creator who only makes marvellous works. No stage of your baby’s development, though hidden to us, is outside of the care and notice of the Father of All. And that same wonderfully enormous sovereignty of God that guards the life of your child, Daisy, guards you also. Remember that you too have been formed by this wonderful and attentive Creator-God, who looked at all he had made and saw that it was very good.”

Jemma could only gaze in awed gratitude at her friend as he recited, almost verbatim, the words of encouragement she habitually shared with her birthing mothers. It was staggering to her to hear the confidence with which he relayed her every sentiment. How could he ever- why would he ever have committed all that she wrote in her letter to memory?

“Daisy,” he went on, his eyes finding Jemma’s given that his sister’s were averted in her concentration. “What comfort and strength there is to be found in knowing your own body to be a masterpiece! You have never been vain, Daisy, you can readily agree with Miss Simmons when she rejoices in what wonder there is to be found in the female of the species! Not only muscle and sinew, brain and soul. Not only the intricacy and magic of the human eye and the perfect physics of the human foot. The female body, your very own body, Daisy, is a vessel that can sustain and foster life, that can bring that life forth into the world and then nourish and nurture it! Your body is not a mere canvas in a gallery to be admired or criticised at the caprice of the beholder. Rather, it is a powerhouse of vigour and might.”

Daisy relaxed into another lapse between contractions, lifting her teary gaze to find her brother’s
face, pressing a grateful kiss to his cheek.

He suddenly laughed, transforming his features from earnest to light-hearted. “Perhaps you should tell her the bit about the uterus, Miss Simmons.”

Jemma could barely speak, so utterly moved was she by his memorisation of her words and by the passion and feeling with which he recited them. “But you are doing so well, Mr Fitz,” she stammered. “And your deep voice is so soothing, do you not agree, Daisy?”

Daisy nodded, folding in on herself to breath through another contraction. “Please, Leo,” she whispered.

He looked anxiously at Jemma, who smiled her encouragement, willing him with her eyes to continue. She was so curious to know how far his study of her letter had gone.

“What a wondrous muscular structure is the uterus,” he began uncertainly.

She nodded her reassurance, reaching briefly across to squeeze his hand.

That seemed to be all the inspiration he needed.

“What a wondrous muscular structure is the uterus,” he began uncertainly.

She nodded her reassurance, reaching briefly across to squeeze his hand.

That seemed to be all the inspiration he needed.

“Your uterus is an extraordinarily elegant and complex design, Daisy,” he continued, his voice gentle but confident, “that can create enough force within itself to deliver your baby. In the second stage of labour, the stage into which you are now transitioning” he glanced over to seek Jemma’s approval which she gave with an affirming nod, “the uterus will exert the primary effort; and you, Daisy, only the secondary effort. You can rest in your God-given beauty and power, trusting that your body knows exactly what it must do. All you must do is stay relaxed enough not to get in its way.”

At the conclusion of his moving speech, Jemma found herself quite teary, so honoured was she by the discovery of just how deeply Mr Fitz respected her and her work. She might have asked him about how he came to recall her words so exactly had it not been for the almost animalistic cry that Daisy let out, harnessing all of their attention.

“Daisy!” Jemma cried excitedly. “We shall be meeting your little one very soon now! The temptation will be for you to push, but I assure you, your body shall do all the necessary work. Any straining on your part will simply exhaust you. Each contraction that takes you over now will be deeply intense. You shall feel your uterus massaging your baby, causing its little lungs to be ready for the air, constricting around your baby’s body so that it gradually pushes the little one downwards, out of your womb, into the wide world and into your arms!”

Daisy came back to herself for a moment, nodding determinedly.

Fitz offered her a sip of fresh water that he’d poured into a teacup of his own accord and Jemma had to suppress the urge to similarly press a kiss to his cheek, so natural was he proving at assisting his sister through her labour.

“Do you want to stand, Daisy?” Jemma asked. “You might find it easier with gravity on your side.”

“Anything that might make this easier sounds worth the attempt,” she agreed, allowing Fitz and Jemma to help her to her feet.

“Mr Fitz,” Jemma urged. “Perhaps you might hold Daisy under her arms, allowing her to lean her weight back on you.”

He obligingly moved himself into position, bracing himself against the sturdy sofa-back behind them
so that he would not stumble.

Daisy glanced over her shoulder at him apologetically, before her face went blank in concentration and she slumped forward, her weight falling onto his outstretched arms and against his body.

Jemma crouched at Daisy’s feet, hastily knotting the excess material of Daisy’s nightgown up and out of the way. She reached up and carefully felt for the baby’s head, ensuring that there was no sign of the umbilical cord in the way.

“Daisy!” she cried, the moment she saw her patient released from the powerful contraction. “If you like, you can reach down and touch your baby’s head.”

Daisy’s eyes widened and she allowed Jemma to take hold of her hand, guiding it between her legs to where she could touch her crowning child. Her eyes filled with joyful tears until the contraction took her over again and her chin dropped to her chest.

Jemma looked up into Mr Fitz’s concerned gaze, trying to convey all of her confidence and assurance to him in her smile.

“You shall meet your niece or nephew very soon, Mr Fitz,” she whispered.

He smiled down at her. “Where would we be without you, Miss Simmons?” he whispered back.

But she could not reply, for with a mighty cry from its mother, Daisy’s baby crowned and Jemma found herself staring at a perfectly formed little head.

“Can you feel the baby’s shoulders turning, Daisy? Enabling it to be born?” Jemma cried. “Oh, Daisy! What a perfect little child!”

From his vantage point above, Jemma could see Fitz watching wide-eyed as she deftly caught the little baby, turning it in her arms, to show the teary new uncle.

He blinked at his pocket watch a moment. “Born at 7:14pm,” he declared.

“Help Daisy to sit down on those towels will you, Mr Fitz?” Jemma urged, pointing him to the lounge seat she’d readied. “And perhaps you might like to be the one to tell your sister her baby’s sex?”

Jemma grappled one-handed with the fastenings at the front of Daisy’s gown, ably assisted by the mother who was already newly empowered by her powerful birthing hormones.

“Daisy?” Fitz croaked, after mouthing his best guess to Jemma and having her confirm it with a smiling nod. “My dear, you have just given birth to a beautiful baby girl.”

Within moments Daisy held the tiny girl against her bare skin and Jemma took up a soft blanket to tuck around them both. As she did so, she realised that the only light in the room was that given off by the fire, all the daylight had long ago faded into night.

“We’ll wait until the cord stops pulsing before I clamp it, Daisy,” Jemma explained softly. “And in a little while we’ll have to help you birth the placenta, but for now, you can spend some time getting to know your little daughter.”

Jemma sat back on her heels with a contented sigh and watched as Daisy, suddenly bright-eyed and re-energised, gazed down at the new baby in her arms. The little girl had a surprising thatch of dark hair and her startling grey-blue eyes were calmly open and alert, drinking in her mother’s beaming
“You did it, Daisy!” Mr Fitz exclaimed, coming to sit beside her. “And I think she might have her uncle’s eyes!”

“It is thanks to God and his kind provision for me in the form of the two of you,” Daisy said warmly, unable to lift her gaze from her daughter’s face.

Jemma felt an even greater degree of the elation a safe birth usually inspired. It was a privilege to attend a woman whom she so deeply admired. It was also a privilege to attend her alongside a man who was proving himself the most faithful friend she had ever known.

So at home did Jemma feel that she did not think to follow her usual pattern and excuse herself in order for the family to become acquainted with their new baby. She simply sat by Daisy’s feet, laughing softly with the new mother and uncle and gazing besottedly at their recent arrival.

“Well, Daisy,” she announced eventually, pushing herself to her feet. “I supposed we had better get this third stage under way. Would you like to see if this little darling will feed? Nursing will hasten the contractions we’ll need to help you birth the placenta.”

“Take my seat, Miss Simmons,” Mr Fitz insisted, getting to his feet and turning his back to them as he drew nearer to the fire.

Seeing as the little one was so calm and alert, it was not too much of a struggle to encourage her to find her mother’s rosy nipple and establish a good attachment.

“The after-pains affect some mothers worse than others, Daisy,” Jemma cautioned as she efficiently clamped the now still umbilical cord. “Let us hope that you shall be one of the ones that barely notices.”

She turned to the uncle leaning against the mantle piece. “Would you like to be the one to cut the cord, Mr Fitz?” she asked.

He turned slowly to meet her gaze, his expression one of trepidation. “I don’t know if ‘like’ is the right word, Miss Simmons,” he replied cautiously, “but I suppose it is an honour?”

“Oh, go on, Leo,” Daisy urged him. “If you are to be a father figure to this darling girl you might as well start at the very beginning.”

Jemma watched with amusement as he drew near, kneeling beside her and waiting warily for her instruction. She handed him her surgical scissors, and retaining her hold of the clamp, leant over his hand to indicate where he should make the cut. She couldn’t help but notice the trembling of his hands as he touched the strikingly blue organ but his cut was steady and decisive. When she looked up his face was pale.

“Nicely done, Mr Fitz,” she congratulated him. “We shall make a doula out of you yet.”

“I do not think I shall prove nearly capable enough for that,” he replied, shaking his head.

“Nonsense,” Jemma replied with feeling, laying out a number of blankets over the carpet. “You’ve just done it. Now, if you’ll assist us while Daisy births the placenta, you shall have proved yourself entirely.”

A deep concern etched itself into Mr Fitz’s features. “What sort of assistance do you require?” he asked.
“Make yourself comfortable on the lounge, Mr Fitz,” replied Jemma, laughing. “When Daisy is ready, your job shall be to hold your new niece.”

A broad smile pierced the clouds that had gathered on his brow, dispersing them entirely. “Oh!” he replied. “Then I shall of course be delighted to help.”

Eventually, once the little girl had fallen decidedly asleep at the breast, Jemma showed Daisy how to gently break the baby’s seal by inserting her little finger between the still-determined lips and her own flesh.

“Do try and remember to do that,” Jemma murmured, carefully taking the little girl out of her mother’s arms, wrapping her tightly in some soft flannel and gently settling her into her uncle’s embrace. “She’ll cause you no small amount of pain over time if you forget.”

Mr Fitz’s grin as he looked down at his tiny niece was profoundly heart-warming.

“What a beauty you are,” he whispered, lifting her closer to his face and pressing the gentlest of whiskery kisses to her furrowed brow. “And if I know your mother at all, what a terror you shall prove to be!”

Daisy laughed softly as Jemma helped her to her feet and over to the pile of blankets that defended the luxurious rug.

“We shall not tug on the cord now, Daisy,” Jemma explained. “Doing so can cause a post-partum haemorrhage which we’d really rather avoid.”

“Is there anything I should do?” Daisy asked. “I seem to be experiencing quite a lot of bleeding as it is.”

“Do not concern yourself. That is very normal. Your postpartum bleeding is known as lochia and the flow will last for six or so weeks. Nursing your daughter is the best thing you can do for now,” Jemma replied. “It releases hormones in your body that help the uterus to contract back to its normal size. It will also help the lochia to subside in time. The little bit of nursing she stayed awake to do just now should hopefully have helped the placenta to prepare for an uncomplicated expulsion.”

“And if it has not?” Daisy asked.

“Then we might get you to cough a few times, or perhaps Mr Fitz could tell you some uproarious jokes. Laughter often does the trick, as does a good cry.”

“Are you implying that my jokes are just as likely to make Daisy cry as laugh?” Mr Fitz asked from his cosy nest in mock high-dudgeon.

Jemma laughed. “I see that exposure to some of the more earthy aspects of life has done nothing to dull your keen observation, Mr Fitz.”

Daisy’s laugh quickly turned to a groan as the purple mass expelled itself from her body. The flow of blood was increasingly heavy so Jemma reached for a few more of the provided towels, thankful that Mrs Hartley so excelled at preparation.

“Look to Daisy, Miss Simmons!” Mr Fitz pleaded as she carefully examined the placenta to ensure she could see no signs of retained product.

She looked up to see Daisy trembling violently.
“Never fear, Mr Fitz,” she replied, helping Daisy back to her well-covered seat and wrapping a couple of clean blankets around the lady’s shoulders. She sought Daisy’s eyes. “Uncontrollable shaking is an extremely common reaction to having birthed the placenta. Perhaps we shall let your little girl stay in the arms of her uncle until this settles down. After that I might attempt a little massage of your stomach just to ensure we break up any clots and to see if we can slow this bleeding a little.”

Daisy nodded, still shaking.

But after the right amount of time had passed, the shaking had diminished and Jemma had attempted to massage Daisy’s abdomen, her bleeding remained heavy.

Given that the little girl was squirming restlessly in her uncle’s embrace, Jemma suggested that it might be time for another attempt at feeding. In the movement of the exchange, she took up her scalpel and furtively cut a sliver from the mass of placenta.

“Daisy,” she said calmly as the new mother settled back into her chair to feed her daughter. “I’m just going to slip something into your cheek now to help with the bleeding.”

Daisy obediently opened her mouth, barely lifting her gaze from her baby, and Jemma tucked the sliver between Daisy’s cheek and gum line to aid the absorption of the powerful hormones into her bloodstream.

She glanced up at Mr Fitz and found him staring at her with an expression that fell somewhere on the continuum between horror and awe.

“I am a scientist, Mr Fitz, as you well know,” she whispered to him. “Various colleagues of mine swear that the ingestion of the placenta reduces haemorrhaging, restores iron lost during pregnancy and acts as a potent galactagogue.”

He raised one sceptical eyebrow.

Jemma shrugged. “I concede, it may all be bunk, but I am at least certain it can do Daisy no harm. If she reports feeling unusually wonderful, I shall certainly make a note of it.”

“It is not for me to question the methods of an expert in her field, Miss Simmons,” he replied. “I only wish I were less squeamish about it all.”

“The key is exposure, Mr Fitz,” said Jemma. “The science behind that is significantly firmer. You can acclimatise yourself into serene acceptance of anything given the right amount of exposure.”

His keen blue eyes shone in such a way that threatened to belie her claim. She found herself having to turn back to her patient.

“How are you feeling, Daisy?” she enquired.

“I do feel those ongoing contractions you mentioned, Jemma,” Daisy replied. “But after what I’ve experienced during labour, these feel almost comical in their feebleness.”

“That is wonderful news. I don’t suppose you would let me quickly check your bleeding?”

Daisy shuffled momentarily in her seat until Jemma was satisfied than in actual fact her bleeding had slowed. Whether that could be attributed to her nursing, the length of time that had passed since the birth, or judicious application of the placenta, Jemma could not yet say, but she enjoyed the thought of adding all these observations to her body of research and reporting back to Mr Fitz regarding her
findings.

Daisy’s attention was entirely consumed by the little girl at her breast, nursing enthusiastically for one so very new.

“Do you know what you shall name her?” Jemma whispered.

Daisy raised her twinkling eyes to meet Jemma’s. “Her name is Jemima, Miss Simmons, named to honour you.”

Jemma felt her hand fly instinctively to press against her sternum, as if trying to hold in the flood of feeling.

“I do not have any confidence that by so naming her I have ensured that it will be you she follows after, but I do so hope that you shall play a large part in her life, Jemma, so that she might have at least a hope of emulating your example.”

She looked to where Mr Fitz leaned dotingly over Daisy’s shoulder. That same muscle twitched in his tightly clenched jaw and his eyes shone with unshed tears as he vigorously nodded his approval.
It had been very late the previous evening by the time Jemma had finally settled Daisy into bed with little Jemima, carefully showing the exhausted new mother how to feed lying on her side without smothering her tiny infant. She had then collapsed herself onto the chaise previously occupied alternately by Mr Fitz and Mrs Hartley and slept like the dead.

She was awoken the next morning by a persistent and irritating tapping. After first checking that her charges were both well and sleeping comfortably, Jemma took up her robe and wandered down the wide hallway to investigate the source of the noise.

Only a few rooms down from where she’d been sleeping, double doors were flung open and through them pale sunlight flooded the corridor. She entered the room cautiously, one hand up to shield her eyes from the light.

“Miss Simmons!” cried a cheery voice. “Good morning!”

“Mr Fitz?” she replied. “I am sure you told me in no uncertain terms that you were not an early riser.”

He strode into view with his shirt sleeves rolled above the elbow, a large hammer in his hand, which at least went some way to explain the disturbance that had interrupted her slumber. “It is not every day one wakes to find himself an uncle now is it, Miss Simmons?”

She couldn’t help but smile at his enthusiasm. “I suppose not, Mr Fitz,” she replied. “But that does not justify your crashing about so early when you know Daisy to be in dire need of rest.”

The cheeriness drained from his features, replaced by a mask of horror. “Did I wake her?” he gasped. “Did I wake little Jemima?”

Jemma shook her head. “When I left them just now they were both fast asleep,” she assured him. “But what on earth can be so urgent that you must attend to it now?”

“So, the nursery, of course, Miss Simmons!” He turned in a circle, arms outstretched. “We had no notice to prepare it so, of course, we shall have to get to work immediately.”

Jemma followed his lead, turning herself about to take in the large sunny room, surveying Jemima’s
new domain. Windows just like those in the library dominated the northern wall and the low, wide sill similarly allowed for deep window-seats to be built into the casement. The worn cushions set into the recesses were dotted here and there with well-loved wooden horses, tatty picture books, limbless dolls and other long-lost childhood treasures that Fitz seemed to be unearthing as he pottered.

“Ah,” she nodded. “Now I understand. But perhaps we all might benefit from your taking a little breakfast before you resume your demanding labour, Mr Fitz?”

He nodded readily. “Now that you mention it, Miss Simmons, I am rather famished.”

Jemma laughed. “I am not at all surprised to hear it. Well, you go down and let Mrs Hartley and Cook feed you and Daisy, Jemima and I shall emerge when we are fully rested.” She turned to make her way out of the room but found herself called back.

“Do you think you might assist me later this morning, Miss Simmons?” he enquired. “I shall have to write to inform my parents of Daisy’s surprising news, and I-I suppose I shall have to inform Ward’s regiment of what has transpired.” His expression was plaintive. “It shall be the regiment’s duty to arrange his burial, shall it not? I do not think I could take that responsibility upon myself.”

Jemma drew near to him, placing her hand comfortingly upon his upper arm. “Dr Coulson will have seen to all the necessary communication, Mr Fitz. No responsibility shall fall to you or your family.”

His eyes met hers, his relief palpable. “Do you imagine Daisy will be expected to attend his funeral?” he whispered. “How can we ask such a thing of her?”

She shook her head decisively. “Daisy’s lying-in period will last for the remainder of the month. No one shall expect her to leave Manderston.”

Fitz placed his hand over hers, holding it gently in place against his arm. “I don’t suppose I shall find such a readily acceptable excuse.”

Jemma looked up at him sadly. “I dare say you are right, Mr Fitz. When the time comes, would you like me to accompany you?”

“I would like it,” he said immediately. “It would be much easier to bear with you by my side, Miss Simmons, but I cannot ask you to endure such an ordeal when no ties of blood require it of you.”

She squeezed his arm gently. “The ties of friendship can be just as strong, can they not, Mr Fitz?”

He nodded, gazing at her a moment, his expression unreadable.

Jemma carefully extricated her hand and turned to look once more around the spacious nursery. “Your parents will attend, I assume?”

Fitz sighed heavily. “My parents are highly invested in Bath society. They only reliably spend Christmas at Manderston of recent years and that is very nearly upon us. I imagine we shall simply see them then.”

Jemma was too tired to suppress the angry surprise that obviously showed on her face as she whirled back to face him. “Not even to meet their new grandchild? To comfort their newly-widowed daughter?”

“Truthfully, Miss Simmons,” Fitz confided, “I cannot help thinking that Daisy shall have an easier time without them here. They have been generous parents, we have never lacked for material goods, but they do tend towards the dramatic and ostentatious. Daisy and I have often agreed that our family
is much more pleasant when it is only her and I.”

“What will your Christmas be like?” Jemma asked, recalling more than one ostentatious display in her own childhood home.

Fitz shook his head. “Mrs Hartley shall be called upon to hire an army of servants, as many françaises as possible, the house shall be almost unrecognisable under its seasonal frippery, there shall be enormous glittering trees in every room, with mountains of elaborately wrapped gifts piled beneath, so many candles I’ll be constantly afraid we’ll lose the entire estate in a fire, and a Christmas dinner fit to feed every man, woman and child in the village. My parents always manage to find some titled friends to invite and show-off for the holidays and they’ll inevitably bring along at least one eligible daughter. They might even decide not to waste any time and bring some with an eligible son for Daisy!”

Jemma remembered the many doltish young earls and lords she’d endured at her aunts’ Christmas table. At least Aunt Melinda would allow her to surreptitiously roll her eyes. Aunt Victoria would be far too busy extolling the virtues of the manor and parkland to be inherited by the gentleman in question.

“You have all my sympathy, sir,” she replied sincerely.

“What about you, Miss Simmons. What shall your Christmas entail?”

Jemma sighed. “Usually, my aunts’ dour manservant, Mr Fury, arrives in the barouche box without any warning. He takes tea with Philip, Audrey and Beth, while I pack my little trunk – little you understand because none of my work garments are deemed appropriate for wear in the company of my Aunt Victoria – and then he whisks me off to the docks onto a ship to the continent or some lavish Yorkshire manor in the moors where we’ve been invited or he drives me to one or the other of my aunts’ many homes. And then similar things take place to those that you’ve described. It’s mostly ridiculous, but I will admit to occasionally enjoying it.”

Fitz smiled. “Despite myself, now and again I cannot help but enjoy it too.”

Jemma fought to stifle a yawn. “But for now, Mr Fitz, the very thought of Christmas is far too exhausting. I’m afraid you might have to let me return to my bed.”

“Of course, Miss Simmons,” he said, bowing. “I humbly apologise for hindering you.”

“Not at all, Mr Fitz,” she called over her shoulder. “It is lovely to see you such an eager uncle.”

…

Some hours later, after ensuring that mother and baby were bonding well, feeding well and generally thriving, Jemma took her leave of Daisy, Jemima and Mrs Hartley and made her way out to the stables. She’d searched in vain for Mr Fitz, ultimately having to ask Mrs Hartley to pass on her farewells. A message had arrived from Audrey informing her that some enquiries had come to Battlesden and though she was loathe to leave Manderston, she told herself she’d enjoy getting back to the care of the parish at large. She’d also had an idea that she was eager to bring to fruition for the benefit of all involved.

Mack proved similarly difficult to locate and so the mostly silent stable boy, Lincoln, readied Xochi for her departure. While she waited she found Franklin dropping his silver muzzle onto her shoulder and nosing her affectionately.

“Hello, good sir,” she whispered, stroking his silky mane. “Thank you for watching over my Xochi
these last few days.”

He raised and lowered his head with a snort as if nodding in acknowledgement of her thanks.

A white blur in the corner of her eye drew her attention. Ward’s pure white stallion pawed restlessly against the floor of his stall, eyeing her almost warily. She idly wondered as she rode away how Daisy might react to his presence. He was a beautiful animal – she hoped Mr Fitz’s idea of him being one lovely thing by which Daisy could remember her husband would prove to be the case.

Guiding Xochi up the drive, Jemma became distracted by the way the wind whirled through the horse-chestnuts, snatching the dry orange-brown leaves from where they clung tenuously on. The newly denuded branches stuck at gangly angles into the sky and the sound of the fallen leaves on the road beneath them helped to keep Jemma awake on the ride home.

Audrey and Beth must have been watching for her arrival, rushing out to meet her as she approached Battlesden. She dismounted and let herself collapse into Audrey’s sisterly embrace, the little girl clinging to both their skirts as they held one another.

“Jemma, darling,” Audrey murmured. “What an ordeal you have had to endure. How is poor Daisy?”

Jemma pulled back to look into Audrey’s face, her fatigued smile genuine. “Daisy had a little girl, Audrey, and she named her Jemima in my honour.”

“Of course she did,” Audrey agreed, brushing away an errant tear. “You do have such a knack of making people love you, my dear.”

Jemma shook her head, laughing as Audrey and Beth shepherded her into their kitchen and Beth fussily settled her into Audrey’s rocking chair near the fire. On the table beside her was laid a lavish tea.

“Mama and Bethie cooked sons!?” the little girl announced, bouncing on her toes and gesticulating wildly toward the table.

“Scones, sweetheart,” Audrey gently corrected her as she poured the tea. “Don’t startle the poor midwife unnecessarily.” She handed Jemma her cup. “The sons of the parish are quite safe, my dear, I assure you.”

…

The autumn leaves crunching under Xochi’s hooves gradually turned to frost and not so many weeks later the elegant mare was bravely trudging her way through the ever deepening snow.

Though little Jemima thrived, Daisy’s lying-in period had not been without its burdens. Fitz and Jemma, as the two representatives of the grieving widow, had been forced to grit their teeth against the hogwash Garrett spouted about Ward in his eulogy. To make matters worse, she had found herself under the constant hovering surveillance of Mr Sitwell, only held at bay by the close proximity of such an illustrious personage as Mr Fitz.

At one point during the service, the adoration of Ward had proved too much for Mr Fitz to bear. Keenly aware of his increasing indignation, Miss Simmons had begun to fear an outburst. Acting quickly, utilising the only resources available to her, Jemma had surreptitiously pulled off her gloves and gripped Fitz’s trembling wrist. Pulling his hand into her lap and resting it palm-up against her thigh, she had immediately commenced one of the techniques she used in an attempt to distract a labouring woman from tensing up in anticipation of a building contraction – firmly massaging the
flesh of the opponens pollicis, the flexor pollicis brevis and the hypothenar muscles with the pads of her thumbs. Her patient had responded extremely well, reinforcing the data gathered in her experiments with her birthing mothers. The soporific effect brought about by the manipulation of the tendons had seemed instantaneous. Mr Fitz had undergone a total transformation, from seething to immediately calm, all of his attention focused on their hands in her lap. The rest of the funeral had been without incident, though tragically, later that week, Jemma and the Coulsons had gathered at dawn in an isolated corner of the churchyard for a very different kind of funeral – to see Gonzales to his final resting place.

Having been quickly called back to her responsibilities to the wider parish, Jemma’s visits to Manderston, though frequent, were never of long duration. To ameliorate her own desire to support Daisy in her time of need, she continued working on her idea and scrambled about between visits to families until the supplies she’d required were ready.

Miss Morse awaited Jemma’s arrival, warming herself by the fire in her small cottage, the sound of the gulls loud over the outgoing tide where her family’s sheep farm was edged by the rugged Scottish coast. The some-time doula had been quite trepidatious about this undertaking, but Jemma had spared no effort in ensuring that she would be more than up to the task.

“The fateful day arrives, Barbara!” she announced cheerfully as the door swung open to admit her. She bowed theatrically low, holding one arm high to prevent the gowns from dragging along the floor. “Madame, your new raiment.”

Characteristically unruffled, at least on the surface, Barbara smiled and held one splendid gown after another against her body, eyeing her reflection in the glass.

“Are you certain I can do this, Jemma?” she mused, half to herself. “I suppose I shall have to hope so, now that you’ve gone to all the trouble and expense of having such beautiful new clothing made for me.”

Jemma waved a hand dismissively. “These clothes are only necessary because Daisy herself dresses in this manner and you shall probably have to fit in with her. You shan’t be a doula, you shan’t be a governess, the role of ‘lady’s companion’ implies that Daisy’s in her eighties, so you shall simply have to let them worry about what to call you, and be her friend. And given it’s simply befriending her that is your task, my dear Barbara, I could not feel more confident. Now, which one are you going to wear first?”

…

Jemma assisted Barbara with her hair, idly hoping that Audrey would approve of the result, and before long the two were guiding their horses through the fallen snow.

On arrival, Jemma led Miss Morse through her accustomed back entrance to the house, so arranged with Mrs Hartley shortly after Jemima’s birth, to save the poor housekeeper from having to rush away from Daisy to answer the front door.

Barbara gazed about her in awe as Jemma led her up wide-staircases and along long corridors.

As usual, the nursery was a hive of activity, the renovations very nearly drawing to a close. Jemma poked her head in the door to find Mr Fitz, Mack and Lance hard at work, applying the final coat of paint. It amused Jemma to watch Mr Fitz taking such an interest in the nursery that he even insisted on having a hand in every stage of its evolution. It seemed to give him a great sense of pleasure and accomplishment to watch his hard work come to fruition as the room was transformed under Daisy’s aesthetic advice and supervision.
Stepping more fully into the room and motioning for Barbara to do likewise, Jemma cleared her throat, immediately gaining the attention of the workers.

Mr Fitz’s smile was eager and warm as always, Mack nodded his greeting then returned to washing his paintbrush but Lance stood utterly still, his lower jaw hanging loosely as he openly stared at Jemma’s companion.

“Mr Fitz, Mr Mackenzie, Mr Hunter, may I present Miss Barbara Morse,” Jemma announced.

Barbara performed an elegant curtsey, with answering bows made by Mr Fitz and Mack, yet Lance remained unmoving, continuing to stare.

Barbara turned to question her friend with a glance but Jemma could only shrug a shoulder in reply. In her considerable experience it was very unlike Lance Hunter to be lost for words.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Morse,” Mr Fitz began, always reliable in supplying the requisite courtesies.

Barbara curtsied in response, seeming utterly unruffled by the process of entering the acquaintance of three such handsome young men.

“I am hoping that Miss Morse and your sister might take a liking to one another,” Jemma explained. “I am only able to spare the time for such fleeting visits these days, I will feel much easier knowing Daisy to have another friend who might prove more reliable. Is Daisy in her bed chamber?”

“I’ll take her!” Lance practically shouted, his leap into animation quite startling after his previous inertia.

He glanced around at the surprised and mildly disapproving expressions of the watchers-on, as well as the lady herself, and seemed to come to his senses. “What I mean to say, if you please, Miss Morse, is that I would very happily lead you in the direction of the library where Mrs Ward is currently taking her tea.”

Jemma glanced over at Fitz who was politely attempting to hide his amused smile. Quietly sharing the joke with him, she intervened. “I’ll accompany you, Mr Hunter. I hope you don’t mind but I’d like to make the introductions myself. Of course you’re very welcome to accompany us.”

Lance looked pleadingly at Mack and Fitz. “Well, it is tea-time, after all. Wouldn’t you agree, Fitz? Mack?”

Mack raised his eyebrows towards Fitz who made a pretence of looking doubtfully at his pocket-watch.

“I suppose we could take a break for a moment,” he agreed, exaggerating his hesitance.

“That’s the spirit, Fitz!” Lance clapped him on the shoulder a little too enthusiastically. He then bowed low to the ground, extravagantly waving his arm toward the door. “Lead on, ladies.”

Jemma offered a bemused Barbara her arm but couldn’t help shooting another little glance over her shoulder at Fitz who was quivering with silent laughter, his blue eyes shining with mirth.

“I admit to having seen you at church of a Sunday, Miss Morse. Do you live nearby to Manderston?” Lance asked politely as they made their way to the library.

“Within the parish,” she replied, without looking around. “And you, Mr Hunter?”
“Mr Hunter is a very near neighbour,” Mr Fitz supplied.

“Ah, yes,” Barbara replied, with a slight inclination of her head. “You have a little son, do you not, Mr Hunter? I have seen you with the boy in morning service. He is a very bonny child.”

“James is thoroughly bonny, I do agree, Miss Morse. But he is not my son. That strapping lad is my brother. There are six sisters between us!”

This time Miss Morse did turn her head to make her response, eyeing Hunter appraisingly. “Ah, that quite answers my question as to what might have become of your wife.”

“Oh, I am not married, Miss Morse,” Hunter hastily re-joined. “Though I heartily assure you, it is not through any lack of interest in the state.”

“Is that your rather quaint way of informing all those present that you are an eligible prospect?” Barbara asked archly. Jemma noticed the mischievous twinkle in her friend’s eye and wondered if it boded badly or well for poor Lance whose countenance was now a concerning shade of magenta.

“I have never been more overjoyed to reach the library,” Mack observed wryly, holding the door open for the ladies to enter.

Daisy looked up at the crowd that had gathered before her with an expression of surprised delight. Her striking mourning gown suited her colouring extremely well and the stark contrast between the black of her gown and the gauzy white of Jemima’s long dress had a certain aesthetic appeal.

Initially intending to make no effort towards conforming to conventions of mourning for Ward, despite the potential disapproval of the parish, a gift from Raina had quite changed the new widow’s mind. After all, Daisy did love fashion and La Belle Assemblée and the plates in Ackermann’s Repository made the latest in mourning gowns look terribly attractive. She wasn’t at all intending to maintain it for the expected year-and-a-day from the death of her husband but, for now, any reason to have a new gown made was reason enough.

It was immediately apparent to Jemma that she had done well with Barbara’s wardrobe. Daisy was eyeing Miss Morse’s gown approvingly, apparently eager to be introduced.

“Mrs Daisy Ward,” Jemma began, “Allow me to introduce Miss Barbara Morse.”

Before Daisy could make a reply, Lance somehow tripped and fell over a low coffee table, stumbling between the two fashionable ladies. He recovered his composure quickly, backing away as surreptitiously as possible.

Once she’d telegraphed her amusement to Lance by means of her eyebrows, Daisy once more turned her attention to her guest.

“Miss Morse,” she said cheerfully, handing Jemima into the arms of her willing uncle so that she might shake hands. “It is a delight to make your acquaintance. Jemma told me she was going to bring me someone whom she would force to make friends with me and though I do not envy your position, I feel sure that I shall at least find you highly agreeable.”

Barbara’s laugh was musical. “Miss Simmons is already congratulating herself, Mrs Ward. She can see that no such force shall be necessary.”

“No force necessary for me either,” interjected Hunter from where he’d deposited himself beside Fitz and Jemima, his voice decreasing in confidence as the words kept tumbling out.
“You’re behaving very oddly today, Hunter,” Daisy observed. “What on earth is it that’s got you all flustered?” She cast her eyes back to Miss Morse’s statuesque figure and then back once more to where Lance sat in his dreamy trance. She sighed dramatically. “Oh, never mind.” She turned her attention back to her friend. “Now, Jemma, how long can we keep you? I’m sure Leo can find you two some science to discuss just to guarantee you’ll stay to the end of one pot of tea.”

“As it happens, Daisy, today I am quite at my leisure,” Jemma replied smiling, “And I am desperately hoping to have some cuddles with little Jemima.”

“Lovely,” Daisy replied with a little clap of her hands. “Then Lance, you shall have to get up and sit over here by Miss Morse so that Jemma can sit next to Leo and take the baby.”

Lance practically leapt out of his seat, almost knocking Jemma over in his eagerness to switch places.

Daisy beamed at him as he took his place beside Barbara. “Together, Mr Hunter, we shall learn all that there is to know about Miss Morse.”

He nodded nervously, casting a sideways glance at the beautiful woman beside him. “Provided the lady is in agreement, of course.”

Miss Morse smiled serenely. “I suppose I can be prevailed upon to answer a question or two,” she replied.

“Splendid,” said Daisy. “Now, Miss Morse, for starters, how do you take your tea?”

Fitz had awoken with every anticipation of a good day. Mack and Lance had both kindly set aside yet another stretch of time to work with him on the nursery and he was hopeful that they might even finish the painting so that the recently restored furniture could be returned, ready for use.

It wasn’t that he thought Daisy was in a hurry to use the nursery. On the contrary, she was loathe to be parted from little Jemima at all, let alone leaving her to sleep alone in a room some distance down the hallway. But Fitz knew that sometimes his sister needed some hours of sleep when her body could momentarily relax the motherly vigilance towards the other little body beside her. And those few precious hours a day were his opportunity to steal his niece away.

Of course he adored her. Jemima was Daisy’s child – he was powerless to do anything else. But her shock of dark hair which habitually stood at stark angles from her crown, her big brown eyes and the way she determinedly gripped his finger in her little fist utterly melted him. He was quite in her thrall.

He loved the moments where Daisy’s yawns took on the proportions of a lioness and he could hold out his arms for the little bundle with an I-will-brook-no-arguments sort of an expression.

His sister would finally give him an affectionate smile and let herself have what she desperately needed, handing Jemima into the arms of her uncle and kissing her tenderly before retiring for her afternoon rest.

For the moment Fitz took her to the library and, propping her carefully on his lap, safely braced on either side by his arms, he would show her the illustrated plates in books of zoology and botany and sometimes even La Belle Assemblée and Ackermann’s Repository – she would more than likely prove to be her mother’s child after all.

But he looked forward to the fast-approaching day when he could take her into the nursery and sit with her in the meticulously reupholstered arm chair in which Mrs Hartley had sat with them and

Fitz had seen to it that all of his and Daisy’s favourite books had been expertly repaired or even replaced where they had been too enthusiastically illustrated by a pair of amateur artists or too well-loved to remain legible. He had also ordered a veritable library’s worth of new children’s books including everything penned by Mrs Jane Marcet. Jemima must have the very best.

In the very back of his consciousness, so deep he barely articulated it even to himself, he was motivated by another dearly held hope. Though he did anything and everything for Jemima, he also occasionally allowed his mind to entertain another vision of the nursery, perhaps some years in the future. In these visions, beside a diminutive dark-haired little sprite, sitting up at the desk and poring unassisted over the many books carefully chosen for her, another little child or two might play, perhaps constructing castles with blocks on the floor, fondly watched over by the honey-coloured eyes of a different mother.

Every night since Ward’s awful funeral he had allowed himself to blow out the candle, lay back on his pillow and revisit those blissful moments of exquisite kindness when she had slowly and deliberately removed each of her kid gloves, laid them aside and reached over to grasp his bare hand in both of hers. Even now he could barely believe that she had so lovingly caressed him in full view of the entire militia.

He could recall in precise detail the firmness and heat of her thigh, radiating through the gauzy layers of her skirts and warming the back of his hand. He knew the size of her dainty fingers against his own and the surprising vigour of her touch. The touch itself had distracted him from everything else in the vicinity but the vital movement of her finger-tips against the fleshy parts of his hand seemed to cause all the tension in his body to flow out of him, into the ether or the earth, he cared not which.

At first he had been shocked that Miss Simmons would behave so intimately in such a public setting, and before they had even become engaged, but now he simply sighed with pleasure at the memory and every wonderful little thing it so certainly conveyed.

And now the day he had eagerly anticipated for reasons of progress and achievement had blossomed into a day in which he could share a sofa with his beloved, both cooing over the perfect baby girl for whom they had so much affection. He wasn’t even reluctant to hand Jemima into the arms of her name-sake. Something about the sight of Miss Simmons with his tiny niece in her arms warmed him beyond anything he could imagine. The library in which they sat, the very sofa in which they were ensconced, already held for him such tender memories of intimacy – it felt as if they were already laying a deposit of experiences, both for better and for worse, over what would be their future home. Fitz dearly believed such a deposit would go a long way towards guaranteeing their future happiness at Manderston.

While Daisy chattered away to Mack, fondly allowing Lance to make a fool of himself in front of Miss Morse unhindered, Fitz soaked in the sight of Miss Simmons seeming utterly at home with his family. It wasn’t until a few moments had passed that he realised she was trying to speak to him.

“You have been off with the fairies, Mr Fitz,” she laughed when he finally twigged to her efforts. “Miss Jemima!” she gently scolded the babe in her arms. “Haven’t you been allowing your poor uncle to get any sleep?”

He wondered if he dared whisper in her ear that it was not Jemima at all, but happy visions of their future together that kept him awake late into the night. He glanced around at the proximity of their companions and thought he’d better not attempt it.

“Forgive me, Miss Simmons,” said Fitz, shaking his head, and she laughed again at the thoroughness
of his remorse, a captivating twinkle in her eye.

“I was saying that the nursery looks magnificent, Mr Fitz. Very few would believe that the bulk of the work had been planned and undertaken by a gentleman.”

Fitz looked back at her with an expression of pained amusement. “I believe that there’s a compliment in there somewhere, Miss Simmons. I shall endeavour to find it.”

She nudged him playfully, the way his sister felt at liberty to do. “I just mean to say you should be very proud of what you’ve achieved, Mr Fitz. Many men of your standing and education would be left to flounder in the face of a task that required one to work with one’s hands but you seem to have quite an aptitude for it.”

“Are you saying I’ve missed my calling, Miss Simmons?” he asked. “Should I turn my back on Manderston and embark on a career as a cabinet maker?”

Jemma shrugged with an oddly uncharacteristic dismissiveness. “Stranger paths have been chosen.”

“I quite see through you, Miss Simmons,” Fitz replied. “You have given up your society life in service of your mothers. Perhaps you believe we would all be happier returning to our roots and working with our hands for a living.”

Miss Simmons smiled. “It is one thing for me to choose a different path than the one set for me by birth. Not much of consequence is lost when there is one less fashionable lady in a ballroom. But you, Mr Fitz, as master of the estate – you have great power to do good to those who depend upon your patronage. I will not have you doubting the necessity of your society life. Much rests in your hands and having come to know you as I do, I believe that you are just the man to manage it.”

Fitz felt quite overwhelmed with emotion, so much so that it was a struggle for him to form the obvious observation. “Miss Simmons,” he managed, his voice thick. “Nor will I have you doubting the enormity of the loss it would be to find you missing from a ballroom.”

She laughed then leaned forward and whispered conspiratorially in his ear. “You must excuse me, Mr Fitz. I have come to match-make Miss Morse with your sister and I determined to be successful.”

Doing his best to ignore the pleasurable shiver down his spine, he managed to whisper back. “It seems you may have succeeded in the more traditional form of match-making if the look on Lance’s face is anything to go by.”

Miss Simmons turned away to glance over at Hunter’s dreamy expression and had to turn her face quickly back towards Fitz to hide her suppressed laughter. She met his eye and both of them lost their composure.

“Goodness!” cried Daisy. “What on earth can you two be giggling at?”

“Nothing at all, Daisy,” Fitz replied quickly. “Your darling daughter has just been pulling faces at us.”

Daisy got up from her seat and came to wedge herself between them, looking intently with her brother over Miss Simmons’ shoulder at little Jemima’s entirely passive face.

“Let me see then, my sweetheart,” Daisy cooed, to no avail.

Jemima yawned extravagantly.
“Babies never perform on command,” Jemma sighed with the air of an experienced professional.

“No, I suppose you’re right,” Daisy reluctantly agreed. “Well, I may not have the opportunity to be entertained by my daughter this morning, but we have found this Miss Morse you’ve brought us most diverting, haven’t we, Lance?”

Hunter could only bring himself to nod but, in his favour, Miss Morse seemed to smile coyly back at him.

“Wonderful,” Jemma replied. “I was sure you’d like one another very much.”

Mrs Hartley appeared with a fresh pot of tea and two little letters, one addressed to Daisy and the other to Fitz. While the tea was poured Daisy announced that she and Jemima had received an invitation from Raina to join the Tripletts after Christmas and spend the rest of the winter with them in their house in London. She refolded the letter and tapped it thoughtfully against her saucer.

Fitz sighed over his letter, raising his gaze to find all eyes curiously on him. Mrs Hartley was making her way out of the library but he called her back, given that his news was directly relevant to her also.

“Well, we have the answer to our question about Christmas, Daisy.”

“Oh, yes?” she asked eagerly.

“Mother and Father shall be joining us. They plan to arrive on Monday.”

“And who are they bringing?” Daisy prompted him. “You can hardly expect me to believe that it shall be just the five of us!”

Fitz sighed heavily. “By the sounds of it, we’ll be joined by two eminent ladies who have recently been visiting Bath.”

“Go on,” Daisy urged. “Are they bringing a prospective wife for you or a prospective husband for me? Or both, heaven forbid!”

“I imagine they’re hoping the grand ladies’ young niece shall make a nice wife for me,” he grumbled, looking to Mack for sympathy.

Mack nodded compassionately.

Daisy pretended to mop at her brow in relief. “Well, let us hope they shall all be vastly entertaining. For if not, I’m planning to pretend that Jemima has the colic and hide myself in my bedroom all day and night.”

“That’s all very well for you, Daisy,” cried Fitz, “but then I shall be left to make awkward conversation with the poor girl all by myself.”

“And to endure the inevitable bawdy Scottish airs,” Daisy added cheekily.

Mack unfolded himself from his chair until he towered over them all. “I’m sorry to break up the party but perhaps we should get back to work, Fitz. We’ve got one more coat of paint to finish before I’ll have to return to the stables.”

Fitz looked wistfully at Miss Simmons who was gently explaining the anatomy of Jemima’s little hands to her.
“I suppose you’re right, Mack,” he agreed, also grudgingly getting to his feet. “Hunter?”

Lance looked about himself as if he’d just been startled out of a dream. “Oh! Right. Of course. Right. Yes, better be getting back to it.”

“And we should probably be leaving too, Barbara,” Jemma said. “I’ve promised to drop in on the McDougals on my way home.”

Daisy sighed. “I’d ordinarily be cross at you all for deserting me but it’s time Jemima had a little sleep anyway. But shall we not see you now until after Christmas, Jemma?”

Fitz whirled about in time to see Miss Simmons nod reluctantly. “I’m still waiting to hear where I might be headed but, yes, I imagine I’ll be summoned away very soon and I probably won’t return for a fortnight or so.”

“Oh, you shall be dearly missed,” said Daisy, kissing her friend warmly in a way that Fitz could only wish to imitate.

Instead, once Jemima was restored to her mother, Miss Simmons approached him with her hand outstretched. He wanted to press his lips to her knuckles – everything in him cried out for him to do it – but something about the watching eyes of Daisy, Hunter and Mack held him back. He simply took her hand in his as warmly as he could.

“You will be missed, Miss Simmons,” he repeated. “We shall be terribly dull without you.”

“Nonsense!” she retorted. “What with your illustrious personages and all those Scottish airs, I believe dull will be the very last thing you shall be.”

“Nonetheless,” he replied boldly. “I’d prefer to have you.” But it suddenly felt too intimate. He looked to his sister as casually as he could. “Wouldn’t we, Daisy?”

“Of course,” she replied, smiling at him sympathetically. “We’d take Jemma over all the illustrious personages in the land.”

“I’m flattered,” Jemma replied. “And I shall of course miss the three of you immensely.”

Fitz tried desperately not to envy his niece the fond farewell kisses Jemma pressed all over her little face.

…

After the visit to the McDougals and the ride home with Barbara, during which Jemma fielded far more questions about Lance than she had quite expected, she made her way directly to the Coulsons’ kitchen planning to bestow her Christmas gifts before the imminent and inevitable arrival of Mr Fury.

The seamstress who had made Barbara’s fashionable garments had been in raptures over the prospect of using the leftover materials to craft a fairy dress for Bethie and she had ordered books for Philip and Audrey that she knew they’d find diverting and edifying in equal measure.

With paper and ribbon strewn all over the table and little Bethie pirouetting about the kitchen in her hastily donned finery, Audrey suddenly remembered the telegram she’d been keeping for Jemma since the morning.

“Goodness, Jemma!” she’d cried, brandishing the recovered envelope in relief. “I hope this isn’t urgent!”
Jemma tore it open, turning the page toward the window so that she might better see to read.

**Jemma Dear,**

We come to you for a change! We shall drop by Battlesden in the box to fetch you early on Christmas Eve. Expect your new ladies’ maid, Maria, to arrive with your trunks the day before and help you prepare. Victoria has taken the liberty of having some new things made up. We have all been invited to stay with an intriguing couple near to you. You surely know of them – Mr and Mrs Calvin Fitz of Manderston. We understand they have an adult son, a recently widowed daughter and a new little granddaughter that they are eager to meet. We look forward to hearing all your news.

**Aunt Melinda**

“Well?” asked Audrey.

“It’s a tragedy,” laughed Jemma. “I don’t know a single bawdy Scottish air!”
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It didn’t matter how many times she had tried to explain the hilarity of the situation to her friend, Audrey stubbornly refused to see the humour in the idea of Jemma being presented to Mr Fitz as an eligible prospect.

To Jemma, of course, it was a fine joke. She could already picture herself, together with Daisy and Fitz, laughing uproariously at the notion for years to come.

It was as clear to her as ever that she would be no man’s wife and, having made that similarly clear to Mr Fitz on at least one occasion, she could only imagine the palpable relief she would see on his face when instead of some trussed up heiress oriented directly towards the aisle of the nearest church, he would find himself presented with none other than herself, his dear friend.

Not that she could escape, in this instance, being presented as the most trussed-up of all the heiresses. This Maria person in whom her aunts were placing so much faith, would no doubt prove to be as fussy and exacting as every other ladies’ maid her Aunt Victoria had foisted on her. And she dreaded to think of Aunt Victoria’s new collection of gowns given that she wasn’t even present in the process to provide a restraining hand. If absence made the heart grow fonder, in her aunt’s case, it also made the wardrobe increasingly extravagant.

Audrey’s stubborn refusal to agree with her did not seem to stop her from breaking sporadically into each of the bawdy Scottish airs she had managed to memorise in the course of her lifetime.

“I don’t suppose you could take your warbling elsewhere?” Jemma inquired archly.

Audrey laughed. “Seeing as you have settled yourself in my kitchen, I doubt you shall have much luck with that!” she retorted. But after a moment she did stop singing and brought her tea over to sit by Jemma, suddenly covering her hand with her own. “Dear, I am a little worried about what is soon to happen at Manderston.”

“What on earth could you mean?” Jemma asked, exasperated. “I have told you. You are quite mistaken about my friendship with Mr Fitz. That is all we are, Audrey – very good friends!”

Audrey nodded patiently. “I believe that is all you think you are. But I suspect Mr Fitz feels quite differently. In fact, I suspect that he is quite dangerously in love with you.”

Jemma scoffed. “You are being ridiculous, Audrey. It doesn’t necessarily follow that every man and woman who enter into friendship must directly fall in love.”

“No, it doesn’t necessarily follow,” Audrey agreed. “But my dear, I sincerely believe that in this case it has!”

“And I suppose by that you mean to imply that I have fallen in love with him in return?” cried Jemma.

Audrey gave a little shrug of her shoulders. “You understand me perfectly, Jemma,” she replied. “I do.”

Jemma placed both feet heavily onto the floorboards beneath and pushed herself to standing. “Well
you are quite mistaken,” she declared. “Have a lovely Christmas, Audrey. I shall see you all in the New Year.” And with that, Jemma swept out of Battlesden and stomped her way up the slight incline to her cottage.

With each forceful step she pushed the ludicrous notion right out of her head. Despite the weeks of excessive frippery and the revelation of certain truths she’d prefer to keep suppressed, she was thoroughly looking forward to all the fun that Christmas at Manderston would hold.

…

Manderston House was a hive of activity. Mrs Hartley had successfully hired her small army of staff and the elder Mr Fitz and his wife had made their triumphant return, bringing with them the faithful family butler, the very English Mr Falsworth, and their own contingent of servants from Bath.

Daisy had had quite the childhood crush on Falsworth and, even now, she couldn’t help but admire the way that age and the silvering of his hair only made him seem all the more distinguished.

She was ever so grateful for the presence of Miss Morse, for Mrs Hartley was increasingly required to be at Mrs Fitz’s beck and call, organising table settings, poring over menus and generally commanding the fleet.

The increased presence of Miss Morse had unsurprisingly secured the regular attendance of Lance Hunter, with or without little James. But not even he seemed able to alleviate her brother’s despondency at the absence of Miss Simmons.

“It’ll only be a week or two, brother,” Daisy teased him as he gazed mournfully over the estate. “Then Jemma shall be back here as frequently as ever.”

“I suppose,” he replied dully. “But that shan’t prevent me from missing her now.”

“Antoine and Raina should arrive this afternoon. We can always rely upon those two to provide plenty of enjoyable distractions.”

“Those two and that Grandmamma of theirs!” Fitz laughed despite himself. “Yes, I am sure they will be highly entertaining!”

“And you aren’t the least bit curious about these eminent ladies and their niece?” Daisy asked playfully. “I’m sure she’s reported to be a great beauty.”

“More beautiful than Miss Simmons?” Fitz scoffed. “I hope this niece hasn’t gotten her husband-finding hopes up.”

“Wouldn’t it be amusing to be a fly on the wall wherever the young lady is now!” Daisy giggled.

…

Jemma opened the cottage door to find a slight dark-haired woman, heavily encumbered by gowns and over-shadowed by the imposing figure of Mr Fury. Behind them stood her aunts’ impressive barouche box, the pedigree pitch-black Friesians waiting with a calm dignity that most humans struggled to achieve.

“Your Grace,” said Mr Fury, bowing low and rising again, an amused twinkle in his one uncovered eye.

“Oh, don’t you start, Fury,” replied Jemma with a fond roll of her eyes. “I’m going to get far more of
that than I need in the next week or so.” She turned her attention to the young woman who was watching their interaction with interest. “Et vous devez être Maria. Parlez-vous anglais?”

The girl curtseyed as daintily as she could with her arms full of fabric, already nodding as she rose to standing.

“Then, please,” Jemma pleaded, before she could speak, “just Miss Simmons for now, Maria. All of that silliness begins in earnest tomorrow but I mean to hold it off as long as I can.”

“As you please, Miss,” she squeaked, struggling under the weight of her load.

“Now do come in and lay down those gowns before you collapse!”

Maria shot her new mistress a grateful smile and followed her into the cottage. Fury trailed behind with a stylish set of matching luggage, traipsing in and out a number of times for hat boxes, shoe boxes and all manner of assorted paraphernalia.

Jemma could only look about herself in exasperation. “How many gowns does Aunt Victoria mean me to model at once? Is the simultaneous wearing of multiple dresses a new fashion on the streets of London?”

“I believe Lady Victoria simply wanted you to have your pick of the new gowns, Miss,” Maria offered. “I can return them to the box if they are at all in your way.”

Turning to look at her new ladies’ maid, Jemma offered an immediate apology. “I don’t wish to seem ungrateful, Maria. But of course I must seem so to you. It’s just that every now and again I catch a glimpse of myself without all that decoration. I’ve enjoyed believing that I can be of value without it.”

“Of course you are of value without it, Miss,” the maid replied with an unexpected fervour. “And don’t think for a moment that your Aunt doesn’t know the same. She just resents the fact that you believe you should have to deny who you are, and suppress the bold defiance of your father in order to see it.”

Jemma blinked repeatedly and Maria slapped a hand to her mouth.

“Forgive me, Your Grace,” she pleaded, eyes wide. “I have always had a terrible time keeping my opinions to myself. I did warn your aunts of the fact but they didn’t seem at all concerned.”

To Maria’s obvious surprise, and eventual relief, her new mistress burst into peals of laughter.

“Oh, now I quite see how it was that the pair of them hired you!” Jemma exclaimed. “They’ll be rubbing their hands together with glee to know that I’ve met my match at last.”

Mr Fury stalked in bearing his last armload of luggage – Jemma’s capacious jewellery box – and looked quizzically from one young woman to the other.

“Are you two quite alright?” he enquired, placing the heavy box on the table.

Jemma sighed. “I’m just amused by Maria’s execution of her duties, Mr Fury,” she explained. “I can only imagine my aunts’ delight upon meeting her.”

Fury chuckled. “They did seem inordinately pleased with themselves upon her appointment,” he agreed. “As I recall, I was to inform Mr Jarvis to have a chilled bottle of champagne prepared for their arrival home.”
Jemma looked from her one of her aunts’ employees to the other. “Oh, dear,” she said. “I’m quite doomed, aren’t I?”

“If you’re asking whether or not your aunts mean business,” Fury replied, “I think you can safely assume that they do. If I were you, I’d let Maria here help you choose a dress and let me take the rest of them on to Manderston. You’ll know I’m not playing around when I say they intend for the three of you to make a big entrance.”

“And I suppose I shall just have to play along,” Jemma sighed. “Though I cannot imagine what Daisy and Mr. Fitz will make of me!”

“I think your Aunt Victoria would advise you not to concern yourself with what other people think. Your Aunt Melinda would immediately remind you that you are only responsible for your own words and behaviour.”

Jemma laughed. “You’ve been working for them a long while, have you not, Fury?”

“As long as I care to remember, Your Gr-, I mean, Miss Simmons.”

“Oh, what’s the use,” Jemma sighed. “I might as well get used to it again.”

“Very well, Your Grace,” Fury replied with a sly grin and a low bow.

…

As Daisy had predicted, the arrival of Antoine and Raina did immediately lift Fitz’s spirits. Their ancient grandmother entered in fine form, cheerily mishearing almost every word that was spoken to her from the moment she set foot over the threshold.

While the elderly lady was settled into her apartment by her swarm of attentive ladies’ maids, the younger Tripletts were led to where they could find their friends in the library. Raina had immediately flitted across the room to embrace Daisy, paying her condolences face-to-face at last and then falling into raptures over her friend’s fashionable mourning clothes.

His sister was looking remarkably well in the cold winter light of the library, the stark black of her gown accentuating the dramatic shades of her eyes and hair, highlighted here and there by sparkling jet accessories set within gleaming silver.

Antoine had greeted Fitz amiably and then, after silently watching her interact with his sister, uncharacteristically stumbled in greeting Daisy. He didn’t quite recover himself until Raina, who had dutifully held little Jemima practically at arms-length from her body, foisted the child into her brother’s arms. Fitz and Daisy watched fondly as Triplett immediately melted into his warm and easy self, sinking into the closest chair utterly mesmerised by the tiny beauty in his embrace.

Fitz immediately sat down beside him and listed to his eager audience all of his niece’s many and varied virtues and accomplishments. He only allowed himself to be slightly irked by Raina’s apparent lack of interest.

“And Jemima?” Trip asked. “What prompted Daisy to choose that name?”

Fitz felt himself go to jelly at the very idea of her.

“Do you remember meeting our friend, Miss Jemma Simmons, at our ball earlier in the year?” Daisy asked.
“The midwife?” asked Raina disdainfully.

“Yes!” Daisy nodded enthusiastically, not hearing or not acknowledging her friend’s tone. “Well, she has been the dearest friend to me,” she went on, looking at Fitz. “To both of us, hasn’t she brother?”

Fitz only trusted himself to nod earnestly.

“She and Leo never left my side during this lovely little girl’s birth,” Daisy continued, “and she has proved herself to be the most faithful of supporters ever since.”

Raina looked theatrically over each shoulder as if expecting to spot her. “And yet she is not here now?” she observed.

“She spends Christmas with her aunts,” Fitz replied despondently. “We shall not see her now for some weeks.”

Raina nodded sympathetically. “And that is all for the best, Mr Fitz. Better for her to spend Christmas with her own sort of people. She would only be intimidated here.”

Daisy laughed. “Jemma Simmons? Intimidated? I think not. She is not afraid of anything.”

Raina muttered something that sounded to Fitz suspiciously like “an age of upstarts” but before he could make any pointed enquiries as to her meaning, one of the many new domestic servants appeared in the library doorway to summon them down to supper.

…

The next morning, Jemma tried valiantly to take her breakfast whilst being so uncomfortably corseted. After a while she was forced to give in, turning to the wrapping of gifts while Maria poked and prodded at her hair. It had been no small effort to decide how best to honour the new friendship between herself and the young master and mistress of Manderston.

Her seamstress had been delighted to use the scraps from Miss Morse’s gowns to create a magnificent fairy doll for the littlest Ward lady that she knew would leave Daisy in raptures. Daisy herself proved a harder challenge. At last Jemma had decided on giving Daisy a piece of jewellery that had belonged to her mother. The amethyst rivière necklace with silver collets and gold backings was a deep purple in colour and it seemed to Jemma to represent the regal strength she saw her friend radiate. She wrote as much in a long explanatory note that she slipped inside the accompanying card.

Mr Fitz had proved no challenge at all. She had already ordered him the leather-bound, gold-embossed chronicle of letters between Antonie van Leeuwenhoek, the Dutch father of microbiology, and the Royal Society. And with it, in a large wooden box, she had placed the microscope she had procured for him and a selection of carefully constructed slides. She had obtained for herself all of the equipment to construct one’s own slides and she held on to her cherished hope of working side-by-side with him in the exciting arena of scientific discovery. Though not an insignificant purchase, she chose to view it as a savvy investment in a satisfying and companionable intellectual future. It seemed much harder work to convey this information in one simple card.

The rumble of cart wheels on the gravel outside heralded the arrival of Mr Fury just as Maria pressed into place the headpiece that crowned Jemma’s outfit. The bounty of extravagant gowns from which Jemma had to choose was undeniably extraordinary. At last she had managed to select one for her initial grand entrance, deciding that if there were no way out, she might as well put her best foot forward.
Consequently, she was now arrayed in saffron yellow silk, edged and trimmed in white crimped gauze with froths of beautiful lace adorning the hem. Down the front of her gown were embellishments created, or so Maria claimed, from over twelve thousand faux pearls of various sizes, stitched onto the gown in elaborate patterns that evoked romantic visions of flowers and ferns and dainty fans.

Jemma quickly glanced at herself in the mirror, taking in her gown, her white silk slippers, her delicate lace gloves and the eye-catching pressed gold and diamond diadem Maria had secured in her hair. Her elegant fan, bequeathed to her by her mother, was decorated with silver leaf and intricately patterned slivers of ebony. Dressed to satisfy Victoria for the first time in a long while, she braced herself for the entrance of her aunts.

Maria went to the door at Fury’s unmistakeable knock and Jemma stood in full view of the doorway, waiting for Aunt Victoria to bear down upon her. In her ermine-trimmed duck egg blue pelisse coat and large, feather-festooned bonnet, the striking red streak in her black-hair gleaming in the pale winter sun, Aunt Victoria was in fine form.

“My dear Jemma!” she boomed, filling the doorway, her arms outstretched, her full voice echoing in the small room. “How gratifying to see you in my favourite of the new gowns!” She looked over her shoulder. “She looks a picture does she not, Melinda?”

Jemma could just make out her Aunt Melinda’s quiet reply. “I’d be in a better position to comment if you’d move aside and let me in out of the snow, Victoria.”

Victoria cast her eyes wryly to the heavens and then stepped aside to allow Melinda access.

The lady’s dark eyes sought out Jemma, allowing herself a small smile and nod of approval.

“You look well,” was all the lady would be prevailed upon to say.

“Thank you, Aunt Melinda,” said Jemma warmly, stepping forward to kiss her diminutive aunt’s cheek. To similarly greet her Aunt Victoria, she was required to stand on tip-toe.

Maria flitted about between them, ferrying boxes and luggage to the door where she handed each piece off to Mr Fury to be stowed in the capacious under-carriage of the barouche box for the journey.

“I quite like these Fitzes,” Victoria declared, pulling off her gloves. “And they seemed greatly intrigued by our description of you, did they not, Melinda?”

Jemma laughed to herself at her aunt’s silence. She could imagine Melinda adding very little to the shared dialogue.

“Of course, we were delighted to hear of their concerns about the parish midwife, as you can imagine!”

Jemma turned to Victoria in some bafflement. “Concerns?” she echoed.

“Well, it would never do to have their only son and heir besotted by a common midwife!” Victoria cried. “So of course we had to accept their invitation. It sounded like it would be ever so fun to shatter their misconceptions. But do you like him, Jemma? We shall, of course, be led by you.”

Jemma blinked a few times before answering. “I do like him,” she replied. “I like him very much. But Mr Fitz and I are only friends. He is most decidedly not besotted by me.” She supposed she was only explaining this so often because it was perhaps unusual for such a friendship to spring up
between a man and a woman, but that only made her all the more determined to pursue it.

“Oh dear,” said Victoria. “Then I imagine we shall witness quite a tumultuous emotional journey for
dear old Calvin and Jiaying! To learn that the midwife they feared their son had fallen for is actually
the best prospect a young man of his station could ever hope to attain and then find out it was only a
mild friendship after all! I hope they shall not be too disappointed.”

“It is not merely a mild friendship,” Jemma heard herself argue petulantly, entirely unsure as to why
she was quarrelling at all. “Mr Fitz is utterly brilliant and I have the utmost respect for him as a
scholar and as a man. We hope to work together as partners in scientific endeavour!”

Aunt Melinda fixed her dark gaze on her, tilting her head ever so slightly to one side. Aunt Victoria,
as was their custom, seemed to voice what Jemma could only imagine Melinda was thinking. “It
shall be awkward to seek to pursue science with him when you each go and marry someone else,
shall it not?”

Jemma attempted to laugh. “Well, as you are both well aware, I have no interest in marrying
anyone.” She shrugged airily. “And I am quite unenlightened as to Mr Fitz’s thoughts on the
subject.”

Victoria and Melinda exchanged a significant look.

“I don’t know about you Melinda,” said the taller of the two women, “but I imagine we are in for
quite an entertaining Christmas. I always enjoy ending an old year with a devastating heartbreak
before ushering in the new – all crisp and fresh and unblemished.”

Jemma scoffed. “There will be no heartbreak!” she declared emphatically. “At least not where Mr
Fitz and I are concerned. Perhaps the two of you might like to break some hearts. I’m sure eligible
single men have been invited to counter every single lady.”

“As is only right and fair,” agreed Aunt Victoria. “I myself am quite excited by the possibilities.
Melinda, as usual, demurs.”

The distaste on the smaller woman’s face was evident.

“In fact,” she went on, noting Maria and Mr Fury standing attentively still by the door. “I am really
quite eager to get on and see who they might have lined up. An agreeable gentleman to flirt with
over Christmas dinner sounds an utterly delightful prospect.”

…

Mrs Fitz was in her element. By her careful arrangement, tea was being served in Manderston’s vast
gallery, the high walls adorned with lavish paintings of the family’s imposing ancestors. She had
ordered multiple elegant Christmas trees to be placed in amongst the marble sculptures and to offset
the dimness of the overcast sky and the snow on the ground, she had overseen the artful laying out of
large candles which provided both warmth and a pleasing golden glow.

As guests continued to arrive, Mr Falsworth announced each individual, presenting them by name
and often by title, his rich, clear voice ringing out in the high-ceilinged hall and adding to the sense of
grandeur she was always at pains to maintain.

More seating was hastily fetched from precisely where Mrs Fitz had ordained that it be kept, and
slotted into carefully pre-arranged places as the party grew. Efficiently furnished with food and drink,
the gathered party remained comfortable, well-fed and watered, and aesthetically pleasing to any
further arrivals.
For herself and her husband, the group Jiaying Fitz most eagerly anticipated were the grand ladies they’d met in Bath and their charming sounding niece. To have them accept her invitation had been quite the Christmas coup.

She glanced across the gallery over her gold-rimmed bone china teacup, deeply satisfied to be overseeing such a gathering of fashionable and monied people. Her son and daughter entertained their attractive young friends, Antoine and Raina Triplett, and Daisy’s statuesque new companion, Miss Morse, sat quietly tending to the care of little Jemima.

She was a lovely baby. Though Jiaying and Calvin had been saddened to hear of her father’s untimely death, news of his shocking behaviour had begun to reach them in Bath. Ultimately his passing was a relief. Unsurprisingly, Daisy looked extremely well in her mourning gown. Black, though deeply unfashionable under any other circumstances, was certainly her colour.

The newly married Sir Daniel Sousa and his lovely wife Margaret were also seated with her children, gallantly trying to have eyes for anything other than one another. Deep in conversation with Antoine and Leopold was her son’s most highly-respected university professor, himself a viscount, though for some reason he elected not to have it widely known. His secrecy aside, Mr Andrew Garner could not pass for anything less than aristocracy even though he tried, his blue blood was evident in everything the man said and did.

Towering over the guests gathered around another small table was Mr Donald Blake and his wife, Jane. Like Calvin, Blake had inherited a vast neighbouring estate, though his many mysterious responsibilities had him often away from home. This time, by Jiaying’s careful design, he had agreed to bring with him his dark-haired brother, equally tall and handsome, but of a much slighter build. Mr Loren Olson seemed a brooding sort of a fellow, slumped in his chair, staring moodily into his teacup and avoiding conversation as much as possible. Mrs Fitz could only hope that, as one of the carefully selected bachelors, he would prove a willing participant in the festivities when his intended counterpart arrived.

One ear attentive to any sounds from the driveway outside, Mrs Fitz grew quite excited when, through the large windows, she recognised the elaborate barouche box of her esteemed new friends. She sat up higher in her chair, sipping daintily at her tea and pretended to be fascinated by something the elderly Mrs Triplett was croaking about.

A footman rapped the butt of his staff on the marble floor. All conversation ceased and all eyes turned to the entrance.

Mr Falsworth stepped forward to announce the new arrivals.

“Lady Victoria Hand.”

A respectful pause.

“The Dowager Marchioness of Montrose.”

A further pause.

Her distinguished friends had arrived at last – tall and short and elegantly clothed – Victoria in somewhat ostentatious ermine (but she could be forgiven for that) – Melinda, characteristically simple in lilac.

Jiaying couldn’t help straining her neck to see beyond them.

Even Falsworth, whom she had never once seen unruffled, seemed awed to make the last
announcement.

“Her Grace, the Duchess of Argyll.”

The young woman entering the gallery, the very epitome of elegance and poise, was perhaps the most handsome creature Mrs Fitz had ever set eyes upon. She glanced over her shoulder to see if the lady’s arrival had had the desired effect on her son. She was hopeful never to hear of this midwife again.

What she saw, despite its unseemliness, brought an instant smile to her face.

Her Leopold, traditionally unmoved where women were concerned, had staggered to his feet at the sight of the beautiful young Duchess, on his face the tell-tale signs of a man in love.

Jiaying rubbed her hands together. A Merry Christmas indeed!

Chapter End Notes

Well, peeps, it seems this is all flowing much more freely now that I have that massive ch 20 out of the way! In case you’re interested, Jemma is wearing one of Princess Charlotte’s gowns from 1817 in this chapter. It looks a bit like this!

The next instalment should be the Christmas special I once upon a time genuinely believed might be published by the actual holiday in question way back in 2015. So much for that! We’ll be lucky to see it by Easter!
Anyway, thanks again for sticking with me! I hope you’re enjoying the way this funny old thing unfolds!!!
Thankfully, the splendour of the three most recent arrivals was such that no one besides his mother paid any mind to the young master’s stunned response.

He stood in the centre of the gallery, mouth agape.

Before him was an absolute vision.

In the moment, not only was Fitz utterly unsurprised to hear that his Miss Simmons was an aristocrat, he was appalled at himself for not having immediately seen the obvious truth.

Everything about her - her poise, her grace, her otherworldly beauty - communicated her elevated status. He could almost kick himself for ever believing she was anything less.

Her hair, held in place by a gold band of sparkling diamonds, seemed simple and uncontrived, where every other lady’s coiffure looked fixed and over done. The warm colour in her lips and cheeks seemed to emanate from some inner glow rather than being smeared on her face like the garish paint on the women around her. Her elegant manner was surely as natural to her as breathing, it could never be the result of the painstaking study so gallingly apparent in everyone else.

However, despite the fact that it was now all so blatantly obvious, the truth of the matter was that his Miss Simmons was not Miss Simmons at all.

Fitz wasn’t even sure how to address her. She was his social superior, above him in every way that mattered and in a vast many that did not.

He slowly sank back into his seat, impervious to all hissed queries and observations exchanged by those clustered about him. He could only watch as, across the room, Her Grace was presented to his parents, her manners faultless. It was clear that they had no recollection of her from their prior introduction earlier in the year.

After their little tête-à-tête, Fitz’s mother paid her what might, under other circumstances, have been interpreted as a great honour. The hostess rose from her chair and herself escorted the young Duchess around the room, asking if she might have permission to make various introductions, to which the guest always graciously acquiesced. At last she led the lady in his direction. Fitz stood to his feet once more, as did all the gentlemen seated near him.

“Duchess,” his mother fawned, lavishing a warm smile upon her and then on those gathered, “May I introduce to you our daughter, Mrs Daisy Ward, and our son and heir, Mr Leopold Fitz.”

…

Jemma maintained her regal composure, pretending to meet and greet and curtsey and how do you do, right up until the moment Mrs Fitz left her to return to her aunts, and then she couldn’t help but collapse into her seat and laugh.

She glanced about from face to face but instead of finding her friends sharing in her mirth, she was met by only stunned wide-eyes and silence.
Jemma quickly composed herself.

“I cannot imagine what you all must be thinking,” she began, smiling sheepishly at Barbara, then at Daisy and then at Mr Fitz.

None of them seemed to know how to reply. In fact, it was Miss Triplett who made the most effort at conversation.

“Have you had to travel very far to be here, Your Grace?” she enquired, smoothing her floral patterned gown carefully over her lap. “I believe I overheard Mrs Fitz mention that Inveraray Castle was your family seat. What a stunning structure, with such magnificent grounds! I myself have visited there with Grandmamma but I did not have the pleasure of meeting you.”

Jemma was surprised to suddenly find Miss Triplett so willing to be polite where she’d previously been prickly. She managed to momentarily put aside her concern for her upset friends and answer the lady’s question.

“No, I myself have not lived at Inveraray since my father’s death almost five years ago,” Jemma replied quietly. “Since then, I have mostly been in the care of my aunts. Inveraray has been let.”

Raina uncharacteristically clasped Jemma’s hand between her own in genuine compassion. “I am terribly sorry to hear of your loss, Your Grace. And to lose not only your father but your childhood home as well! It must have broken your heart to leave such a glorious estate.”

Touched by her empathy, Jemma slowly nodded her head. “I don’t suppose you and your Grandmamma were lucky enough to watch the sun set over the hills from the western tower?” she asked wistfully.

“Yes!” cried Raina. “I shall never forget the way the setting sun set the lake ablaze with light. I have never beheld a more picturesque scene.”

Jemma felt her eyes fill with tears. “Now I know you really have seen it, Miss Triplett,” she whispered, squeezing the other lady’s hand. “I am so delighted to hear that you enjoyed your visit.”

“Rainaaa!” called a tremulous voice, the quavering note resounding throughout the gallery.

“Forgive me, Your Grace,” said Miss Triplett, getting hurriedly to her feet. “That is Grandmamma calling, I must go to her.” She scurried off, calling over her shoulder, “I hope we might find some more time to reminisce about Inveraray as the day progresses.”

Still teary, Jemma nodded at Raina’s retreating form, fishing blindly for her beaded reticule to locate her handkerchief. In her haste, her little Pinard horn clattered onto the tiled floor.

It was Daisy who reached forward to pick it up. She smiled shyly at Jemma as she handed it back.

“So perhaps it really is you in there after all?” she observed.

Jemma took the horn gratefully, even as she dabbed at her eyes. “Oh, Daisy, of course it is!”

Mr Triplett looked between the two women in some confusion.

Daisy’s reply was hesitant. “Je—– Oh, I don’t know… I’m terribly sorry, but what do we call you now?”

“My name, of course!” Jemma replied emphatically. “What else would you call me?”
“But you are not precisely who we thought, are you?” Daisy pressed. “Your aunts, my parents, would no doubt be utterly horrified to hear Leo address you in the manner to which he has become accustomed.”

Jemma sighed, risking a glance at Mr Fitz who had not long resumed his seat and was watching her like she might suddenly sprout wings and fly. “Oh, dear. I suppose you are right.”

The furrow in Mr Triplett’s brow deepened considerably.

“Your Grace,” Mr Fitz said softly, inclining his head. “Or Duchess. These are the only ways I can address you.”

“But, Mr Fitz, neither of those are my name,” Jemma countered. “And I’m exactly the same girl you’ve known these last months.”

Barbara interjected, her tone reproachful. “You cannot deny that your title is part of your identity, Jemma, any more than I can deny my father or mother. Or the sheep for that matter! You have chosen to keep part of your identity from us. You call yourself by another name but perhaps you have as much right to that name as I would have to declare myself the Queen of Spain.” She softened at Jemma’s stricken expression. “Do not be alarmed, Duchess. I understand why you hid the truth, but I suppose I would still have liked to know it.”

Daisy’s hand suddenly flew to her mouth. “We had a duchess using the servants’ entrance! What will Mrs Hartley say?”

“Daisy! Please!” Jemma whispered. “I chose to go by Miss Simmons for this very reason. Please don’t alter the way you treat me because of a mere name.”

“Miss Simmons?” Triplett repeated disbelievingly, turning to carefully scan Jemma’s face.

He looked to the young master in utter bewilderment. “Fitz? This cannot be your midwife friend?”

Jemma was incredulous. “But you and I have met, Mr Triplett!” she cried. “We’ve conversed! On more than one occasion!”

“You are right, of course, Miss Simm- I mean… Your Grace,” Triplett replied apologetically. “But you must understand, it is very difficult to perceive the midwife within when a lady is introduced to you as a duchess with all the accompanying pomp and circumstance as befits the royal court!”

“You are right, I suppose,” Jemma sighed. “Though, to its detriment, the royal court does tend to prefer a great deal more drums and trumpets – and those outrageous hooped skirts!”

“Not all of us are privy to the preferences of the royal court, Your Grace,” laughed Daisy. “I believe your pedigree is showing.”

…”

Lady Victoria beheld the room from her position at the supper table with quiet satisfaction. Beside her was seated the man obviously designated to entertain her for the holiday and she could find absolutely no cause for complaint. Mr Olsen was lean and dark with a quick wit and a penchant for making dry observations at the expense of their fellow diners. His green eyes were piercing, the flickering movement of his long fingers enchanting and his deep, cultured voice utterly hypnotising. Only a few hours in and she was already enjoying herself immensely.

Across the table and a few places to her left, Melinda was deep in serious conversation with her
assigned bachelor. Though she could not make out a syllable, she felt certain that her friend had never spoken so many words together. Victoria had even become convinced that, now and then, when she could bear to tear her attention away from her own companion, Melinda occasionally smiled.

But together with Mr Olsen, to whom, in hushed but amused tones, she’d explained the entire situation, Victoria gave most of her attention to the young Mr Fitz. He had been seated, to no one’s very great surprise, close beside the Duchess of Argyll. It was very apparent that the pair were also being approvingly observed by the gentleman’s parents. There was no doubt that Jemma was doing her part in gaining their favour. It was yet to be determined whether young Fitz would be equally successful.

Victoria’s aim for the evening was to ascertain the young man’s chances at winning her reluctant niece’s hand. Young women were always to be encouraged to pursue their dreams and ambitions. Victoria’s beloved late brother, Jemma’s father, had believed that whole-heartedly. When he fell ill, he conserved all his energy to daily fight against the phalanx of lawyers and advisers, unwavering in his insistence that Jemma would inherit his title and the entire estate and not some distant relation – a third cousin, twice removed – who came recommended by virtue of his genitalia alone.

Mr Olsen quite liked the young man and said so. The idea of the two of them marrying seemed to please him but, mischievous soul that he was proving to be, this was because he’d become invested in the idea of witnessing Mrs Fitz’s realisation that the midwife and duchess were one and the same woman.

As for Victoria herself, she felt less sure. Their conversation did flow freely and the few words that she and Mr Olsen managed to catch were all technical in nature, pertaining to their shared passion for scientific discovery. To Victoria’s mind, the young pairs’ mutual interests boded well both for friendship and for more than that, though she suspected that if the more than that proved out of the question, Mr Fitz’s ability to sustain the friendship would be severely tested.

“Do you know, Lady Victoria,” Mr Olsen said at last, a lazy smile on his handsome face. “I think we’ve learnt all we can about your niece’s beau for now. Perhaps you might permit me to spend the rest of the evening learning some more about you .”

Victoria gave him her best coy smile. Oh, yes. Mr Olsen was proving highly satisfactory.

…

Jemma was grateful to have been seated beside Mr Fitz for supper and not only because she had been looking forward to discussing with him her long-held doubts about the medicinal application of mercury.

Truthfully, she had never given a moment’s thought to the consequences of concealing her identity until she had seen her friends’ shocked faces that afternoon in the gallery. Fitz had remained almost completely silent for the remainder of the hour, suddenly excusing himself and disappearing somewhere until they all reconvened only moments ago, changed into their finery for the evening meal.

To have laid aside her lovely gown from earlier was quite a pang. But Jemma had taken Maria’s sound advice and donned the white silk gauze dress with the puffed sleeves, dotted all over with gleaming turquoise silk embroidery. In her hair, in place of the pressed gold diadem, was a carefully wrapped string of tiny seed pearls, weaving in and out of the pile of expertly pinned tresses.

Mr Fitz, resplendent in a gold-toned waistcoat and black jacket over his ruffled white cravat, seemed
to Jemma somewhat cool in his initial address.

“I trust you have found your rooms to your satisfaction, Duchess” he muttered over the soup.

The banal choice of subject matter immediately put her on her guard.

“Thank you, Mr Fitz,” she replied politely, taking up her spoon. “My apartment is utterly splendid.”

“I cannot imagine that Manderston would hold a candle to Inveraray Castle,” he observed flatly.

“Well, it has been many years since I left there,” said Jemma sadly. “I cannot imagine that anywhere on the face of the earth could attain to the splendour of my memories. But those recollections are borne out of happy times with my father more than anything to do with the estate itself.” She paused to take a dainty mouthful of soup. “I have amassed almost as many happy memories during my time in Berwickshire, Mr Fitz. In this part of Scotland I have a very different existence – a meaningful occupation, freedom and dear friends the like of which I have never known elsewhere. Were I forced to compare where I have been happier I believe I would find it a difficult task.”

When she raised her gaze to his, Mr Fitz was watching her intently, his blue eyes filled with relief and something else that she couldn’t quite identify.

“So Daisy was right?” he asked tentatively.

She blinked back at him and Fitz broke into a smile at last, the first time she'd seen it that day.

“It really is you in there after all?”

She sighed in amused exasperation. “I am sorry for deceiving you, Mr Fitz.” she said again, this time in hushed tones, “but you have seen me delivering a baby. Can you imagine me arriving at a birthing mother’s home in this ensemble and doing as you have seen me do?”

Mr Fitz’s gaze seemed to have gotten stalled somewhere in following the motion of her hand as she gestured toward her elaborate gown. At last he shook his head, the colour high on his cheeks.

“I suppose not, Your Grace,” he agreed huskily, grasping for his glass and draining it in one sudden motion. In an instant a hovering footman was at his shoulder to refill it.

“Now, Mr Fitz,” she said, at last seeing the way clear to raise her vastly more important concerns, “how familiar are you with the chemical properties of dimethyl mercury?”

…

Melinda had tried to convince Victoria to cease in her mad pursuit of proving Jemma the most accomplished woman in the kingdom but it had been to no avail. Determined to school the Fitzes for stating disapproval of their midwife niece, Victoria was hell-bent on building Jemma up to regal standards in their eyes only in order to raise the stakes of the revelation when it should arise.

It certainly was not that Melinda did not believe Jemma to be up to the challenge. No, their niece had proved more than capable in every task they’d given her. It was more that Melinda had been inclined to take Jemma seriously when she’d stated her intention not to catch the young Fitz as a husband.

Where Victoria was either blind or disinterested, Melinda could see plain as day how badly the boy had fallen. Leopold Fitz would certainly not escape from this ordeal unscathed, especially not now that Victoria had gone and produced the harp-lute for later. It was a certain fact, well known among women of their rank, that an eligible man in a little bit of love could be instantly promoted to the
position of an eligible man very much in love with the judicious application of the harp-lute.

She was thus inordinately thankful for the companionship of Mr Andrew Garner whom Jiaying had seen fit to pair her with. Unbeknownst to Jiaying, and secret even from Victoria, Melinda and Andrew had been carrying on a passionate affair that had already spanned years and continents. So at ease in their love, it was natural for her to pour out to him her concerns, and it was nice to be able to do it verbally rather than by letter, so that she could enjoy the pressure of his hand around hers under the table and the sympathetic attention of his chocolate brown eyes.

But as Andrew agreed, there was nothing to be done. Victoria had her point to make and Jemma must do the work – Jiaying and her son would recover their damaged pride somewhere along the way.

Melinda only hoped that Jemma’s own dignity could remain intact through all that lay before her.

...Later that evening, after Cook’s triumphant Christmas Eve supper, the well-fed and merry crowd adjourned to the music room where those confident in their accomplishments took to the pianoforte for the edification of all gathered therein. The party had been informed that that the next night there was to be dancing and Fitz anticipated the arrival of the musicians his mother had procured from London with a new eagerness now that his preferred dancing partner was in attendance.

Attempting to appear nonchalant, he maneuvered himself into the best seat in the house, ready to once more be wowed by the staggering talent and beauty of his beloved after spending supper being once more wowed by her mind. However, perhaps eager to prove herself in such illustrious company, before anyone else could be prevailed upon to perform, Miss Triplett had taken her place at the instrument.

Before even the first familiar refrain had seen through its traditional number of notes, Fitz had cast his eye about the room and found the duchess twinkling prettily at him from her place. Within seconds the two of them were united in a battle to suppress their laughter, eyes averted and lips pressed firmly together.

Fitz had never imagined enjoying one of those notorious Scottish airs so entirely. Though he and Jemma both knew that making eye-contact would only renew and exacerbate their amusement, they both seemed unable to resist glancing in the other’s direction. Cautiously raising his head from where he had lowered it to hide his sniggering, he caught the duchess similarly watching him before she turned her head away once more, daintily raising her handkerchief to her mouth.

He sidled up to the duchess at the refreshment table after a number of other guests had exhibited and before they had even exchanged a word they burst into surreptitious giggles. His heart, having keenly felt the initial blow of her concealing from him her identity, once more felt full enough to burst.

At last his mother called upon Her Grace to bestow her no doubt considerable talent upon the crowd. Fitz hastened back to his seat, not wanting to miss a moment of basking in her light.

It was quickly discovered by the seated party that Lady Victoria Hand and The Dowager Marchioness of Montrose, aunts to the Duchess of Argyll, had conspired together (without the young lady’s consent judging by the flash of annoyed surprise – noted only by those who knew her well – that flitted across her otherwise perfectly composed features) to bring along an instrument in which only the crème of society had the opportunity to attain accomplishment.
Thus Jemma was seated, not behind the piano, as Fitz had anticipated, but in the very centre of the room, not more than a few feet away from where he was positioned, and presented with an instrument the like of which he’d never laid eyes on before – her beautifully lacquered and gilded harp-lute.

It seemed to Fitz, perhaps due to the excellent wine he’d imbibed or perhaps as a result of the glorious half-hour he’d spent sharing in illicit laughter, that a goddess had approached the spot where he reclined in the long, lush grass of the Elysian Fields and begun to serenade him.

There was a charming uncertainty in her gaze which, for the first few bars of her ethereal song, strayed neither to the left nor to the right. She played that tune and sung those words directly to him – to his heart, to his soul – and enthralled him all the more.

Then suddenly she smiled.

Had there been any question as to how deep the enchantment, Fitz now knew himself to be entirely bewitched. He could wait no longer. There would be gifts exchanged in the morning but at the ball the following evening when they might find a moment to converse alone, he would offer her himself.

…

It had been some years since Jemma had handled this beautiful instrument – a sixteenth birthday gift from her father of which she’d always been inordinately fond. Glad to see it though she was, dominating her consciousness was her fear that she could remember neither how to play nor what to play.

She had no desire to make a fool of herself and she knew she must play along with whatever game Victoria had devised, for everyone’s sake. Therefore, to find her friend, Mr Fitz, directly before her, watching her intently, always so ready and eager to let her impress him, was no small boon to her confidence.

Recalling a trick Melinda had taught her so many years before, she imagined her audience dwindling to only one. In the past she had always focused upon her father. He was unfailingly reliable for this sort of assistance. Jemma always knew that he believed in her with a single-minded certainty. In his eyes, she was her best self.

It occurred to her as she began to play and sing that Mr Fitz was very like her father in that way. In his friendship she felt that she could achieve almost anything.

In the consequent calm that washed over her, her hands reaccustomed themselves to the timbre of the wood and the trembling strings in her lap. Her voice ceased its quavering and returned, full and resonant.

She smiled at Mr Fitz. Thanks to him and all he represented, her skill and her confidence had come flooding back. Buoyed by this new rush of conviction, Jemma gradually let her consciousness of the wider audience return.

…

Not a single person who encountered Mr Antoine Triplett, with his effortless charm and debonair good humour, would ever have suspected the disappointed soul that dwelt beneath the attractive exterior. He had watched his adult life take one unsatisfactory turn after another, beginning with the untimely death of both his beloved parents and reaching its zenith in the searing loss of the woman he had loved since childhood into the arms of a brooding interloper. However, this Christmas Eve as
he sat in the music room at Manderston House between his sister and that recently widowed childhood beloved, he felt himself approaching a tipping point of sorts.

From what little she’d revealed to Raina, he now knew that Daisy had suffered unbearably at the hands of her late husband. It pained him to think that, had he only summoned his courage and acted earlier, he could have saved her from all of that.

What had held him back then, and worried him still, was his certain conviction that she never saw him in that light. To Daisy, as Raina had repeatedly and rather painfully made clear, Antoine was no more than the little boy she’d dressed up as her dragon when she played the knight. On the rare occasions when her fantasies had included a wedding, Fitz had been cast as the handsome prince, Raina as his glowing bride and Antoine as her disapproving father, Emperor of All There Was. In those fantasies, Daisy herself had usually played the dragon. Even after Antoine had pleaded with his sister to seize the narrative reins and throw him and Daisy together, his beloved had turned the plot political rather than romantic and they were both assassinated within a half hour. But today, something different seemed to be happening.

When Antoine had earlier met the tiny Jemima, he’d been so taken by her perfect little fingers and the way they closed themselves so fiercely around his own, that he’d almost failed to notice the new respect in Daisy’s gaze. Finding herself seated beside him at dinner, she had asked him new and thoughtful questions about himself and prompted him to elaborate upon his answers. And just now, when she had taken her place at the pianoforte, she had smiled warmly at him causing a fluttering sensation in his stomach that was yet to settle down. He’d clapped loudly as she made her way back across the room towards him and the pink of her cheeks as she’d raised her gaze shyly to meet his, utterly took his breath away.

It wasn’t until the Duchess of Argyll was beginning her second piece on the harp-lute that he regained his composure. But then Daisy was leaning over him to address his sister and the scent of her hair was in his nostrils and he was lost again. He barely managed to make out her words.

“Oh, Raina,” she whispered. “Look at my poor brother.”

In a daze, Mr Triplett mimicked the direction of their heads, his eyes falling on the spot where Mr Fitz sat transfixed before the duchess.

Uncertain as to how Daisy could be oblivious to what he’d known for years, Triplett snapped out of his reverie enough to glance sympathetically at his sister.

Unrequitedness, by members of the same family no less, had engendered an unlikely relational cohesion between Triplett and his very different sister. Much of the time they teased one another good naturedly. On very rare occasions they had been known to weep in one another’s arms.

He noticed that Raina seemed to be bearing it all very stoically. Perhaps in the face of such obvious wealth and breeding, his sister knew herself to be beaten.

“Are you not stunned by Jemma’s transformation?” Daisy continued, with a shake of her head.

“I beg your pardon, dear?” Raina turned, leaning over her brother so as to better hear her friend.

“I suppose I am not entirely surprised,” Daisy went on. “But it is somewhat shocking to find that one’s baby was delivered by an aristocrat.”

“What?” By now, Raina was practically in his lap as she craned her neck to hear Daisy’s reply.

“I mean look at her!” Daisy giggled. “The Duchess of Argyll! And who knows how many
subsidiary titles she has. Mother said there are too many to count. And you’ve even visited her very own personal castle! To think, with all that she’d choose social anonymity and a career! I couldn’t be more proud of her.”

His sister suddenly sat back in her chair. Triplett turned to find her face a worrying shade of green.

“Raina?” he whispered urgently. “Raina, my dear, are you quite well?”

Without a word, his sister pushed herself to her feet. The base of the chair scraped loudly against the hard wood floor, drawing the eye of many an audience member as well as the lady in the centre.

Raina swayed one way and then the other.

“My dear,” he hissed, reaching for her hand. “Sit down! You are not at all well!”

She took one menacing step towards the centre of the room. By now, every eye was upon her.

The duchess calmly laid aside her instrument.

At last, Raina toppled. Antoine leapt up to catch her, holding her upright.

“No, no, Mr Triplett!” called a loud, clear voice. “Your sister must be fully reclining if she is to recover.”

He looked up to see Her Grace quickly making her way towards him, snatching up her beaded reticule from her seat as she approached.

The gathered crowd watched the spectacle unfold with some interest.

After fishing in her purse a moment, the duchess produced a tiny vial of smelling salts. She held them under Raina’s nose causing the prone woman to jolt back into consciousness.

Antoine held his sister’s hand tightly, deeply relieved to see her eyes flutter open.

By this time, while some of the guests had retreated to allow them space, others permitted their curiosity to overcome their other instincts. Amongst these onlookers was Mrs Jiaying Fitz, Lady Victoria Hand and The Dowager Marchioness of Montrose.

Raina looked up at her brother and blinked – once, twice. Then she turned her gaze upon the woman leaning over her on her other side.

“Miss Simmons!” Miss Triplett hissed. “Shall I never escape you?”

Where he might ordinarily have found it reassuring to hear his sister’s voice at such a robust volume after a fainting fit, Antoine was utterly mortified.

“Raina!” he cried reprovingly. “The Duchess of Argyll has been nothing but considerate towards you!”

“Duchess, my foot!” Raina cried, vigorously resisting Antoine’s attempts to encourage her to recline. “I admit, I was deceived by your tasteless disguise for an instant, but now I quite see through you!”

She turned to the onlookers. “This woman is an imposter! How can she possibly be a duchess when my brother and I, and Mr Fitz and Mrs Ward also, have seen her riding her horse alone, all over the countryside, lavishing her attention on birthing women and the poor!”

His sister turned her steely eyes upon duchess. “I know your game, Miss Simmons. You are nothing but a common midwife, embarking upon this elaborate charade to steal Mr Fitz’s heart away from me!” She struggled to sit
up. “Well, he shan’t fall for it, Miss Simmons! A man of his status shan’t condescend to marry a trollop like you!”

While the crowd gasped and while his sister continued her humiliating shrieking, the duchess reached across her lap to grasp his hand and get his attention.

“Mr Triplett,” she urged, “your sister is still very unwell. We must get her to her room so that she might rest and recover.”

Antoine nodded his understanding and, moving into a crouch, he grasped hold of and bodily lifted his sister, thankful for her slight build, and carried her out of the music room.

Raina continued to squawk her disapproval all the way along the corridor.

The duchess kindly accompanied them despite the vitriol aimed in her direction.

“Do you know your way to her room, Mr Triplett?”

Antoine nodded. He was more thankful than usual that their Grandmamma, accommodated in the neighbouring apartment, retired early.

Indicating the correct door with only an exhausted nod of his head now that he’d carried his thrashing sister up several flights of stairs, Triplett stood back to allow the duchess access. She stepped into the room, holding the door open for him so that he could carry his complaining, slanderous sister towards the bed. By the time it came to put her down, he found himself dropping her fairly unceremoniously upon her backside.

Raina was taking a deep breath, doubtless to resume spewing bile in the direction of the woman valiantly attempting to see to her care.

Antoine found himself strongly disinclined to hear so much as another syllable. “Be quiet, Raina!” he snapped. “Her Grace has accompanied us to ensure you are well. You simply must cease this invective at once!”

“Her Grace!” shrieked Raina. “Pah! She will never be anything other than Miss Simmons to me!”

“Then you, Miss Triplett,” the duchess interjected calmly as she measured the lady’s pulse, “shall be the only person at Manderston addressing me according to my preference.”

“Oh ho, yes,” Raina replied sarcastically. “Of course, Miss Simmons. I understand you perfectly now. You set your cap at Mr Fitz in the hope of gaining a foothold at Manderston and getting your hands on his money. You ingratiated yourself into poor, trusting Daisy’s affections by the deeply unethical means of delivering her child. And when none of that seemed to work, you impose upon the family at Christmastime with this outlandish scheme of trying to pass yourself off as a duchess! I too have read my fairy tales, Miss Simmons, but in the real world the prince gives up his idle dreams of glass slippers and listens to his mother. Mrs Fitz has intended me for her son since childhood!”

Antoine found this last assertion to be almost the most preposterous of the entire tirade but did not have a chance to say as much before the duchess took to her somewhat surprising rebuttal.

“Oh, calm yourself, Miss Triplett,” said the duchess firmly. “Your pulse is extremely rapid. Allow me to assure you that I have absolutely no designs on Mr Fitz, other than entertaning the hope that he and I shall remain firm friends long into the future. We share a love of science and discovery and learning that is mutually beneficial and invaluable to me in my work. But even if he were to consider me as a prospect for matrimony, he would be wasting his time. As I am sure I have communicated in
no uncertain terms to the young master, I am entirely devoted to my vocation. One’s work as a midwife and one’s commitments as a wife would be utterly incompatible. So you may rest easy, Miss Triplett, that my charade, as you call it, is certainly not being performed for the purposes of catching a husband.”

Antoine did not know whether to be more ashamed for Raina or more concerned for Fitz who was almost certainly hurtling headlong towards the kind of heartbreak with which he himself was all too familiar.

Thankfully, at that instant, in rushed an out-of-breath Mrs Hartley and a small contingent of female servants.

“Mrs Fitz sent us directly,” she gasped, one hand clutching her ample bosom. “What would you have us do, Miss Simm- I mean, Your Grace?”

Raina, who had sat in silence for the longest moment since she’d come to in the music room, without the slightest acknowledgement of Mrs Hartley’s humanity, simply said “Bring tea.”

Mr Triplett gave his sister a disapproving glance. “If it is not too much trouble, of course, Mrs Hartley,” he added.

Deciding that his empathy for Fitz far exceeded his sympathy for his unrepentant sister, and glancing around at how well things seemed to be in hand under the duchess and housekeeper’s combined care, in a mutter he took his leave of Raina and backed silently out of the room.

…

A few floors below, beside the pianoforte, Mrs Fitz was undergoing quite the revelation. With the aid of her daughter and her two eminent friends, it was quickly becoming apparent that the midwife she had hoped to keep away from her son was, in actual fact, the very duchess she had been eager to foist upon him. It was all rather distressing.

To make matters worse, Calvin was still softly snoring, oblivious to all the drama, and her one fallback bride for Leopold, should the need for an heir have become pressing, had proven herself extremely ill-bred.

Lady Victoria, who seemed to be enjoying the commotion a little too much, had assisted Jiaying to a chair and presented her with a glass of brandy supplied by the ever resourceful Lady Montrose.

“But why should your niece feel it necessary to conceal her identity from my children?” Jiaying asked vaguely. “Surely she could relax her guard around her own kind.”

She was sure she didn’t imagine an exasperated roll of Lady Victoria’s eyes. “It wasn’t that she was on her guard, Jiaying. She was trying not to intimidate the women she cares for.”

Mrs Fitz blinked at her blankly.

Victoria sighed. “Melinda and I have devoted ourselves to carrying out the Duke of Argyll’s wishes that his only daughter receive the very best education. He didn’t want her to be merely “accomplished” as our circles tend to put it. He wanted her intellect to be fully developed. He wanted her mind and capabilities rigorously stretched in every direction and every resource placed at her disposal for the purposes of her learning. When Jemma saw an opportunity to put her excellent education into practice, assisting women in childbirth, we were in no position to stand in her way. How could we have prepared her only to then deny her the use of her considerable knowledge and skill. Consequently, Melinda and I have supported her in every choice she has made.”
Lady Montrose coughed expressively.

“I admit,” Lady Victoria continued, “that when it came to the simple wardrobe and the forgoing of her rightful title, I did give a moment’s pause.”

Lady Montrose appeared to have something caught in her throat.

“Very well, Melinda,” Lady Victoria snapped. “I admit, I was initially deeply opposed. But my sister-in-law saw that Jemma was in the right and undertook the provision of her disguise, as I like to think of it. Until I saw that unfortunate young woman’s reaction this evening, I didn’t for a moment expect it could have been so effective!” Victoria turned somewhat accusingly toward Lady Montrose. “She must look an absolute fright in that work garb!”

“Not at all,” Daisy boldly interjected on behalf of her friend. “Her Grace is all kindness and consideration. She comes alongside women of all stations in their time of need and presents herself as the friend every woman only wishes they could have already had – ready and willing to talk about the things that matter, unafraid in the face of the physical challenges of pregnancy and childbirth, unfailingly generous with her time and her energy, devoted to her craft and passionate about providing the best possible medical care and emotional support.”

Daisy didn’t quake in the face of the three distinguished women before her. “Jemma has been a gift from God to me. I love her dearly, and I care very little if she is Miss Simmons or a duchess or the Queen of Sheba.” She turned to Lady Victoria and Lady Montrose. “You simply must be proud of your niece, both of you. She is a wonder. You are an inspiration to me. I have every intention of raising my own daughter in a way that emulates what you and Jemma’s father have done for Jemma.”

“Oh, but Daisy,” her mother interjected, “what will sweet little Jemima do with a head full of knowledge?”

Daisy maintained her ground, unflinchingly meeting her mother’s eye. “Whatever on earth she pleases.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for being so patient with me! I hope you liked this bit! Please let me know if you did!!!
Chapter 23

To Jemma’s consternation, due to a surprisingly light snowfall overnight, the roads were declared clear enough for the party to wend its way to the little parish church for Mr Koenig’s Christmas service. It wasn’t at all that she sought to avoid worship but she did fear discovery from the ordinary folk of the parish.

Donning one of her more simple gowns and covering it in a heavy, dark cloak, Miss Simmons made her apologies to her aunts and peeled off from the party heading for the front of the church, instead slipping unobtrusively into her usual pew beside Philip, Audrey and Beth.

Little Beth crowed with delight to see her and threw her chubby arms about Jemma’s neck pressing sloppy Christmas kisses to her cheeks. With a mischievous delight, Beth drew back the dark fabric of her cloak to show Jemma’s fairy dress beneath.

Audrey smiled tentatively in Jemma’s direction.

“T’m so very sorry, Audrey,” she whispered in response. “I should never have spoken to you so crossly. I was anxiously anticipating the arrival my aunts. Can you forgive me my childish behaviour?”

Audrey’s smile widened. “Of course you are forgiven, Jemma, and I am so pleased to see you cheerful. I imagine your face would look quite different had I been correct in my meddling.”

The two ladies simultaneously cautioned a glance in Mr Fitz’s direction and found his eyes already on them. His countenance brightened considerably at their attention.

When Jemma turned back to Audrey she once more found her friend’s face a mask of concern.

“Please, Audrey,” Jemma sighed. “You need not worry yourself.”

“I am sorry, dear,” she replied, “but do allow me one final question on the subject. Do you specifically recall the conversation in which you explained to Mr Fitz the reasons you intended never to marry?”

Jemma’s brow furrowed as she struggled to remember. She distinctly recalled explaining it to Mr Sitwell in no uncertain terms. She waved her hand dismissively. “I do not happen to remember the details, Audrey, but I am positive we have discussed it.”

“You are quite certain?”

Jemma nodded, though in truth she felt more uncertain than ever. She glanced back up towards Mr Fitz, sitting in state at the front of the church, sandwiched between Daisy with little Jemima and Miss Triplett in the crowded front pews.

It would be unkind of her to assume, simply because her friend was a single man in possession of a good fortune, that he must be in want of a wife. If anything, Mr Fitz had been the one speaking regretfully about the single women constantly and insensitively foisted upon him by his parents.

She shot him a brilliant smile across the cold stone church and he blinked rapidly in response. She
could at least do him the favour of being the first of those single women as sensibly disinterested in
the state of matrimony as he.

What a breath of fresh air Mr Fitz would find her!

After the service and much hearty singing of festive hymns, while the distinguished members of the
congregation perfunctorily greeted Mr Koenig and made their way to their carriages, Jemma took the
opportunity to rush around and greet as many of her families as she could find.

The twelve Nashes crowded around to give her Christmas greetings, Sally bestowing on her a jar of
her homemade strawberry preserve that she seemed to produce from within Matilde’s capacious
blankets.

“What’s come of that ill-tempered soldier, Miss Simmons?” asked little Charlie, curious because
his brothers still taunted him with the moniker Sitwell bestowed. “Did he have in for Father after
all?”

Jemma laughed. “Don’t you worry, Charlie,” she said, bending down to his eye level. “I told that
soldier your father was a fine upstanding man and that the militia had nothing to fear from him.”

The little boy gave her an approving nod before he was dragged bodily into the tangle of limbs that
was his wrestling brothers.

Shauna McLaughlin pressed a bottle of raspberry wine into her hands and kissed her cheek. Little
Cameron was evidently thriving, already a good way toward reaching the height of his brothers even
while still distinctly horizontal.

Donnie Gill, a robust cherry-cheeked boy on each hip, proudly introduced her to his blooming sister,
Mrs Rose Smith, and brother-in-law, Peter, visiting for Christmas from Yorkshire. “You should see
their place, Miss Simmons,” Donnie sighed. “Holling Hill is the dairy farm that haunts my dreams!”

Peter laughed and clapped his brother-in-law heartily on the shoulder. Jemma couldn’t help but
notice he had distinctly blue eyes not unlike Mr Fitz’s.

“How far along are you, Mrs Smith?” Jemma enquired politely, but Callie intervened.

“No, you must guess, Miss Simmons! You always manage to be so accurate!”

Jemma laughed, thinking of Daisy. “You are mistaken, Callie, I have made some dreadfully
misguided estimations!”

“Go on, Miss Simmons,” Rose encouraged her, her husband nodding good-naturedly behind her.
“Have a guess.”

Jemma carefully noted the lady’s size and shape, the way she moved and the way she spoke. “I want
to say seven and a half months, but I can see that you’re of hardy Yorkshire stock. You’re further
along than that, aren’t you?”

Rose nodded, laughing. “Just over eight months. Made the journey a trial, I tell you!”

“You’re game to travel this late, Mrs Smith,” Jemma observed. “Especially after a cart-ride the like of
which you must have endured.”

“I won’t argue with you about the cart-ride,” Rose replied laughing. “But my own mother was as late
as could be birthing me and all my siblings. I’d feel like an imposter if a babe of mine arrived early!”
Jemma wished the Smiths all the very best with the birth and Callie presented her with two jars of apple jelly labelled in a tidy hand – one Scotch Bridget the other Galloway Pippin. “Our late season varieties,” she explained. “They’re lovely on scones or as an accompaniment to meat.”

Concerned that she might have missed all the carriages, Jemma made swiftly for the church doors but Ainsley rushed over with Ewen and Elspeth before she could quite escape. “Miss Simmons, you must take some of my homemade gingerbread,” the lady insisted. “And Harry and I wish you every blessing for the new year.”

Jemma thanked her profusely and, her arms now full of parcels, rushed out into the lightly falling snow, bestowing a rushed kiss upon Audrey, Philip and Beth as she passed them.

Only one carriage of the Manderston party remained, a cunning red-trimmed curricle, and on its perch sat Mr Fitz, breathing warmth onto his gloved hands.

At the sight of her Fitz got to his feet and came at once to meet her, insisting she transfer every last package into his arms.

“I was certain I’d been left behind, Mr Fitz!” she cried. “Thank you for rescuing me.”

He beamed at her, handing her some blankets to wrap around her shoulders and over her legs. “It isn’t far but I could hardly leave you to trudge through the snow, Duchess. Besides, while you battled the blizzard, everything would be dull at Manderston without you.”

“Mmm, dull,” she repeated as she took the blanket he was struggling with and leaned back to wrap it snugly around his shoulders for him.

She sat back to find Fitz watching her, an odd expression on his face, but he said nothing, merely fixing his eyes on the road ahead and flicking the reins to have them on their way.

“I’m not entirely sure that a little bit of dullness would be so terrible after the somewhat theatrical events of Christmas Eve. Besides,” she held out her gloved hand to catch a few of the swirling flakes, “we can hardly call this a blizzard, can we?”

“It is possible that I may have exaggerated a little for dramatic effect,” Fitz admitted.

She laughed. “My father used to advise me never to spoil a good story through lack of imagination.”

He nodded appreciatively. “A man after my own heart.”

Jemma eyed the man beside her appraisingly. “You are quite like my father in some ways, Mr Fitz.”

Before he could reply, she became distracted by the bounty she’d had lavished upon her in church.

“What on earth shall I do with all these gifts?” she mused as Fitz guided Franklin through the loosely packed drifts of snow that had gathered under the now entirely denuded avenue of horse chestnuts leading down to Manderston House. “I’m going to have an odd collection of foodstuffs gathered in my chamber. Do you enjoy apple jelly, Mr Fitz?”

“I do not think I’ve had the pleasure,” he replied.

“Neither have I. Gingerbread, however, you must know.” She unwrapped the package and offered it to him.

Fitz glanced over at her, seemingly amused by her unsuspecting generosity. “Are you certain,
Duchess? You shall find yourself in grave danger of losing all your hard-earned gingerbread,” he warned.

Jemma laughed. “Consider it your reward for coming to my aid.”

“Very well.” He cheerfully tossed a large piece into his mouth.

Before long, Fitz was helping her out of the curricle into the welcoming warmth of the enormous stables. Mack and Lincoln were run off their feet seeing to the horses so the two of them lingered in the warmth, taking up brushes and once more seeing to Franklin themselves.

“You two had better get up to the house,” Mack rumbled when he at last had the leisure to take over. “I don’t want to suffer the wrath of Mrs Fitz for making two key members of the party too late to partake in tea.”

Jemma sighed, looking longingly down at her one comfortable gown as she wrapped her cloak around her for the dash to the house. “I suppose I shall have to go and change for your mother’s table. Shall we?”

The stepped hastily out into the snow, the ice biting through the leather of their shoes.

“I only wish I had your excuse for dressing more comfortably for church rather than less,” he replied as they hurried to the house. “Those pews are a little shallow in the bench for my liking as it is. Add a stiffly pressed neck-cloth and one of Koenig’s longer sermons is tantamount to agony.”

“I’d wager you pay excellent attention then, Mr Fitz,” she replied wryly.

“Trust you, Miss Simmons, to find a virtue in my suffering,” he laughed, opening the door for her to enter.

When they were at last in the warmth of the corridors beneath the house, Fitz suddenly clapped a hand over his mouth.

“What is it, Mr Fitz?” she asked.

“But you are not Miss Simmons!” he replied, his eyes wide. “And in full knowledge of your peerage I’ve gone and led you through the servants entrance again!”

Jemma laughed. “I assure you, Mr Fitz, that is just the way I like it.”

…

Jemma had been uneasy to learn that her second point of business for Christmas Day would be standing together with her aunts and graciously receiving an apology from an allegedly humbled Miss Triplett. According to Daisy, Mrs Fitz (no doubt firmly encouraged by Lady Victoria) had insisted upon it.

Raina, of course, was livid. Mrs Hartley told Jemma and Daisy in hushed tones that she’d heard the young lady bellowing for some minutes at her unyielding brother through the ceiling of the floor below.

Maria sympathised as she helped Jemma into the peacock blue “Russian” gown they had decided upon for Christmas Day. In vivid silk, trimmed with a central vertical line of intricate gold embroidery, this dress was worn over a floaty white lace blouse and was finished in a triumphant hem of gold tassels that weighted the skirt in such a way that it swished appealingly about Jemma’s
ankles as she walked. The evening gown they’d selected – the indisputable pièce de résistance of Victoria’s collection – was carefully hung and awaiting its later debut.

“Perhaps Mrs Fitz produced our proof of nobility for Raina overnight,” Jemma mused at her reflection while Maria stylishly caught up her hair under the matching gold-trimmed bright blue turban. “I suppose in the face of all those glaring family trees and the castle, Miss Triplett has no choice but to acknowledge her mistake.”

“Mmmm,” Maria replied through a mouth full of hair pins.

“Though I cannot say I look forward to seeing her groveling before us,” Jemma went on. “I’d vastly prefer to pretend that nothing at all has happened and let her get on with throwing underhanded barbs at me. In truth, I’ve always found her quite good fun.”

Maria took the last pin from between her lips and hid it under the folds of the turban. “I suppose Mrs Fitz feels that, as the host, it is part of her duty to ensure all slights are swiftly attended to. It would be shocking for your aunts to return to Bath and let it be known that they’d been publicly insulted in her house.”

Jemma sighed heavily. “I suppose. But is it any wonder, Maria, that I prefer being known as Miss Simmons?”

Maria laughed. “Life must be hard with a pair of ragtag aristocrats standing upon your rights, I suppose.”

“Exactly!” cried Jemma with feeling before she caught a glimpse of Maria’s sardonic expression. “No, you are right, Maria. I cannot complain. Who’s to say whether I’d be living my chosen existence had I not been born to such privilege.”

With a curt nod, her maid eloquently communicated her agreement.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Maria,” said Jemma earnestly. “What would you be doing if all the world were at your feet?”

…

Triplett stood behind his sister and tried hard not to roll his eyes at the pathetic excuse for an apology she was performing for her hostess and the esteemed guests she’d offended the previous evening.

It would have to do. Wild horses could not drag so much as a skerrick of genuine repentance out of the girl. The best he could hope was that Raina would at least be satisfied with the insults she’d already hurled and not continue to add to them as the holiday went on. So consumed was he was by both his mission and his own fluttering heart, he couldn’t muster up much more in the way of energy to dwell on it.

His attempts to talk to Fitz the previous evening had been unsuccessful. According to Daisy, by the time Triplett had made it back to the music room, he’d announced that he would retire early in order to conserve his strength for the following day. Triplett assumed that the loss of the duchess’ company probably played no small part in his decision.

However, the journey back down stairs had not at all been wasted. Daisy had enquired as to whether he might like to come with her and peek in on a sleeping Jemima. He had squandered no time in heartily accepting her invitation.

She looked back at him with a wistful expression. “I know she was no more than an idea to him, but
Grantham never showed even a fraction of the enthusiasm for his own child that you’ve shown for her in a single day, Antoine.”

“Oh, but Daisy,” he replied sincerely. “If only Ward could have seen her! No man could behold a child as beautiful as Jemima and not be entirely in love.”

She shook her head, her eyes downcast. “I cannot be sure he would have agreed to see her at all. But even then, he could never have loved her as you say. Grantham was incapable of loving anyone but himself.”

Triplett reached for her hand in sympathy. “I am truly sorry, Daisy, for all that you have had to suffer.”

Daisy smiled sadly back. “Thank you, Antoine,” she whispered, letting her hand slip from his and turning to go.

It took him a moment to remember to follow after her.

Daisy winced as the nursery door creaked loudly at her touch. Inside, seated by the fire, talking in hushed tones were Daisy’s companion, Miss Morse, and a man Triplett had known almost as long as he’d known Fitz.

“Hunter! What are you doing here?” he asked.

Lance shot to his feet. “I was just keeping Miss Morse company. Your Jemima’s such a good sleeper, Daisy, she needed some help staying awake herself! What about you, Triplett? You’re the last person I expected to find popping in to the nursery!”

Triplett was thankful that it took quite a bit for his blush to be evident. He tiptoed over to the bassinet and gazed in at the dark-haired sleeping beauty.

“Daisy invited me to come and see little Jemima as she slept,” he whispered. “And seeing as this baby already has me wrapped around her exquisitely tiny little finger, I was powerless to refuse.”

Daisy laughed prettily behind him and Triplett wondered how he’d ever escape unscathed now that he was so entirely besotted with both mother and child.

Suddenly she was beside him, leaning over the side of the bassinet, her arm pressed against his in the confined space.

“She is lovely, isn’t she?” Daisy murmured.

“Not that I am the least bit surprised, knowing her mother,” Triplett agreed, wondering whence he had unearthed the courage.

Daisy turned her face to him, a coy smile playing at the corner of her mouth. “Thank you, sir,” she said warmly, “on behalf of my daughter and myself.”

Triplett inclined his head in acknowledgement.

Daisy leant down and placed a tender kiss on the little girl’s brow and then turned back to Hunter and Miss Morse.

“Now, are you absolutely certain about tonight, Daisy?” Miss Morse asked doubtfully.

Daisy nodded vigorously. “Of course, Barbara! You know you are more than welcome at
Manderston but I’d be frightened you’d spend the whole holiday hiding away in here. I know you’d rather be with your family and so you simply must go. You have entirely spoiled me by staying so long and insisting I join in all the festivities. And to have to endure Lance’s company too!” Daisy winked. “You must be nearly desperate to get away.”

Miss Morse smiled fondly at Hunter. “Mr Hunter is not such terribly bad company,” she replied, her eyes not straying from his beaming face. “In fact, he has very kindly offered to drive me home.”

“Oh, has he now?” asked Daisy, turning her twinkling gaze upon Hunter also.

Lance shrugged. “Hasn’t snowed all day. Sky’s clear. Nice night for a drive if you ask me.”

“Bit chilly perhaps?” observed Daisy.

“We’ll rug up warm,” Hunter replied. “Miss Morse has a good woollen cloak and I’ll throw some blankets in the gig.”

“Mmm hmm,” Daisy nodded, turning her back to the pair of them to hide her laugh. Triplett turned away from the bassinet just in time to catch her gleeful expression. It hit him with all the potency of one of Cupid’s arrows.

…

Once the apology was over and Miss Triplett pursued which ever course took her to the opposite end of each room the two young women were forced to share, Jemma’s day vastly improved.

She had hoped to find a chance to discuss Maria’s revelation with her aunts but it seemed circumstances – in the form of one tall, pale gentleman with eyes of piercing green and one more compact, darker gentleman with eyes of chocolate brown – were conspiring against her.

In the morning, due to Miss Morse’s departure late the previous evening, Daisy brought Jemima down to the drawing room where all the guests had gathered to exchange gifts. The bright yellow room was bedecked in festive greenery, a towering Christmas Tree, festooned with glittering baubles, overseeing the assembly. Beneath its boughs was a small mountain of gifts. The air was heavy with the spicy scent of mulled wine and the enormous Yule log burned merrily in the hearth. Noting Jemima fussing in her mother’s arms, Jemma led Daisy to an armchair near the blaze so that she might feed in comfort.

As the gift-giving seemed to have commenced in earnest, Jemma took her opportunity to present Daisy with her gift first. It took her a moment to locate the correct package in the darkness beneath the lowest boughs of the tree and in the process she brushed fingers with another, similarly hunting through the pile. Looking up she found herself falling into the deep blue eyes of Mr Fitz whose sudden smile and proximity to a twinkling candle set his features alight like an ornament.

“Ah, Miss Sim- Your Grace,” he began, recovering his composure admirably after his near mistake. “I am extremely glad to find you here. I have a little gift for you should I ever manage to locate it.”

Jemma laughed as she uncovered Daisy’s parcel and extricated herself from the tangled pine. “There is something for you adrift in this veritable sea also, Mr Fitz, though I’m sure that, if we are patient, our gifts shall be unearthed eventually.”

“It is all very well for you to advise restraint,” he replied, getting to his feet beside her and thoughtfully plucking an errant pine needle from her turban. “But I am terribly impatient to give you my gift, Duchess, and I shall not be able to cease scrabbling around on the rug until I have found it.”
“Very well, Mr Fitz,” she laughed. “You carry on unhindered. In the meantime, I have a gift for your sister that I am eager to bestow.”

Making her way back to Daisy, Jemma knelt beside the arm chair and held out her gift.

“As your arms are otherwise occupied,” said Jemma, “would you like me to open it for you?”

“I think you shall have to, Jemma,” Daisy laughed, watching Jemima feeding ravenously. “This little one shall brook no interruption.”

“Nor should she,” replied Jemma fondly, undoing the ribbon and removing the gold fabric in which she had wrapped the velvet jewellery box.

Daisy gave her friend a wary look. “Oh, Jemma, I hope you have not been too extravagant.”

Jemma smiled, opening the jaws of the jewellery box so that Daisy could see inside. The lady gave a gratifying little gasp as the light from the fire lit the deep purple jewels from within. Jemma handed Daisy the card to read in her one free hand as she unclasped the necklace and stood to fasten it around Daisy’s unadorned throat.

My dearest Daisy,

First, a caveat: In giving you jewels, I do not for a moment mean to give you the impression I think of you as a woman of fashion concerned primarily with outward attractiveness. Of course, you will always be the most handsome woman in any room you should enter, but your true strength and beauty reside within.

These amethysts were my mother’s and, though I never knew her, her legacy has determined my path. You have overcome a great deal, Daisy, and yet retained your compassion and spirit. You strike me as having a regal bearing, a resilience and enduring hopefulness that cannot be easily crushed. Your daughter will learn wonderful things from you, Daisy, not least to trust in the Saviour whom the purple of these stones also represents. Pleased as man with man to dwell, Jesus our Immanuel.

I wish so many wonderful things for you from His hand, Daisy, and I hope that I might be blessed to be near you and see you happy.

Your loving friend,

Jemma

Fitz watched from across the room in elated silence as his sister read from Jemma’s card and wept tears of joy. He had to fight to hold back tears of his own as the duchess, with whom he’d shared friendly banter only moments before, stooped to clasp the sparkling necklace at the nape of Daisy’s neck. She then knelt once more at the nursing mother’s feet, reaching to squeeze Daisy’s free hand and then raised herself up on her knees to press a little kiss to the brow of his sleeping niece. She presented Daisy and the babe with a doll the detailed magnificence of which he’d never seen.

Before he’d grown aware of any movement, Triplett was by his side, insisting that the two of them converse with some urgency but Fitz could barely tear his eyes away from the scene before him.

“Look, Triplett,” he urged, over the top of whatever his friend was saying. “Can you see? Look at Daisy and how blessed she has been by the Duchess of Argyll. She has changed both our lives forever.”
Whether or not Triplett agreed, Fitz was not to learn – something about the scene he’d indicated had silenced the other man entirely. It took him some effort to gain his friend’s attention in order to present him with his new hunting rifle. Fitz had had Mack help him order it according to the unique specifications Triplett had painstakingly enumerated ad nauseum over the dinner table in Shropshire. For a moment he thought Antoine might embrace him.

In return, Fitz was given a heavy parcel which, upon opening, revealed all Comte de Buffon’s celebrated nine volumes of his *Histoire naturelle des oiseaux*. On the card, Triplett had written: *For use in your dressing gown from the serenity of your own conservatory*. For a moment Fitz thought he might embrace Antoine.

Noticing the safe distance the two gentleman stood from the duchess, Raina soon appeared bearing gifts and inserted herself between them.

Trying not to stare over at Daisy and Jemma, Fitz found himself watching as Triplett unwrapped Matthew Henry’s *A Method For Prayer with Scripture Expressions* about which he was genuinely delighted.

“You take instruction exceedingly well, sister,” he joked, kissing her cheek warmly and dashing off to find her gift beneath the tree.

In her brother’s absence, with a coquettish flutter of her eyelids, Raina presented Fitz with his gift also. He accepted it with a nod of thanks, finding contained within the expert wrapping a silky burgundy cravat. He tried to disguise his recoil, associating the colour entirely with his father and too much claret and finding it not at all compatible with his own taste.

“Thank you, Raina,” Fitz said. “That is most thoughtful of you.”

“I believe it will match your complexion, Mr Fitz,” she replied – a claim he found highly doubtful. “And I’m sure you shall look exceedingly well. Will you wear it this evening to dinner?”

Fitz stammered in his rush to find an excuse. At last he thought to blame the help. “Alas, my valet is quite particular, Miss Triplett. He has already laid out my clothes for the evening’s festivities and shall not be dissuaded from his choice.”

He was thankful he’d gathered up Raina’s gift from under the tree together with Antoine’s. Daisy had advised him in the purchase of a stylish little brooch which he had obediently snapped up without giving it a second thought but Raina’s reaction would have been more appropriate to a ritual coronation. She practically sobbed with gratitude for some minutes before he managed to change the subject. Even that proved tiresome, for finding a thread back to the valet topic of earlier, Raina was preparing to school him in the art of managing his manservant when Daisy unexpectedly joined them.

Her hand was pressed to the jewels at her throat, her eyes still misty with emotion.

“Brother!” she sighed. “Did you see this incredibly generous gift from Jemma? The new winter cloak I’ve had made for her quite pales in comparison, but she insists on being delighted by it.” She shook her head, laughing. “After all, it is such a trial to learn at short-notice that your midwife friend is a member of the aristocracy, is it not?”

Fitz nodded but Daisy was in full swing. This was enough for Raina, she grasped her brother’s arm, muttered some excuse and marched him off, very clearly against his will.

“I shall caution you now, Leo,” his sister continued, “receiving this lovely thing has quite paved the
way to me throwing off my mourning garb. The black has been a nice change but it is only right to celebrate on the night of our dear Saviour’s birth, is it not?”

Despite his obligatory nod, Fitz had entirely stopped paying attention. His notice had once more been entirely arrested by the duchess. In the armchair where Daisy had sat feeding Jemima only moments before, Her Grace now sat, tenderly holding the infant upright and, though he couldn’t make out the words, he could see that she was singing softly to her.

“Daisy,” he whispered, shaking himself from his reverie and tugging gently on his sister’s arm. “Do you suppose that you could come and take Jemima in a moment so that I might be able to sit by Her Grace and give her my gift without distraction?”

His sister smiled at him indulgently. “Surely you cannot be referring to your niece as a distraction, Leo,” she said feigning shock. “But alright.”

“Thank you,” he whispered over his shoulder as he made his approach.

In his hands he held a long, thin, ornately carved wooden box, tied with a decorative gold silk ribbon. He sank into the armchair beside her. “I don’t suppose you have the inclination to accept yet another gift, do you, Duchess?” he asked.

She patted Jemima gently on the back and shot him a little smile. “I suppose I might,” she replied. “So long as you are equally willing to receive.”

“I’m sure I could be persuaded,” he said.

“Then you shall have to accept your gift first,” Jemma insisted. “And I apologise, Mr Fitz, but you shall have to fetch it from the foot of my chair yourself.”

“That sounds perfectly reasonable,” said he, reaching down to find two large parcels and one smaller, thinner one, all tied together with a deep green bow. “Is this all for me?” he enquired, straightening up.

She smiled enigmatically. “It is all for you, Mr Fitz,” she replied. “Though I admit to hoping you might occasionally let me share the contents.”

It thrilled him to imagine her choosing gifts for him that also appealed to her own interests.

“What’s mine is yours, Your Grace,” he replied, a foretaste of the offer he planned to make her later that evening. But when he opened the parcels it all seemed far too good to possibly be true.

In the card that accompanied the microscope, her impeccably labelled hand-made slides and Antonie van Leeuwenhoek’s bound correspondence with the Royal Society, she had written in her perfect hand:

Dear Mr Fitz,

Think of this as an investment of sorts into the scholarly partnership that I hope you and I shall soon embark upon. Let us continue to ask our questions of the world together and study our various disciplines side by side – one another’s second pair of eyes. To that end, I supply a microscope to aid our discovery.

The slides I have prepared for you are not precisely relevant to either of our main areas of interest but should be fascinating for first subjects of study under the lens – a turquoise damselfly Ischnura senegalensis, a common honey bee Apis mellifera, and a black-headed cardinal beetle Pyrochroa
I look forward to studying the intricacies of creation alongside you, my dear friend. May we spur one another on in service of our Lord, creatures to wonder and be in awe but also created in His image to create.

Merry Christmas.

Jemma

In truth, by the time his eyes reached the bottom of the card, Fitz had almost forgotten to breathe. He looked up to find Jemma watching him with such tentative hopefulness that he never knew how he would find the words to thank her.

As it happened, in that moment, his sister appeared as requested to free Jemma’s hands by taking Jemima.

“What is that that you’ve given Leo, Jemma?” Daisy asked, carefully picking up one of her meticulously constructed slides and holding it to the light.

“She has given me a microscope, Daisy,” he breathed. “And I can barely believe my eyes.”

“You like it then, Mr Fitz?” Jemma asked uncertainly. “You were silent for some minutes. I could not tell.”

“I believe speechlessness is a universal expression of awe is it not, Duchess? You have simply stunned me with your thoughtfulness and generosity. I could not… I still cannot quite find the words to convey my gratitude.”

She suddenly beamed at him. “No, Mr Fitz, there is no need for more words. Those few phrases will certainly suffice.”

Daisy reached down to take Jemima, and Jemma, after pressing a last little kiss to her downy scalp, allowed her mother to take her. Daisy winked surreptitiously at Fitz and walked away.

“Now, Miss Simmons,” Fitz began. “Please allow me to give you my gift.”

She smiled shyly. “Very well, Mr Fitz. You are most kind.”

Sidling closer beside her, so that their knees almost touched, Fitz took up the dark wooden box from where he’d stowed it beside him and held it out to her. She took it from him reverently, her gaze flicking from the gift, up to meet his eyes and back again.

He watched as she ever so slowly drew the loose end of the gold ribbon, and pulled it free, resting the scrap of silk in her lap where it perfectly matched the gleaming trim of her gown.

The moment she opened the box, the firelight caught the gleam of mother of pearl. Fully tipping back the hinged lid, encased in navy velvet, she saw a slim, elegant gold cylinder, decorated with an intricate mother of pearl mosaic.

She looked up at him in awe, drawing the object from its velvet-lined bed. “Mr Fitz, it’s a telescope!” she breathed, extending it from its collapsed state to its full length of about a foot and a half.

“It is,” he replied. “Read the card, Your Grace. And forgive me for neglecting your rightful title.”

Looking back down into the box, she drew out the slim card and he held his breath, saying the words
he’d agonised over in the quiet of his mind as she read.

Miss Simmons,

You are a person who can do whatever you set your mind to achieve. I know this with certainty because when you and I first became acquainted, you determined to educate me against my will about the art of childbirth. On that night, if you had told me I would later assist you in delivering my own sister’s child, I never would have believed you. You have lit a new fire of understanding in me and I shall be forever grateful for your passion and your patience.

We have talked about your hopes for the further education of women and we have rejoiced together over the successes of women such as Jane Marcet and Caroline Herschel. I fully expect to one day read your name, Miss Simmons, among the great pioneers of scientific discovery. Perhaps not for finding a new constellation, but if it is, now you shall have to attribute the provision of your technical equipment to your friend, Mr Leopold Fitz.

I am utterly in awe of you, Miss Simmons. Never have I found myself more inspired by anyone.

May you continue to work away at every project with all your heart as working for the Lord, since it is the Lord Christ you are serving and he himself will be your reward.

Leo Fitz

Just as he’d watched Daisy weep with gratitude as she received her necklace from Jemma, the duchess now wept with gratitude herself, clutching his card and the retracted telescope to her breast.

“Mr Fitz,” she said quietly, attempting to stem the flow of tears with her free hand pressed to one cheek and then the other, “I am blessed to have a valued circle of men and women who believe in me and my abilities, but I do not think that any of them believe in me quite as you do – you who understands the great horizon of things I yearn to know and how far my passion to learn extends. You are the very best friend I could ever hope to have.”

Fitz smiled and heard his own voice thick with emotion. “Then I have no further ambition,” he said, and handed her his handkerchief.

Chapter End Notes

DUDES! That was over six thousand words and I am still nowhere near where I planned to be up to by the end of this chapter! At this rate I’ll never get through this plot – I keep adding 1000-word-long new ideas in here, there and everywhere! This is the longest Christmas Special anyone has ever endured!

Anyway, I hope you’ve had fun reading this and, take heart, I’m already 1000 words into ch 24! Love to hear what you think - your comments are seriously the most awesome thing about this!!!
OK, I'm not sure if I'm allowed to announce it, I don't want to steal any thunder BUT A VERY EXCITING THING HAS HAPPENED TO A READER OF THIS FIC. Representative characters, named by this reader, have been introduced in this chapter in celebration of an event we thought might be a week or so away. Anyway, I'm shutting up now until I have the go ahead to light fireworks and open a tab at the bar!!!
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

At last! A chapter! I think part of my problem is that they keep getting longer and longer. This one is out of control! Aaaaanyway...

Welcome to the world, Baby Popsicle86! Our pal had QUITE the birth experience. Jemma would be so proud and completely powerless to assist you so YAY MODERN MEDICINE! There’ll be more of Popsicle86’s inspired Yorkshire family to come!

And Happy Birthday for Wednesday to a reader who apparently really likes this story!!! It’s lovely to have you reading and I hope you have a super fabulous day!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After watching their niece in some consternation over the broad shoulders of their attentive admirers, Lady Victoria and Lady Montrose finally introduced the gentlemen to one another and shooed them off in search of some tea.

“Well, Melinda, as much as I hate to admit it, you were absolutely correct,” Victoria declared. “She is her mother’s daughter! And how long did it take us to make your sister realise my brother was in love with her?”

Melinda sighed. “At least a year.”

“Well, I’m not at all sure that the young master has a year in him. I rather think Mr Fitz is in danger of making her an offer this very night, do you not agree?”

“I agree entirely.”

“Then how shall we proceed? Set the house on fire, bundle her into the barouche and make our escape? Or must conversation be the order of the day?”

Melinda shrugged.

“Oh, don’t leave it to me to make all the decisions, Montrose! We’ll both have to tolerate her moping and misery when she realises she’s gone and shattered the poor wretch’s heart.”

“Would that be such a terrible thing?” Melinda muttered. “It’s hardly as though she’d move home. We can always lay any tear-stained letters to one side.”

“Ahh, I quite understand,” Victoria nodded. “You mean this to be another of your famous life lessons. Resilience. Fortitude. Strength of Character.” She looked over to where the young pair sat, heads bowed over their gifts. “Oh, look at them, oohing and ahhing over scopes of varying size and purpose. Honestly, Melinda, they’d most likely bore any other possible candidates to tears!”

“Then let her arrive at that conclusion herself. She will.” Melinda delivered her judgment with all the finality of a gavel.

Victoria nodded her approval. “Very well, Montrose, I shall not interfere. However, I would like to
propose a wager.”

“Oh, yes?”

“That jade comb of yours and an extravagant luncheon at the Savoy says we’ll be celebrating with
them next Christmas as husband and wife.”

Melinda eyed the pair appraisingly. “Summer Solstice.”

“How very pagan of you, Montrose. And so uncharacteristically optimistic.”

“I know when a thing is real, Victoria. Did I or did I not accurately predict her parents’ engagement
despite Charlotte swearing black and blue that she’d never succumb to matrimony?”

Victoria sighed. “You did. Though allow for the possibility that despite your excellent record, one
day you shall have to be proven wrong about something.” She flicked open her fan and waved it
lazily back and forth between them. "But let us say you do win, what shall you require of me for
your prize?"

The Dowager Marchioness leveled her friend with a flat glare. "A month of blessed silence."

Her words faded into a mutter as the two ladies were joined by the diminutive but no less imposing
figure of their hostess. Victoria seemed to feel a need to draw herself up to full height.

“Lady Victoria, Lady Montrose,” Mrs Fitz gushed. “I do hope you are both enjoying yourselves.”

“Mmm,” replied the Lady Montrose mysteriously.

Victoria couldn’t help enjoying the glint of panic in Mrs Fitz’s eyes.

“Oh, very much,” she added, after letting the silence stretch on just a moment or two too long.

Mrs Fitz clasped a relieved hand to her bosom and looked pointedly in the direction of her son and
their niece, taking up her cup and saucer.

“The Duchess of Argyll seems to be very content.”

“Yes,” Victoria nodded. “Apparently, she and your son intend to go into business together.”

Having just taken a sip of her tea, it took all of Mrs Fitz’s years of training not to spit it straight back
out again.

“In a manner of speaking,” Melinda added and though Mrs Fitz was clearly hanging on her every
word in the hope of more details, the Dowager Marchioness seemed disinclined to disclose any
more.

“Your family has an extremely… progressive attitude, has it not?” Mrs Fitz observed somewhat
shrilly.

“Would we describe ourselves as progressive, Melinda?” Victoria enquired, for the simple pleasure
of hearing her friend’s maddeningly monosyllabic answer. She didn’t mind nearly so much when
Melinda maddened other people.

Melinda raised her game accordingly, responding with only the slightest of disapproving grimaces.

Victoria let Jiaying stew a little while before she said, “We certainly like to make the most of the
freedom our privileged position allows, if that is what you were implying, Mrs Fitz.” She let just a hint of offence slip into her tone.

Jiaying immediately embarked upon an apology of epic proportions, but was cut-off mid-stream by the return of Mr Garner and Mr Olsen bearing tea. The hostess looked stricken that she could not complete her groveling. Victoria decided at last to put the poor woman out of her misery.

“Do not be anxious about your son, Jiaying. He is certainly not the one proposing a professional relationship. We are hopeful our niece might be persuaded to come around to his way of thinking.”

“In time,” added Melinda ominously.

“Really, Mrs Fitz, it is almost genetic,” Victoria laughed. “Remind me to tell you the story if we should find ourselves with the leisure.”

…

Triplett had one last gift to bestow and the pressing matter of his news to report to Fitz. Seeing as his friend was deep in conversation over microscope slides with the subject of his intelligence, he instead approached Daisy and Jemima where they were seated on a sofa by the window, the early afternoon light illuminating their dark features.

Daisy’s eyes lit up as she saw him approaching, so much so that he cast a quick glance over his shoulder to see if such a smile could really be intended for him.

“Antoine!” she cried as he drew near. “You are just in time to receive your gift from Jemima.” She leaned towards him conspiratorially and whispered, “I helped her to choose it.”

Triplett laughed as he lowered himself onto the seat beside her and accepted the parcel she held out.

He unwrapped it eagerly and found himself holding a beautiful leather-bound edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. “Thank you, Daisy. This is awfully kind.”

“I know you are fond of Shelley,” she said. “I hope Wordsworth and Coleridge are equally to your taste.”

Triplett was already thumbing through the book in earnest.

“I came across a poem of Wordsworth’s in *The Gentleman’s Magazine* that touched me deeply,” he murmured as he rifled through the volume. “I shall be thrilled if it is included.”

“Well, if you should find it, you must read it to us. Jemima shows a promising sensitivity, though perhaps she is not yet particularly discerning.”

Triplett laughed then suddenly stopped to study a page.

“Yes!” he cried, eagerly scanning the open book. “Here it is!”

“Well, sir,” Daisy replied after a moment had passed, disturbing his silent reading. “Do not keep us in suspense. If Jemima has chosen a pleasing gift, she must have confirmation.”

The gentleman kept his eyes trained on the pages in his lap, recalling at once all of the reasons he had been so moved and finding himself thinking twice about reading it aloud to Daisy Ward of all people. “It is a poem he wrote for his childhood playmate-”

“Like you and I, Antoine!” Daisy interrupted.
“Well, yes, in a way, Daisy… but Wordsworth went on to marry Mary.”

“Oh,” said Daisy quietly. “I see.”

He was silent a moment longer before enquiring, “Would you still like me to read it?”

“Very much,” Daisy replied, settling the little girl upright in her lap so that she faced him. “And, of course, Jemima simply insists upon it. You know how she can be when she doesn’t have her way.”

Triplett chuckled, turning as far towards them as the sofa allowed and taking in the serene little face gazing up at him. “Far be it from me to deny mother or daughter!”

And then, taking a deep breath to sustain him through what would, in essence, be a thinly-veiled confession of exactly what was in his heart, he began to read:

_She was a Phantom of delight_

_When first she gleamed upon my sight;

A lovely Apparition, sent

To be a moment's ornament;

Her eyes as stars of Twilight fair;

Like Twilight's, too, her dusky hair;

But all things else about her drawn

From May-time and the cheerful Dawn;

A dancing Shape, an Image gay,

To haunt, to startle, and way-lay.

I saw her upon nearer view,

A Spirit, yet a Woman too!

Her household motions light and free,

And steps of virgin-liberty;

A countenance in which did meet

Sweet records, promises as sweet;

A Creature not too bright or good

For human nature's daily food;

For transient sorrows, simple wiles,

Praise, blame, love, kisses, tears, and smiles.

And now I see with eye serene
The very pulse of the machine;
A Being breathing thoughtful breath,
A Traveller between life and death;
The reason firm, the temperate will,
Endurance, foresight, strength, and skill;
A perfect Woman, nobly planned,
To warn, to comfort, and command;
And yet a Spirit still, and bright
With something of angelic light.

“Oh, how lovely,” Daisy breathed. “I am sure I perceive why you were moved by it, Mr Triplett. Sometimes even the most beautifully constructed love poetry leaves me cold. Try though I might, I cannot recognise the subject as a real flesh-and-blood woman. But this…”

“He knows her,” Antoine continued quietly where Daisy had trailed off, lifting his dark eyes to find hers. “He once loved her with such fervent idealisation that perhaps it even verged on idolatry, but as he comes now to pen this, he knows her. She is not, after all, a creature out of his experience or reach. She partakes of food like him and feels and wills like him – she is real. Yet his knowledge of her, his realisation of her mortality, does nothing to shatter his adoration of her. She is all the more alive to him, more vibrant to him, more vital. She is all the more perfect for her imperfections. He no longer pines for her, he simply loves her.”

Daisy watched him a moment, unblinking. Triplett wanted to believe that he wasn’t imagining the flush of colour in her cheeks or the quickened pace of her breathing.

Her sudden twist away from him was initially startling but in a moment she turned back, holding out to him an envelope, yellowed with age.

“A little something from me,” she said. “I’m terribly embarrassed but I thought that where Jemima’s gift was lofty and edifying, this might at least prove entertaining especially in light of your choice of poem.”

Antoine reached into the envelope and slid out a sheaf of papers covered on both sides in a childish scrawl and painstakingly, though clumsily, illustrated.

The first page was filled with stark black, if amateurish, calligraphy, punctuated by generous splodges of ink.

“I was in such trouble from Mrs Hartley for getting into her inkwell,” Daisy recalled, giggling. “I spilled it all over my pinafore and broke several nibs for my pains.”

Antoine would have laughed along has his heart not been thumping fit to burst out of his chest. Young Daisy had risked interrupting her regular supply of pudding and purloined contraband ink to write:

Mr and Mrs Calvin Fitz
together with
Mr and Mrs Fabien Triplett

invite

Mr and Mrs Leopold Fitz

to the wedding of

Daisy

and

Antoine

Saturday 3rd June, 1814

Triplett looked straight past the immaturity of the handwriting and the splotches of ink and the spelling mistakes and fixated upon the date.

“Daisy,” he breathed. “That is less than six months from today!”

“Yes!” she laughed. “And I checked on Leo’s calendar – the second of June next year will even fall on a Saturday. But do not fear the tasks that lie ahead of us, Antoine. Look at the following pages. Seven-year-old Daisy has the event and our entire future meticulously planned!”

He held his breath as he turned the page to find detailed annotated diagrams of what each of them would wear, what flowers would be included in the bride’s bouquet, who would play the part of best man (“Leopold wearing blue” was what Daisy had specified) and what they would feast on at the wedding breakfast (“Passionfruits,” she had inscribed wistfully, “for I have only ever read of them in books and they sound unspeakably romantic”).

Antoine looked up to find himself gazing into deep coffee-coloured eyes that sparkled with mirth and something else he couldn’t quite identify.

“I never knew you entertained the notion of taking me as your husband,” he said, working hard to keep his tone light.

Daisy leaned a little closer. “Oh, I was always in love with you, Antoine,” she whispered, “but it was too precious to tell anyone. I couldn’t stand the thought of you teasing me about it.”

He took her hand and gripped it tightly. “I would never have teased you, Daisy. I couldn’t have.”

Daisy’s dark eyes searched his.

“Do you know,” she whispered. “I only accepted Grantham because I finally resigned myself to the fact that you would never look at me the way he did.” She paused a moment, taking her hand from his and returning to affectionately stroking Jemima’s little head. “I suppose I had to learn more explicitly than most that to be assessed like an appealing bit of horse flesh does not a good marriage make.”

Antoine could not speak. He could barely even breathe. He absent-mindedly turned over the page he was holding.

Daisy leaned forward to comment. “Of course we were to live at your estate in Shropshire, but Leo was to visit us every second month with his future wife, whoever I might have imagined her to be.”

She pointed to a drawing of a stick figure sitting up in a crude bed. “And, as my husband, you were
to bring me tea first thing every morning.”

Triplett so wanted to enter the life messily transcribed on the yellow pages in his hands that he was almost thankful when Fitz approached, Jemma having been summoned away by her aunts.

“Poor Antoine,” Daisy was saying. “I was just showing him the evidence of my appalling childhood crush.”

“That’s right,” Fitz chuckled. “I was to be your best man, Triplett. And I was under strict instructions to wear blue if my memory serves me correctly.”

“Well, it is your colour,” Daisy retorted.

The arrival of Fitz seemed to help Triplett regain his footing.

“Daisy,” he said, “you must allow me to give you my gift. But please don’t expect anything nearly so grand as an invitation to your own wedding.”

She laughed and accepted it gratefully, holding the parcel in front of a fascinated little Jemima who watched enraptured as she folded back the wrapping.

“Oh, Antoine!” Daisy gasped. “This is one of your own pieces, is it not?”

In her grasp she held a hand-tooled wooden frame of ebony. Into the wood, Triplett had carved an intricate design with a woodland daisy as the central motif.

“Lift up the card,” he said, and watched with his heart in his mouth as she removed the white paper from within the recess of the frame and revealed the drawing beneath.

Daisy’s hand flew to her mouth at the sight of it.

“Fitz, look! It is Jemima and I! The perfect likeness!”

She turned to Antoine. “When on earth could you have drawn this beautiful thing?” she asked incredulously.

“I managed a quick sketch of Jemima that first day I arrived while we sat together in the library.” Triplett fiddled with his cuffs. “I suppose later I must have conjured you from memory.”

The appreciation in Daisy’s expression far exceeded his expectations and he had spent no small amount of time anticipating the moment he could bestow his gift upon her. Her features were etched into his consciousness long before he’d started devoting hours late into every night as a teenager, straining his eyes by candlelight to get the shading of her hair or the curve of her lower lip precisely right. He had filled enough folios to take up a whole shelf in his bedchamber in Shropshire but had given up his art entirely the moment he’d heard of her engagement to Grantham Ward. That day he believed he would never draw again, but something about recent events had brought on a sudden revival of interest.

“I suppose the ladies shall all be retiring to dress for dinner soon,” Fitz commented, watching the duchess from across the room.

“I suppose you are right,” Daisy sighed.

“How many hours shall you require to don your finery, Triplett?” the young master enquired of his friend.
Triplett rubbed a hand over his closely cropped hair. “Not nearly as long as it shall take me to tame my mane.”

“Time for billiards then?”

Triplett saw an opportunity to warn Fitz of his imminent heart-break but Daisy fixed her brother with a look that he couldn’t help but be intrigued by.

“Oh, but Leo,” she said, “I had hoped that Antoine might assist me in putting Jemima down for her rest. You must agree, he does seem to have quite a way with her.”

Something about Daisy’s tone pulled Fitz’s gaze away from the duchess. Triplett watched his friend search her face and then turn his curious gaze upon himself. The look Fitz gave him spoke of joy and hope tinged with a significant amount of warning.

“I would never deny you your assistant, Daisy,” Fitz replied, at last quitting his scrutiny of Triplett to cast a glance towards the Sousas, curled into one another on a brocade loveseat. “I can always bother Daniel for a game if I get desperate. Even those two must eventually be parted by the demands of the lady’s toilette.”

But Triplett was beyond caring how Fitz filled his time just now. Beside him Daisy smiled and seemed to want him. There was no room in his bursting heart for anything else.

…

Jemma had regretfully but obediently left her place by Mr Fitz’s side and slotted herself onto the empty couch cushion between Aunt Melinda and Aunt Victoria.

“If I am here to be warned off Mr Fitz again, you need not concern yourselves,” Jemma began. “He and I were simply-

“Whatever you think you were simply doing with Mr Fitz is no concern of ours, Jemma,” Melinda interrupted and Jemma knew her well enough to tell that her tone, though firm, was not unkind. “You alone must manage your feelings and the consequences of his. Victoria and I trust you to see things clearly.”


“And now you must allow us to give you your gift,” said Victoria.

Jemma looked from aunt to aunt in shock. “But, Aunt Victoria, the two of you irrevocably banned the giving of gifts between us! You told me when I was twenty that I was to consider myself free of the obligation to purchase books for you that you had no intention of ever reading and that I was to consider myself free of the obligation to pretend to enjoy those frilly trinkets and hunting knives you two used to buy for me!”

“Quite,” agreed Melinda. “But this is something out of the ordinary.” She handed Jemma a tiny parcel.

Jemma gazed from aunt to aunt once more as she accepted it, before tearing into the wrapping. Within a black velvet box, Jemma found a long, fine, silver chain and from it hung the most breathtakingly beautiful pendant she had ever seen. It was a silver cross with tiny pavé-set turquoise stones of varying shades, each meticulously placed one-by-one and nestled securely into little sterling settings.
Speechless, she held the chain up high and allowed the pendant to dangle in the light.

“It was your mother’s,” Melinda whispered.

“A gift to her from your father,” Victoria added.

Jemma handed the necklace to Victoria and turned her back so that her aunt might fasten it for her.

Now fully facing Melinda, Jemma took both her hands in her own. “This is such a beautiful memento of my parents,” she whispered. “Thank you.”

Melinda gestured to the pendant now hanging low against Jemma’s bosom.

“Beautiful though it is,” she said quietly, “my sister never displayed that cross. She always wore it on that long, slender chain, tucked into her gown or hidden under her fichu.”

Jemma took it up to gaze at it a moment longer then reluctantly tucked the beautiful ornament inside her own gown. “Then I shall do the same.”

“Charlotte treasured it because she believed in the resurrection, Jemma,” Melinda continued, brushing away a rare tear.

The young woman nodded seriously. “One day I shall meet her,” she said. She sat back in her seat and took up Victoria’s hand, “and I shall see my father again. When our bodies are made perfect and where there shall be no more sadness or crying or mourning or pain.”

Melinda nodded. “We give it to you now because, meanwhile, while we dwell in this earthly tent, and while so many families grieve the loss of mothers and children, we are so proud of the work that you do, and we know that Charlotte would be proud of you also.”

“I know that sometimes I seem disapproving, Jemma,” continued Victoria. “But watching you channeling your grief into action, not only assisting labouring mothers but studying and working and striving to improve their plight in the future – you are an inspiration. You truly are. Anything we might do to assist you, we shall do. Do not hesitate to ask.”

At this, Jemma sat up straighter. “Well,” she said, “there is one thing you might do. It concerns the employment of Maria.”

…

“And they agreed?” Maria gasped, when Jemma went up ostensibly to dress for dinner but really to relay her wonderful news.

“Without hesitation!” Jemma replied. “They immediately conceded that, seeing as you have such considerable experience in delivering babies, you should absolutely be freed from your domestic duties and taken into my own employ!” She held out her hand. “Would you be content to consider yourself a partner in my fledgling midwifery practice?”

Maria grasped her mistress’ outstretched hand firmly and shook it in the manner she had seen assumed by many a pair of gentlemen.

Jemma found it quite thrilling.

“Your Grac-!”

Jemma held up a stern finger. “Oh, no, Maria. There shall be no more of that. You are my partner
now, not my servant. You shall have to address me as Jemma. If you absolutely must give me a title while you settle into it, Miss Simmons is your only available option – you’d terrify my birthing mothers coming out with a “Your Grace” in the middle of a contraction!”

“I suppose you are right, Je-, Miss Simmons,” Maria valiantly attempted.

Jemma sighed.

Maria glanced out the window at the overcast sky to determine the height of the sun. “Well, we must get you dressed, I suppose. I am looking forward to seeing this gown on you!”

Her new partner beamed. “I must admit, I am rather impatient to see it myself!”

She allowed Maria to begin helping her out of her day dress.

“And what shall you do this evening while the rest of us are cavorting below?” Jemma enquired.

“I was hoping Mrs Ward might allow me to sit with Jemima so that she might be able to be part of the festivities this evening,” Maria said as she pulled the gown over Jemma’s head. “Do you think she would allow it?”

When she at last emerged from the swathes of fabric, Jemma sprung forward to plant a kiss on Maria’s cheek. “You are a darling, Maria!” she cried. “Has anyone ever told you that?”

Fitz lolled about in the drawing room trying to concentrate on the book he had smuggled down with him. His man had dressed him in record time and now he had to find a way to spend the interminable minutes until the duchess descended for dinner.

Daniel Sousa, as it turned out, had not been available to play billiards. Fitz was unsure as to what sort of arrangement the new husband and wife had made with their staff, but it seemed that the two of them retired to dress together and somehow found a way to sequester themselves in their bed chamber for the lion’s share of the afternoon. He hoped he and any future bride might pursue a similar pattern, perhaps even as soon as next Christmas, but he tried not to allow his imagination to get too far ahead of itself.

He couldn’t fathom what was keeping Triplett. Usually the man was unfailingly punctual for dinner but something had transpired between his friend and his sister that he wasn’t entirely sure how to interpret. He nurtured a private hope that it might lead to wonderful things. Not having been given the opportunity to wear blue and eat passionfruit at their wedding had been the one major disappointment of his adult life.

He nestled back into his chair, closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on the words he would finally have the chance to speak later that evening, but it was not to be. A hoard of men in evening wear clamored into the drawing room simultaneously. Perhaps in his reverie he hadn’t heard the gong.

Triplett was amongst them and his friend made his way across the room to sit beside him, sighing heavily.

“Is everything alright, Triplett?” he asked, lowering his book and sitting up straight.

The other man grinned. “Fitz, I am floating on the clouds,” he replied. “But that is not what I need to talk to you about.”
But there was no use in Triplett saying any more words. On the staircase, just visible through the open double doors of the drawing room, a goddess was descending.

The Duchess of Argyll was a silvery vision, the beautiful sheen of her heavily embroidered silk lamé gown catching the light of every candle and sparkling in reply. It was embellished with rich Brussels lace and swathes of intricately embroidered flowers and shells festooned the hem. The manteau was of silver tissue lined with white satin and it fastened in front with a splendid diamond ornament. Tendrils of her gleaming hair tumbled from a glittering diamond tiara that glowed in the warm light like the halo he firmly believed she was worthy of.

Fitz stared, open mouthed. It was just possible that somewhere in the distance on his left, Triplett was persisting in his futile attempt to impart some significant information, but Fitz’s attention was entirely arrested. Had Her Grace required any additional assistance to pass for a native resident of Olympus, surely this evening’s apparel would prove more than sufficient.

…

Though Fitz did not remotely notice, a few seconds later Triplett too was stunned into silence. No longer in the striking black of mourning, Daisy made her way down the stairs behind her friend, arrayed in regal purple, her gift from Jemma gleaming at her throat. As she slowly took the steps, her hips swaying elegantly with the movement, her eyes found their way to Triplett’s and she smiled. He would never recover.

Gentlemen were rushing forward to offer an arm to the ladies but somehow, as if in a dream, Daisy waited for him, her eyes locked on him in a way that dissuaded any other gentleman from approaching her.

The warmth of her touch permeated her glove with a thrill that reminded him how deeply his happiness was tied to her. Antoine had been here before and knew it to be dangerous ground.

Eventually he found his voice. “I wasn’t sure we would be having the pleasure of your company this evening, Daisy,” he admitted. “I had suspected Jemima might insist upon keeping you for herself.”

“An angel in the form of Jemma’s lady’s maid, Maria, came and offered her assistance,” she replied smiling. “I left my baby sleeping peacefully and I am so very grateful. It has been ever so long since I have danced.”

“Then you must allow me to claim you for as many dances as you can spare,” Triplett urged.

Daisy fanned herself coyly in reply. “You were always my favourite partner, Antoine.”

“Then I wish Christmas dinner already over and done with. I shall be all impatience until then.”

“No,” Daisy shook her head with a little smile. “Sit by me and enjoy yourself, Antoine. There shall be plenty of time for dancing soon enough.”

…

Cook, together with her small army of underlings, had managed a Christmas feast that almost equalled the sheer sumptuousness of the royal court. Trimmed birds of every variety, enormous hams, piping hot dishes of perfectly cooked vegetables and delicate sauces and gravies became the props with which the footmen performed their ostentatious theatre.

Wine flowed freely and the twinkling light of the countless candles sparkled in the impeccably polished glassware and in the gleaming eyes of the merrymakers.
It had not escaped Fitz’s notice that no twist of fate would allow him to part ways with the Duchess, not that he was remotely interested in leaving her side. At every turn his mother or one of her trusted servants seemed to usher the pair of them together such that they had no choice but to be seated side by side at table. Her gift of the microscope aside, no gift could be more dear to him than that of a Christmas dinner tête-à-tête with the woman he loved.

Seemingly as thrilled as he to be reunited after the two or so hours that Fitz had found so unbearable, the Duchess immediately launched into one of those conversations guaranteed to set his mind whirring and his heart pounding. Intellectual and physical stimulation were synonymous where Her Grace was concerned. More than once he had flung himself panting onto his bed after an hour spent in her company as if he had just spent the time fencing or dancing a reel.

"... I attribute it, not to luck, but to the grace of God and my own relative inexperience," she was saying, "but some day, no doubt much sooner than I’d like, I shall once more encounter an infant or a mother in considerable distress and I shall not be able to assist them. I shall need, Mr Fitz, in that moment when it inevitably comes, to feel that I am at least making some progress towards saving lives like theirs in the future."

"Of course," he nodded vigorously. "And this leads us back to our reflections on the medicinal applications of oxygen."

"Precisely," she agreed over the rapidly moving hands of footmen as they skillfully distributed potatoes and poured sauces. "And the utter absence of safe and effective methodology and equipment for its storage and dispersal." She picked up her gleaming silverware and began to eat.

Fitz watched her a moment, taking up his glass and thinking through the challenge of her words. "Am I correct in assuming, Your Grace, that in order to undertake experimentation with medicinal oxygen, the first hurdles to be overcome are those of a more basic and practical nature? You do not so much need a doctor of medicine to perform these prerequisite tasks."

The duchess laid down her cutlery and took up her own glass, raising her voice a little to be heard over the jovial din of conversation. "You are quite right, Mr Fitz. I suspect that a physicist or perhaps an engineer or preferably someone capable of mastery in both these fields could design the apparatus and perfect the technique necessary to produce and administer the gas."

Fitz stroked his chin thoughtfully. "While at university, I did study some of the work of James Watt – an instrument maker who made an enormous difference to the steam engine. He had some very interesting ideas about this sort of thing. He was off to Bristol to work for a new medical research facility-"

"Not the Pneumatic Institution!" the duchess interjected.

"Yes," Fitz chuckled at her fervour. How he adored her passion! "The very place. How did you know?"

She smiled merrily back at him, though he could not tell whether the coincidence, his reaction, or the general cheer of the occasion earned him such a prize. "I have been looking eagerly into their work. They did not get terribly far before the typhoid outbreak forcibly turned the institute into a hospital and their work with gases was abandoned, but the techniques and tools they must have developed would surely be invaluable to my own research."

"Watt is retired, I believe, though his firm continues to thrive. From what I understand, he still works on his inventions." Fitz focused his eyes on the mostly neglected dinner before him and took in a deep breath. "Perhaps you and I could one day go in search of Watt, to see what we could learn from
him? I have some theoretical knowledge of physics that I would dearly love to put to practical use. Perhaps I might at last prove myself useful to you, Your Grace.”

The duchess laughed her musical laugh. “Mr Fitz,” she replied, her eyes twinkling. “Have I not told you enough? You have already more than proved yourself utterly indispensable.”

Towards the end of the Christmas feast, just as the musicians were relocating to facilitate dancing, Triplett’s heart leapt into his throat when Maria appeared at Daisy’s side carrying a squirming and red-faced Jemima.

Daisy’s eyes were pools of sympathy and disappointment as she disentangled her arm from his. He immediately felt the loss of her warmth.

“Oh, Antoine,” she sighed. “Perhaps it is too soon, after all, for dancing.”

But Maria boldly interjected. “Mrs Ward, why not take Jemima into the conservatory and feed her and then I shall return her to the nursery leaving you free to continue celebrating. If I am unable to settle her, I shall return, but at least you shall have one dance.”

Daisy beamed at the slender woman as she took the baby from her arms. “You are a wonder, Maria,” she said. “Were you not in the employ of my beloved Jemma I should most certainly be trying to poach you away.”

Maria smiled. “As it happens, Mrs Ward, thanks to Her Grace, I am not long for domestic service.”

“You have been found to have a higher calling it seems,” Daisy said. “And I could not be happier, for you or for Jemma.”

“Thank you, Ma’am,” Maria replied.

He watched as the women retired to the conservatory then turned to find couples spilling out onto the dance floor in preparation for a reel. Unsurprisingly, one of the first couples taking their place opposite one another were Fitz and the duchess and Triplett was still yet to find his opportunity to warn him. Amidst the giddiness of a dance would never do.

In a corner of the room, somewhat alone and forlorn loitered Raina. His disgraced sister had taken to lurking in shadows and working against her own personality in an attempt not to draw attention to herself. The poor girl was miserable. The least he could do was take the opportunity to cheer her up.

But it seemed that Raina was not to be cheered. Though she agreed to the dance, all her brash over-confidence had melted away and she barely let her gaze deviate from her brother’s face. However, he couldn’t help but notice that when her eyes did stray across the room, they lit upon Jemma with a feverish hatred. He elected not to bring it up in conversation.

Two interminable dances with his cranky sister later, at last Mrs Ward returned to the room, a new peacefulness seeming to infuse her entire form.

Triplett felt torn – should he grab hold of Fitz now that he also must relinquish his partner for the remainder of the evening? Or should he seize hold of the opportunity to dance with Daisy, in case Jemima decreed that their time should be fleeting?

Casting a glance over his shoulder, he watched, helpless, as Fitz and Jemma disappeared into the night air. He shook his head. There was no longer anything Triplett could do for him. For himself,
however…

His eyes once more found Daisy and she smiled sweetly at him as he made his approach. He bowed
down to the ground then, raising himself up, offered the lady his hand. “Gather ye rosebuds while ye
may, Mrs Ward?” he asked mischievously.

“Very well, Mr Triplett,” she agreed, curtseying daintily. “Though it must be said, we are in the
hands of Young Jemima rather than Old Time.”

He nodded as he led her on to the floor. “Then, Daisy, shall we make the most of whatever she sees
fit to allow us?” he asked.

“The very most, Antoine” she replied, with a smile that almost stopped his heart.

…

In the whirl of the dance, with the duchess buoyant on his arm, Fitz couldn’t help but notice her
fanning herself vigorously whenever the movement allowed. The flame of the myriad candles
required for adequate illumination heated the large room like a furnace.

“Shall we step outside a moment?” he called over the noise of the musicians.

“Into the snow?” Jemma asked, her eyes bright.

“Just for a moment,” he urged her. “We can come straight back in if we start to form icicles.”

She nodded eagerly and within moments the two of them danced through the lightly falling snow,
laughing together at their own folly.

Their spinning slowed to a halt and Fitz was left to watch, captivated, as intricately formed
snowflakes drifted onto her flushed skin, melting on contact. The tiny white crystals gathered lightly
among the diamonds in her dark hair and came to rest on her long eyelashes, twinkling there as she
smiled up at him.

Fitz knew the moment had come at last to speak. He drew in a deep breath.

“Cognitively speaking, Duchess, I can fathom the possibility of a man drifting into your orbit as I
have, of becoming one of your admirers, perhaps, and yet somehow resisting your manifold claims
on his heart. I will allow it to be conceivable,” he said. “But in the time since I very first made your
acquaintance, I have been granted, no, blessed with what I imagine, what I hope to be unique access
to your heart, mind and soul. My intellect revolts at the very notion that a man who has been allowed
to know you as I know you – to talk with you about the great and important ideas of the universe, to
see you devotedly practice your craft, to share with you in the blood of gruesome execution and in
the blood of new life – that any man could know you as I have been granted the privilege to know
you, and not fall utterly, Miss Simmons, utterly and hopelessly in love with you.”

Her Grace’s beatific smile faltered, her eyes widening as he continued.

“I have been alive long enough to know with conviction that there is no other woman on God’s earth
that could inspire me, provoke me, excite me and bewitch me as you do and so, though I can have no
confidence that a creature so incomparable as yourself could possibly return my love, I must at least
seize the moment and ask.”

He fell to one knee in the snow at her feet, grasping for her hand.
“I must ask, Miss Simmons, Duchess, if you could ever consider the possibility… Would you perhaps agree…?”

Fitz looked down at the glistening snow a moment, sucking in a shuddering breath, before raising his blue eyes to find hers.

“J-Jemma, I am entirely in love with you. Would you… could you ever… allow me the honour of your hand in marriage?”

The crashing open of the door through which they’d flitted just moments before was the only thing that could have torn Fitz’s eyes away from his beloved in that crucial moment.

Mrs Hartley immediately took in her master’s telltale posture, her hand flying to her mouth. “I am so very, very sorry to interrupt, Mr Fitz,” she whispered, cringingly providing the explanation his expression demanded. “But Donald Gill is at the servants entrance begging for your urgent assistance, Duchess. His sister and her husband are visiting from Yorkshire and though the lady is still at least a month from her expected delivery, her labour keeps seeming to intensify. The poor man’s quite beside himself.”

Fitz turned his gaze back to the woman he desperately hoped was about to agree to become his wife. Her face was pale, her dark eyes fixed on Mrs Hartley rather than himself. Suddenly, she was shivering violently.

At the look on her face, he too began to feel the blistering cold seep into his body, especially where his now sodden breeches met the snow. He clambered to his feet.

“Mrs Hartley,” he managed, despite the chattering of his teeth. “Do you think I might have just one more moment alone with Her Grace?”

The housekeeper nodded earnestly, bowing low but shooting him an encouraging raise of her eyebrows as she disappeared through the door, pulling it shut behind her.

The duchess seemed to have fixed her unseeing eyes on the ground.

“Oh, Mr Fitz,” she whispered. “There is so much I need to say.”

“Tomorrow,” he gulped. “We’ll speak tomorrow.”

The lady nodded, avoiding his eye, and turned to go.

But Fitz could not bring himself to let her leave him so unsatisfied. Grasping her hand he gently held her back.

“Despite my ramblings, Duchess, it is in its essence a simple question.” He knew how his eyes must plead with her. “A single word will suffice.”

The look she gave him did nothing to meet his pressing need.

“A single word could never do my feelings justice, Mr Fitz,” she replied earnestly. “You simply must let me say more.”

“Tomorrow then?”

“Tomorrow.”

And she was gone.
For those interested, here is Jemma's evening dress, which was actually Princess Charlotte's wedding dress but I'm not in the habit of doing things by halves with this fic...

Her pendant from the aunts looks like this:
And if any of you are remotely interested in the history of oxygen therapy, I have been finding it fascinating!  
http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1079621/  

I'm a good 2000 words into the next chapter so maybe if I go back to a reasonable 4,500 words a chapter like I started, you won't have to wait five months for the next instalment. We'll see!  

LOVE to hear what you think of this one, peeps!!! Thank you so much for all the enthusiasm, it's keeping this funny old fic alive!!!  

And thank you thank you thank you to the truly amazing and sunshiney recoveringrabbit who read a first draft of this proposal one hundred years ago and helped me out as I worked out what to do next with it (which obviously will unfold in later chapters). She's got a magnificent new fic in the pipeline - keep an eye out!!!
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

This is the first chapter of this fic that will go some way to garnering points for Team Engineering! YAY! (Unless I completely misread the rules!?) Thanks for your patience peeps, this has been all written bar the birth scene for weeks now! Just couldn’t make myself sit down and write it. Sorry for keeping you all in suspense!!!

The very moment Mr Fitz had launched into his heart-rendingly beautiful and evidently long-planned speech, the bitter cold of the Scottish midwinter had crashed over Jemma like a wave.

To her mind, Mrs Hartley’s interruption could not have been more ideally timed but afterwards, as she rushed through the house to her chamber to change out of her impractical finery, she cursed herself for having failed to see what had been so patently obvious to her aunts, to Philip and Audrey, and most likely every other person but herself.

She pushed her way blindly through her chamber door and, having closed it behind her, fell back against the cool wood, finding her stricken reflection in the glass opposite. Beyond even her own mortification was the pain she now knew she would have to cause her dearest friend. The very thought of refusing him almost broke her heart.

She had begun to struggle with the fastenings of her gown when the door opened again and Maria appeared.

“But the baby!” Jemma protested. “And poor Daisy!”

“Mr Fitz just appeared in the nursery,” Maria explained. “He told me that he would spend the rest of the evening with Jemima and that you would have need of my help.”

Jemma’s hand involuntarily flew to her breast. “So thoughtful,” she whispered to herself. She turned to her companion, keeping her tone as light as she could. “Was he… Did he seem quite well to you, Maria?”

Maria kept her face averted while she was busy gathering work clothes, for which Jemma was extremely grateful.

“I must admit, Mr Fitz did look a little haggard. And it was the strangest thing, Miss Simmons, one knee of his breeches was utterly sodden! He came in ever so quietly, so as not to wake little Jemima, whispered that you were in need of my urgent assistance and then simply leant his forearms on the mantle piece and buried his head. I didn’t like to disturb him after that so I quickly gathered my things and tiptoed out.”

Jemma could imagine her friend’s precise pose and could guess at the state of his mind. Her heart went out to him.

“Do you have reason to be concerned for his health?” Maria enquired mildly as she approached to free her from her dress.
Jemma did not immediately answer.

“Miss Simmons?” Maria repeated.

“Mmm?”

The girl was holding out one of Jemma’s day dresses and by the look on her face, had been doing so for some moments.

“I ran into Mrs Hartley on my way to your chamber. She said Mr Gill is in quite a desperate state,” she added. “You will let me come with you, will you not, Miss Simmons?”

The reminder of the labouring woman at the centre of all this activity as well as the prospect of seeing Maria in action centred Jemma and within minutes the two women were rushing down the stairs into the servants’ hall below, hurling their thick cloaks around them.

Mack reclined in a wooden chair with the newspaper, his enormous feet propped against one side of the stone fireplace. Jemma noticed he was dressed for the weather. At the sight of the two women, he sprang to his feet.

“I sent Mr Gill home to his sister ahead of us,” he said. “An open sleigh is no way for ladies to travel on a night like this. I’ve harnessed the four best horses to the coach and assured him we would be along directly.”

“Thank you, Mack,” replied Jemma gratefully.

“You might want to cover your heads,” he added in his low voice as he led them towards the servants’ entrance. “The snow has just begun falling quite heavily.”

Jemma pulled the hood of her new cloak from Daisy up around her face and was again thankful for her friend’s thoughtfulness. Once bundled into the carriage, the sparkling snowflakes that rested on the dark wool reminded her forcibly of the minutes just past in which she had naively allowed Mr Fitz to spin her laughing into the snow, alone, without anticipating the hurt it would ultimately force her to cause him.

As Mack spurred the horses on and she and Maria surrounded themselves with the blankets he had thoughtfully piled into the carriage for them, she looked up at the house, searching for Fitz’s form in a window.

…

Jemma did not see him, for the nursery light was dim, but Fitz watched with a deep ambivalence as the carriage rumbled away.

He had never before found himself in love enough to propose, so he had little notion of what to expect in this specific set of circumstances. Had she had it in mind to accept him, wouldn’t she have done so without hesitation, right there on the spot?

Fitz had heard from university friends that sometimes the lady had no words, she simply burst into tears of joy, or, far more appealingly, threw herself into her lover’s arms and accepted him with a kiss.

He almost wished he had never heard the latter anecdote. It had occurred to him more than once during the anticipation as a possible and very pleasing outcome of his own venture.
Perhaps it had simply been the sudden presence of Mrs Hartley and the pressing call to duty that had held her still and silent? Perhaps she had been too overwhelmed with delight to speak? Perhaps she could not simply whisper the Yes that would forever cement his happiness because she wanted to accompany that Yes with a pouring out of what was in her heart – a reply of sorts to the pouring out of his?

Or perhaps, and in his sombre solitude he increasingly believed it more likely, she could not pronounce the Yes for which he yearned because what she intended to say, with pity and with explanations and excuses, was, in fact, No.

He could not have guessed at the amount of hours that passed in which he stared into the fireplace vacillating between optimistic conviction and pessimistic desolation but when Daisy returned, beaming, to the nursery and found her brother in place of Maria, he at last twigged to the echo of the grandfather clock some distance down the corridor (it would never do to have a booming clock directly adjacent to the nursery door).

“Have you and Antoine been dancing all this time?” Fitz asked, waiting for the next nine chimes and realising it ceased its clanging after two.

Daisy fluttered her fan coyly. “We danced our two, drank punch a while and made conversation and then, after enough time had gone by and enough wine had been consumed by the general assembly, Antoine proposed we pretend the earlier two dances had never happened and take to the floor afresh!” She stifled a giggle behind her hand at her scandalous behaviour. “I honestly do not believe that anyone noticed, though I suppose we shall find out tomorrow!”

She tiptoed across the rug to look in on little Jemima who slept sweetly on.

Turning back she fixed her curious eyes on Fitz. “What of you, brother? Antoine said you and Jemma disappeared out into the snow and we haven’t seen hide nor hair of either of you since! You must have a story to tell.”

Fitz nodded soberly. “But, Daisy, you have long expressed a preference for stories with happy endings.”

“You cannot be serious, Leo.” His sister stopped short, eyes wide. “Jemma refused you?”

“Not yet,” he sighed. “She received an urgent summons – a guest of the Gills’ had gone into early labour. I had just stammered out the question, Daisy, and there was Mrs Hartley calling her away.”

Daisy went to her brother’s side, drawing him away from the mantelpiece for the first time in hours, and leading him back towards the recently reupholstered sofa. She sat beside him and gently took his hand. “She left you with not so much as a whisper?”

“Believe me when I say I almost begged her,” he laughed bitterly. “But she was not to be drawn. She said that a single word could not suffice, that I must let her say more and that we would speak tomorrow.”

Daisy chewed on her lower lip thoughtfully. “Had I received a proposal this evening,” she began cautiously, “I should have shouted an immediate yes, even if I had found myself being pulled away from the gentleman in question.”

Fitz smiled at what lay beneath her words and then realised it compared rather unfavourably with his own experience.

Daisy saw his face fall and squeezed his hand. “But I am not Jemma, as well you know, Leo. She is
a creature quite beyond my understanding. Just because that is what I would have been compelled to do, it does not mean she would behave the same."

“I don’t suppose that she has ever confided in you at all?” he asked tentatively.

Daisy shook her head. “Not with regard to her feelings for you. Jemma is too wise for that. She knows I could never keep it from you if she told me she loved you.” His sister paused thoughtfully. “She is without a doubt the most independently-minded woman of my acquaintance. I suppose it may be that she had intended to remain single. But surely she must have changed her mind upon meeting you, Leo. How could anyone not love you?”

Fitz shook his head grimly. “I am grateful for your efforts, Daisy, I am, but nothing can be done to alleviate my suffering. I stand poised on a precipice and there I shall remain until the duchess draws me tenderly back to safety in her arms or pushes me, alone, into the abyss. So,” he said, forcibly brightening, “let us instead talk about you. All I know is that you did not receive a proposal this evening, but that, if you had, you should have shouted your acceptance.”

Daisy’s face was once more transformed by an irrepressible gleefulness.

Fitz couldn’t help but smile back. His sister looked happier than she had since the day of her ill-fated wedding.

“I must caution you, Daisy, Antoine has a terrible passion for the mud and the rain,” he warned playfully. “He’s always reciting poetry and I have never once seen him partake of a decent breakfast.”

“Go on!” laughed Daisy. “By all means, provide me with the complete catalogue of his faults!”

“Well, he also reads a ridiculous amount of theology.”

“A grave short-coming indeed!” She suddenly sobered. “These deficiencies of character you perceive in our beloved Mr Triplett serve only to recommend him in light of my recent experience.”

Fitz grasped her hand in earnest. “Daisy, of course Triplett will love you the way you deserve to be loved. He has been dogged and loyal to both of us from infancy and though he has kept silent about it, I believe he has loved you ever since then.”

Daisy nodded, her eyes sparkling. “I believe we have a chance at making one another happy,” she whispered. “But if only I could see you so happy.”

Fitz’s vision immediately filled with Jemma in her silvery gown and then he once more recalled his position on the precipice.

“If only,” he sighed.

…

On arrival, Jemma had learnt that Mrs Smith’s contractions began in earnest on the fateful cart ride back from the morning’s Christmas service. By her reckoning, the lady had been in active labour now for sixteen hours but still seemed calmly disinclined to accept the inevitable, clinging to the four or five weeks she had calculated to remain. Her husband, Peter, as well as her brother and sister-in-law were thankfully far more willing to accept the facts as they perceived them.

Mack had huddled in the stable with the horses for a time to stop himself taking up vital room in the cottage but when it became apparent that there’d yet be some considerable hours to go, Jemma had
asked Donald to go out and send him back to Manderston. Donald himself tried to take responsibility for the ladies’ transport but Mack would have none of it, insisting he would return at daybreak.

So adamant was Rose that she could not in fact be in labour, not for at least three more weeks, that she had unearthed a box of her sister-in-law’s ginger root and was determinedly mixing a batter for parkin. The slim form of the expectant mother’s wrists belied an impressive strength that Jemma felt confident would serve her well in labour. Occasionally, she would stop, leaning on the rough-hewn wooden bench for support, and groan in what she seemed to believe was a subtle fashion through her increasingly intense contractions.

Jemma was, of course, delighted by Rose’s practicality. So often had she encouraged a labouring woman to take up some activity that would absorb her mind and busy her hands, but it was a suggestion rarely taken seriously. She allowed herself to take advantage of Callie’s hospitality, accepting with a smile her hostess’ whispered apology for Donald’s unnecessary panic over his sister’s health.

“You could have stayed and enjoyed your celebrations for another few hours, Miss Simmons, had Donnie not gotten it into his head to fetch you,” she murmured, as she handed Jemma a much-needed cup of hot tea. “What a way to end your Christmas Day!”

Jemma shook her head, remembering with a pang the reprieve Donald’s call had allowed her. “Nonsense, Callie. Though Rose denies it, she may well need our help eventually.” She looked over at Donald watching his sister as she rode through another contraction. “And I think our presence at least makes your husband feel better.”

Callie snorted. “Anyone would think it was Donnie expecting the baby!”

…

Though Fitz embodied exhaustion, he could not seem to find the strength required to halt his body from its ceaseless pacing. He had paced in the nursery until Daisy had felt forced to turn him out. He had paced along the corridors until one of the guests flung open their chamber door and glared at him. Now he paced around the library, once his sanctuary, but now a poor choice of location given that every fibre and filament of the room seemed to whisper to him of Jemma Simmons.

The yawning question was eating away at him and he wondered how he had come to the confidence to make his offer when his insecurity around her acceptance was now so complete.

He slumped into the window seat where he had once knelt at a weeping Jemma’s side and surveyed his estate, transformed as it was by its silvery blanket of snow.

A flicker of movement at the top of the horse chestnut drive drew his eye. He shot to his feet, recognising the family carriage in an instant. They were returned already!

Barely remembering to spare a thought for the sleeping guests, Fitz careened out of the library, sprinting along the interminable corridors as fast as his legs could carry him.

In the shadows of his traitorous imagination, he saw himself out in the snow as the carriage drew up, opening the door to Miss Simmons who flung herself into his arms whispering Yes! A thousand times, yes!

But when he finally escaped the confines of the house and found himself in his shirt sleeves in the bitter cold, the carriage had already been sheltered and there was no Miss Simmons to be seen.

Fitz ran for cover in the stables where he at last located Mack, brushing down the horses and
blanketing them for the night.

He looked frantically around for a sign of his beloved.

“Her Grace?” he asked Mack, knowing he must sound desperate. “Is she returned?”

Mack wore an expression Fitz had come to know well over the years. It somehow combined equal measures of amusement and sympathy and convinced the young master all the more that the groom had the ability to read his mind.

“She remains at the Gills’ for the night,” Mack replied, looking him over knowingly. “You’re up late.”

Taking up a brush, for there was no idleness tolerated in the stables, Fitz went to work.

“There shall be no sleep for me,” he responded melodramatically.

“Alright,” sighed Mack. “What have you done?”

“I offered myself, body and soul, to Her Grace, the Duchess of Argyll,” Fitz replied.

Mack grinned. “Then I must offer my congratulations! No wonder sleep eludes you.”

Fitz shook his head. “I cannot accept your congratulations. Not until Her Grace has accepted me!”

“She left you without an answer?” Mack asked.

“She was called away!” Fitz huffed. “It’s not as though she has refused me. Yet.”

“You believe she will refuse you?”

Fitz leaned his forehead against the horse’s warm neck. “Truthfully, Mack, it hadn’t occurred to me as a possibility until the moment I asked her,” he admitted. “Until the moment I said the words, I was certain she would accept me. Her behaviour towards me has been more genuine, more warm, more affectionate, more candid than the behaviour of any other woman I have ever encountered. She and I are friends and our friendship, as you know, has been refined by the fire of some not inconsiderable trials. I know she values me. I know she trusts me. I know she loves me! But, alas, I do not know if she will accept me.”

Mack stood silently by his side, continuing to run his brush thoughtfully over the horse’s flanks.

“Either way, Mack,” Fitz murmured, “I shall never love another. If she refuses me how shall you tolerate me moping around the estate like a kicked puppy?”

Mack scoffed. “I shall put you to work,” he said flatly. “Miss Simmons is a woman of industry, is she not?”

The young master nodded. “That she is.”

“Then no indolent brooding on your part shall win her over. If she refuses you, you must grieve, of course, and then, if it is true that you will never love another, you must reconcile yourself to a productive single life and pray that God shall continue to cause your paths to cross.”

Fitz looked askance at his friend, his head still resting against the horse’s sweet-smelling mane. “Since when have you been so wise with regard to love?”
Mack sighed, placed his brush on the worn bench behind them and reached into his pocket to draw out a battered watch. He clicked the clasp and opened the silver case to reveal a portrait of an elegant looking woman with dark hair, dark eyes and an enigmatic smile.

“Who is she?” Fitz asked.

“Miss Elena Rodriguez,” Mack replied, his voice soft and reverent. “The woman for whom I continue to live a productive single life and for whom I fervently pray, petitioning God for her health and flourishing. Perhaps one day the Lord might see fit to allow our paths to cross again.”

How Mack managed to make his unrequitedness sound so noble was beyond Fitz’s ken, but somehow he left the stables with equilibrium. He wandered back to his chamber quite dazed but no closer to the possibility of attaining sleep than the moment he had woken to the day’s dawn with all of its exhilarating potential.

He undressed in a stupor, casting his evening clothes haphazardly onto his dresser. Shrugging on his night shirt and once more allowing his mind to dwell on his uncertain fate, he almost resumed his pacing but he knew nothing was to be achieved by it. And as Mack had reminded him, he was seeking to woo an industrious woman. He strode purposefully over to the reading chair he’d long ago had moved into his chamber. Once he’d cleared the cushion of its piles of books, he sunk into it, and though he knew it to be a futile effort, took up whatever volume was to hand and attempted to lose himself in it.

When his eyes at last focused themselves on the text before him, he realised he had taken up his Bible and flopped it open to the closing chapters of The Epistle to the Ephesians.

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.

So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh.

Mr Koenig had carefully and repeatedly instructed his pupils in the Sunday School not to liken the falling open of a bound book of paper to the phenomenon of God speaking specific instruction to Moses out of a bush that burned but yet was not consumed. Fitz now sought to cling to that teaching and not let his mind gallop to the territory it so yearned to explore. Instead, he read the words to himself afresh, forcing himself to heed the challenge entailed therein.

To be a husband was no easy undertaking. A husband was to lay his own life at the feet of his beloved, to put her first in every aspect of their shared existence. But to be called to love this woman, to be joined to her, to put his body, his mind, his energy, his resources entirely at her disposal – this was a quest he longed to be given the chance to embark upon, though it cost him all he owned.

While Maria hovered at a respectful distance from Mrs Smith, now almost certainly entering the second stage of labour, Jemma sat back and observed her new colleague’s approach. She was encouraging without being overbearing, attentive without being suffocating, friendly without being overfamiliar. Jemma found herself increasingly confident that Maria would prove to be an efficient and trustworthy birth attendant.
With the birthing mother’s care in the capable hands of another and the birthing mother herself remaining strictly in denial, Jemma took the opportunity to also observe the interaction between the husbands and wives in the room. She had long admired the healthy partnership she’d discerned between Callie and Donald but now she saw them through the critical eye of a woman looking to justify her decision to refuse a proposal. Was there something cloying about the sweetness of the husband’s affection towards his beloved?

Rose and Peter Smith similarly aroused her suspicions. Though the husband had come alongside his wife to assist in the increasingly slow-going parkin-baking and to surreptitiously offer the support of his own strong body when her strength seemed to waver, Jemma wondered if his attention was actually what his wife desired or if she yearned to be left alone and free to move through her contractions unhindered yet felt prohibited from saying as much.

There was such a symbiotic-seeming attachment between the siblings and their spouses. On one level it was undeniably attractive; each pair had whole-heartedly committed to one another for better or for worse. Yet in Jemma’s addled emotional state, she saw stifling where there was only affection, condescension where there was only reassurance, assumption where there was only attunedness.

At long last, there could be no more pretending. Rose’s baby was insistently making its debut and no strongly-voiced objection of the mother could hold it back.

“I’ll admit, Miss Maria,” she said in one of the dwindling moments of reprieve between contractions, “I was quite determined to be home at Holling Hill before this child arrived.”

Maria smiled indulgently. “Rose, I am almost as surprised as you are. If anyone could have held back the birth of a full-term child by the means of their own sheer bloody-mindedness, I genuinely believe that it would have been you.”

Rose laughed good-naturedly at this until the next contraction claimed all her concentration.

Jemma watched with some interest as Maria encouraged Rose onto all fours and invited Peter to join them on the floor.

“See this place right here, Peter,” Maria said, indicating the centre of the birthing mother’s lower back. “As her contractions continue to grow in intensity, Rose might find some relief in you pressing the flat of your hands just on this spot. Listen to your wife, mind,” she cautioned. “You’ll know by the sounds she makes if you’re helping or hindering.”

Peter looked back at the midwife with a mix of apprehension and resolution. He nodded and attempted to mimic Maria’s stance, the flat of his hands pushing gently against his wife’s sacrum.

There was an immediate change in Rose’s vocalising. There could be little doubt that she was experiencing the promised relief.

When the force of the contraction faded, Rose turned to smile at her husband. “And here I was thinking I had to manage all of this on my own,” she said quietly.

“I was helpful to you then, love?” he asked.

Her body seemed to rise up into the next wave. “Please, Pete,” she pleaded, and her husband was quick to oblige, applying once more the pressure that seemed to so aid his wife as she rode through the waves.

Jemma exchanged a satisfied nod with Maria and began to quietly question Callie and Donald as to how equipped they were to accommodate an unexpected newborn. In the activity of the evening,
neither of them had given it a moment’s thought. Jemma focused her attention on assisting the pair make space for their new niece or nephew and did her best to gather the swaddling cloths and various other bits and pieces the new mother and baby would require.

By the time Donald had shuffled some furniture about in the room where his sister and her family were sleeping, and Jemma and Callie had assembled a satisfactory pile of linens, Rose was thunderous in the final moments of her baby’s crowning. Maria deftly caught the little child and invited Peter to make the announcement to his exhausted wife.

“It’s our Robert, Rosie!” he cried. “Our little Bob! You’ve done it, love! We have a perfect strapping son!”

Strapping was the word for it. The baby, having been gently lowered into Rose’s ready arms, most certainly took after his broad-shouldered father rather than his slender mother.

“We did it, Pete,” the new mother declared generously, just loud enough for Jemma to overhear. “You were by my side all that time. I can’t help but feel that you aided me in pushing him out.”

Peter’s eyes glistened in the firelight as he pressed a proud kiss to his wife’s brow and then to his son’s tiny hand.

“Come and see my son!” he roared tearfully to the hovering family. “My son and my beautiful wife!”

It was some hours before Jemma and Maria had done all they could to aid the recovery of the mother and the settledness of the newly expanded family and by the time those hours had passed, the sun had begun to show itself behind the heavy snow-filled clouds and Mack had returned, drawing the carriage up to the door of the Gill’s small cottage.

“Are you sure you’ll be alright?” Jemma asked Callie as Maria gave some last minute feeding assistance to an exhausted Rose.

Callie nodded. “We’ll be fine. Donnie has always been a wonder with our babes. I think he’s quietly excited to show Pete the ropes.”

“You’ll make sure Rose gets some rest, won’t you? She strikes me as the type to throw herself straight back into action given half the chance.”

The lady’s sister-in-law laughed. “You’ve accurately taken Rose’s measure in only a day!”

“One gets to know a person when one watches them give birth,” Jemma agreed, smiling.

Maria got to her feet and crossed to the door, handing her bag to Mack who took it straight out to the carriage.

“Thank you, Maria,” Callie said, grasping her hand. “You were just the midwife Rose and Peter needed.”


Maria flushed prettily.

Mack came back in to fetch his charges, helping them quickly through the snow and into the carriage, encouraging them to surround themselves with blankets before he drove away.

Where Maria dozed against the window within moments of the carriage lurching away, Jemma
found herself somehow wide awake, alert to the painful task ahead of her. She could not put it off. She must go and discharge her responsibility to the young master immediately upon her return.

…

Jemma knocked quietly on Mr Fitz’s door in the dark corridor.

She heard nothing.

She knocked again, this time slightly more insistent.

Still no response.

At last she turned the handle, pushing the door open and slipped inside, quietly pulling it closed behind her.

“Mr Fitz?” she whispered, just making out his slumbering form on the large bed in the middle of the room. She walked quietly across the lush carpet, parting the brocade curtains a little way so she could see.

She couldn’t help but smile at what the glimpse of pale dawn revealed. Beside the comfortable looking armchair at her elbow (which had clearly been positioned precisely to make the most of the reading light) and on every visible surface teetered towers and towers of books, places marked here and there with poking out letters or bits of torn up newspaper or, in the case of one of his brand new ornithology volumes, a crumpled claret-coloured cravat.

Turning back to the bed, she was struck by the prone figure of Mr Fitz in the early morning light, serene and striking in his repose. He lay flat on his back with one arm thrown above his head, his breathing slow and even, the rise and fall of his chest mesmerising.

Jemma tiptoed to his side and, looking down, found herself admiring the way his long, dark eyelashes pressed against his cheek. His head was tilted a long way back on his pillow, exposing once more the full expanse of throat and clavicle which had so affected her only months before. His ginger-red stubble glowed gold in the sun as did his tumble of soft curls. To her dismay, all the physical evidence suggested she had gained little in the way of equilibrium as a result of her prior exposure.

“Mr Fitz,” she repeated, louder this time, her hand hovering above the curve of his almost bare shoulder.

His eyes opened slowly, taking time to drift into focus. Of course, their piercing blue focused directly onto her, leaning over him in his bed. A lazy smile spread across his face at the sight of her, and she felt her own breathing grow somewhat ragged.

Perhaps this plan to wake him had been even more unwise that she had initially allowed. He was so beautiful in his loose-limbed languor, one hand pushing back his unruly curls, the loose sleeve of his flimsy nightshirt falling back to the elbow and exposing the compelling contour of his wrist and forearm.

“I know that this is very untoward, Mr Fitz,” she stammered from above him, “but I have not yet slept and I could not in good conscience fall into my bed for the rest of the day without having given you my answer.”

Fitz’s somnolent smile grew broader as he gazed up at her and when he spoke his voice was deep and husky with sleep. “You will marry me, Jemma?” he whispered incredulously, his eyes sudden
wells of emotion. “I am dreaming, am I not? I must be. I have been so anxious for your answer.”

Without any warning he wrapped an arm about Jemma’s waist and, to her extreme shock, pulled her down onto the bed beside him. She was stunned into speechlessness as he folded her against him, his limbs warm from slumber. “You have visited me in my dreams so many times before, Jemma,” he whispered into her hair, “but never with such aching verisimilitude! To think that one day – it must be terribly soon if you’ll only agree – you might become my wife!”

He had propped himself up on his elbow so that he gazed fondly down at where she lay stiff in his arms. He reached up to stroke her hair back from her brow, the melting tenderness in his gaze silencing her with its intensity. “I intend to love you so very well, my darling,” he whispered as he lowered his face towards her.

Before Jemma could quite harness her wits to act with any of the strict decisiveness she knew the occasion demanded, Fitz’s gaze flickered from her startled eyes down to her lips.

The soft brush of his mouth over hers weaved a spell, enchanting her into his own dream-like state. Jemma’s eye-lids fluttered closed as her will power began to fade, but then she remembered precisely what it was she had come to tell him.

“Mr Fitz!” she cried, pushing herself off the mattress and away from him.

Fitz’s eyes snapped open at her words and he stared at her in some horror, one hand flying to his mouth.

He sat bolt upright, wrenching his hands away from her, swinging his legs onto the floor. His loose night shirt had gathered itself around his upper legs, exposing his well-formed thighs and calves.

Just the sight of his bare feet against the rug seemed so indecently intimate but, of course, that paled in comparison to what had just passed between them.

Jemma backed quickly away from the bed, forcing herself to avert her gaze. It took more than one attempt to find her voice. “P-perhaps you would like to dress, Mr Fitz? Mrs Hartley has kindly agreed to serve us some tea in the conservatory.”

Fitz looked down, wide-eyed as if seeing himself for the first time. His shocked silence communicated volumes.

Jemma fled.

Mr Fitz appeared in the conservatory only minutes later, still fumbling with his neck cloth, his features tortured.

“Duchess,” he croaked, his tone strangled. “You cannot imagine my relief in finding you here. I fully anticipated that you would have abandoned your plan to give me a civil answer and publically accused me of lechery. It would be deserved. I have had to apologise for my indecent behaviour once before and you ever so kindly forgave me then. I cannot imagine you could possibly be willing to forgive me for–”

“Mr Fitz,” Jemma interjected. “Once more, it is I who must apologise. It was very wrong of me to intrude into your personal space…”

“What do I care about personal space where you are concerned?” he replied forcefully. “If I have not yet managed to make myself clear to you, it is the dearest wish of my heart to open my every private space to you, my love, to give myself over to you entirely – body and soul.”
Jemma’s whole person began to feel pleasantly strange at his words. Once more, she couldn’t bring herself to interrupt.

“I should never have attempted…” he glanced quickly from left to right, checking that they were entirely alone in the conservatory. He stepped closer, his voice dropping to a hoarse whisper. “I should never have reached for you. I should never have tried to draw you into my arms just now. It is inexcusable, but overnight as I awaited your return, I confess, Jemma, I loosened my grip on my self-control. I allowed myself to imagine that you would accept me – that you would agree to become my wife. It is no justification for my behaviour. It was very wrong of me but…” he took one step closer, lowering his head so that his blue eyes gazed intently into hers. “Oh, Jemma, should you take me as your husband, how I shall luxuriate in your closeness.”

As though hypnotised, Jemma again felt herself drawn toward him. Her hand drifted to her bosom where the hammering of her heart was palpable. How could he have such power over her? All her consciousness was required for the simple act of drawing breath, quick and shallow, and the blue of his eyes seemed to make up the only horizon she could see. But as she felt herself lean closer, desperate to once more feel the sweetness of his soft lips on hers, her fingers felt through the fabric of her fichu the silver pendant of her mother’s that hung between her breasts. She dug into the neckline of her gown and yanked it out, unwittingly inviting Mr Fitz’s heated gaze.

Clinging to the unyielding metal and stone, Jemma found the strength she needed. She stepped right away from him once more and took her seat at the little table by the fire, taking up the teapot to pour. She kept her eyes fixed on her task but sensed him moving hesitantly to take the seat safely opposite.

"Mr Fitz,” she began, handing him his cup and saucer with trembling hands. “I am...”

She drank deeply of her own cup a moment, trying to gather her addled wits. Feeling the invigorating draft doing its work, she steeled herself to say what must be said.

“I am deeply honoured by your proposal, Mr Fitz. If ever I had thought to marry, I imagine that to be your wife would be the very height of domestic felicity. But you shall not be entirely surprised, sir, to know that I have long made my choice.”

His blue eyes, watching her intently over the rim of his tea cup, now dropped to the table between them.

“These women I serve are my life, Mr Fitz, and I have devoted myself to their aid. To step back from my calling for anything, even for the great honour of becoming the mistress of Manderston, is not something I can even consider.”

“Jemma!” Fitz stammered, frantically reaching for her hand across the table. “I would never ask you to step back from your calling! Of course, you must go on exactly as you are now. And I shall lay myself and all of my resources at your feet to ensure you continue to provide your mothers with the very best of care!”

Jemma shook her head sadly, her fingers evading his grasp. “I have been granted unique insight into many a marriage, Mr Fitz. As you know, I am daily inside the many and varied homes that constitute our parish. If you knew what marriage looks like in practice as I do, Mr Fitz, you would know that what you describe is impossible. You would consume me, sir, and if I agreed to marry you, I would be giving you the right. I see my work as my calling, Mr Fitz. That right was never mine to give.”

“Consume you?” he echoed.
“What else would become of all the energy and the passion you have so admired me expending on the women and infants I serve? Loving you would channel all of that energy and passion away from the ones who need me most.”

“The very idea of my consuming you appears to me abhorrently violent. I do not think of love the way you do. But I cannot argue with you, Duchess,” Fitz replied, his voice breaking with emotion. “Nor do I want to press upon you an unwanted suit. You must pursue your calling, of course you must. I will not allow myself to deprive the women of Berwickshire of their devoted guardian and advocate.”

He pushed his chair back to stand but Jemma made a grab for his hand as it lingered on the tablecloth.

“Your friendship, Mr Fitz, is one I value over all else,” she whispered, her upturned eyes welling with hot tears. “Please assure me that, though I cannot marry you, you will not withdraw your friendship. Never before have I found someone with whom I am able to share so much.”

Fitz’s eyes roved across her face a moment, his own tears spilling over. A muscle jumped in his tightly clenched jaw as he contemplated her plea.

At last he nodded – once, twice – then got to his feet, swiping at his wet cheeks with the back of his hand.

After a deep bow that somehow seemed to convey grief and love and hopefulness and despair, Mr Fitz turned on his heel and stalked from the room.

The moment his footsteps ceased echoing through the cavernous hall to the conservatory, Jemma dropped her face into her hands and wept.

Chapter End Notes

Well, there you have it. Fret not, gentle shippers. Allow me to simply say that this story is FAR from over.

LOVE (as always) to hear what you think!!!
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

It's been four years but the master and the midwife are back!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“What a to-do!” Victoria crowed across her apartment as her sister-in-law entered. “Are you not excessively diverted, Montrose? Come and have some tea and tell me the latest from downstairs.”

“What could there possibly be to tell that you have not already ascertained by your own devious means?” Melinda muttered, lowering herself into the seat opposite her companion and accepting the freshly poured cup from her hands.

Victoria sighed. “Then simply allow me to repeat my intelligence and correct me where I might be in error?”

Melinda silently nodded her resigned acquiescence over the rim of her teacup.

“That dreadful Miss Triplett has seized her aged Grandmamma and left for London in high dudgeon!” Victoria leaned forward, eagerly awaiting further titbits of information.

Her companion was unresponsive.

“Mrs Ward packs to follow her, accompanied by her little daughter, Miss Morse and the doting Mr Triplett. Mr Fitz, who has not shown his face since Christmas Day, lurks somewhere above in an inertia brought on by heartbreak.”

“Not quite,” Melinda offered, though she required to be drawn for more detail.

“Not quite what?” her sister-in-law huffed.

“Mr Fitz has been persuaded to go to London also.”

“By whom?” Lady Victoria enquired, intrigued.

“It seems Lance Hunter has been the main instigator. He plans to accompany the young master.”

“Then of all the bright young people who feasted with us a mere day or so ago, it is only our Jemma who remains behind in Berwickshire?”

“So it would seem, though she too has quit Manderston and returned to the cottage.”

Victoria was silent a moment, looking determinedly out of the window.

“Dare I inquire as to what it is that you are planning now?” Melinda asked, her tone resigned.

“I was thinking it might be about time for us to away, would you not agree, Montrose?” Victoria asked innocently.
“You suggest that we return to Bath?”

“Oh, no, no, no,” Victoria replied. “Bath would never do at this time of year.”

Melinda nodded wearily. “Then I shall inform Fury of our desire to have the London house prepared?”

“Do you know, Melinda, you have quite read my mind.”

“And I suppose Jemma shall be summoned to join us forthwith?”

“In time, my dear.” Victoria smiled triumphantly. “All in good time.”

Despite her intense exhaustion after the night she spent alert delivering Rose Smith’s baby boy, Jemma had barely slept all week. She had lain awake in her bed in the dark of the cottage poring over her every memory of Mr Fitz, cataloguing her guilt in every interaction. How could she have been so callous? And to ignore Audrey’s well-meaning insistence as well! She had broken the heart of the man whom she most wished to bless in all of the world and she could never, ever forgive herself.

And yet beneath that persuasion lay an even deeper conviction. She was meant to work, to serve, to use the many resources with which she’d been graciously endowed for the benefit of others. She felt certain that his desires and hers were simply incompatible.

That did not absolve her of her inappropriate pursuit of intimacy with Mr Fitz. It was wrong of her to enter into such a close and affectionate relationship with him. Yet even as she chastised herself, she couldn’t have imagined any other way for their relationship to have unfolded. As Mr Fitz himself had said as he proposed, they had survived such intensity of experience together – a murder, a birth and almost everything along the spectrum between. How could they ever have remained coolly aloof under such circumstances?

It came down to the inescapable fact that Audrey was right. She should simply have been sure to have communicated to Mr Fitz in no uncertain terms what she had been forced to tell Mr Sitwell and the many other suitors prior to him before his suit arose. She mused upon the potential of a sign about her neck that declared “Committed Spinster.”

On a foggy morning she traipsed to the Coulson residence to tell Audrey as much and to humbly seek her forgiveness. Despite her own depressed mood, it became quickly apparent that she had wandered into a scene of great jubilation gathered as she was into the fervent, joyful embrace of first Audrey, then Philip and then little Beth, for whom, of course, she was required to drop to one knee so that pudgy arms could be thrown about her neck.

“What is happening here?” she cried as Audrey and Philip danced about the kitchen, laughing with glee.

“Oh, Jemma, you darling creature!” Audrey released herself from Philip’s arms and seized her friend’s hands in hers. “Do you recall Robert Gonzales mentioning some provision for Beth and for Mrs Ward and her daughter?”
“I do.” She nodded. “What of it?”

“We can no longer joke about our poverty, Miss Simmons,” Philip supplied. “I have just heard from my lawyer. Mr Gonzales bequeathed to us as Beth’s guardians far more money than I have ever managed to earn in my lifetime!”

Jemma beamed at them. “And there has never been a family more deserving!” she cried. “This is wonderful!”

“Even after gifting a third of the amount to Mrs Ward,” Audrey added, “we shall never be in want.”

“I am thrilled to hear it!” Jemma replied. “You who are always so unfailingly generous to others. This is a fitting reward.”

Philip hoisted little Beth up into his arms. “Of course we shall save the lion’s share of the money for Miss Beth’s education,” he said. “Perhaps you might take after Jemma, my love, and be the parish’s favourite lady.”

Jemma thought of what it was she had come to tell them and her face fell. “I am far from a favourite in at least one quarter I can think of,” she said quietly.

Sensing the familiar signs of Jemma’s need to confide in his wife, Philip took up Beth’s winter woollies and began to rug her up warmly. “We’ll leave the ladies to talk shall we, Bethie, and go and find ourselves an adventure?”

Beth threw up her chubby hands in delight. “’Vencha!” she echoed. “Hooray!”

When the kitchen grew quiet Audrey took a long look at her friend. “I can see we’ll require tea and perhaps even the judicious application of some gingerbread.”

At the mere thought of the gingerbread, Jemma recalled sharing her Christmas gift with Mr Fitz on their way home from church just a few days prior. The tears she’d been working so hard to hold back spilled over at last under her friend’s sympathetic gaze.

Audrey came gently to her side, speaking softly to her and rubbing her back. “Oh, my dear, tell me what has happened?”

“You were right, Audrey,” Jemma sobbed. “He was in love with me. And I hadn’t told him I never meant to marry. Can you ever forgive me?”

“Jemma!” her friend soothed. “There is no need to seek my forgiveness. I am just sorry for you. What you must have had to endure!”

She shrugged her shoulders, sniffing into her handkerchief. “Oh, but what have I had to endure? Where is the suffering in being a woman beloved of a truly wonderful man? It is he that suffers and to think, I could have prevented it.”

“My dear Jemma,” Audrey soothed. “Do not fret. You have refused suitors before and all of them continue to thrive. Mr Fitz will recover in time.”

“You didn’t see him, Audrey,” she replied, shaking her head forlornly. “You didn’t see how deeply I wounded him. He who has only ever been kind to me, who has only desired to love me.”

Her friend was silent a moment before she replied. “My dear Jemma,” she said at last. “You do know, do you not, that no one would think any less of you if you were to accept his proposal. In
fact,” she went on, “I dare say it would give a good many of us a great deal of pleasure to see you the wife of such a man. And perhaps you should consider the possibility that Mr Fitz was never intended to be your friend.”

“By Providence, you mean?” Jemma asked.

Audrey nodded. “What if he has been sent to you as Philip was sent to me?”

This image did give Jemma a moment’s pause.

Audrey allowed herself a little laugh. “Oh, my dear, it doesn’t seem so long ago that you were suggesting it might do a man good to have his heart broken while he remained young. I believe you said it might help to breed compassion.”

“Please do not remind me of the things I said then,” said Jemma, her head in her hands. “I was callous and utterly unfeeling.”

“And yet now you seem to feel so much,” her friend observed.

…

How Lance had talked him into travelling to London was beyond Fitz’s understanding but now he sat slumped in his armchair as his man bustled officiously around him, gathering various and sundry items into his capacious luggage.

It occurred to the young master that he had never had the leisure to observe this process before, consumed as he usually was with dining and visits and whatever business his parents saw fit to foist upon him. But as news of his rejection travelled around the estate, even his parents seemed to be extending him an unforeseen measure of compassion and he had not been required to appear below.

Despite his melancholy, he had managed to light upon a project. He would allow himself to be dragged to London. He would endure whatever entertainment and diversion the Triplets attempted to distract him with in the evenings, but in the daytime he would sequester himself at the London Library and pursue answers to the questions he had discussed with Jemma only days before over Christmas dinner when his heart had been light and his future had sparkled on the near horizon.

Now that the gloom had descended he could at least attempt to channel the constant whirring of his mind away from what might have been and toward a more fruitful endeavour. Mack’s image of the productive single life had been the one boon of the previous days. It gave him a means of conceiving of himself without Jemma by his side. And if his work led to further benefit for her, perhaps it could at least afford him a topic to cling to in her presence that would prevent him from pleading for her to reconsider.

He had scrawled a list of the titles he could think of and find reference to in his notes that he would need further access to: Polish alchemist, philosopher and physician Michael Sendivogius' De Lapide Philosophorum Tractatus duodecim e naturae fonte et manuali experientia deprompti, Swedish pharmacist Carl Wilhelm Scheele's Treatise on Air and Fire, English clergyman Joseph Priestly's Experiments and Observations on Different Kinds of Air and, of course, French chemist Antoine Laurent Lavoisier's Sur la combustion en général. Perhaps once he had a hypothesis to work on, Andrew Garner could be persuaded to allow his former pupil access to his old stomping grounds.
The thought of the laboratories of Cambridge brought to mind the gifts that Jemma had given him and the card she had written that had so convinced him of the welcome with which she would receive his suit. He was still uncertain as to how he had erred so egregiously in his interpretation of her every look, her every touch, her every word. He took up her card again from where it rested atop the boxes on the floor at his side and read her words more carefully, this time seeking, not proof of her love, but proof that she somehow might not have detected his regard. She had written of their scholarly partnership and of studying side-by-side. She called him her dear friend and referred to them as one another’s second pair of eyes. He supposed he could see that to a woman who had already eschewed the very notion of marriage there might have been nothing she need fear was untoward in her words.

Wanting to see the very best in her, he took each treasured memory and held it up to the cold light of day. Perhaps as their acquaintance progressed, what he’d perceived as evidence of his requitedness was simply evidence of her growing respect for him. He could hardly hold her responsible for misleading him when he had been so eager to see promise where there may have been only pleasantry. And there was the matter of their well-matched intellects to consider. Not many, male or female, could converse with him at his heightened level of understanding. Not many seemed to want to try. That they found in one another an academic peer was certain to create an additional level of excitement. What for Jemma may simply have been fellow-feeling, for him had quickly became infatuation. Having absolved her of all transgression he then mournfully turned his attention upon himself.

It ultimately did not matter a jot what she felt or conveyed. He was so entirely in love that without her the earth seemed to him a sterile promontory. How was he to go on? Lolling about on the chaise in his bedroom did not seem the most promising beginning to his productive single life. Instructing his man that he’d need his riding attire immediately, he began plotting the most surreptitious path out of the house and into the stables.

Once dressed, rugged up, and in the saddle, having been duly cautioned by Mack to be careful of Franklin on the ice, Fitz set off determinedly up the denuded horse-chestnut drive. However, it wasn’t long after leaving the confines of the avenue before his purposeful canter descended into directionless meandering. As it happened he had no particular destination in mind – he hadn’t quite thought that far ahead. Though single it seemed he would remain, purposefulness would perhaps have to come in time.

Over the mist of his breath in the cold, his eyes were drawn to the heavily laden branches above him, bowing beneath the weight of the weather. He found that the thickly falling snow perfectly suited his mood. A robin lighted on a twig just ahead of him, ever so slightly warming the expanse of white with the flash of red at his breast. In lieu of any other specific plan, Fitz followed along behind him as he hopped and twittered from tree to tree above his head.

Just how long this went on, Fitz was entirely unaware. He had fallen into a reverie – sensations and images coming to him unbidden – recalling the night he and Jemma had spent in one another’s arms in the library at Manderston. From there he had flitted in his memory, much like the staccato movement of the robin, to his very first meeting Miss Simmons outside her cottage and thence to dancing with her alone in the music room as Daisy played. Smiling through his icy tears he relived almost their every encounter, crashing at last out into the snow with her on Christmas Day and back into his chilly reality.

Fitz surveyed his surroundings, casting about for a landmark by which to best judge his location and distance from home. As he trotted on, he became aware of a raucous laughter and a high-pitched squeal on the hill that had arisen to his left. A sled rocketed toward him down the slope bearing two figures, rugged up beyond recognition, one bundle of person rather large and the other very tiny.
Landing abruptly in the soft bank of snow that ended just ahead of Franklin’s hooves was a chuckling Dr Coulson and his little pink-cheeked daughter, Bethany, who squealed with delight.

“Again!” the little girl cried, rolling into the powdery snow, clapping her hands. “Again! Again!”

Coulson staggered to his feet in the snow and grinned at Fitz as he drew close enough to be recognised. His greeting was cheery as he helped the little girl to stand. “Look Bethie, it’s Jemma’s friend, Mr Fitz!”

“Hullo,” said little Beth, sidling behind her father’s legs and peering out from behind them.

“A Happy New Year to you and your family, sir,” Coulson said.

“And to you, Dr Coulson,” Fitz replied. “And you of course, Miss Beth,” he added, earning him a shy smile.

“Do you come to call upon Jemma?” Coulson enquired. “She’ll be cognisant of the honour given the weather you’ve endured, Mr Fitz, but just now she seemed to have some urgent matter to discuss with my wife and so Bethie and I have cleared out to give them some privacy.”

It dawned on Fitz that, as yet, Coulson had no notion of what had transpired between he and Miss Simmons and that perhaps, even now, Mrs Coulson was only just hearing the news. Somehow he found this touching – that days had gone by in which she had maintained her silence, even amongst her dearest friends.

On the one hand he was tempted to cheerily reply “Well then, I shan’t disturb them,” and after exchanging a few more pleasantries with Coulson, move off without further comment. However, he could anticipate the inevitable consequence of choosing such a course of action. Dr Coulson would enter his home and casually announce to his wife and apprentice that Mr Fitz had come to call, braving the January snow, but that he would return at a more convenient time. This could never do. He only had one other choice: the truth – all of it.

Fitz dismounted to approach the doctor so as not to be shouting the sad news from the vantage point of all Franklin’s seventeen hands.

As if sensing the young master’s need to talk, Coulson tasked Bethie with gathering some snowdrops for her mother, pointing her to where they grew thickly, their verdant green a lush contrast to their icy surrounds. The little girl ran off eagerly, grasping at the blooms in her gloved hands.

“Dr Coulson,” Fitz began, uncertain how to proceed, “I am not here to call on the Duchess… though I wish with all my heart I had license to do so.” He paused, weighing the delicate favour he had to ask. “I wonder if you might see fit not to mention that you saw me here,” he requested. “It is only that… Oh, Dr Coulson, you must have guessed that I’ve fallen in love with her.”

The older man nodded, his face kindly. “I had suspected. Our Jemma is quite unlike any other.”

Fitz bowed his head under the weight of his agreement. “But it seems you do not know that I made her an offer of marriage, Christmas Day, and was refused,” he rushed on, almost choking over the pain of it.

Coulson grasped the young master’s shoulder, his expression sympathetic. “I am very sorry to hear it, Mr Fitz,” he said. “If any man could have dissuaded her from her long-held vow of celibacy, I would have believed it to be you.”

This brought the younger man little comfort. He shrugged. “Alas, it is not to be.”
The compassionate concern etched across the doctor’s features prompted Fitz to at last articulate the question he’d been musing over in his darker moments.

“How would you go on, Coulson, were you in my shoes?”

Coulson thought a while, scratching at the silvering whiskers below his ear. “It pains me deeply to imagine Audrey refusing me,” he said quietly. “I knew from the first moment that we were intended for one another.”

“Like Adam’s song?” Fitz asked, his voice hoarse. “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh?”

Coulson nodded. “That is how you feel about Jemma, Mr Fitz?”

But it was quickly apparent to the older man that the young master simply couldn’t respond. He squeezed his shoulder again, as if trying to convey all of the sympathy he could.

Having scrubbed a gloved hand over his face, Fitz once more gained command of his voice. “I rode toward Battlesden just now without particular use of my eyes, Dr Coulson. I just needed to get out of the house.”

“Then you need not fear me, Mr Fitz,” Coulson replied. “As another man prone to wandering when I am lost in thought, I entirely understand your predicament. Be assured that I shall not mention a word of our meeting.”

Fitz held out his hand. “I thank you, Coulson.”

The two men looked to where Beth toddled proudly towards them, an uneven sprouting of bedraggled snowdrops grasped within in her glittering mittens.

“I must be returning home, I suppose,” Fitz sighed. “I travel to London in the morning.”

“I shall keep you both in my prayers, Mr Fitz,” said Coulson once the young master was back in the saddle. “One never can be sure precisely what the Father has in mind.”

“Thank you again, Coulson,” Fitz replied, then after a last longing look toward the glowing windows of the cottage, set his face towards Manderston House.

…

Returning home, Fitz was not quite as successful as ducking the attention of others. In fact, it seemed as if his parents might have been lying in wait for him.

“Hello, Father,” Fitz sighed, almost stumbling over where the pair of them hovered. They had positioned themselves much nearer to the servants’ entrance in the lobby than they would usually allow themselves to drift.

“Son.” Calvin Fitz nodded his greeting.

It was clear that his mother planned to carry the conversation in this instance. She extended her cheek towards Fitz to be kissed and he dutifully obeyed.
Grasping at his hand, she wasted no time in cutting to the heart of her concerns. “Dearest Leopold, are we to understand that her Grace, the Duchess of Argyll, has refused your suit?”

Even coming from his distant parents, even with the formal and exacting use of the impressive title he barely new her by, Fitz felt the pang of Jemma’s rejection afresh.

“She has, Mother,” he said quietly.

“Ah, a shame,” she replied. “And on your first attempt too.”

Her son’s confusion was obviously apparent enough for her to explain.

“My dear, there may well be many more such rejections before you find the right one,” she supplied airily.

Fitz laughed humourlessly. “Mother, I did not fail to find the right one,” he said. “Her Grace is the only one I could possibly consider.”

His mother shook her head determinedly. “I observed to you, Calvin, did I not? I said he was taking it all too far.”

“You did, my dear,” Calvin murmured, nodding, clearly long-used to providing his wife’s echo.

“Taking what all too far?” their son enquired incredulously.

“Leopold,” his mother replied consolingly, “You did your utmost with the Duchess of Argyll. And we were very pleased to see you trying so hard, weren’t we, my dear?”

“We were, my dear…”

“But you cannot simply give up now, after only one attempt!”

Fitz sighed. “The Duchess made herself very plain, Mother. She intends to remain unmarried. To return to her and ask the same question without any indication of a change in her perspective would be pain the like of which I am not yet ready to endure, not to mention a grievous failure to honour her clearly stated preference.”

Mrs Fitz cast her eyes heavenward. “Oh, you are wilfully misunderstanding me.”

Fitz wondered how this could possibly be.

Looking at him with the bright determination that often accompanies trying to explain something very simple to a very small child, his mother said, “What I mean to say, Leopold, is that simply being refused the hand of one lady you liked is to be expected in this process. Now the real work begins! We must find you another lady you might like just as much and try again!”

“Liked?” Fitz sputtered. “You believe I merely liked Miss Simmons?”

His mother’s eyes grew wide and her nostrils flared at his evoking of her midwife alter ego but Fitz could not begin to care.

“And you allow for the possibility that there might be some other woman that I could like just as much? Jemma is to me the only woman I could possibly be drawn to consider as the partner of my future life,” he fumed. “I have played these games for years for your amusement, Mother, and at last you succeeded! You brought into our house, with your express permission and blessing, the one woman I wanted most in the world. I did precisely as you hoped I would do and yet it all came to
naught. I will spend the rest of my life recovering, trying to deserve her, trying to accept that I never shall, but if you think I can replicate this heart-shattering process with some other great lady – that anyone at all could be interchangeable with Jemma Simmons – then you know nothing of her or of me or, dare I say it, of the workings of the human heart!”

Jiaying scoffed. “Oh, Leopold. Always so dramatic!” she sighed. “Calvin, can you please make our only son and heir see some sense?”

Chapter End Notes

Well, FINALLY this story is back. At last. And there are three more complete chapters and plenty more finished bits and pieces of chapters and a definite plot such that I really believe I’m going to get it finished this time. Would love to post the final chapter just before S6 lands on the 10th of May. We’ll see! That gives me roughly a month! If you think you might be inclined to forgive me for my years of absence and come back and give me another shot here, I would love to hear from you in the comments!!!

Additionally, the London Library wasn’t opened until 1850. I don’t even care! Who’d write historical fiction? One has to be so damned accurate! If the Adam’s song reference intrigued you, go have a listen to “At Last” by the Oh Hellos and swoooooon. Also, Fitz seems to have been inspired a bit toward the end of this chapter by Richard Chamberlain’s Prince Edward from the 1976 Cinderella musical entitled “The Slipper and the Rose” – the same source material as the Triplets’ hard-of-hearing Grandmamma!
“Fitz, please tell me you’re not going to mope like this all the way to London.”

The young master kept his gaze on the fast-moving scenery. “I make no such assurances.”

His friend leaned forward in earnest. “This trip was meant to give you a bit of break - a chance to take your mind off it all.”

“I can tell you now, Hunter, my mind has proven very stubborn where it comes to Her Grace.”

“Wonderful,” Hunter griped, shuffling in his seat so that his back rested almost against the carriage door, allowing enough room to put his feet up on the cushioned bench. “It seems we’re in for an exhilarating drive. Oh, and I can just imagine the scintillating contributions you’ll be making to dinner conversations. Try not to wear out your welcome immediately upon arrival, mate.”

Fitz turned from the window to coolly regard his friend. “Did you perhaps undertake this venture with an undue serve of sunny optimism, Hunter? If I might remind you, I have all but literally had my heart very recently ripped from my chest.”

“No one’s suggesting the last few days have been a picnic for you, Fitz.”

“Good, because they most certainly have not. And remember, just as we travel ever closer to your beloved, we hurtle minute by minute further from mine.”

Hunter muttered something that contained a lot of words like “outrageous” and “insinuate” and “poppycock”.

Fitz laughed. “I hear your strenuous denial of ulterior motives, my dear fellow, and I assure you, I do not for a moment doubt your intention to be of service to me in this expedition.”

“I should hope not!” Hunter replied, clearly ruffled. “A very hurtful suggestion, that is!”

“Forgive me. I am aggrieved by the entire world at the moment. The last thing I want to do is upset you too.”

Hunter regarded him for a moment and then nodded his acceptance of the young master’s apology.

“But do you as strenuously deny that Miss Barbara Morse has captivated your interest?” Fitz asked, concluding he’d better make a more valiant attempt at appeasing his companion. “I am not the only member of our party who has noted your distinct preference for her company and conversation since she came to Manderston.”

Hunter attempted a casual shrug but a bashful smile played upon his lips and his cheeks distinctly coloured. “She’s alright, I suppose.”

“Come now, Hunter. I surely need not remind you that you’re in the presence of a lovelorn sod who has very recently made a spectacle of himself for the sake of another intimidating and wonderful woman. You can be forthright with me! Miss Morse is only alright?”

“Well, you’ve seen her, mate. She’s a goddess, isn’t she? And sweet-natured, most of the time. She’s
got plenty of opinions, I’ll say that for her. But I’ve never liked those simpering, agreeable girls, have you?”

Fitz thought of the many and various ways in which the Duchess’ opinions, strongly expressed, had bettered him and prepared him to live a deeper and richer life, whether or not he lived it by her side. “They’ve never held even a mite of appeal for me.”

Hunter snorted. “Anyone who has spent more than a minute with Miss Simmons can see that. What is it with us, mate? Why are we drawn to these spirited, intelligent, frankly terrifying women when so many other men want their wives under their thumbs?”

Fitz thought about how the Duchess would answer the question. “I’d like to think that it is because you and I, and the other rare men of our ilk, will settle for nothing less than the marriage of true minds.”

“That suggests that we think we’re up to deserving these women. Are you that cocky?”

“Not anymore,” Fitz sighed. “I myself have been weighed and found wanting, but that does not preclude the possibility that you might succeed where I have failed.”

Hunter slumped back in his seat. “I think I’ve probably got to give it a try. Better to have loved and lost and all that.”

“That’s the spirit.”

“And worse comes to worst, I suppose I can always find solace in going back to thrashing you at chess.”

Fitz fixed his friend with a look.

“Allright, in my dreams.”

“Precisely.”

…

To Miss Triplett’s way of thinking, even despite the recent arrival of her esteemed friends, the usually refined atmosphere at Number Twelve Wimpole Street left a good deal to be desired. For a start, Mr Fitz seemed unduly prone to long, melancholy sighs over his impenetrable books and he absolutely refused to be drawn into a game of whist or even, shockingly, to politely play his part in an appreciative audience when the ladies exhibited on the pianoforte. Beside that disappointment, the help as she internally referred to them, would not cease from their constant flirtation though they were, at all times, in full view of their obvious superiors rather than comfortably situated below stairs where they belonged. Miss Triplett did not for a moment wish to deny Daisy the assistance she needed but she did query the necessity of Miss Morse’s constant companion.

The oafish Mr Hunter, inexplicably encouraged by her brother and Mr Fitz, seemed to Miss Triplett always to be precisely where he was not wanted. She supposed she did owe him a debt of gratitude for convincing Mr Fitz that London was the best place for him to be, but could he not have simply accompanied him there and promptly left again?
While Miss Morse took up her mending it would be Mr Hunter who would bounce about the drawing room raucously singing what sounded for all the world like drinking ditties to Daisy’s precious daughter. That the baby gurgled and giggled was interpreted by all the rest of the party as evidence of Mr Hunter’s triumph but Miss Triplett could certainly not see it so. Little Miss Jemima Ward, already suffering the indignity of being named for an outright traitor to her class, was now being sung to by the son of the Fitz family steward. Would there be no end to the outrage?

Aiding and abetting Mr Hunter in his debasement of her own flesh and blood was Daisy herself. And as if there weren’t enough to be borne in the way of coquetry from Mr Hunter and Miss Morse, Daisy and Antoine’s behaviour towards one another was occasionally bordering on the scandalous. They whispered to one another, they laughed over secret jokes and behaved in general as if the engagement Miss Triplet could only assume was imminent had already been announced. If only her Grandmamma’s faculties of hearing and sight were what they used to be, not a man nor woman among them would escape her once phenomenal wrath. And yet, as a single lady of fortune, Miss Triplet was left to telegraph her disapproval to her companions through her disdainful expression alone.

She steeled herself for one more attempt to pierce through Mr Fitz’s cantankerous exterior. Though she understood that he felt himself infatuated with the midwife, and consequently humiliatingly rebuffed, she stoically held out a good deal of hope for the future. To her mind, even the best and most noble of men must be permitted their youthful folly. Who was she to hold such a slight and redeemable misdemeanour against him?

The time would soon come when Mr Fitz would look about him and see the world as it really was, when his eyes would be opened to the temporary insanity of even contemplating an alliance with one who held her pedigree so cheap. On that day, as she liked to imagine in considerable detail in her moments of quiet reflection, he would raise his eyes from his senseless attitude of mourning and see her anew, recognising that her blood ran bluer than the sky on a clear summer’s day. He would beg her forgiveness of his idiocy while simultaneously begging for her hand and she would of course pardon and accept him provided certain conditions would be met, chief among them that the midwife would never again darken the door of Manderston House.

Before such conditions could be negotiated, she first had to gain his attention and it was here at this early stage of the project that she was already grappling with defeat. In the evenings, polite attempts at conversation, offerings of witty observations or insightful commentary received a mere “Mmm” in return that sounded from behind the cover of some massive tome. During the day Mr Fitz was simply nowhere to be found. She supposed she would have to allow him a far longer period of mourning than the vexing situation could possibly demand. It was not to be borne, and yet bear it she must.

The task Fitz had set himself after his last conversation with his parents had not been an easy one. How would he sever an attachment that everything within him yearned to nurture? But having resigned himself to harsh reality, revealed to him first by the object of his affection herself and then by his mother and father, he knew he must waste no time. Weeks of study went into the research he wanted to complete for her and it felt like even more effort had been required of him to finalise the wording of the letter itself, his walk to and from the library in those early days often completed in the same unseeing daze in which he’d found his way to Battlesden just after Christmas. When the small bonfire of drafts had been reduced to ashes in his fireplace at the Tripletts’ and both final documents
were contained behind the still-warm wax of his seal, he allowed himself a fleeting moment to press the package to his lips and then summoned his man to arrange an expedient delivery.

Over the course of that first month in London, Fitz had found himself developing a grudging affection for the London Library and all the many and varied individuals who found refuge within it. In between his ferrying of piles of books from shelf to desk, his compilation of copious scribbled notes and his moments of thoughtful repose he had even begun to wonder about the particular characters that crossed his path repeatedly.

It came as a surprise to him that he was not the only person dutifully attending the library from daybreak until nightfall as some others might attend their place of business. Some of them even frequented the same haunts as he for repast and as time went on, they began to acknowledge one another, first with slight nods and later with more fulsome conversation. The restrictions convention placed upon them with regard to making introductions somewhat hindered true friendship developing but the camaraderie of familiarity seemed to broach the gap.

Like parishioners attending the same church for generations and never straying from the family pew, each of the library regulars claimed a preferred desk. Now that the initial daunting project was complete, the surface of Fitz’s desk was covered with a swathe of blueprints Mack had delivered to him, humbly requesting his expertise in checking them over before he submitted them to the patent office. Fitz had been eager to accept a diversion from his grief and the layers of enormous diagrams and schemes were now overlaid by a scattering of his own scribblings of notes, queries and equations.

Beside Fitz, under the window, sat one character with whom he had not exchange a single nod nor any other pleasantry. While he worked on his papers and letter for Jemma she had been a mere shadow like everything else but now he regularly found his unfocused gaze directed toward her when lost in thought over Mack’s designs.

The woman was slim, dark-haired and dark-eyed and sat at her desk each day with a distinct elegance of bearing as she read. To Fitz she seemed inexplicably familiar though he was certain he had never made her acquaintance.

One morning, while he was returning to his table carrying a book he’d wanted to consult, he found the woman standing behind his chair tracing her finger over the lines of the blueprints. As he approached she turned boldly to face him, her book clasped to her chest.

“These designs you pore over – this is not your work!” she hissed, her accent thick. She was clearly making a semblance of an attempt not to disturb those working around them but her anger was palpable. “I would know this hand anywhere!” she continued. “This is the work of Mr Alphonso Mackenzie. How did you come by these papers?”

At last Fitz understood why he had felt he recognised her. The lady standing before him, her eyes flashing with indignation, was the woman he had seen in the portrait Mack carried inside his pocket watch, the woman in whose honour the big man lived his productive single life.

“Mack is my friend,” he whispered, hoping to convince her. “He wants to patent these designs and has entrusted them to me for my input and approval.”

At once her whole demeanour changed – her face flushed and she raised her book to cover her open mouth.

Fitz mimed towards the lobby of the library, his eyebrows raised, intimating that they might take the conversation out of the earshot of their quiet and conscientious companions.
She nodded and he led on with her trailing behind as he navigated the maze of tables and shelves.

Once out in a space where they could talk at a regular volume, Fitz turned to the lady and bowed. “Mr Leopold Fitz at your service, ma’am,” he said.

“Miss Elena Rodriguez,” she replied with a hurried curtsey.

Yes, *that* was her name.

Her cheeks were still pink with mortification. “Please, sir, forgive me for my rudeness just now,” she pleaded. “But can you really be acquainted with Mr Mackenzie?”

“I am!” Fitz grinned. “He is a dear friend. He handed those designs to me himself only a day ago at our mutual friend’s home here in London.”

She looked back at him aghast. “Mr Mackenzie is here? Now?”

“Well, no,” Fitz replied apologetically. “He would be back at Manderston by now – that’s my family home in Scotland.”

The lady hugged her book to her heart and Fitz could see that she was breathing heavily.

“Are you quite well, Miss Rodriguez?” he enquired. “Might I fetch you something for your present relief?”

She waved him away with her other hand. “I am just astonished to learn that Mr Mackenzie and I stand on the same soil once more. It has been so many years.” She looked searchingly into his face. “And is he well, Mr Fitz?”

“He is the very picture of health,” he replied. “And designing and making wonderful things, as you have seen.” Fitz wondered whether or not he should go on and reveal to Miss Rodriguez the circumstances under which he himself came to be familiar with her face.

Her cheeks coloured again as she selected her next words. “And by now he must have… a family?” She looked down at her shoes. “A wife?”

Detecting in his new acquaintance a hint of the same regard in which he knew his friend held her, Fitz smiled warmly and elected not to divulge Mack’s confidence.

“He has neither wife nor child but lives a productive single life, Miss Rodriguez,” he replied, hoping she might like the sound of the noble path Mack walked. “Perhaps, if you are an old friend of his, you would like to accompany me to Manderston on my return to pay him a visit?”

“Really, sir?” she asked eagerly. “How soon do you leave?”

Now there was a question to which Fitz drew no closer to settling an answer. He did miss his home though he could not yet face his parents, renewed as they were in their ambition to marry him off by the year’s end. Thus he had planned to put off his homecoming until they made their return to Bath but though he daily awaited their letter announcing as much, it was yet to be forthcoming.

“I am visiting with friends here so I shan’t leave for a few weeks yet, I imagine,” he replied, watching her face fall with an other-person-centred gratification. “But in the meantime I have plenty to be getting on with for Mack’s sake and, Miss Rodriguez, you seem to be very diligently applied to your studies.”
She sighed. “As a girl I had so much to do, so many things I wanted to achieve and I was in such a hurry to do them all. Despite the barriers to my sex, I found that with hard work and persistence, I could travel the world, I could make a difference for my family and community in Colombia, I could do almost anything I put my mind to. Now I find myself an independently wealthy woman with no more pressing things left to prove.” She held up the book in her hand. “The task I have set myself now is to simply see if I can be still and rest, to do no more than sit and read one book until it is finished and then return it to the shelf in order to select another.” A soft smile transformed her features. “It is a meditation that your friend, Mr Mackenzie, once tried to teach me – to savour each pleasure, to work away steadily at each task until its completion and then to begin another.”

“And did you prove to be a willing pupil?” Fitz asked, smiling to himself at her fitting description of Mack.

She laughed sadly. “I teased him. I called him Turtle Man and took my leave of him. These last ten years I have never found his equal.”

“I can well believe that,” he agreed. “I know no other quite like him.”

“To think we have sat side-by-side, you and I, the whole month and only now established this connection,” she observed.

“To think that if you had not glanced over at his designs, we might have parted and never spoken!” he replied.

Miss Rodriguez shook her head, her smile enigmatic. “No, that is not God’s way.”

“How so?” asked Fitz, intrigued.

“He does not bring special people into our sphere only to pluck them away, never to be seen again.” She brandished her book. “God is the master storyteller, weaving all our knotted and ratty threads into his glorious tapestry. In his household, nothing is wasted.”

Fitz could not suppress the immediate yearning he felt for her words to prove true in his own story in a very particular manner. “I am sure you must be right, Miss Rodriguez.”

“Then I suppose we shall continue on with our work until you are ready to leave London for home?” she asked.

“I suppose we shall.” Fitz smiled, extending the crook of his arm to her to escort her back inside.

…

The Berwickshire snow still lay thick on the ground in late January and out of concern for poor Xochi’s hooves, given that there seemed no urgent need to be traversing the parish, Jemma stayed by the fire at Battlesden Cottage as much as she could justify.

Of course she was never idle. She remained devoted to her ongoing studies, always seeking new knowledge that might benefit the women and infants she served. That she found her mind often straying back to the events of Christmas, she attributed purely to her fascination with the topic of discussion she had enjoyed with Mr Fitz over dinner. It felt not unnatural to her that certain points he had made stood out more in her mind than others, not because of the force with which he made them,
but due to the evidence of his sheer brilliance or to the way his blue eyes had flashed at her in his enthusiasm.

Certain questions they had raised that day particularly played upon her mind and, though she never articulated to herself an actual anxiety about their next meeting, whenever that might be, the thought that they might have an ongoing conversation to resume, one that would not invite further discussion pertaining to matters of the heart, gave no small amount of relief to her unacknowledged trepidation.

Jemma had managed to procure some volumes which proved useful to her in her research and on more than one occasion she found herself imagining how some new insight or other would be received by her friend. She could almost anticipate his every reaction – a musing observation (sitting back in his chair and scratching thoughtfully at his whiskers), an incisive question (leaning emphatically towards her, his blue eyes wide and excited) or an eloquent but humbly expressed rebuttal (his eyes lowered deferentially, his palms upturned to invite her perspective). This keen sense of where he might lead them next allowed her to some degree to perpetuate that Christmas Day debate even though she was entirely alone and it was this imagined dialogue between them that kept her eyes flying over the page late into each night, her pen scratching across her notes at a fevered pace.

In the mornings, provided she was not required to uphold an appointment, she would wake with a renewed longing, not precisely for her books, but rather for the scintillating, if imagined, company of the man who brought out the best in her intellect, who met her thought for thought and spurred her on to deeper understanding and ever more important questions.

When she could face it, she let herself wonder if Mr Fitz really had agreed to maintain their friendship or if he had merely nodded that terrible morning to give himself the chance to flee. Into one of those painful moments came a booming knock. Waiting for her at the cottage door was a sodden rider, his breath steam in the frigid air, holding out a thick envelope. She took it, paid the man a handful of coins and before even managing to shut out the icy gale became captivated by the elaborate seal. Mr Fitz! He had upheld his word!

The envelope contained a bundle of papers covered all over in his spidery scrawl and one additional note on different parchment. On closer inspection, the bundle of papers were not precisely addressed to her but rather laid out as scientific hypotheses – tested and proven or disproven with a raft of possibilities for further exploration enumerated beneath. It did look like fascinating reading but she couldn’t help feeling a pang of disappointment that it did not at all read like the intimate collegiality with Mr Fitz that she’d been imagining while busy at her own work.

She took up the note, immediately noticing with a jolt of pleasure that this separate page was addressed to her – the letter that would perhaps supply all that she had hoped she might find within the other documents.

In order to savour the treasured communication with her much-missed friend, she forced herself to wait until she had freshly boiled the kettle and made herself a cup of tea over which she could better enjoy their communication. Tea in hand, she settled down to read:

My dearest Jemma,
It is with a heavy heart that I undertake to compose this letter. It grieves me to think that I might reawaken unpleasant memories that you would prefer remain dormant, but there are things I must say and beg you to understand. Do not fear, Duchess. You can at least be sure that I do not write in order to renew my suit.

In the weeks that we have been apart, I had been busy formulating a new plan for my future. Though I cannot deny that your refusal left me bereft, I had since determined that I would simply be the friend you hoped I might be – that if I could not marry you, I would live unmarried also. If we two could not grow old together as husband and wife, we would grow old together in the neighbourliness, friendship, intellectual companionship and camaraderie that would be all I could hope for in consolation.

However, in recent conversation with those to whom I owe obedience, it has been pressed upon me that the decision to remain unmarried is not within my power. As the one to whom the care of Manderston will ultimately be left, there are certain responsibilities from which I cannot in good conscience abdicate.

But how could I marry another, Duchess, while at the same time keeping alive an intimate friendship with the lady to whom any other must always be compared? I do not hold out hope of finding another like you, nor would it be right for me to try. I accept that I shall not love another the way that I love you, Jemma, but I do intend to love my wife, whomever she shall be, and to similarly earn and deserve her love in return.

As a consequence of my predicament, I have resolved that this shall be the last letter I write to you. Our precious friendship, damaged though it has been by my blunder in falling in love with you, must come to a close. I cannot earn and deserve the love of another when my every thought turns to you. I must try to forget you, even as my eyes continue to search for you in that little stone church every sabbath, and can only pray that you will understand and forgive me.

This will seem premature, I know – I myself am only just reconciling myself to this new future – but I must ask a favour of you and impress upon you the utmost importance of your cooperation. Though you are the person I love most dearly in all the wide world, should there be a wedding in my future, you must not anticipate an invitation to it. Should Daisy or Mrs Hartley or any other individual see fit to invite you, you must not contemplate attending. You must promise me, Jemma. Please observe this last request I ask of you. I shall never be able to commit myself to another if you are anywhere in the vicinity.

And now I shall somehow devote myself to learning how to think without thinking of you, how to discover without formulating the news of my discovery for you, how to walk without willing you beside me, how to sleep without imagining you in my arms, how to dream without conjuring your lovely face before me. I confess that in this moment it seems an insurmountable trial but I must conquer this. I simply must.

Enclosed are the scribblings of some reflections I offer in lieu of that scholastic partnership of which I dreamed the two of us might develop. I hope they might somehow be to your benefit.

May the Lord bless you and keep you, my love.

Leopold Fitz
Jemma laid the letter down beside her tea, now tepid from neglect on the table before her, and allowed herself to taste the bitterness of her disappointment – the exacting cost of her unwavering commitment.

Chapter End Notes

Lots of you guys DID say you were ready for a bit more angst before we begin our slow ascent to the finish line! I hope you weren't joking!!! Hopefully a bit of Fitz / Lancelot Amadeus Ravenclaw Hunter snarky bromance softened the blow? And a bit of Raina-in-fine-form?? And a bit of MackElena!?

Seriously, the warmth with which this fic has been welcomed back BLOWS MY MIND. Thank you so much!!! I am so excited to be delivering another chapter and SO hoping you will like it. LOVE to hear from you if you do!!! Your kind comments over the course of this week fuelled the way-faster-than-expected completion of this new chapter.

I cried actual tears writing that letter and imagining the heartbreak all round. So, like, it's not that I want to make you cry or anything, but I'll be super-stoked if this causes you to shed a tear or two! By all means let me know!!
Chapter 28

The sudden arrival of Mr Fury at Battlesden Cottage could not, to Jemma’s mind, have come at a more opportune moment. Whether it was that all the Berwickshire babies were awaiting the arrival of spring or just that the entire community was hunkered down to stay warm in the late-January snow, the demand for her care seemed to have all but dried up. She could imagine a time in which such a lull might have been welcome, but the despondent weeks following the arrival of Mr Fitz’s last letter was certainly not that time. Maria assured her that she would remain and tend to any emergencies should they arise and Jemma willingly agreed. She even packed for London with far more enthusiasm than usual, hungry as she was for a change of scenery and some blessed diversion.

“I can’t help but feel that this uncharacteristic eagerness to see your aunts is a bad sign,” Fury observed from her kitchen table as she bustled around him gathering her belongings. “Is Berwickshire turning out to be a disappointment after all?”

Jemma pursed her lips and pondered how to respond. “It’s these Scottish winters,” she settled upon. “I think I simply require a week or so of something to look at other than white as far as the eye can see.”

“Then prepare yourself for London grey,” Fury huffed. “I swear it’s been raining since St. Andrew’s Day.”

Fury’s prediction turned out to be prophetic. Her view out of the carriage window was punctuated by huge waves of water sporadically thrown up by the wheels and a constant drumming on the roof as the heavens opened. Not even the enormous black umbrella Fury wielded as he accompanied her out of the carriage and up the stairs to her aunts’ front door could protect her from the veritable moat that had formed around their palatial Grosvenor Street home.

In order to change for dinner she was shown up to the suite of rooms that had been her home not so very long before life had taken her to Berwickshire. While whichever of her aunt’s many servants it was rifled through the swathe of rich gowns in her closet, Jemma sat on the bed in which she’d tossed and turned during those years of grief and uncertainty and watched as the heavy rain pounded against the glass.

What she wouldn’t have given in that moment to have her father knock quietly on her door the way he used to when she was a girl. He had always been able to sense her disquiet and seemed to instinctively know what she needed. When her mind was raging through a thousand possibilities, often his simple presence, his silent embrace, would provide her with a bedrock of certainty on which to build her own perspective. His faith in her instinct was infinite and in his dying days he had done all he could to feed that flickering faith inside her.

It was on the strength of that confidence that she had triumphed over every obstacle in the single-minded pursuit of her ambition and would continue to do so. She only wished she could hear him once more enumerating all of the reasons he trusted she’d choose the right paths through her future life – even the most headstrong of pioneers occasionally needed some encouragement.

Like a lamb Jemma allowed herself to be fabulously garbed and adorned, so caught up in her own thoughts that she was barely aware of the painstaking process. It was not until she saw Aunt Victoria’s approving expression that it occurred to her to so much as glance down at her gown.
“Ah, Jemma, you are an absolute picture,” Victoria sighed at the sight of her before leading them into dinner. “Does she not look well, Montrose?”

Jemma no longer wondered at Victoria’s persistence in attempting to glean Melinda’s perspective, though the fruitless exercise had regularly troubled her in her youth.

Over the soup, when Jemma anticipated the interrogation to begin, she was instead surprised to be told of the latest antics of Victoria’s “friend” from Christmas at Manderston. Apparently Mr Loren Olson had been quite converted to residing in London by Victoria’s own enthusiasm and was now a regular guest at their table. Jemma was informed that she should not be troubled by his sudden presence about the house and that he materialised and just as instantly dematerialised entirely at his own will and with deference to no one. She was apparently just as likely not to see him as to see him.

During the main meal of perfectly roasted beef and vegetables she was treated to Victoria’s views on the latest developments in fashion - the rolled hem - about which Jemma, of course, knew absolutely nothing and cared even less. She said as much only to be laughed at and loudly ordered to glance down at the hem of the very gown she was wearing and appreciate that it was, in fact, tastefully rolled as per the fashion at hand. After being required to stand, walk about the room, curtsey and in all other activities wholly appreciate what a lustrous fullness it added to her movement the topic finally seemed to reach its natural limit.

It wasn’t until the pudding that she at last heard something to pique her interest. With Victoria’s mouth daintily full of strawberry blancmange it was left to Melinda to inform her, as minimally as possible, of the plight of a London friend of theirs whose pregnancy had been fraught with trouble.

“We had no idea of Polly having conceived when we travelled to Bath, so anxious was she not to speak too soon of her joy after so many years of disappointed hopes,” Victoria added as soon as she was disposed.

Melinda shook her head. “Perhaps that was for the best.”

“Is the lady experiencing difficulty?” Jemma asked.

“I did visit her this morning,” her aunt replied, “and what with the pain and the bleeding, she is very fearful as you can imagine.”

“Is she in the care of a physician?” urged Jemma. “For, if not, I shall visit the lady myself, as soon as I can be spared!”

Melinda gave her niece one of her rare appreciative smiles. “She is from home this evening calling on her husband’s sister but I am very sure she would welcome a visit from you in the morning if you feel so inclined.”

“I shall go to her first thing, though I wish she were at home resting tonight rather than travelling about. Does the lady live far away? Shall I require a carriage?”


…

It was not that Daisy could not have been happier. She certainly could imagine circumstances in which her happiness could be increased, namely those that pertained to the longed-for restoration of
fellowship between her brother and her much-missed friend, Her Grace, the Duchess of Argyll. Yet those unfortunate circumstances aside, she managed to find scope for a great deal of gratification.

Around the table at which she dined on sumptuous food each evening sat said brother, Leo, her childhood friends, Mr Lance Hunter and Miss Raina Triplett (whom it escaped no one’s notice had yet to exchange a word), her new companion and confidant, Miss Barbara Morse, and, most significantly, Mr Antoine Triplett, the object of her ardent affection.

Though not every member of their little party contributed to it, to Daisy, the atmosphere in the fashionable London home was one of easy and relaxed pleasure, no doubt enhanced by the lessened faculties of their ancient chaperone who mostly snoozed quietly in her comfortable fire-side chair.

Mrs Ward could watch with doting amusement as Lance made bid after bid for the attention and approval of Miss Morse and she enjoyed her anticipation of the future as the lady responded with increasing enthusiasm. She could observe with sympathetic exasperation Raina’s disapproving barbs hurled indirectly at Lance and her desperate pleas for attention aimed unmistakably toward Leo who remained utterly unmoved behind his books. She could sit for hours and adore her precious little daughter whose speedy growth and increased alertness further fascinated and enraptured her. But most happily she could bask in the undisguised affections shown to her and to Jemima by Antoine. That one framed sketch from Christmas she would always treasure was added to daily as Mr Triplett made no effort to hide his delight in gazing at her, the charcoal in his hand only the vaguest of justification.

Oddly, that evening, Leo arrived with a new sort of, if not cheerfulness, at least willingness to be engaged.

“How are those designs of Mack’s, Fitz?” Hunter asked quietly as if mostly expecting to be rebuffed.

Raina did not seem to know whether to glare daggers at Hunter for daring to address the young master or to gaze in eager expectation in the direction of Mr Fitz.

Leo lowered his fork thoughtfully. “They are works of art,” he replied, and every eye was suddenly upon him, surprised to hear him extend himself beyond his recently preferred monosyllable. “I have never seen their equal.”

Though it seemed unlikely to have been prompted by the quiet yet fervent sound of the young master’s voice, the Tripletts’ Grandmamma eyed him keenly. “Eh? The sequel? The sequel to what, pray tell?” she squawked.

“No, Grandmamma!” Raina shouted in her ear. Even while bellowing she managed to sound dismissive. “Mr Fitz merely speaks of some drawings done by his mechanic!”

“In a panic?” she parroted. “Why should Mr Fitz be in a panic?” The elderly Mrs Triplett peered across the table. “Did that gel you wanted refuse you, sir?”

Raina’s eyes were wide with horror to have found herself thrown back into conversation about the midwife. She grasped her aged relative’s hand in a manner that looked to Daisy a little too firm. “No, Grandmamma,” Raina shouted pleadingly. “Mr Fitz is not discussing anything like that.”

“It is alright, Raina,” Leo muttered. “I can answer the question.”

Miss Triplett could not have looked less relieved, her eyes darting apprehensively between the young master and their chaperone.

Fitz’s voice, when he spoke, was clear and loud. “She did refuse me, Mrs Triplett. But I am hopeful
that I shall make a full recovery in time.”

“Good man,” the aged lady replied, somehow apparently hearing him perfectly well. “Besides, the gels shall be quite crawling over one another to get to you, Leopold, mark my words.”

Antoine’s face lit up with mischief and he briefly raised his eyebrows at Daisy in glee.

“How so, Grandmamma?” he enquired, his tone unfailingly deferential.

The elderly eyes roved hungrily over Mr Fitz’s features. “Look at him, Antoine!” she cried. “Your friend is an absolute crumpet!”

Raina’s hands shot to cover her face for a moment before she leapt to her feet and flew into action.

“Grandmamma! I knew this to be far too much exertion for someone of your frail disposition. It’s high time we get you upstairs to bed.” She turned to the door, fairly shrieking for the housekeeper. “Mrs Price! I need you!”

Every other member of the party diligently held their fine linen napkins to their mouths and avoided one another’s eye. Fitz dropped his flaming face into his hands as if trying to process what on earth had just transpired.

When Raina and the housekeeper finally managed to bundle her grandmother out of the room they all crumbled into undignified cackling.

Dabbing at her tears, Daisy turned beaming to Mr Triplett. “I do so love your grandmother, Antoine!”

Antoine nodded vigorously and when at last he could stop chuckling long enough to speak said, “My very favourite relative!”

Though Fitz’s eyes pleaded with him not to, Hunter could not help himself. “Fitz! A crumpet!” he repeated and the gales of laughter began afresh.

Very late that evening after Mr Triplett had assisted Daisy in settling Jemima for the night he seemed to grow uncharacteristically bashful.

“There are some items I hope to show you, Daisy,” he said, not quite able to meet her eye, “If you think you might be able to spare the time.”

“Of course, Antoine,” she replied, her whisper doing nothing to hide her eagerness.

“It is just that… they are… err… well, they are in my chamber,” he replied hesitantly. “I could bring them to you, I suppose…”

Daisy shook her head as she drew closer to him, the intimacy implied in a peek into his bedroom irresistible. “Everyone has long retired, have they not?” she asked.

Antoine gave her a nervous smile, taking a backwards step towards the door and feeling behind him for the knob. “Shall I check?”
The lady nodded.

“Will you wait here for me?” Triplett stood still grasping the doorknob at his back, his expression almost anxious.

“Of course, Antoine,” Daisy laughed. “Where else might I run off to at this time of night?”

He nodded and opened the door, giving her that nervous smile once more as he slipped into the corridor.

Daisy took a deep breath to compose herself. Could this be the moment Mr Triplett would ask the question she so longed to answer?

Not many minutes passed before Triplett reappeared in the doorway, his smile somewhat easier and, in a return to his usual debonair gallantry, held out his arm to escort her from Jemima’s makeshift nursery.

“We are all alone,” he whispered and Daisy felt it like a soft breath tingling down her spine.

Antoine’s rooms were situated in the furthest corner of the uppermost floor of the extensive Wimpole Street house. Decorated in rich reds and exuding an imposing manliness, his chambers evoked for Daisy the daydreams she’d indulged in in her youth when she’d liked to imagine Triplett cast melodramatically atop his bed, his forearm thrown across his brow, chest heaving, yearning for her.

Of course, it was not to his bed that he led her. Rather it was to a deep-set bay window seat, situated beside a large set of bookshelves. Kneeling at her feet in such a way that caused her heart to flutter, Antoine reached into the bottom shelf and withdrew the first of a number of somewhat battered volumes.

“I know this is all very untoward,” he began, opening the cover, “but I need to show you these in response to the precious Christmas gift you gave me.”

Daisy laughed at the thought of her childish scheme and the scrawled invitation to their future wedding with which she’d presented him.

“Precious?” she asked, smiling fondly.

“*Inestimably* precious,” Antoine replied earnestly, raising his chocolate-brown eyes to meet hers. He lifted the open volume onto her lap and sat back on his haunches as she read the scribbled inscription:

*Antoine Triplett*

*1804*

“You were what age then?” Daisy asked. “I was thirteen so you must have been…”

“I was fifteen years old,” Antoine replied. “Fitz and I were at Eton.”

Daisy stroked her hand across the page. “It’s like traveling back in time.”

“I’m glad there’s no danger of that.” He laughed. “What a gangly, awkward young man I was.”

Daisy looked back at him wide-eyed, emphatically shaking her head.

“Are you remembering some potent example of my awkwardness, Daisy? Is that why you shake...
your head? Or or are you perhaps disagreeing with my self-assessment?"

She sighed. “I will not deny that someone less infatuated with you at fifteen might have described
you as gangly and awkward.”

Triplett’s eyes were pools of disbelief. “You were really infatuated with me? All that time ago?”

Daisy shrugged. “Leo is available to be consulted on the matter anytime you should see fit to ask
him.”

“Well, Daisy, you and I have been at almost comic cross-purposes for years!” said Triplett. “Turn
the page and you shall at once see what I mean.”

Her eyes on him, she turned the page slowly before looking down to take in the contents.

Antoine’s skill as an artist had been well-remarked upon by all their mutual acquaintances. He had
been celebrated as a prospective naturalist or botanist, his detailed, lifelike boyhood sketches of
sparrows and strawberries, woodpeckers and whitebeams always adorning his doting mother’s
mantlepiece. None of this quite prepared Daisy to see her thirteen-year-old self hauntingly evoked by
Antoine’s unmistakeable hand. In his drawing she sat alone and barefoot on a rock by the river, her
fingers trailing in the water, on her head a hawthorn crown just like the one she had fashioned for
herself a day or two prior to Jemima’s birth.

She raised her eyes once more to meet Mr Triplett’s gaze. “This is of me,” she whispered.

“They are all of you, Daisy.” He waved his hand toward the large collection of similar volumes lined
up along the shelf. “I will admit to having had them sent from Shropshire as soon as we arrived here
after Christmas in the hope that I might have this very opportunity.”

Letting her eyes fall once more to the book in her lap she turned the page to find a number of
sketches of her face scattered across the double spread, the pencil strokes light and tentative as if he
were trying to conjure her exact features, unsatisfied with his progress. Over another leaf, she found
herself seated in state as Queen Charlotte, over another, simply her childish self, pouring tea in the
conservatory at Manderston.

“Did Leo ever know you had these?” she asked, uncovering page after page of beautiful
representations of the cusp of her adolescence.

“I could never bring myself to tell, Fitz,” Antoine confessed. “He knew I was always drawing but I
never let him see the matter.”

“But if only you had, Antoine…” Daisy’s voice trailed away, her eyes roaming his face.

When he could speak at last, Triplett’s voice was hoarse. “Can you ever forgive me, Daisy, for not
having found the courage to speak to you sooner?” He pushed himself to his feet, stalking away from
her. “When I think of what I might have saved you from! When I think of everything that blackguard
put you through!”

“That is not what I meant, Antoine!” Daisy exclaimed. “You cannot possibly hold yourself
responsible for Ward’s behaviour towards me.”

“But I do!” he cried. “You have given me every indication that if I had only spoken then, before you
ever met Grantham Ward, you would have accepted me. I could have preserved your safety and
happiness and at what cost? Only the promise of myself, a promise that to this day I remain eager to
make to you.”
Daisy blinked at the startling manner of his declaration.

Trip held out his palms to her from where he stood, halfway across the room, his voice no more than a pleading whisper. “You are not surprised, are you, Daisy, to learn that I love you? That I have always loved you?”

The lady could not speak but replied with a tearful smile.

“That you cannot be surprised to hear how desperately I want you for myself, that I long for you to be my wife. That together with you, by your side, I want to raise your beautiful Jemima as my very own daughter. Might you see fit to allow me that honour, Daisy?”

Mrs Ward nodded, her reply, not a shout, but a heart-felt, whispered “Yes!”

He crossed to the table by his bed and took up the yellowed parchment that she immediately recognised as her own handiwork, pressing it against his heart. “You yourself have set the date for our union, Daisy, and I look forward to that day with everything in my being. But let us not have such a long engagement as five months.” He laid the paper down and came once more to sit beside her, taking up her hand.

“Use the meantime to heal, Daisy. Find a way to say goodbye to those awful days with Ward. It cannot be good for the soul to move so swiftly from being treated like chattel in one marriage to trying to begin another. I saw the way you were tormented by him, the way he forced you to defer to him, to plead with him for his grudging attention. Everything in my being revolts at the thought of you deferring to me, I who have always loved you for your wit and your mind and the strength of your will.

“By his evil Ward reduced you, Daisy, minimised you – a feat I would never have thought possible. Since his death I have seen you return to yourself more and more, blossoming every day into your true, whole, wonderful self. With God’s help, my love, and by his grace and healing, let yourself be built up once more to your full strength as your own formidable woman – the tower of strength I have always known you to be and loved you ferociously for it. In a few short months I shall more traditionally throw myself at your feet and beg for your hand and hope that, by then, your single days have not entirely prejudiced you against agreeing to once more take a husband.”

The power he imparted to her in his words brought Daisy to her feet. “I’ll bid you goodnight now, Antoine,” she said, her voice clear and steady. “But I want to thank you for your care of me, your unwavering belief in me.”

The gentleman stood as she stood, rendered by force of training and habit quite unable to do otherwise. He took her hands in his and brought them to his lips, placing a soft kiss on each palm. He walked with her to the door of his bedroom and reached for the knob.

Daisy placed her hand on top of his, momentarily halting him, her face mischievous. “You realise your actual proposal, when it comes, can only pale in comparison to the beautiful words you have spoken tonight, Antoine,” she said.

He looked back at her uncertainly. “Can there possibly be any remedy for my blunder?” he asked. “How can you accept a proposal that has already been outgunned?”

“Let me simply do as you have done and exceed now the answer I shall give you then,” she suggested.

Triplett’s face broke into his easy grin.
“I love you, Antoine,” she whispered. “I believe that you are the only man I have ever really loved. And though I would not have thought it possible, I love you more than ever right in this moment for the words that you have just spoken. You who are at pains to make clear to me that you have never desired me in a manner akin to the acquisition of property. I am devastated that I cannot offer myself to you as the unsullied bride I might once have been…”

He tried to interrupt, assuring her such sadness was unnecessary, that her feeling any grief over those circumstances was painful to him, but she pressed on.

“But be assured, Antoine, that even now, you are the one who is teaching me, who is showing me what it feels like to be genuinely loved, the way a husband is called to love his wife. Though I may have been married, I have never been allowed a taste of this all-encompassing bliss, and you bestow it all the more in your insistence that you’ll wait for me to more fully heal before we come together in God’s sight.”

Triplett’s eyes shone in the dim light, his joyful tears threatening to spill over. “I shall never be far from you, you understand, Daisy,” he whispered. “I am certainly not promising to absent myself. I do not think that I could bear it.”

“Nor would I desire you to, my beloved,” she replied. “I shall always want you very near.”

“Do you think that you and I might be happy, my love?” Triplett asked. “Do you think we might be granted that unique joy?”

“If how I feel in this moment is any indication,” Daisy whispered, “I am absolutely certain we shall.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, at least our main ship is in the same city, hey FitzSimmons lovers? And I hope that in the absence of interaction between them (though it is imminent, I promise) you have been somewhat appeased by some significant developments on the Trip/Daisy front??

Loren Olson is one of Loki's alter-egos. I'm not promising that he'll reappear but if I should feel like throwing in a bit of Tom Hiddleston (let's face it, I usually do...) I have that option available. (If you like the idea of that, you could go and read my Loki fic entitled "Loki in the Library" - it's silly but hopefully fun.)

Oh, Grandmamma... This little interlude is due to my brother-in-law's nicknaming of Benedict Cumberpatch as "the thinking woman's crumpet". The ancient Mrs Triplett is no-doubt a thinking woman and we'd all agree that Leo Fitz is a bit of a crumpet, would we not!?

Hope you enjoyed these developments! The arrival of the next chapter will be speeded on by your letting me know in the comments! Thank you, dahlings!!!
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It wasn’t until Jemma awoke to utterly unexpected sunshine streaming through her bedroom windows that it occurred to her the name of Leopold Fitz had not been spoken once in all the hours since she had arrived in London. She did not allow herself time to ponder her aunts’ reticence in introducing the topic nor did she let herself dwell on the unnamed gentleman herself. Her concern was all for this Mrs Polly Hinton and the fate of her longed-for child.

Having ascertained grudging permission from Victoria to make the visit in her less extravagant working clothes, Jemma partook of a quick breakfast and, sending Fury ahead to be sure of a welcome, left to call upon her charge.

Running up the front steps, Jemma could see frantic movement within. The door swung open to receive her and after only a breathless, “Miss Simmons?” and her nod in reply, she was ushered inside and rushed up a much grander staircase within.

The expectant mother sat pale-faced at the edge of her bed, her hands roaming over her protruding abdomen. As soon as she saw Jemma in the doorway she beckoned her into the room, her anxiety palpable.

“Thank you so much for calling, Miss Simmons” the lady whispered, her voice hoarse.

“I’m glad you allowed me to come, Mrs Hinton,” replied Jemma. “My aunts led me to understand that you’ve been having quite a difficult time.”

Mrs Hinton nodded. “I’ve been experiencing little spots of bleeding,” she whispered. “I’m so frightened.”

Jemma nodded sympathetically and after ascertaining permission to examine her patient, set about reassuringly preparing her.

“Have you noticed any change in the amount of movement you’ve been experiencing?” Jemma inquired.

Her patient swallowed a sob, turning her face away. “The babe has been ever so active, Miss Simmons, up until last night. Since supper yesterday I’ve not felt a single movement.”

“Might I measure your pulse?” Jemma asked gently, refraining from comment on this recent revelation.

The lady nodded, obediently holding out her wrist for Jemma to hold.

“You are almost full-term are you not, Mrs Hinton? You await the birth of your baby any day?”

“That’s correct, Miss Simmons. We hope to welcome our child within the week.”

Helping to lift the skirts of her charge’s gown, Jemma carefully searched with her trusty Pinard horn for any signs of a heartbeat. She heard nothing, but to further distress the lady at this point would have been counterproductive and she knew of some reasons why a heartbeat might not have been easily detected that did not have to signify the worst. With her hands she once more gently palpated
the lady’s stomach, making out the position of the baby, head down and in all other aspects, ready to be born.

Jemma assisted her to sit up and took her hand reassuringly. “What you need to do, Mrs Hinton, is rest. There is every chance that your baby is just asleep. Perhaps the little one has had a growth spurt and finds itself feeling a bit more confined in your womb. Perhaps they’ve simply turned and changed position and so you’re just not feeling movement where you’re used to noticing it. Perhaps as you slept last night, your baby did all its moving for the day and then as you woke and began to get up and about, your movements lulled it back to sleep. There are any number of possibilities. We shall have to allow any and all of them.”

“Oh, thank you, Miss Simmons,” Mrs Hinton sighed. “I do hope you are right. This little one has been so dearly longed for by all our family. It took us a great many years to conceive so this child feels extra precious.”

She smiled. “I quite understand, Mrs Hinton. Let me help you get comfortable.”

Jemma spent some considerable hours with the lady, mostly focusing on making conversation in a manner to distract her from the lack of fetal movement she experienced.

It wasn’t until the afternoon sun started to be swallowed up by dusk that she began to make her farewells.

“Well, Mrs Hinton, I’ll leave you now to rest for the evening. If you should feel any change, or if the bleeding you’re experiencing increases, send someone straight to my aunts’ address and I will, of course, return without hesitation.”

“I do so appreciate your care, Miss Simmons,” the lady said. “I shall sleep soundly at last knowing there are some other possible explanations for the quiet.” She rubbed her hand over her stomach again and though she spoke confidently, Jemma could see the tell-tale crease of concern between her brows.

She sought to reassure her patient as much as possible. “If you do not send for me overnight, I shall come first thing in the morning to see how you are getting along. Perhaps by then the movement will have resumed so vigorously that you’ll be longing for another rest!”

“I do hope so.” Mrs Hinton managed an anxious smile. “I miss our little communications.”

Jemma squeezed her hand. “If when you wake tomorrow, you still don’t feel anything, put your feet up while you wait for me. Have something to eat, maybe something sweet, and try to relax. You could also try having a very cold drink to see if that prompts a response. Even a loud noise like slamming the door might startle a movement out of your baby if you’ve tried everything else. If you still feel nothing then we’ll talk in the morning about what to do next.”

The lady nodded and Jemma took her leave of her, gathering her belongings.

As she left the house she reiterated her instructions to the concerned lady’s maid who nodded gravely.

“Just do all you can to help her rest and send for me if you have any concern,” Jemma urged.
It had not been lost on his perceptive sister that some change had occurred in Fitz, enough even to draw him into minor contributions to the conversation around the dinner table the previous evening. Immediately seizing upon the opportunity to undertake the project set for her by her intended, Daisy had caught her brother alone during his early breakfast and insisted upon him accompanying her for an errand later that day during Jemima’s nap.

Thus Fitz had dutifully returned hours earlier than usual from his library hideaway and, after Jemima was fed and showing promising signs of actually sleeping, the brother and sister sallied forth into the unexpected late-January sunshine.

“Thank you for agreeing to accompany me, Leo,” said Daisy, enjoying the wan winter warmth on her face as her brother extended his arm to her.

“Of course, Daisy,” said Fitz. “You are the only woman in the family whom I cheerfully obey. But what is it that you plan to achieve?”

“I have not been back to Harley Street since that morning I returned in disgrace to Manderston. I want to see the place, to thoroughly face it and then finally close the door on my life with Grantham Ward,” she replied. “I need you beside me for moral support.”

“Then you shall have me, dearest,” he said sympathetically, squeezing her hand. “I am available for all the tear-drying and swoon-catching that might be required.”

“What of you, brother?” Daisy asked tentatively. “I’m aware every moment of your suffering. Is there any way that I can be of support to you?”

Fitz sighed. “I can barely bring myself to think of what has transpired since you and I spoke in the nursery on Christmas night.”

“I imagine our parents had some things to say?”

“They did indeed.” Fitz nodded dolefully. “And in obedience to their command I have written to Her Grace to free her from all obligation to further consider my suit.”

“Oh, Leo!” Daisy cried. “I feel utterly bereft even thinking of it.”

“You must let me also impress upon you the one favour I asked of her, Daisy.”

“Of course, brother. Anything.”

“It seems that I must marry,” Fitz sighed. “No amount of unrequitedness from the woman I love shall save me from that fate. And so I have made a request of the Duchess that should she hear news of my upcoming nuptials, she must stay away.”

Daisy looked as heartbroken at the idea as Fitz felt. “You could never go through with marrying another if Jemma were in attendance.”

“Precisely.”

“But Leo…”

“Mmm?”

“Though she has refused you, this I firmly believe: if Jemma were somehow in attendance, she...
would prove equally unable to stand calmly by and allow you to marry another.”

Fitz glanced at his sister warningly. “You wouldn’t dare test that, Daisy. For my sake, and for the sake of the poor bride, whomever she might be, please do not even consider testing that theory.”

Daisy artlessly held his gaze. “Honestly, Leo, I am holding on to the hope that it will never come to that. Like you, there is only one woman that I desire to see walking down the aisle towards you.”

“But she is so very far from wanting me, Daisy. Wanting her loses a good deal of its loveliness when I know I am not wanted in return.”

Daisy’s pace slowed and the brother and sister came to a halt at the foot of an imposing Harley Street house.

“Here we are,” she said, staring up at the looming edifice. “When last I walked out of here I feared for my very life.”

“I am so sorry, Daisy, that your first home was not a happy one,” Fitz offered sadly.

His sister squeezed his arm. “My first home, Manderston House, was the happiest I could have imagined. Our mother and father have perhaps not been the most affectionate of parents but to compensate for them, God gave me you, the best brother any woman could ask for.”

Fitz grinned and scratched at his whiskers. “You are far too kind.”

Daisy laughed. “I am nothing of the sort.”

“So what is it that you hope to achieve here?” he asked, looking about them.

“Do you know,” his sister replied, “I really expected standing here to affect me more deeply. I had quite pictured myself collapsing into your arms and weeping hysterically.”

Fitz peered at her theatrically. “Is that a single crystal tear I spy? The one drop of remorse you can summon for the loss of this pitiful excuse for a man?”

Daisy swatted at him with her free hand. “Perhaps this was a wasted excursion.”

“Time is never wasted when I am with you, sister dear,” Fitz laughed and then grew serious. “But I am genuinely pleased to see that this period of your life in which Ward so abused you holds no remaining power.”

“So I suppose I am free to…”

Her brother grinned. “Free to reduce my usually sturdy friend to a puddle of mush?”

“Antoine is not so easily undone,” Daisy replied playfully.

“Except apparently when it comes to you, dearest.”

“Well, shall we return?” his sister suggested. “Jemima will wake soon and I don’t want to overburden Miss Morse.”

Fitz scoffed. “Miss Morse overburdened by the care of her infant charge? Hunter wouldn’t hear of it!”

“He has been missing little James, hasn’t he?” said Daisy.
“Is that how you choose to interpret Hunter’s solicitous care?” Fitz laughed. “I do not doubt he is missing his baby brother but I assure you it is not James at the forefront of his mind.”

“So will you return with me to endure some more of their display or shall I lose you now to your mysterious occupation?” Daisy asked.

“If it suits you, my dear, I might walk you to the door, kiss you goodbye, and then go on.”

“Oh, very well.” Daisy directed her brother back towards their lodgings, the two of them quickly falling into step. “But you will join us for dinner?”

Fitz laughed without mirth. “My heart may be broken but my appetite remains unchanged I assure you.”

“And how shall your poor broken heart endure if you are forced to return to Manderston accompanied by one or more engaged couples?”

“Matrimony is a bit like the plague and can be just as catching. I shall have to do my utmost to increase the number to three,” he replied, his plight garnering yet another sympathetic sisterly pat.

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The sun was slipping almost out of sight as Jemma descended the Hinton’s front steps but there remained more than enough light for her to recognise the familiar figure striding towards her, the dusk doing nothing to dull the ginger glow of his whiskers.

“Mr Fitz?” she gasped, clutching her bag close to her body. She had not seen him since that terrible morning in the conservatory when he’d fled her rejection.

“Duchess!” he replied, stopping still to peer up at her, his expression utterly incredulous. “I had no… no notion at all of seeing you here in London.”

“No, Mr Fitz, nor did I have the slightest expectation of seeing you. I am only just arrived as of yesterday, visiting with my aunts, but I’ve just been calling on a friend of theirs – an expectant mother.” She indicated the steps on which she stood, needlessly explaining, “This is the lady’s home.”

Fitz gazed up at the house a moment longer than seemed reasonable as if trying to establish his footing. “Err… I will admit to being uncertain how to proceed just now, Your Grace,” he said eventually, “Especially after my recent and somewhat decisive correspondence.”

Jemma thought of the letter with a pang.

“Of course I know the substance of what I wrote to you,” he said, his eyes on the pavement before him, “but obviously as yet I have made no attempt at progress in the direction I described.” When he raised his gaze his expression was hopeful. “I wonder, Duchess, if you would consider accompanying me to the Triplett’s home in Wimpole Street so that I can share you with Daisy, Jemima and the others and so that I might selfishly draw out what might be a last opportunity to enjoy your company.” He smiled sadly. “We often speak of you, Daisy and I. You are much missed by both of us.”
“And I miss both of you terribly,” Jemma replied earnestly. “Please do allow me to accompany you
to see them, Mr Fitz.” She paused, her gaze faltering. “Provided, of course, that you are sure my
presence will not be err… counterproductive to you?”

Fitz smiled sadly. “It may very well prove counterproductive to indulge my preference for your
company, Your Grace,” he allowed, “but I cannot let that to stand in the way of what will otherwise
be a wonderful evening. I shall simply have to screw my courage to the sticking-place.”

“Very well, then, Mr Fitz,” she agreed. “But first, if it will not be too much trouble, might we walk
past my aunts’ home and tell the staff of my plans? They are but six doors away and I want to let
them know where I can be found should I need to be summoned urgently.”

Fitz’s smile was as warm as it ever had been as he extended his arm for her to take.

“How fares the lady you have just visited?” he enquired politely as they walked arm in arm. “Has
she got long to wait before her baby arrives?”

Jemma had not yet articulated her fears even to herself so it was a blessing to have found such a
friend in whom to confide even if she would later have to say her final farewells to him. “I will own
to being very frightened for her, Mr Fitz,” she said quietly. “She has not felt her baby move since
yesterday evening and I could find no sign of a heartbeat.”

“Is there anything that can be done for her?” he asked, his eyes full of concern. “Or for the child?”

She shook her head. “No, nothing. She must simply wait for labour to begin and perhaps for God to
grant her a miracle.” She stopped at the foot of her aunts’ enormous house. “Would you mind
waiting here a moment, Mr Fitz?”

“Not at all,” he replied and she ran up the stairs, disappearing within as soon as the imposing front
door swung open to admit her.

…

Fitz knew full well that the evening unfolding before him would ultimately increase his heartache
rather than relieve it but he could not find within him a scrap of regret over his choices. There was no
earthly possibility that he could simply have greeted the Duchess on the street and walked on. That
would certainly have been the path to self-loathing. However, this alternative allowed him the joy of
basking in the presence of his beloved for however long she would bestow it – the ultimate goal of
everything he had been trying unsuccessfully to work toward.

He looked about him, taking in the road on which Jemma’s aunts lived, thinking of the many times
he’d had cause to wander up and down Grosvenor Street in his youth. On how many different
occasions might he have passed by the Duchess in London? How could he have failed to notice her?
How could he not have stopped still in the street, captivated by her beauty, making a spectacle of
himself? How many times might he have sauntered down this very road while she was within the
house towering above him and never realised his proximity to the woman who would come to be so
closely tied to his happiness?

In the dream-like state induced by his speculation regarding the street where she lived he was utterly
unaware of the passing of time. When Jemma returned, not only had she passed on her message,
she’d also found the opportunity to change her gown.
Her expression was a little disgruntled as she descended the stairs. “Do please excuse my tardiness, Mr Fitz,” she said. “Aunt Victoria would not hear of me coming with you without changing for dinner.”

Hoping that he had been invited to appreciate her altered appearance by the apology she seemed to feel necessary, he allowed himself to gaze up at her as she drew nearer, drinking her in. She was swathed in strawberry pink silk in the bodice, with a fine lace trim accentuating her perfect bust and a pink ribbon wrapped high about her waist. From this flowed delicate, sheer silk net and gauze in a floral design that fell into a billowing patterned skirt and her pink slippers were adorned with tiny silk rosettes. A white wool wrap had been placed around her shoulders against the cool evening air.

“Your Grace,” he said, holding out his hand to her as she reached the bottom of the steps, “You are a vision.” Fitz knew he was entirely failing to affect the indifference he should perhaps have been trying to cultivate where the Duchess was concerned, if only for his own survival.

“Thank you, Mr Fitz,” she replied, taking his hand, her cheeks as pink as her gown. “You are too kind.”

Suddenly conscious of the chill in the air, Fitz said, “Should we take a carriage, Duchess? Or might I call us a taxi cab? I should hate for you to feel cold.”

“Oh, no, Mr Fitz,” she replied. “I’ve been cooped up inside all day and Wimpole Street is not at all far. Would you mind terribly if we walked and took a little fresh air?”

“Not at all Your Grace,” he said with a little bow. “You shall find me very easily persuaded.”

Walking the streets of London with such an unearthly beauty on his arm, Fitz felt himself the envy of every man he passed.

“I am indebted to you for the research you conducted on my behalf, Mr Fitz,” she said, snapping him out of his smug enjoyment - she was no more his than any man’s.

“Your ideas for the oxygen apparatus and storage canister will no doubt help a great deal with establishing how one might go about administering the gas. It was ever so kind of you to establish your correspondence with James Watt so that I could benefit from your findings. Of course, I myself lack the requisite skill to produce anything that might do justice to your suggestions.”

Fitz forced himself to take a deep breath and hold back the impossible offer of his own services. “I suppose there must be someone with whom you could consult.”

“Of course, Mr Fitz,” she nodded vigorously. “I shall find the right person to work with eventually.”

Conversation of this type was too painful to sustain for any length of time. All Fitz wanted to do was launch into another rebuttal of all her reasons for refusing him. Instead he strove for the very safest, if dullest, of topics.

“How lovely it has been to have a break from the rain today,” he observed.

“Indeed, Mr Fitz,” she replied. “Yesterday, I was contemplating building an ark.”

“I imagine it is the same at home?” he enquired.

“Oh, no,” Her Grace replied. “Berwickshire is still buried under a blanket of ice and snow from which it looks as though it shall never emerge.”
“Spring shall come eventually, Duchess,” he replied. “It always does.”

“Of course you are right, Mr Fitz. And before we know it, Summer shall be upon us.”

Having never imagined it possible that he should find himself scraping the barrel of polite but banal small talk with the luminous Duchess of Argyll, at last he was leading her up the steps to the Triplett's front door.

Chapter End Notes

Note: For the musical theatre fans (of which I'm not really a rabid one but I've been exposed to a great deal of them in my life), yes, Fitz is channelling a bit of Freddie Eynsford-Hill in that bit on the street where she lives. Marry Freddie? Ha!

Also, the pink dress, for those who like to have a visual and look at the source material from which I have gently plagiarised my description: http://agreeabletyrant.dar.org/gallery/1810s/pink-silk-gauze-dress/

Lastly, yes, I am building to a sad thing regarding a birth that will unfold over the next couple of chapters. I promise it will not be graphic or anything like that. It will happen because, even though my genre is "Regency-Lite" (all the privileges, none of the responsibilities) this is still a time before so many of the wonders of modern pre-natal care that we know today.

If you are pregnant and reading this fic, it is so very very very unlikely that this will happen to you. I hate to think I might be contributing to the anxiety of an expecting sister out there and I know that over the years a lot of expectant mothers have read this fic (and given birth to their babies and now have three-year-olds because it has taken me so bloody long to finish it!!) BUT should YOU feel like there's sudden halt to the fetal movements you're used to experiencing, don't be a Mrs Hinton and go out and visit your sister-in-law and certainly don't leave it 24 hours before you try all the things Jemma suggests to Mrs Hinton. Try them all and if no change, go and see your midwife or doctor or whatever care-provider you've chosen and get yourself checked out. They have stuff they can do to assist. This was not the case in the early 1800s!
When the drawing room doors were dramatically flung opened by the Triplett’s obsequious footman and Mr Fitz and his entirely unanticipated companion were announced, a range of reactions were apparent on the faces of those seated therein.

Daisy clasped her hands together in delight, Hunter raised his eyebrows encouragingly, Raina kept her eyes entirely focused on the embroidery in her lap.

Mr Triplett was the first to his feet to enthusiastically greet their guest. “Your Grace!” he cried. “What an honour to have you visit! You must stay and dine with us. I hope Fitz has already insisted.”

Jemma smiled graciously. “He has. Thank you, Mr Triplett. It will be lovely to spend some time with you all after such a long absence.”

Antoine turned to his friend in mock irritation. “Run and change, man. Anyone can see that you have been vastly shown up by your companion and Hunter’s about to start gnawing on the furniture.”

Fitz laughed and hurriedly made his excuses, his gaze lingering on the duchess as he backed out of the room as if he half expected her to have disappeared by the time he returned.

Jemma moved about the room greeting each friend until she reached Raina who apparently had elected to entirely ignore this latest addition to their party.

Her brother silently apologised for his sibling’s rudeness by means of an expressive shrug from behind where she sat. Jemma responded with an understanding nod and a sad little smile.

Where Daisy’s greeting was a lot warmer than Jemma had entirely expected, Miss Morse nearly crushed the duchess with the force of her embrace.

“Oh, Jemma,” she whispered. “It is so good to see you!”

“How have you been holding up, Barbara?” her friend enquired. “Have you been alright here in London?”

“I will admit to missing my parents and my little cottage and even, now and again, my sheep.” She stopped suddenly and gasped, holding her hand to her mouth. “Oh dear, I forgot myself and called you Jemma just now! Forgive me, Your Grace.”

“Oh, don’t do that, Barbara. You must promise me that I can always be just Jemma with you.”

Her friend looked back at her uncertainly.

“Honestly, you’ll be almost the only person with whom I shall feel an enormous sense of relief!”

“Alright, Jemma,” Miss Morse replied. “But you must promise to stick up for me if another overhears and is offended by my disrespect.”

The duchess laughed. “You may at least be certain of that!”
Barbara smiled. “I suppose you are right.”

“Now, I have a poignant favour to ask of you, Barbara. Do you think you might be able to get an hour or two out of the house tomorrow?”

“Of course! Mrs Ward is always encouraging me to go out exploring when we put Jemima down for her nap. And I’m never required when she wakes because Mr Triplett claims the baby for the bulk of the afternoon.”

The two women shared an indulgent little smile, glancing over at the gentleman who looked back at them in some confusion before smiling tentatively back.

“So what is this favour, Jemma?”

She began to explain the plight of the Hintons and her doubts for the survival of Polly’s longed-for child.

“Oh, the poor lady,” said Barbara. “Do you anticipate a stillbirth?”

Jemma nodded. “I do. And though a stillbirth is, of course, traumatic under any circumstances, I feel that for this couple it will spell the end of their hopes for a family.”

“So how is it that I can be of assistance?” Barbara enquired. “Would you like me to attend the lady alongside you?”

“No, I am thinking of a plan that may be entirely refused by the Hintons but one that I should at least like to be prepared to put it into action if it should seem appealing to them.”

“Do go on,” Barbara urged her.

…”

When Mr Fitz reappeared in the drawing room he did so with a vague sense of lingering regret for harassing his man into dressing him so quickly while insisting on such excessive care and attention to detail. Fitz was not at all vain, he’d always dismissed any mention of his being handsome, but he knew that he’d been granted a rare opportunity, perhaps even another chance, and consequently he felt that he could not rule out any advantage, even the somewhat superficially sartorial.

Having been told by every female relative he could remember that the blue of his eyes was greatly enhanced by the blue of his clothing, he had his man rummaging through his cravats and waistcoats and evening jackets until the two of them lit upon a combination of items that he felt was blue enough and that his man felt did not breach the limiting bounds of good taste.

Daisy and Antoine stood close together by the window, Hunter was helping himself to a third pre-dinner sherry, Miss Triplett seemed to be giving more attention to her embroidery than he had ever seen her dedicate and the duchess was deep in conversation with Miss Morse though she did look up, perhaps even appreciatively, on his arrival.

It was Antoine’s duty to escort the duchess in to dinner which he immediately set about doing, leaving Fitz to serve his role of escorting his sister.
Once they were all seated, Fitz was disappointed to find himself flanked by Daisy on the one side and Raina on the other with the duchess seemingly miles away across the table, still murmuring with Miss Morse. The aged Mrs Triplett, though technically required as chaperone to the unmarried ladies, had evidently been regarded ‘ill’ enough by her granddaughter to remain sequestered safely above stairs.

Ordinarily he would have slumped into his seat with some degree of relief, keenly anticipating what the kitchen might have produced for his enjoyment. Tonight, however, with his senses heightened, he noticed the perfectly crisp white table linen, the gleaming silver cutlery and the warm glow of the candles reflected in their sparkling glasses of golden champagne and in the shining eyes of his dinner companions.

He tried not to feel envious as he observed Hunter being invited into the intimate tête-à-tête conducted between the duchess and Miss Morse but it seemed that some time had gone by since his attention had begun to be sought by Miss Triplett.

“Forgive me, Raina,” he said at last, noting her exasperated repetition of his name. “What was it that you were saying?”

Her eventual reply seemed far louder than necessary. “I was saying, Mr Fitz, how much I have enjoyed being sequestered by the fire with you away from the elements this last month you’ve been in London. You and I have been quite cosy together have we not?”

Daisy and Antoine exchanged anxious glances.

Fitz blinked at her, baffled. “I am sorry, Miss Triplett. I’m not sure I understand you.”

Narrowing her eyes at the duchess who was still whispering rapidly with Miss Morse and Mr Hunter, Raina’s volume increased all the more. “I was just saying what a pleasure it has been to have your exclusive company, Mr Fitz. I do so enjoy having you all to myself.”

This last phrase was shouted so loudly that every eye was drawn to her, even those of Her Grace whose conversation had trailed away at the exhibition.

Uncertain what Raina was playing at, he suddenly felt frightened that the duchess might conclude he had begun wooing her of all people. A treasured childhood friend Raina may have been but Fitz would never actively choose to be alone with her, certainly not since her display at Christmas. He felt he had to be polite to Raina but transparent to the Duchess.

“It is kind of you to elevate our few scattered conversations to the level of my exclusive company, Miss Triplett,” he began tentatively, “but I am keenly aware that I have neglected all of you these last weeks.” He cast his gaze around the table connecting with each of his friends until at last he met Miss Simmons’ eye. “I had essential work that I had to complete for the sake of a cause very dear to me.”

She bestowed on him a little smile, holding his gaze between the flickering candelabras long enough that his heart started pounding.

“Now that your work there is done, Mr Fitz,” the duchess asked, her lovely eyes still on him, “What is it that you plan to do next?”

“I feel a bit bereft, I must admit,” he said quietly, “But Mack has delivered some of his vehicle designs to me and I’ve dedicated myself to helping him ensure they’re ready to be patented.”

“And how do you get on?”
With the glow of the candelabras positioned on either side of her, it had begun to seem to Fitz as if the rest of their dining companions had disappeared into the darkness.

“Mack’s work is wonderful, Your Grace. He hardly needs me at all. I am simply assisting him with his documentation.”

“Yet I recall you once bemoaning your lack of opportunity to practically apply your knowledge gained at university,” she observed. “It sounds as though you have found a number of meaningful projects.”

He shook his head. “I am still firmly trapped in the world of the theoretical, Duchess. I yearn to actually build, to construct, to get my blessed hands dirty.”

“Mr Fitz!” Raina’s shrill voice cut through his reverie, bringing the rest of the room sharply back into focus. “Someone of your elevated position has not been born to manual labour!”

“That could equally said about, Her Grace, Raina,” he replied, with a little bow across the table. “And yet look at the fine example she sets for us all.”

Miss Triplett’s shining eyes began to appear as though the candle flame burned from within them. “Would we call it a fine example, Mr Fitz?” she asked archly. “Is it at all wise or responsible for the aristocracy to abandon their station in the selfish pursuit of their own whim?”

Fitz was horrified. He and the other members of the party looked to the duchess who delicately dabbed at her mouth with her napkin and subtly shook her head. He could see her warning them all that they were not to take the bait.

“Tell us the latest from home, Jemma,” Daisy chirped to his right, brightly cutting through the tension. “How was Berwickshire when you drove away?”

“Buried under a blanket of ice and snow as I was telling Mr Fitz on our walk here,” she replied. “Perhaps that is the reason I had no urgent work to attend to.”

“I see,” said his sister, “You would only allow yourself to leave provided you felt certain you were not abandoning any of your mothers.”

“And Maria is there, of course,” Jemma went on. “She is increasingly known and trusted by the women of the parish and I have absolutely every confidence in her.”

“Do you not see?” Miss Triplett apparently could not help herself. “If the Duchess’ responsibilities can be just as well executed by a woman born into service, what advantage at all does she bring?”

“Stop it, Raina.” Fitz spoke quietly in an attempt to contain his rage but every eye was on him. “I cannot sit idly by while you repeatedly insult Her Grace and denigrate her life’s work.”

“Oh?” The lady’s voice was shrill. “I myself have been raised to honour position and title and to expect the deference appropriate to my station. Meanwhile, she ignores all that is essential to the good order of our society.”

“What could be more essential to the good order of society, Miss Triplett, than the diligent care of expectant mothers and the safe birth of their babies?” Fitz demanded. “I cannot imagine a higher calling. And if Her Grace is willing to selflessly put to use the education afforded her by her elevated status in the service of the very bedrock of the society you claim to defend, then that communicates volumes to me about what genuine aristocracy consists of. Consider the model of Our Lord if you can think of no other example - he who made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form
of a servant. Is that not precisely what the Duchess of Argyll does every day?"

“You are very kind to me, Mr Fitz,” the Duchess interrupted, her liquid eyes on him. “Far kinder than I deserve.”

Fitz watched as she composed her features and turned her attention on her attacker. “Can we not agree to disagree, Miss Triplett?” she enquired gently. “It is apparent that you and I shall never see eye-to-eye on questions pertaining to the conduct appropriate to title. I am concerned that you shall go on listing my transgressions and Mr Fitz shall go on defending me until the two of you have quite broken fellowship. I do not desire to be in any way responsible for a breach in such a long-standing and treasured friendship.”

Raina’s expression grew increasingly livid as she listened. “You are so arrogant as to believe that a little disagreement over your inconsequential class traitorship would have the power to damage such a potent friendship as the one that exists between Mr Fitz and myself? A friendship that has long preceded our acquaintance with you and shall flourish long after you have been forgotten?”

“You are wrong, Raina,” Fitz said quietly. “Her Grace shall never be forgotten.”

“Oh, Leo, you fool,” Raina spat. “Need I remind you that the midwife has rejected you? You do not have her love or her respect. There is no advantage to be gained in further fawning over her.” Her attitude suddenly softened. “You need to turn your attention to women better suited to your position.”

Fitz stood to his feet, the scrape of his chair against the wooden floor resounding. He could no longer sit at a table at which the woman he loved was dishonoured.

“You are not leaving, Leo?” Daisy enquired, grabbing his hand.

Antoine also stood. “It shall not be Fitz that leaves,” he said firmly. “Raina, may I speak to you privately?”

As if she had merely been discussing the weather, Miss Triplett daintily dabbed at her mouth with her napkin, laid it neatly beside her plate, stood to her feet and ever so calmly left the room, head held high.

Triplett cast an apologetic glance around the room and then followed her out, closing the door firmly behind them.

“Look at the passion you inspire, dear Jemma,” Daisy said quietly, once it seemed sure the siblings were out of earshot. “I have never had more interesting meals than the ones where you are near.”

“I assure you, Daisy,” the lady replied, “I never intend to be quite so interesting.”

Fitz let out a sigh of relief which quickly became a chuckle. “Apparently, you cannot help it, Your Grace.”

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friend. “Would you like to accompany us, Your Grace?”

“I should like nothing more,” Jemma replied, eager to at last exchange a few words with Daisy in private.

The lady held out her arms to take Jemima from Mr Triplett who was obviously loathe to hand her over. Kissing her tiny brow once and again, he finally allowed the girl’s mother to draw near enough for the exchange.

Jemma saw the look that transpired between Daisy and Triplett as they stood close, arms and hands touching, ostensibly for the safe transfer of the baby.

Following mother and daughter out into the grand hallway, she allowed herself to feel a deep joy even as she suppressed what might have been a slight pang of envy. The little family so clearly in formation before her would be well-equipped to contribute to one another’s thriving – something she had hoped for Daisy since the moment she had made her acquaintance.

The darkened room that had been set aside as Jemima’s nursery was situated far enough from the main rooms that it was entirely quiet apart from the crackle and pop of a low fire burning in the grate.

Daisy positioned herself to feed her baby in a large armchair drawn near to the fireplace and so Jemma sat down in the matching chair opposite.

“You look wonderfully well, Daisy,” Jemma observed. “And Jemima has grown so big and bonny since the last time I saw you.”

“It has been a whole month since we were last together,” said her friend reproachfully. “And you never even came to say goodbye.”

Jemma looked at her hands.

“I understand why, of course, Jemma” the lady said, her voice suddenly infused with sympathy rather than accusation. “But having enjoyed your constant and loyal companionship, I will admit to finding your total absence somewhat jarring.”

“Can you forgive me, Daisy?” Jemma asked, making the request to cover far more than just her desertion.

Daisy’s eyes remained on her feeding baby, her voice was quiet. “I know it is not fair of me to feel disappointed, Jemma, but I had whole-heartedly encouraged Leo. I had his happiness at all times utmost in my mind, of course, but my own happiness was caught up in his being accepted also. I have always longed for a sister and meeting you, finding you to be so wonderful, and seeing my brother fall so all-encompassingly in love with you, I assumed that the granting of more than I had dared to wish was imminently to transpire.”

Jemma could not think of words to say.

The nursing mother looked up to search her friend’s face. “I know you have your principles, dearest, but when my brother declared his love, did you really never waver in your resolve?”

Every instant which Jemma had since labelled a ‘moment of weakness’ came rushing upon her, from catching the first flash of Mr Fitz’s blue eyes the night James Hunter was born through to her elation at his gallant defence of her career a mere hour before.

“Oh, Daisy,” Jemma whispered imploringly. “Please do not ask me such a question.”
Daisy gave her friend a sad smile. “You have just told me all I need know. That at least makes it easier for me to promise not to ask again. However, in return you must promise to listen to me now.”

Jemma promised, steeling herself to hear whatever Daisy would say without crumbling.

“You are one of the most faithful women I know, Jemma. In your care of me through Grantham’s death and Jemima’s birth, you have taught and shown me more about our God and his intimate involvement in our sphere than anything I had ever learned in a sermon. So though it is unclear why it falls to me to impart this to you, you need to understand that in God’s household, scarcity is never the problem. Despite the affluence of my upbringing, because of Ward I know what it is to live in a home in which every mere penny is grasped. But my whole life since then is a testimony to the truth that our God is a God of abundance. He took the ashes of my first marriage and has exchanged them for beauty, has he not? Look, Jemma, at this daughter in my arms. And do not pretend you did not observe Antoine earlier and the way he dotes on both of us. I have not even mentioned the letter I received from your friends, the Coulsons, but I suspect you already know of its news. Our Father has taken my empty, broken cup and filled it with a cascading fountain of grace that will never, ever stop flowing.”

Warming to her theme, the lady reached for Jemma’s trembling hand.

“He has not filled your heart with just enough love for the mothers of Berwickshire and not a skerrick more. He is not a God who exacts and never bestows. No, Jemma. You watch families grow almost every day. You have never seen a new mother carve the finite love in her heart into ever thinner portions so that there might be enough to go round. Quite the opposite – I have observed it within my very own being. The addition of Jemima has doubled rather than halved the capacity of my heart to love and you have seen tenth babies welcomed with the same abundant joy.”

At this Daisy paused while she stood to gently transfer her sleeping daughter into her cot, pressing a goodnight kiss to her forehead. Turning back to her friend she continued.

“You are in error if you really believe that marrying Leo, that giving him your heart, would take from what remains of your heart to give. I have heard it said that you are a genius but if you believe that then I know far better mathematics than you.”

Jemma gave her a tremulous smile, not quite permitting herself to face the enormity of the truths Daisy expressed.

“I cannot tell if you believe me or not, my dear,” Daisy said. “But you promised to listen and I can see that you have.”

Jemma nodded. It was all that she could manage.

“Then let us return to our friends so that they might enjoy you a little longer. I am loathe to be charged with selfishly keeping you all to myself.”

…

Daisy’s words left Jemma ill-equipped for small talk, especially with Mr Fitz whom she barely knew if she could face. So it was almost a mercy when, on their return to the drawing room, she found Mr Fury waiting for her.
“Is it Mrs Hinton?” she asked and received a grim nod.

“Oh,” Daisy said sadly on sighting the man in black. “I had so hoped to hear you play this evening, Your Grace. Rarely have I heard anything that has given me more pleasure. Wouldn’t you agree, Leo?”

He nodded earnestly.

“I thank you both,” she replied, “But I am not sure that would have been wise, given what transpired over dinner.”

Triplett came up to her and took her hands in his. “Please allow me to beg your forgiveness for my sister’s behaviour earlier.”

Jemma shook her head, smiling warmly. “I am only sorry that I seem to pose such a threat to her. I assure you, Mr Triplett, your sister does not trouble me at all.”

“Be that as it may,” he replied. “She certainly troubles me.”

She glanced about the room at all the pairs of eyes on her. “I am sorry to leave you all so suddenly,” she said, and perhaps her gaze lingered on Mr Fitz a little longer than it should have.

“We will keep the lady in our prayers,” he said, bowing deeply from where he stood by the window.

It felt unfair that this farewell had to happen in the full view of so many.

“I thank you, Mr Fitz,” she replied.

She turned to look at Fury who held the drawing room door for her.

Steeling herself to depart she looked once more into Mr Fitz’s deep blue eyes.

“Goodbye,” she whispered.

His echo was just audible over the sound of Fury’s boots on the tiles.

“Goodbye, Your Grace.”

Chapter End Notes

Who have I become posting all these chapters in the space of a week? So hoping I can keep up this pace!!
Thank you so much to those faithful ones who have stuck with this fic through thick and thin!!!
“Have I told you how much I like this Duchess of yours?” Hunter asked playfully as he assisted Miss Morse down from the carriage.

“Jemma spreads sunshine wherever she goes,” the lady replied.

“But this little scheme of hers? This is truly a gift.”

She gave him that maddening little smile of hers, barely more than a pursing of her lips, but he was utterly bewitched by it.

“You realise this is a serious undertaking, Mr Hunter,” she chided him. “And brought about for sombre reasons. As gleeful as you might feel that the two of us have been asked to pose as husband and wife, we really must ensure we are convincing if we are to be at all successful.”

Seizing his opportunity, eyes never leaving hers, he kissed the back of her gloved hand in a manner quite beyond the bounds of their real-life relationship.

“Oh, have no doubt that I can be convincing, my love,” he replied, taking her hand and tucking it tenderly into the crook of his arm as they walked on. “Every man and woman we encounter will leave us utterly convinced that you are my moon and stars.”

He liked the way her smile broadened, even the tiniest degree, at his words. Thus encouraged, he chattered on.

“And just imagine you and I, dearest, about to become parents! What a bonny family we would make.”

“It remains to be seen whether or not anyone will trust us with a child,” she murmured, consulting the scrap of paper on which the duchess had scrawled the address. “Ah, here we are.”

The imposing brown-brick building loomed above them but Barbara, utterly unintimidated, strode inside fairly pulling Hunter along beside her. She spotted a harried looking nurse and swiftly approached her.

“Excuse me, Sister” she said. “My name is Mrs Barbara Hunter and this is my husband, Mr Lance Hunter. We are interested in exploring the possibility of adopting a child. Could you please point us in the right direction?”

“The nursery’s right full of babes just now, ma’am,” the nurse replied earnestly. “I helped deliver a beautiful little girl just this morning. Sadly her mother didn’t survive.”

“Oh, how tragic,” Barbara replied, her hand pressed to her sternum for all the mothers and babies that the story of this little one evoked.

“Would you like me to take you where you can see them?” the nurse asked.

Noticing that Miss Morse was still lost in her moment’s sorrow, Hunter took up the reins. “Thank you, Sister. That would be most helpful.”
The couple trailed after her as she set off down the hallway.

“The Foundling Hospital might be harder on you than you were prepared,” he muttered to Miss Morse who seemed to hold his arm all the more tightly.

“I do not imagine you shall mind terribly if I am forced to lean on you,” was her wry reply.

“Not at all, my dearest love,” he replied. “Lean all you like.”

They were led into a large room filled with little beds, many of which held squalling infants no older than a few days.

Hunter noticed Miss Morse’s glistening tears as she glanced about the room and steadied himself to do the talking.

“As you can see,” the nurse was saying, “These are the poor orphans we’ve had born here or who’ve been brought in over the last week.”

“Is it a challenge to find homes for them?” Hunter enquired.

“Oh, yes,” she replied, “Especially in the winter time when so many are struggling to feed and clothe the children they already have.”

Glancing at Miss Morse and gaining a subtle encouraging nod, Hunter went on. “My wife and I very much hope to adopt in time. We as yet have no children of our own. Would it be too much trouble for you explain the process to us?”

“Not at all, Sir. When it comes to the orphaned infants, the ones that have no one likely to come and claim them, a young, respectable, married couple like yourselves would be ideal candidates for adoptive parents.” She smiled warmly at them. “We do rejoice when we can find a lovely home for any these little ones. Of course, we try the best we can for the others, but their lives will be very hard if they are left here long term.”

“And is there considerable paperwork involved?”

“We do like to keep meticulous records as best we can, Sir,” she replied. “It is rare but it sometimes happens that a grown up gentleman or lady adopted from here in their infancy comes to us to seek information about their parentage. We want to be able to tell them anything we can.”

“Of course. So you require identification from us as prospective parents?”

“That’s right, sir,” she nodded. “Your marriage certificate and proof of your current address.”

“Wonderful,” Hunter replied. “My wife and I shall begin to gather the requisite documentation. And then can the adoption happen straight away?”

“In the case of the unclaimed infants, yes,” she replied cheerily. “You shall arrive here as a couple and leave as a family of three!”

“How marvellous, Barbara, darling,” Hunter enthused.

“Before you go, should you like to see the little girl I mentioned earlier?” the nurse suggested.

Miss Morse nodded earnestly, dabbing at her eyes with her handkerchief.

The nurse patted her kindly on the arm. “It can be distressing, Ma’am, I know, to see these little ones
all alone in the world.”

She led them to a spartan cot in the corner of the room where a perfect little girl lay sleeping peacefully, all swaddled in blankets.

“Her mother named her Robin but we have no surname for her,” she whispered. “A darling little thing, only a few hours old she is. Look at all this lovely dark hair.”

“She is beautiful,” Miss Morse whispered, “Oh, I do hope she is provided with a loving home.”

The nurse nodded kindly and they took their leave of her, walking slowly arm-in-arm along the bustling corridors.

It wasn’t until they emerged into the daylight that Hunter saw the full extent of the toll the Foundling Hospital had taken on Miss Morse.

In his assumed role as her husband, Mr Hunter took the liberty of wrapping his arms around Miss Morse and holding her close, smiling sadly to himself as she allowed herself to lean into his embrace, resting her head on his shoulder.

…

Jemma had slept most of the morning after arriving at home just after the dawn tried valiantly to make itself known through the perennial mid-winter fog. When she woke at last, her aunts were not at home. She wondered if they had perhaps gone to pay their respects to Polly Hinton and whether or not the bereft lady would have agreed to see them.

She allowed herself to be dressed and managed to ingest a sparse meal then wandered uncertainly about the large, empty house, peering into once-familiar rooms and frightening unsuspecting servants. At last, after unnerving enough of her aunts’ staff, she settled upon their lavish formal reception room loosely holding a book by her side the title of which she was utterly unaware.

She positioned herself before the giant window, gazing down to the street below when her tears began to fall afresh. No sooner had she first raised her hand to stem the flow than the door opened and Mr Jarvis’ familiar voice sounded across the cavernous room, announcing the arrival of Miss Barbara Morse and Mr Lance Hunter.

She turned and managed a tremulous smile for the kindly butler who had known her since infancy before her friends entered the room. His smile in return somehow managed to conveyed his sympathy and concern before he disappeared from view, closing the door behind him.

Barbara rushed to embrace Jemma while Hunter hovered awkwardly near the door apparently absorbed in the family portraits hung in their dozens around the room.

“Do come in, Mr Hunter,” Jemma said quietly, and the two ladies made their way back to the centre of the room to sit down while the gentleman shuffled towards them, nervously perching himself on the edge of the lounge opposite.

“Was it awful?” Barbara asked gently, still holding her friend’s hands. “I have been thinking of you all night.”

Jemma nodded quietly. “The child was stillborn as I had anticipated - a perfectly formed baby boy but with two impossibly large knots in his umbilical cord. His parents christened him Tristan for
“Oh, Jemma,” Barbara replied. “I am so terribly sorry. Poor Mr and Mrs Hinton.”

“Indeed. We do not grieve as those who have no hope... and yet... in this case...”

She was suddenly reminded of Miss Morse and Mr Hunter’s purpose for calling. “But what of your progress this morning? Were there any infants in need of a home?”

“So many,” Barbara said, shaking her head. “And one child born just this morning. A little girl named Robin.”

Jemma nodded grimly. “I cannot be sure that they will even consider it but I am so grateful to have this information to pass on to them.”

Barbara nodded, standing to her feet and Hunter, looking confusedly from one lady to the other, did likewise.

“Thank you both,” Jemma said and walked with them to the door embracing Barbara once more before the pair took their leave of her.

Walking back to the window, she tried to imagine the task that lay before her. How could she go to a couple so heartbroken by the raw loss of their longed-for child and present them with such a simplistic solution? And yet it was anything but simplistic. Polly Hinton’s body was uniquely equipped to sustain her baby boy though he never took a breath. On a bare cot at the Foundlings Hospital lay a tiny baby girl whose mother had not survived long enough to give her any such motherly care.

Could she present such a bare-knuckled exchange to the grieving couple? And if she did not? What of the little girl left languishing amongst the other orphans?

The simple process of standing before them and presenting the choice was daunting. What words could she use so they they could hear it as a sensitively considered option rather than a callous denial of the trauma they were enduring? Her tears fell afresh at the thought of it, as she knew with certainty that they would when she was actually in their presence - how could she not weep alongside them?

It seemed as though almost no time had passed before Mr Jarvis was once more at the door, an apologetic expression on his face, this time announcing the highly unexpected arrival of Mr Leopold Fitz.

Before Jemma had quite processed what she’d heard, the gentleman appeared in the doorway, splendidly dressed as always but looking distinctly haggard. Under different circumstances, she might have been unable to look at him without recalling what she had almost confessed to his sister the previous evening. However, the ordeal she had been through overnight allowed her no auxiliary energy to dwell on what might have been.

Feeling no particular need to hide her grief from Mr Fitz, she turned and made her way across the room, settling herself once again on the capacious lounge.

Fitz gave her one of his extraordinary deep bows.

“I happened to be walking past, Your Grace...”

He paused.
“No, Jemma, I shall not attempt to deceive you. In truth have been pacing between here and the house where I happened across you yesterday evening for the last few hours,” he admitted. “Despite spending the night upholding you in prayer, I could not help but feel anxious for you, Duchess, especially after the way you were treated over the dinner that I had hoped might be so enjoyable. Just now I ran into Hunter and Miss Morse on the street and they told me of your patient’s tragic news. I hope you can forgive me but I felt I had to come in straight away to see if I could be of any use to you. If not, say the word, Your Grace, and I shall at once leave you to your solitude.”

His kind consideration touched her deeply. Every one of his wonderful words over dinner the previous evening rang in her head - here before her was perhaps her truest friend and ally. He could be trusted with the depth of her feelings.

When she did not immediately speak but simply closed her eyes and let her tears silently spill over, he took a step closer.

“Oh, Duchess,” he whispered. “Your heart must be breaking.”

She nodded, sensing the intensity of her sadness becoming overwhelming.

The hovering Mr Fitz seemed to sense it too.

“Jemma,” he urged, kneeling beside her, “I know that you have found comfort for your distress in my arms before. I have no expectation of you that you need fear. You have made your wishes perfectly plain. I just long to once more be allowed to prove myself your friend in your hour of need.”

He held his arms out wide, his blue eyes pained for her.

Though Jemma had resolved that as a single woman in her often traumatic line of work she must be stoic and self-reliant, in that moment her anguish seemed all encompassing. To have heard the longing with which Mrs Hinton yearned for her baby and the struggle she endured to conceive and yet to have had to place that beautiful but frighteningly still little body into the arms of his distraught mother - never to take breath, never to nuzzle at her breast, never to open his eyes – it was too much to bear.

To be additionally burdened with an idea she felt she must act on, but about which she felt such ambivalence increased the rawness of her grief.

Had Mr Fitz not arrived, she might have wept her torrents of tears alone. But to have him here, offering her the support of his arms even as he assured her that he expected nothing in return, was a gift she could not refuse.

The slightest indication that she might be opening her arms to him was enough. Mr Fitz swept onto the seat beside her, gathering her entirely into his embrace.

Held in his strong arms, her face pressed against his chest, she felt warm and cocooned against the world, safe to allow her tears to fall and the violent sobs to wrack her form.

As on that terrible night in the Manderston library, Fitz traced mesmerising patterns across her back and whispered unintelligible but soothing words onto her fevered brow.

At last she fell still and quiet, and for some considerable time he simply held her close, allowing her to find her equilibrium undisturbed.

“I have found a little orphaned girl, Mr Fitz,” she whispered eventually, knowing that if she could
feel so safe to share her grief with him, she could certainly broach the idea over which she agonised. “Miss Morse and Mr Hunter visited the Foundlings Hospital this morning for that purpose at my behest.”

“Mmm?” he murmured gently, encouraging her to speak.

“I want to go back to the Hintons who will likely never conceive again, let alone carry a baby to full-term. I want to suggest to them that though they have lost their precious son, they might find consolation in becoming parents to a motherless little girl. Polly fairly leaks with milk, this child would be struggling to get enough nourishment. But I worry that it seems all so stark and utilitarian.”

“They may not receive it so,” he replied.

She felt as much as heard his voice as a deep vibration in his chest.

“I cannot tell how they will receive it, Mr Fitz,” she whispered. “I feel so torn.”

She felt him press his cheek to the top of her head, his arms tightening around her. “I cannot tell how they will receive it, Mr Fitz,” she whispered. “I feel so torn.”

She felt him press his cheek to the top of her head, his arms tightening around her. “I have never had more faith in any person I have ever known to make the best decision when it comes to the care of another, Your Grace,” Fitz replied, his voice gentle but insistent. “I would not dream of making your decision for you, or even advising you, but you must allow me to impart to you my absolute confidence in your ability. Your instinct, your wisdom, your compassion abounds, Jemma. You will choose the right path.”

How did he know to select the very words that she most needed to hear?

When some time had passed, Mr Fitz pulled back a little to look into her eyes, his expression grim.

“The loss of this little one, Jemma - was it the sort of tragedy that our research into oxygen therapy might have prevented, should we have been able to divine a breakthrough?”

The duchess shook her head. “What we needed in this instance, Mr Fitz, is far beyond your or my imagining. The power to somehow see past the layers of tissue and muscle, through to the womb within. The power to induce early labour if there were a concern for the baby’s wellbeing. The power to perform the sort of surgery that would allow successful delivery of the baby and to provide wound care and recovery assistance for the mother. The ability to monitor a mother and baby’s vital signs. Even the ability to somehow take blood from a healthy donor and transfuse it into the veins of a mother suffering blood loss. These are medical innovations of which I can only dream.”

“Then you and I must work towards realising these dreams of yours,” he urged, “Towards preventing this tragedy from occurring in future.”

“But we cannot, Mr Fitz.” Jemma looked at him, trying without success to keep the reproach out of her tone. “You made it abundantly clear in your letter. It will not be fair to her.”

She sat up more fully and slipped out of his arms, straightening her skirts and wiping at her eyes. She smiled sadly across what immediately felt like a cold and yawning chasm of distance between them. “You will find yourself another project.”

“Oh, do not cite this ‘her’ at me, Your Grace,” cried Fitz. “She, whoever she is, must understand that this is life and death of which we speak, as you know now more keenly than ever.”

Jemma managed a bitter little laugh. “I will admit,” she whispered, looking down at her hands in her lap, “At times I think I quite hate her, this fantasy wife of yours.”
The silence drew on until at last she felt forced to seek his face.

“*No*, Duchess.” He regarded her fiercely, his blue eyes blazing. “It is, and will always be you who is the fantasy.”

She felt herself willingly melting back towards his solid warmth, his molten gaze, the strong arms in which she’d been held only moments before. Daisy’s words from the previous evening began to pulse in her brain along with her own inability to deny that she had wavered in her resolve.

Fitz snapped his gaze away. “Forgive me, Jemma,” he whispered, his own unshed tears sparkling in the light of the chandelier above.

She shook her head, trying to convey that his transgression had been nothing that concerned her, certainly nothing that had struck once again at the very core of her teetering resolve.

Her voice, when she found it, was brightly brittle. “Perhaps you might find other midwives with whom you could collaborate?”

“None nearly so brilliant or so insightful as you,” he replied.

Jemma felt sure that if she spoke, her fragile but principled stance would entirely collapse.

He glanced at the clock. “Your aunts will surely be returning soon. You must allow me at last to take my final leave of you, Your Grace.”

As he stood to his feet, his tears spilled over. Dashing them away with the back of his hand he spoke, his voice raw with emotion. “You can only imagine how I wept as I wrote you that letter, Jemma. I knew there’d surely be times we would stumble across one another’s path but little did I imagine having to say goodbye again in person, alone and in such intimacy as we are.”

Jemma gave him a sad smile. “It pains me to farewell you also, Mr Fitz. Your letter did not invite a reply and I knew it would have been terribly wrong to send one but at least now I can tell you how desperately I wish I had made my position clear from the moment we met. Maybe then you and I could have simply been friends and none of this parting would be necessary.”

“How little you must know of your absolute luminosity, Your Grace,” Fitz said quietly, “if you can truly believe that your being clear with me might have saved me the trouble of falling in love with you.”

Again the ache in his words and the blue of his eyes set her heart to pounding in a fashion that nothing else in her existence seemed to precipitate.

“Please do not be afraid that you misled me, Jemma, or that somehow you are responsible for my wretchedness. I know with utter certainty that I would have loved you regardless of the circumstances. I am glad I was not tested but I could not remotely guarantee that even a pre-existing husband would have protected you from the force of my regard. Of course then, at least, you would have been saved the trouble of having to hear of it.”

He bowed deeply. On straightening he allowed himself to look her directly in the eye, silent for some moments, his gaze yearning.

“Goodbye, Jemma,” he said at last, his voice crackling with emotion, before he turned and fled the room.
Chapter End Notes

The Hintons called their son Tristan because it means Sorrow which is my little nod to my beloved Tess of the D’Urbervilles. *sob*

And more AAAAAAAAAANNNNNNGGGGGSSSSSSSTTTTTTT - sorry not sorry! Some light-heartedness coming your way next chapter I PROMISE!

And for the Huntingbird Shippers, having Hunter and Bobbi go undercover as a married couple was my own little memorial to the magnificent but ultimately doomed idea that was Marvel's Most Wanted.
“You like to exude a tough-as-nails exterior, Miss Morse,” Hunter observed slyly as they wandered through Grosvenor Square, “but I think you’re quite gooey on the inside.”

“All humans are gooey on the inside, Mr Hunter,” she replied. “Stick a knife into any of us and you shall immediately have your proof.”

“See, there you go again, unnecessarily terrifying the living daylights out of me,” he laughed. “But I suspect you’re really a teddy bear. I saw you with your friend just now and in the hospital earlier. You are a great big ball of tender-heartedness and I shall take considerable convincing to believe otherwise.”

“And you, Mr Hunter?” she enquired. “You have all sorts of opinions about my internal make-up. What of yours?”

“Well, I’m not much to write home about, am I, Miss Morse? A bit of insecurity here, a large portion of false confidence there, a few delusions of grandeur, and all wrapped up in the devilishly handsome package you see before you.”

“I see,” she laughed. “More or less the ideal man.”

“I’d make a good husband, would I not, Miss Morse?” Hunter asked playfully as at last they approached the carriage.

“Passable, I’d imagine,” she replied.

“Passable?” he repeated as he assisted her up the carriage steps. “That’s hurtful. You’ve seen me with James. I’ll make a darned good father as well, I’d wager.”

Once seated he found himself being studiously regarded by the lady opposite.

“Forgive me, Mr Hunter,” Barbara said quietly. “I do believe that you are quite right.”

Hunter grinned. “Right about which part? A good husband or a good father?”

“Both.”

“Do you mean that in a general sense?” he asked casually, “Or do you suggest that perhaps I might make a good husband to someone specific?”

She smiled broadly at him. “To me is what I was specifically suggesting, provided, of course, that you would not be too terrified.”

Lance’s heart thundered within him. “So you’ll have me, Miss Morse? As your husband that is?”

Miss Morse nodded coyly. “Do you know, I think I will. I quite enjoyed introducing myself as Mrs Barbara Hunter.”

“And lord, did I enjoy hearing it!” Hunter jumped out of his seat and unceremoniously plonked himself beside her, taking her hand in his.
“Is this really happening, Barbara?” he asked her earnestly. “Did I really just propose to you? And did you really just accept me?”

Miss Morse laughed. “Would you like me to pinch you so you might be assured you’re not dreaming?”

“Go on then,” Hunter laughed but found himself quickly crying out in pain.

He gave her a disgruntled look as he rubbed at his arm. “That wasn’t quite how I’d imagined celebrating my engagement with my brand new fiancé, you know.”

She angled her body towards him on the carriage seat and reached out to tenderly stroke the place where she’d pinched him.

His gaze softened. “And shall we return to the Foundling Hospital one day after we’re wed, my love? Perhaps there might be some other little orphaned babe that would find a good home with us.”

She nodded, clearly moved by the thought and then gave him her maddening little smile. “Perhaps now you might like to try kissing me instead?”

Hunter felt his grin return in force. “That sounds more like it.”

She smiled sweetly back at him.

“I do adore you, Miss Morse,” he whispered, leaning towards her.

“I know,” she whispered back, just as his lips found hers.

...

Jemma could barely believe it when a few moments later she heard the reception room door open again. Who could possibly have arrived to call on her this time? But rather than stepping into the room to make the expected announcement, Mr Jarvis simply poked his head around the door.

“Are you quite alright, Your Grace?” he said quietly. “I cannot help but notice the keenness of your distress.”

Jemma managed a little smile. “You are too kind, Mr Jarvis,” she replied. “It is just that I find myself with a decision to make and I feel too overwrought to make it.”

In truth, after Mr Fitz’ departure she felt herself managing two decisions but she had only fully acknowledged the urgency of one of them.

Jarvis stepped more fully into the room, closing the door behind him. “I recall that when you and your father were pondering something together, you used to like a plate of those little custard tarts to assist you. I happened to notice Cook preparing some earlier. Might I interest you in one or two of those, Your Grace?”

“The ones with the sugared violets?” she asked eagerly.

He smiled warmly. “The very same.”
“I suppose I could be tempted to try one or two,” she agreed eagerly, “provided that it would not be too much trouble, Mr Jarvis.”

“No trouble at all,” he replied, turning to fetch them.

“Err... Mr Jarvis?” she called after him.

He whirled back to face her, the tails of his coat flying behind him. “Yes, Your Grace?”

“Actually, I wonder if…”

He held up a hand. “Allow me to anticipate what you are about to say, Duchess.”

She smiled at him indulgently.

“Instead of one or two custard tarts, you were thinking perhaps I might bring you more like five or six.”

Jemma beamed at him. “You know me very well, don’t you, Mr Jarvis?”

He lowered his head bashfully. “I should like to think I have known your family well over the years,” he allowed. “And if I might take the liberty to say it, Your Grace, I am quite sure that if your mother and father could see you now, they would be simply bursting with pride at the woman you have become.”

He turned once more to go but Jemma called him back, standing to her feet and rushing to his side.

“Is it terribly inappropriate for me to ask to hug you, Mr Jarvis?” she asked.

The older man smiled kindly and opened his arms to her. “It wasn’t uncommon for your mother to embrace me and even on occasion your father after her death,” he said quietly into her hair.

The very thought of it made her cling to him even tighter.

“Not my aunts though?” she laughed, eventually pulling away. “I cannot imagine that.”

His expression was mysterious. “I shall refrain from comment when it comes to your aunts, Your Grace,” he said. “News of them occasionally embracing the butler might damage their fearsome reputations.”

“You are quite right!” she laughed.

He narrowed his eyes. “But even if it should get out, no one would ever believe it.”

Jemma found herself feeling quite lightened by this unexpected moment of connection.

Jarvis smiled kindly at her. “It has always been an honour to serve your family, Your Grace. I shall fetch you some tea and those seven or eight tarts and then you must let me know if you think of anything else I can do for you.”

...
Strengthened first by Mr Fitz and then by Mr Jarvis, Jemma harnessed all her faculties for her return visit to the grieving Hintons. Charles met her at the drawing room door, where he had been sitting with his son’s tiny body, his eyes red from weeping.

“Oh, Mr Hinton,” she said, taking his hands. “I am so terribly sorry for all you have been through.”

He nodded, unable to speak, and motioned her into the hallway and up the sweeping staircase into the room in which Jemma had delivered Tristan in the darkness just before dawn.

Charles went straight to embrace his wife and then fetched a chair, placing it next to the bed for Jemma to sit on. He himself sat on the mattress grasping his wife’s hand.

“The two of you have lost so much today, Mr and Mrs Hinton,” she said. “I cannot begin to convey my sympathy.”

Polly nodded, her red eyes dry for now. “I am so thankful to you, Miss Simmons,” she said. “Your kindness and care has made such a difference to us in this terrible ordeal.”

“How are you feeling, Polly?” Jemma asked gently.

“It is hard to explain exactly how I feel,” she said quietly, “for I know, of course, that I have suffered a great loss... but when a person you love passes away, you miss the sound of their voice, the endearing things they did and said. There is a space in your life they used to fill but now they fill it no longer. As it is I never really met my little Tristan, never heard his sounds, never knew what it was to hold him while he lived. It is a terrible blow, and it must sound terribly heartless to you, but it is almost as though I grieve more for the loss of myself and Charles as parents rather than precisely knowing how to grieve for Tristan himself.” She shook her head. “I know that probably makes no sense at all.”

Jemma took her other hand. “Polly, that makes perfect sense and it certainly does not sound heartless. In fact I have heard much the same sentiment from other women who have suffered stillbirths and miscarriages. Your pregnancy is a unique stage of connection with your child but it is, as you say, the idea of them more than the reality of them that you connect with. Your imaginings of the future are more to do with you than the child because the child, especially a first child, is an entirely unknown element. Women I have cared for describe a sense of grieving the loss of their own potential as mothers as much as, if not more than, grieving the loss of the child itself.”

Polly nodded. “Thank you, Miss Simmons. It is comforting to know that others have felt this somewhat distanced and abstract sadness.”

“It shall come and go in waves, Mrs Hinton,” Jemma added, thinking of her own experiences with grief. “Some days you will find yourself utterly consumed by it, other days you will almost forget until at last you realise that you have learned to live in a new reality in which your grief is simply a part of you. You have been changed by it and you will never be the same but you can go on and live and find joy again even with its constant presence.”

Stemming his tears with the back of his hand, Charles steadied his voice to speak. “Our struggle is perhaps most concerned now with trying to accept our lot as a childless couple,” he croaked but was unable to continue.

At the sight of her husband’s tears, Polly began to weep afresh. “I believe I could perhaps manage to accept it better if it weren’t for all this milk my body is producing. I feel more than ever as if I am meant to be a mother to someone.”
Jemma nodded. “I know, Mrs Hinton. Your body has been preparing to sustain a little life. It shall be some time before your physical self comes to terms with the loss.”

Charles leaned forward and rested his brow on his and his wife’s clasped hands.

Jemma steeled herself. “I do have one suggestion to make, but I am almost afraid to make it,” she said.

Lifting his head, Mr Hinton looked at her with interest. “Does it pertain to our chances of conceiving again?” He looked eagerly to his wife. “Is there hope for us after all, Miss Simmons?”

“It is not quite as simple as that,” Jemma replied. She took a deep breath. “I wonder if the two of you have considered giving a home to child that is not from your own bodies?” she asked. “Just this morning, only hours after Tristan was born, another baby was born here in London. A little girl delivered of a mother who did not survive the birth.”

She watched as the husband and wife once more exchanged glances.

“She has been given the name Robin and even now she languishes at the Foundling Hospital not far from here. She herself is well and bonny but if she remains in that place, though they will do all they can for her, she shall most likely not have an easy life. I do not suggest for a moment that it might lessen your grief but it might be a means of weaving a single strand of hope into these twin tragedies.”

“Could I…” Polly began hesitantly, “Could I feed her?” she asked. “Could this milk that was meant for Tristan sustain her little life?”

Jemma nodded. “It would sustain her, Polly, if you feel able to give her a home.”

Seeing that a wordless conversation had begun between husband and wife, Jemma got to her feet.

“Let me go downstairs for a little while and allow you to discuss it. Of course there is no rush. Should you decide not to take this option now, you can always pursue the path of adoption later if you change your mind.”

She backed out of the room, noting the eagerness with which the couple were whispering to one another.

Jemma had barely made it down the stairs before Charles’ head appeared over the banisters.

“We want to give Robin a home,” he announced. “Today if we can. I am dressing now to go and see about it. Will you accompany me, Miss Simmons?”

She smiled up at him. “Of course, Mr Hinton!”

Daisy happened to be in the hallway furtively closing the nursery door after placing Jemima down for her nap when her red-eyed brother almost pushed past her, shrugging off her attempt to reach out to him in comfort.
She smiled sadly to herself. This was at least a scenario she knew exactly how to handle after long years down the corridor from adolescent Fitz when he was not away at school.

She left him for half-an-hour in solitude - he hadn’t ever appreciated an audience on the rare occasions when he’d really needed to cry - and despite the acquisition of several inches in height and his luxuriant whiskers, she imagined that little had changed.

When the time was right she arranged for Mrs Price to have tea things placed on a trolley on the upstairs floor and wheeled it herself to her brother’s door.

There was no reply to her tentative knock but this was just what she anticipated.

“Leo?” she called quietly. “It’s Daisy. I have tea and I’m coming in.”

She pushed open the door to find her brother sprawled across his bed looking moodily out the window.

“The gloom has descended again,” she observed as she wheeled in the trolley, glancing out at the overcast sky.

“How poetic,” Fitz muttered. “Have you got biscuits?”

“The chocolate ones you like. I told Mrs Price we’d require a full dozen.”

“Good.”

“Though I claim at least three for myself,” she said, daintily counting them onto her own plate to be sure.

While Fitz sighed, Daisy poured them both tea.

“Has it gotten so bad you’ll require sugar?” she asked gently.

“Four,” he replied.

“As bad as all that?”

“If you were offering a nip of scotch I’d quickly take that as well,” he replied grimly. “Who knows? Perhaps I’d even refuse the tea and take the bottle.”

“Now, Leo,” she scolded gently, utterly unimpressed by his attempt to appear tough. “There’s no need to go channeling our father.”

Fitz pulled his legs up under him on the bed so he could sit up at an angle more conducive to tea drinking. “I suppose not,” he agreed, “though the idea of a bit of drunken revelling is not entirely without appeal.”

“I’ve lived through enough of that to last me a lifetime,” Daisy said quietly. “It is no solution to anything.”

Fitz looked at her sympathetically over the rim of his teacup. “Don’t despair, Daisy. As Ward made humiliatingly clear, I cannot even begin to hold my liquor like he could. I promise I shall steer entirely clear of the scotch.”

After a biscuit or two, dunked in tea and slowly savored until he had to lick the melted chocolate off his fingers, Fitz laughed without humour.
“Did you ever imagine having to perform this remedy on me even after I’d supposedly grown into a man, Daisy?” he asked.

“I planned to always be ready,” she replied, licking the chocolate from her own fingers in a manner that would have caused their mother to faint dead away. “Just because you’re all tall and hairy now doesn’t mean you stop feeling.”

“No,” he agreed. “Sadly it doesn’t.”

“There is nothing sad about you feeling, brother,” she said decisively. “Your sensitivity is your greatest asset. It is what makes you so very loveable.”

He huffed. “Not loveable enough apparently.”

“She loves you, Leo,” Daisy replied. “And you both know it.”

“Please don’t say that, Daisy,” he pleaded. “If I have any respect for her I must take her at her word and she has said she will not have me. Of course I long to be able to follow her about, mooning over her until she changes her mind, but if I know anything of the Duchess, I feel certain that that sort of behaviour would only galvanize her in refusing me.”

Daisy sighed. “Of course you are right, Leo.” She stood up, taking her last biscuit off her plate and sliding it onto her brother’s. “Here. You need this more than I do.”

“I don’t deserve you, Daisy,” Fitz replied, immediately seizing it to dunk in his tea.

“What you deserve, brother, is to be incandescently happy,” the lady replied. “And I am doing all I can to facilitate it.”

...

Jemma sat patiently with Charles and Polly Hinton long after the sun had gone down stilling the bereft and yet restored mother’s trembling hands and helping her learn how to tenderly nurse her precious new daughter. The tentative father sat close beside his wife, his tears still falling, but Jemma sensed that these tears were very different from the bitter ones of the morning.

At Polly’s bare breast nuzzled the dark-haired baby girl, the movements of her tiny head almost like a pecking in her eagerness to feed. Jemma demonstrated to the mother how to foster a good attachment and within an incredibly short time, little Robin fed blissfully at Polly’s breast just as if she really had been born to her.

A new calm infused the grieving mother as she nursed her adopted daughter and it seemed to transfer to her husband as well.

“You are the only mother and father she knows,” Jemma whispered to the couple. “You have saved this little girl from a difficult fate.”

“And she has saved the two of us from our own difficult fate,” her father whispered, “thanks to your thoughtfulness, Miss Simmons.”

“I feel somewhat conflicted, you understand, Mr and Mrs Hinton,” Jemma said. “This is a great
happiness, yes, but you must prepare yourselves for strong emotions in the next weeks and months as you come to terms with what has happened. You must allow yourself to grieve for Tristan, to fully feel the weight of his loss and, as I said this morning, allow that grief to settle in you rather than anticipating that you shall ever entirely be free of it."

“"You are right, of course, Miss Simmons,” Charles replied. “Robin will be Tristan’s younger sister, not his replacement. I only wish we would have a means of holding on to him so we could speak of him to her, the brother Robin will never know but might still be able to love.”

“If only we could have had a portrait of Tristan,” said Polly wistfully. “Just a little one to have had in a frame to remember him.” She glanced at her husband before fixing her brimming eyes on the little girl in her arms. “He would have looked so much like you, Charles.”

The new father nodded, his jaw clenched with emotion.

Chapter End Notes

Note: I know that this is only a FitzSimmons fanfic so this probably feels a bit out of place (especially if you’re one of my teenage readers! Sorry guys!) but there might be some readers out there for whom this strikes a bit close to home. Perhaps you have experienced a miscarriage or a stillbirth, perhaps you have had to make a hard decision about a pregnancy, perhaps you long for a baby but for whatever reason you have been unable to have one. All that grief is real and should never be minimised. We’re not too good at talking about these sadnesses but we should be better. Here’s a link that might help you if you have suffered pregnancy loss:
It’s an Australian site but it’s a bit of a universal experience so the information will still be helpful wherever in the world you are.
My first pregnancy ended in a miscarriage at thirteen weeks. It was very rough. I’ve pretty much given a version of my thoughts at the time to Polly here but everyone copes differently and that’s ok.
Lots of love to you if grief of any kind has been a part of your life.

There’s a poem I’m still haunted by, written by A.S. Byatt in her novel “Possession: A Romance” but attributed to her fictional character, the mysterious poet Christabel LaMotte. It’s an amazing homage to Emily Dickinson. Here it is if you feel you want to read it:

'Our Lady- bearing- Pain'

Our Lady- bearing- Pain
She bore what the Cross bears
She bears and bears again -
As the stone- bears- its scars

The Hammer broke her out
Of rough Rock's ancient- Sleep-
And chiselled her about
With stars that weep- that weep-

The Pain inscribed in Rock-
The Pain he bears- she Bore
She hears the Poor Frame Crack-
And knows - He'll - come - no More -

It came all so still
The little Thing -
And would not stay -
Our Questioning -

A heavy Breath
One two and three -
And then the lapsed
Eternity -

A Lapis Flesh
The Crimson- Gone -
It came as still
As any Stone -

My subject is Spilt Milk.
A white Disfigurement
A quiet creeping Sleek
Of squandered Nourishment

Others in a heavy Vase
Raise darkly scented Wine -
This warm and squirted White
In solid Pot - was mine -

And now a paradox
A bleaching blot, a stain
Of pure and innocent white
It goes to Earth again -

Which smelled of summer Hay
Of crunching Cow - Divine -
Of warm flanks and of love
More quiet, more still- than mine-

It runs on table top
It drips onto the Ground
We hear its liquid Lapse
Wet on soft dust its sound.

We run with milk and blood
What we would give we spill
The hungry mouths are raised
We spill we fail to fill

This cannot be restored
This flow cannot redeem
This white's not wiped away
Though blanched we seem

Howe'er I wipe and wipe
Howe'er I frantic- scour
The ghost of my spilled milk
Makes my Air sour.

You should definitely read the book! (But DO NOT watch the film after reading the book. It’s a one or the other affair. It was this dreadful film adaptation in 2002 (yes, the one Fitz and Jemma rant about over dinner in the WIP version of “Do Your Read Me?” which is another FitzSimmons fic of mine!) that made me implement the rule I have lived by ever since with the exception of the Potter films - one must leave AT LEAST five years between the reading of a book you love and the watching of the film adaptation thereof. So yeah, there are lots of films I have just said no to as a result. This one broke me.)

Additionally, one of my lovely readers knows lots about the Foundling Hospital and Thomas Coram, the founder. Apparently it was a pretty great place so I hope I have not maligned it in using it to further my own plot and feels.

Lastly, I have seen Avengers Endgame. I will only say this: it is AMAZING! I SO look forward to discussing it ad nauseum with you all later. Anyone else bummed not to see Iain looking fancy on the red (purple?) carpet? Maybe he’s developed an allergic reaction to events like that.

Ok, now that I have written almost more notes than chapter, I will STOP! Love to hear what you think, lovelies!!!
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The following morning as Fitz entered the drawing room to farewell Daisy, preparing to return to his pattern of sequestering himself in the London Library, he found her hunched over some letter writing that she seemed at considerable pains to hide from him.

“Had you not been so obvious in throwing your arms over the page when you saw me,” he laughed, trying to peek over her shoulder, “I should not have been nearly so curious as to what you are up to.”

“I am enquiring about your Christmas present!” she huffed. “Do go away, Leo!”

“It’s only just February!” he cried. “What can possibly take almost the entire year to have made?”

“I suppose you shall have to find out in December!” she retorted, jumping in her seat so that she could place her body more fully between him and the letter.

At last he surrendered. “Alright, Daisy,” he sighed. “I give in. At least let me kiss you goodbye before I go.”

She sweetly turned her face up towards him to be kissed but when he feigned leaning in and instead grabbed for her parchment, she was more than ready for him.

Laughing gleefully, she snatched the paper away, stood slightly and then sat herself back down with the letter on the seat beneath her.

Fitz chuckled as he leaned over her chair defeated. “And to think, here you are, a grown woman with a daughter of your own.”

“Elder brothers set the example for their younger siblings to follow,” she said, her eyes wide and innocent. “If I am at all lacking in decorum, Leo, I suppose it is you who must bear the blame for it.”

Fitz shook his head. “What you lack in decorum you more than make up for in conniving.”

“Why thank you, dear brother,” she shot back. “It has been gained over many years of self-defence. Allow me to wish you a wonderfully pleasant day amongst your musty old books.”

Her brother laughed as he walked towards the door. “Very well, Daisy. I’ll leave you to your mischief.”

With an extravagant movement, Daisy raised herself from her chair, retrieved her letter and sat back down again, flourishing the paper as she laid it back on the escritoire. She then waggled her fingers in an exaggerated wave and settled back to her work.

Fitz rolled his eyes. “Goodbye, Daisy.”
Jemma had not returned home until quite late the previous evening waiting to be sure she had done all she could to care for the fragile and yet exuberant Hintons and their precious little Robin. It was a fraught time for the fledgling family to have the tiny body of their son laid out in the drawing room downstairs and their living, breathing, adopted daughter to learn how to care for above stairs. Their mixed emotions of elation and grief would continue in tandem for a long time into the future and she wanted to do all she could to help them manage their unusual transition.

None of this allowed her very much opportunity to dwell on the state of her own heart. For one who was so cautious to preach to others the virtue of taking time to come to terms with upheaval, she was surprisingly reticent to take her own good advice.

Falling into bed each night too exhausted to think was one of her most effective strategies of avoidance and she was pursuing it wholeheartedly.

Jemma woke late, thankful that the maid who at last her pushed open the drapes over her windows had waited until the mid-morning. As she had habitually done in her youth, she surrendered herself into the hands of the maids, a book in her hands, until they released her to breakfast.

While she ate, Mr Jarvis approached with his kindly smile and a letter on a silver salver.

“This arrived for you just now, Your Grace,” he said. “I’d have sent one of the young’uns in with it but, do you know, Duchess, they are all quite skittish about being in the same room as you.”

“They are?” she enquired with interest. “What on earth could it be about me that makes them skittish?”

“They tell me you are far too beautiful and ethereal to even approach, Your Grace.”

“You are teasing me, Jarvis,” Jemma retorted. “I don’t believe a word of it.”

“Believe it, Duchess,” said a languorous voice.

The pair of them turned to find that Mr Loren Olson had somehow silently entered the room and seated himself at the far end of the table reading a newspaper.

“They have all been whispering about you since your recent arrival. Toby has discovered he has the same birthday as you and believes that gives the two of you some sort of deep connection. Jim and Quentin think that you are more like a goddess than a human woman. Frederick swears he saw you once on the stage.”

Jemma laughed, looking to Jarvis in mock horror. “What sort of a ship are you running here, Mr Jarvis? The staff have quite gotten away from you!”

Mr Jarvis eloquently cast his eyes to the heavens. “I suppose you require your usual coffee, Mr Olson?”

The gentleman tossed his head, swishing his long dark hair over his shoulder. “Black as an Icelandic winter if you please, Jarvis.”

“Would you settle for black as the London smog, sir?”

“If that’s all we can manage.”

“Certainly, sir. I’ll see what I can do.” And with that, Jarvis melted away.
“Why is it that my aunt’s more recently acquired staff have so willingly divulged their inner-thoughts to you, Mr Olson?” she enquired.

His smile was wide and mischievous. “I have various means at my disposal, Your Grace.”

A nervous looking young man entered to deliver the gentleman’s coffee, glancing repeatedly in Jemma’s direction.

“Toby.” Olson mouthed to Jemma once his cup had been filled, jerking his head in the direction that the young man exited.

Once he’d left the room Mr Olsen’s grin returned. “Did you feel the thrumming connection, Your Grace?” he asked slyly. “Or do you imagine it’s more of a one-sided thing?”

She shook her head, smiling. “If you don’t mind, Mr Olson, I might just see to my letter rather than speculate as to whether or not Toby and I might be soulmates.”

“Probably for the best,” he replied. “Toby’s far better suited to Geraldine in the kitchen anyway.”

Jemma shook her head and then, noticing the handwriting, eagerly opened her letter.

Dearest Jemma,

I know you’ve been through an awful lot these last few days. I do not know how you bear it. You have been constantly in my prayers.

I wonder if you might find time to come and visit Jemima, Barbara and I in Wimpole Street today. I can promise all manner of cakes.

If it aids you in making your decision, Leo is from home all day and Antoine is even now farewelling Raina and Mrs Triplett who travel back to Shropshire this morning.

I will tell you that the journey has been arranged for Mrs Triplett’s health but if you should wonder if Antoine has other motives, I can assure you that there is quite a list.

I do so hope you will come.

I wish you every blessing,

Daisy

...

When Jemma arrived at the Wimpole Street house, her first instinct was to check if Mr Fitz really had departed for the day. On the one hand, her friend’s absence made her somewhat melancholy but on the other, she wondered what on earth they might find to say to one another now that all their
allowed and all their taboo topics had been thoroughly exhausted.

To find it similarly true that Miss Triplett had departed left less of a lingering melancholy. Jemma bore the lady no ill-will but had come to find her increasingly overt attacks a little trying.

It seemed tragic to Jemma that Raina had so sabotaged her own project to catch Mr Fitz. It wasn’t that she liked the idea of him marrying Miss Triplett, in fact, she was almost surprised by the violence of the degree to which she most certainly did not, but still it pained her to see a woman with such a clear ambition having so little notion of how to go about achieving it.

Mr Fitz was not impressed by under-handedness or aggression. He valued open and honest communication. Mr Fitz did not value or denigrate people according to their appearance or rank. He engaged every person with generosity and open-heartedness. Neither did Fitz enjoy small-talk or gossip. Like Jemma herself, Fitz was drawn to truth and beauty and life and God. When he spoke, he spoke of what mattered. When his admiration was bestowed, it was deserved. When his anger was roused it was in the defense of others. Raina could simply not see what was plain as day. She just didn’t know Fitz like Jemma did, of that she felt utterly certain.

Miss Morse had been left to preside over the cake-cutting and tea-pouring while Daisy fetched Jemima from her nap. When she returned she said to her little daughter, “Are you ready to show your godmother your new trick, Jemima?”

“A new trick?” Jemma asked eagerly. “Let me see!”

Daisy placed the little raven-haired girl down on the carpet and she immediately pulled herself onto all fours and began rocking herself back and forth as if rearing to be on the move.

Jemma shook her head proudly. “Right on time. This daughter of yours is-”

“-A prodigy?” Daisy supplied.

Her godmother apologetically tilted her head to one side. “She is even better than a prodigy, Daisy. Jemima is spectacularly average.”

“Ahh,” Daisy replied, disappointed. “And this is better? You’re sure?”

“Very sure,” Jemma laughed. “And so the shortening is upon us!”


Barbara snorted. “If you consider hemming baby clothes dramatic.”

Daisy looked from one woman to the other. “Now this,” she said, “this right here is the magic I always experience in your presence, Jemma.”

“Sewing? Magical?” Jemma replied. “Well, I can tell you what I know of the art but I can’t pretend it’s my favorite topic.”

Daisy laughed. “Oh, Your Grace, what you impart is far bigger than sewing.”

“You might as well get Jemima’s things so we can get to work while we talk. I don’t pretend to love it but I’m actually very good at sewing and Barbara is even better than I.”

“Let me fetch them,” Miss Morse agreed, getting to her feet. “My sewing box is there in the corner, Jemma.”
“Thank you, Barbara. I’d already spotted it.”

“Goodness, you women are a whirlwind!” Daisy cried. “I barely know what is transpiring around me!”

Jemma looked at her friend with interest. Daisy really hadn’t any prior knowledge! She cast her mind back to her own life before she began the pursuit of her career. She supposed that no one had required her to demonstrate her knowledge of those domestic arts that had any practical application then either.

“Note the long dress your daughter is wearing, as per the custom, Daisy.”

Daisy nodded, smiling at the little girl as she seemed caught in a battle between her advancing will and her quickly-catching-up body.

“As lovely as she looks, all wrapped in her flowing white nightie, this style is not conducive to her ultimately mastering crawling.”

“No,” her mother agreed. “I suppose it is not.”

“So shortening is exactly what it sounds like,” Jemma explained. “Right now, as we talk, and between mouthfuls of cake, the three of us shall literally take up our scissors, shorten Jemima’s gowns and re-hem them so that she can crawl uninhibited.”

“Wonderful!” Daisy replied. “Thank you both!”

The three of them set to work, Daisy watching over the shoulders of the other two and copying where she could until progress had been made enough to justify a break for the concentrated partaking of more tea and cake.

“How are you feeling, Jemma?” Daisy asked gently, handing her a cup and saucer. “What a week you have had in London.”

Jemma smiled back at her. “I am ever so grateful that Mr Fitz stumbled across me that afternoon on Grosvenor Street,” she said, remembering the shock on his face as he spotted her. “Had I not had the pleasure of all your companionship in town I believe it would have taken a far greater toll.”

“We are ever so grateful also,” Daisy agreed. “It has been wonderful to have you amongst us again, has it not, Barbara? We were all at a bit of a loss without you.”

“That is not at all true, Daisy, and you are quite well aware of it,” Jemma replied, laying down her cup and returning a moment to Jemima’s gown. “You will thrive wherever in the world you are and you shall never convince me otherwise.”

“Speaking of thriving,” Daisy said mischievously, “Miss Morse has some news to tell you.”

Jemma turned with interest to her friend who beamed back at her.

Without preamble Miss Morse announced, “Mr Hunter has proposed and I have accepted him!”

Jemma dropped her sewing and leapt to her feet to embrace and congratulate her friend. “Oh, this is wonderful news!”

“It is,” said Barbara grinning, “but I was worried about the effect this change would have on you. I shall in some ways be just as available to work with you as ever - Lance is fully supportive of my
carrying on as I have always done - but in other ways I shall be less available. I shall of course want to spend as much time as possible with my new husband.”

“As is only right and proper, Barbara,” Jemma said smiling as she sat back down and picked up her needle. “You shall have as much time as you need. Do not forget my coup in successfully acquiring Maria!”

“And I’ve been meaning to tell you,” Miss Morse added, “Callie Gill has written to me to let me know that Rose and little Robert are doing wonderfully well. In her letter she expressed an interest in gaining experience as a doula.”

“Has she really?” Jemma asked, taking a second nightie from Barbara’s pile and getting to work. “She’d be wonderful!”

“So with Maria available to share your patients and Callie eager to begin training to assist both of you as I have done, I can continue my work but perhaps for only half the hours in a week that I used to. That enables me to fulfill my desire to spend time with Lance, and to help train Callie and assist you wherever else I am needed. Callie, of course, has her young family to care for so initially her contribution in terms of hours might be quite small, but over time she shall gain experience and be gradually less essential to her children as they grow.”

Daisy nodded. “I would also like to see you freed up, Jemma, to take some rest now and again, to pursue your research and experimentation, and also to do precisely what you are doing now-”

“-the sewing thing again?”

“No,” Daisy laughed. “Not the sewing, the educating!”

Jemma looked back at her, confused.

“Remember what my brother said of your work the other night at dinner?” Daisy asked. “He asked what could be more essential to the good order of society than the diligent care of expectant mothers and the safe birth of their babies.”

Remembering afresh what Mr Fitz had said, how his eyes had flashed as he defended her, how he had even compared her service to that of the Lord Christ, made her feel quite teary.

Daisy went on. “Jemma, I have learned more from you than anyone who has taken it upon themselves to speak into my life. You have a gift, not just of assisting women in birth, but of imparting to them precious understanding of their bodies and what they can do. You can show mothers not only how to feed and bathe a baby but how to love their child and be a parent to their family. You can gather women together and help them learn to encourage and support one another. You galvanize women and strengthen them as individuals and wherever you make introductions between women, community blossoms. Look at Barbara and I as an example!”

Jemma’s teariness only increased at the sweeping picture Daisy painted of her impact.

To celebrate both the engagement and Daisy’s sense of Jemma’s contribution, Mrs Price was called upon to supply a bottle of champagne and before it even arrived, Jemma had finished shortening another of Jemima’s gowns.

Daisy immediately put one on her daughter, freeing her chubby little legs for movement and exploration. As she did so, she admired the Duchess’ exemplary handiwork.

“It must have been a punishing regime, your girlhood,” Daisy remarked. “You don’t even like
sowing. Is there anything at which you are *not* the most accomplished woman I know?"

Antoine poked his head around the door. “Did I hear that there is champagne on offer in here?” he enquired.

Jemma looked up at Antoine, suddenly struck by an idea. “I am not much good at drawing,” she said. “But Mr Triplett - you are remarkable. Might I perhaps borrow you for an hour? If you still feel up to it after the task I have for you, you can come back and drink champagne for the rest of the evening.”

…

Mr Triplett was considerably subdued after the commission Jemma had charged him with but when he had presented his finished, beautiful portrait to Tristan’s parents, the warmth of their reception and the depth of their appreciation obviously moved him.

Walking afterward through the gathering London mist with the Duchess he suddenly said, “I drew him as if he slept, Your Grace. It was the only way I could manage it.”

“And you have made so many beautiful portraits of Jemima sleeping,” she said. “It is clear from the reaction we just saw that you did it wonderfully, Mr Triplett. Thank you. I know that was harrowing. Is there any way I can repay you?”

Triplett shook his head. “It is I who should have been trying to find a way to repay you after my sister’s awful treatment of you, Your Grace. I am thankful to have found an opportunity to be of assistance but I think I must hurry home and cuddle Jemima by the fire for the rest of the evening to help heal my poor heart.”

Jemma smiled. “Of course, Mr Triplett. I would not delay you for the world.”

“Would you join us again for dinner tonight, Duchess?” he asked as they came to a halt outside her aunt’s home. “You never took the glass of champagne that you were being offered when I intruded upon you this afternoon. Besides, tonight I can promise you a much calmer dining experience than what you have become accustomed to in my house.”

She thought of the way Mr Fitz’s tearful farewell had affected her the previous day and felt certain he could promise no such thing.

“Thank you so much for the kind invitation, Mr Triplett,” she said, “but I shall sadly have to refuse. I have barely seen my aunts this week and visiting them is the sole reason I came to London.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” he replied, glancing up at the stately home. “Our conversation shall be far less scintillating without you but I would not desire to keep you from your aunts. Besides, you can at least attest that I have now discharged my duty. Daisy would have given me a severe scolding if I had not been able to tell her that I tried.”

“Then especially pass my apologies on to Daisy,” she said. “We bury Tristan in the morning. Provided Polly and Charles feel comfortable to have Miss Morse support them in the next few weeks, I shall make my return to Berwickshire the day after,” she said.

“So soon?” Triplett enquired. “There is more than one person residing in Wimpole Street that will be
devastated to hear it.”

Jemma thought particularly of the person she felt certain he most meant to imply.

“Alas, it cannot be helped,” she said lightly. “I cannot desert Maria to manage my work at home indefinitely.”

“You are very dedicated to your work, Your Grace,” said Triplett. “Allow me to once more express my admiration for all you do. I want to assure you once again that I share in none of my sister’s harsh judgements.”

“There is no need for you to say such things, Mr Triplett,” she insisted. “You have only ever been just as kind and respectful to me as you are now.”

“Though I do not think anyone admires and respects you as much as my friend, Fitz, Your Grace,” Triplett added meaningfully. “If I might be so bold, I will admit to overhearing some of your conversation with Daisy and Miss Morse this afternoon. It sounded to me like arrangements have been made that perhaps provide you with a little more leisure than you had previously anticipated having.”

She stared back at him, concerned as to what precisely he would allow himself to say.

“When the commander of an army has amassed enough competent troops, Your Grace, he usually finds himself with time and space to sit back and give thought to his strategy,” he went on cryptically. “He can determine where and when to most wisely deploy those troops in a manner that leaves him whatever resources he needs in reserve. And he can take stock and look about him and see what other resources he might need to acquire in order to ensure his ongoing success into the future.”

“I’m not sure I follow, Mr Triplett,” she replied carefully.

Triplett shook his head, clearly not believing for a moment that she’d found him anything other than entirely transparent.

“I have said too much already as you well know,” he sighed. “So I suppose it cannot hurt for me to be explicit. It certainly cannot hurt any worse than watching Fitz moping about without you, Your Grace.”

Though of course she had known his meaning all along, she could no longer pretend to be obtuse.

“I have learned the hard way what it looks like when a lady reciprocates a man’s regard. I was too late myself to catch it the first time but now that I am more enlightened, I may just be allowed to triumph on my second attempt. Do not make me watch Fitz pine for you when I see those very same signs within you, Your Grace.”

She held up a hand. “Do not say any more, Mr Triplett,” she pleaded. “But I will at least tell you that you have astutely hit upon another of the reasons for which I must depart. I am already aware that I have a good deal of thinking to do along the lines you mention.”

His replying smile was one of considerable relief.

“I do not find London particularly conducive to quiet reflection, do you, Mr Triplett?”

He chuckled. “It is possible that I do not value quiet reflection quite as highly as you do, Your Grace. But in this instance I very much appreciate your need of it.”
Jemma smiled tentatively back at him. “Will you send my fondest regards to all those in your house?”

“Of course, Duchess.” Triplett inclined his head. “At the present moment my little party plans to allow the Spring to thoroughly defrost Berwickshire and then make our own return.” He raised his eyebrows expressively. “I am sure that we shall all be reunited with you at Manderston before we know it.”

“Until then, Mr Triplett,” she said, managing a little curtsey.

“Until then, Your Grace. God bless you.” Triplett bowed, then turned and strode off into the mist.

Chapter End Notes

Note: Trip is not mucking about! Yes, I can assure you at last, gentle readers, we are on the home stretch!!! Only got a few scenes to write and for the first time ever I know exactly what needs to happen in them. Fair warning, I do often start writing something and get carried away and birth (ha!) an entirely new plot point that takes an additional seven thousand words to tie up but I'm REALLY hoping not to do that...

What is all this shortening business you might ask, as I did when reading all the LM Montgomery novels that flowed on from those first few that got made into a miniseries. Now you know!!!
Chapter 34

Jemma looked at herself in the glass admiring the deep green gown in which she’d been dressed for what was to be almost her last night in London. Adorned with decorative cream satin bands across the bodice and sleeves, and with a delicate tulle layer of lace and embroidery falling to the rolled hem, she looked as ever she had done in her youth, her hair perfectly coiffed, her complexion creamy, her eyes clear and bright.

How deceptive appearances could be, she reflected. Within she was in turmoil.

Perhaps she would cut her week in London short and leave for home the following day after Tristan’s burial service. She needed the simple cosiness of her cottage, the blank slate of the Berwickshire ice and snow, the unaffected affection of Audrey, and some considerable time alone to diligently begin the thinking she had all but promised Triplett to undertake.

“What a week you have had!” Victoria exclaimed when at last the three of them were seated together around the table.

Melinda nodded. “We are ever so grateful for your care of Polly and Charles, Jemma,” she said. “I know it was difficult for you, but your diligence and compassion has utterly transformed three lives.”

Jemma smiled sadly at her aunt, moved by the words of one who never said anything she didn’t absolutely mean.

“You will keep a close eye on them, won’t you?” she said, glancing from Victoria to Melinda. “They will need a lot more care over the weeks and months ahead.”

Melinda nodded.

“What of you, my dear?” Victoria asked. “Who shall be taking care of you when you return to Berwickshire?”

Jemma gave her aunt a quizzical look. “Do I appear as one who needs particular care, Aunt Victoria?”

The ladies exchanged glances.

“We have been anxious for you, Jemma,” said Melinda. “You carry a great weight all alone.”

She wondered if her aunts could read her mind.

“I have engaged Maria, Aunt Melinda,” Jemma replied. “Do you not recall? I quite poached her from you!”

Her attempt at humour did not seem to lighten the concern with which she was regarded.

She supposed she should share her idea with them, fledgling though it was.

“In fact, when I return, I plan to officially establish a practice of sorts, a midwifery clinic. It is my hope that my workload will be more evenly shared between Maria, Miss Morse and myself together with some other interested women who aspire to learn how to similarly support mothers and families
in the parish.”

“Why this is a splendid idea, Jemma!” Victoria enthused and Melinda nodded in vigorous agreement.

“I think it shall work very well,” she went on, trying in vain to suppress the picture Triplett had painted for her that afternoon. “Daisy hopes that I might even find some more time for research and experimentation.”

“Daisy also insists on your finding some time for leisure, does she not?” Victoria asked, as if she could quite see into her mind.

Melinda’s assessment was decisive. “This scheme is doomed to fail if you are to free yourself from one set of responsibilities only to take up the burden of another, Jemma.”

Again, pushed back towards trying to see herself as Triplett’s commander with increasing time and space, Jemma nodded. “I believe that Daisy is quite committed to ensuring my long-term survival,” she laughed.

“You do not think such a project is necessary?” asked Victoria.

“Or worthwhile?” added Melinda.

Under the weight of the maternal gaze of both her esteemed relatives, Jemma felt herself begin to crumble.

“It’s just that…,” she hesitated, hearing the petulant whine inherent in her complaint.

“That what?” Melinda insisted.

“That I always believed I could do it alone,” she finally whispered, relieved to have owned it aloud but ashamed at the extent of what she revealed.

“And you think that in sharing this load with your colleagues, you have somehow failed?” Victoria asked.

“Oh, Jemma,” said Melinda, her tone far more gentle and sympathetic than she was used to hearing. She turned to her sister-in-law. “This runs deeper than seeking assistance from colleagues to care for her mothers, does it not, Victoria? She does not mean that she always thought she would do that alone.”

Jemma felt her eyes welling up with tears.

“We have not mentioned his name, dear one,” Melinda said quietly. “For we knew the realisation had to come from within you.”

She nodded, unable to speak.

“But now that it has, I can see that it has brought you quite undone.”

Melinda got to her feet and came around the table to where Jemma sat. Kneeling beside her she took her hand and kissed it.

“You are so much like your mother,” she said gently, “In all of the wonderful ways and in all the ways that made us want to throttle her.”

“I am sure we have told you how it took my brother a full year to persuade Charlotte from her
conviction that she would remain single all her life,” said Victoria. “He gave her that turquoise cross
that you wear when at last she agreed that there was no possibility of her sticking to her principles
after she’d fallen in love. Do you remember, Melinda, what he wrote in the card when he gave it to
her?”

Melinda gave Jemma a sad smile. “Jesus said unto them, The children of this world marry, and are
given in marriage: But they which shall be accounted worthy to obtain that world, and the
resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given in marriage: Neither can they die any
more: for they are equal unto the angels; and are the children of God, being the children of the

“Cheeky of him to suggest that she made the right choice to marry him in this world given that they
would be like the angels in the next,” Victoria said, laughing.

Jemma looked from one aunt to the other in some consternation, yanking the chain from about her
neck to hold the cross in her hand, just as she’d done to steel her resolve on the morning she’d forced
herself to refuse Mr Fitz. “But that is not at all how you made it sound when you gave this to me at
Christmas!” she cried. “I had understood that you intended it as a symbol of my unwavering
commitment to the women I served, those whose lives I could save even though my own mother was
not spared. You even said, I remember it distinctly, that my mother
[376x726]treasured this cross because she
[58x712]believed in the resurrection!
[193x712]

“So she did,” Melinda said simply. “And in the light of that belief, it mattered not whether she
remained celibate or changed her mind and married your father. Charlotte knew, because of the real
and rugged cross of Christ that pretty little turquoise cross reminds us of, that she was free to choose
to serve Him however she found herself, whether single or married, a mother or childless, and you
are similarly free to make the same choice.”

Again Jemma looked from aunt to aunt in amazement. “But what of the two of you?” she demanded.
“Aunt Victoria, have you not chosen to live a single life for the purpose of what you might achieve?”

Victoria sighed. “There are all sorts of things one can achieve while single, it is true. I like not
answering to anyone but myself. But, my dear, though I have had many wonderful men pursue me, I
have never found myself induced to succumb to the temptation. Mr Olson is currently trying his best
to convince me, and truthfully, I am not entirely certain that I shall continue to resist him.”

“Aunt Melinda?” Jemma’s tone was somewhat desperate. “The Duke of Albemarle has been dead
for some decades but you never thought to remarry!”

Melinda looked sheepishly from Jemma to her sister-in-law. “I never had cause to think of it again,”
she said, “until quite recently.”

Now it was Victoria’s turn to be shocked. “What are you saying, Montrose?”

“Being married as a girl was lovely, though it was ever so brief that afterward I barely knew what I
was missing,” she said. “My life that followed after Albemarle’s death has been delightful. I have
enjoyed your companionship immensely, Victoria, and helping to raise you, dear Jemma, has been
one of the true joys of my existence. But Andrew, though unfailingly patient, has grown more
insistent over the years. It was ever so lovely to actually be with him at Christmas. I love him and
have done for years. It seemed churlish to continue to refuse him.”

“Andrew Garner?” asked Victoria, incredulous. “Over the years? I thought the two of you had just
been introduced by Jiaying!”
“So did she. As I have often said, Victoria. I reveal information on a strictly need-to-know basis.”

Her sister-in-law looked back at her, impressed. “You could keep secrets for England!”

Melinda gave her a mysterious smile. “Bold of you to assume that I do not.”

...

Standing by Charles Hinton’s side at Tristan’s little grave had been a difficult but necessary way to spend the morning. Polly was still in her lying-in period after the birth and was required to care for tiny Robin, whom Jemma had been pleased to see was absolutely thriving. Miss Morse had accompanied her, both to the Hinton’s prior to the funeral and to the churchyard for the burial, in order to begin her few weeks of supporting the new family until her eventual return to Berwickshire with Daisy and the others of their party.

Jemma had been surprised to find that besides Charles and his and Polly’s family members and friends, another small group of people joined the mourners to pay their respects at the graveside.

Mr Triplett and Daisy had stood side-by-side, Mr Fitz had cuddled his little niece and Lance Hunter had stepped away from his friends and come forward to stand beside Miss Morse.

As the custom had it, those most loosely connected to the deceased were the first to walk silently away from the grave, so there had been no opportunity for conversation, but just the sight of them there, their very presence, had communicated much to Jemma about the nature of the family that she had been so entirely embraced by.

She had managed to briefly catch Mr Fitz’s eye and she tried with the warmth of her gaze to convey to him her appreciation of his presence and also the last of the farewells she would make before they met once more in Scotland.

At last, with a final glance about her aunts’ home and one last fleeting embrace with Mr Jarvis, Jemma acquiesced to Fury’s attempt to herd her into the carriage. The long journey would afford her more time than she could comfortably consider for the thinking she knew she must do and for the process of leaving behind her once firm and fast resolves. Though she was not in such a tearing hurry to do away with them all. She would have some weeks at least in Berwickshire before the Manderston party returned. Perhaps she could give Audrey the pleasure of convincing herself that Jemma’s change of heart had been all her doing.

...

Jemma did not have to wait long for her opportunity. Her aunt’s carriage made a merry jingling as Fury guided the horses past Battlesden House to the cottage and before she had so much as removed the thick cloak Daisy had given her at Christmas, there was Audrey, warmly embracing her, while Rose stoked up the fire that had been laid that morning in keen anticipation of her arrival.
Audrey watched wide-eyed as Fury carried in trunk after trunk.

“I am all amazement, Jemma,” she said, turning to regard her tenant with interest. “This cannot be the usual cargo that Victoria attempts to foist on you!”

“Thankfully, that is all it is,” Fury interjected as he walked out to fetch another. “If it were any more than gowns weighing down these trunks I’d be making a great deal more fuss. That’s not to say they’re not worth a king’s ransom.”

“And what on earth will you do with them all, my dear?” Audrey enquired, turning back to her friend. “You usually make such a point of insisting that Victoria cease and desist from packing your wardrobe but this must almost be its entire contents!”

“Firstly, you are mistaken,” Jemma replied. “This is nothing like the entire contents of my London wardrobe.”

“Even this small part of it must vastly exceed your requirements for your modest lifestyle in Berwickshire.”

Jemma did not immediately answer.

Audrey was too perceptive. “Unless… My dear Jemma… Have you perhaps lit upon some reason for a transformation to your lifestyle here?”

She did not at all know how to reply. She cast a meaningful glance towards Fury, silencing for the moment Audrey’s insistent questioning and at least buying her some time.

At last Fury had finished unpacking the trunks and fondly farewelled his young mistress, the carriage had jingled out of earshot, Rose had completed her hanging of Jemma’s gowns and, leaving a freshly brewed pot of tea on the table, returned to her duties at Battlesden House.

Audrey and Jemma sat in down by the fire in the ensuing calm to drink tea and to talk.

Thankfully, Audrey’s resumed approach was not nearly so direct.

“Tell me about your time in London, dear. Are your aunts in good health?”

It took some considerable time and more than one refilling of the pot to convey to Audrey all of the developments of the week. She listened sympathetically to her tale of the Hintons, with considerable interest to her aunts’ burgeoning romantic interests and with remarkable restraint to her encounters with the party from Manderston. Of course she was delighted to hear of Miss Morse’s engagement and simultaneously horrified and amused to hear of Miss Triplett’s ongoing faux pas.

Before Audrey could return to the topic that was clearly her focus, Jemma asked of the news in Berwickshire.

“Oh, little to report beyond Philip’s constant calls for colds and chills in this weather, my dear,” she replied. “But I have been anxious to share something with you that pertains to our own little family.”

Jemma looked at her friend eagerly. “Daisy hinted at the letter she received from Philip,” she said. “It has been a very eloquent means of demonstrating God’s ongoing grace and provision to her.”

“That has been grace indeed, for all of us.” Audrey nodded. “And I have further evidence of such ongoing grace and provision within my very own body.” She placed her hand low on her abdomen.
Jemma’s eyes widened. “Could it be? Oh, Audrey! I am all astonishment! Could it be that you and Philip are expecting a child of your own?”

Her friend’s happy exclamation in the affirmative came with tears of joy that proved utterly contagious.

Jemma quickly established, swiping at her tears and berating herself all the time for not have immediately seen the signs, that in line with her physician and husband’s observations her friend was at three months gestation and healthy as a horse.

“Will you attend the birth, Jemma?” Audrey asked. “I can think of no one I would rather have beside me than you.”

Jemma nodded vigorously. “It will be an honour!”

“Philip will, of course, be by my side as well,” Audrey added.

“But this way he shall be able to just be your husband and leave all the other things to me.”

“Precisely.”

Jemma clasped her hands together. “Oh, I eagerly anticipate the arrival of this little sibling for Beth!”

Audrey nodded. “Another little sibling, together with Jemima.”

“That’s right!” Jemma laughed. “Oh, Audrey, how you must thrill at the very thought of it!”

“I never believed that Philip and I should have a child of our own. And truthfully, I still struggle to believe that I shall be able to love this babe as much as I love precious Beth.”

Daisy’s words came to Jemma immediately and she tried her best to diligently apply them to herself even while she repeated them to Audrey.

“In God’s household, scarcity is never the problem. He takes ashes and exchanges them for beauty. He takes our empty, broken cups and causes them to overflow with grace. He has not filled your heart with just enough love for Philip and Beth and not a skerrick more. I have been reminded recently that I have never seen a new mother carve the finite love in her heart into ever thinner portions so that there might be enough to go round. In fact, it is quite the opposite – the addition of a second baby doubles rather than halves the capacity of a mother’s heart to love and I have seen tenth babies welcomed with the same abundant joy.”

“So much joy,” Audrey replied, reaching to grasp Jemma’s hand with her own. “And what a preacher you have become, my dear!”

Jemma laughed. “Do we not preach most fervently the sermons we ourselves are most in need of hearing?”

“Alright, Miss Simmons,” Audrey said, with the tone of a school teacher, clearly hearing the echoes of far more than Jemma was revealing. “That’s quite enough about me. You have a tale to tell and I shall not be leaving this cottage until I have heard it all.”

“But Audrey!” her friend complained, “Can you not imagine how I am famished after my long journey?”

Audrey smiled. “Which is why Rose is to appear promptly at six with our dinner.”
There was to be no getting away with it then, Jemma observed. She would have to tell it all.

“I will admit that I gave in about the gowns without displaying my usual spirit,” Jemma sighed.

“Poor Victoria,” Audrey laughed. “Was she very disappointed in you?”

Jemma shook her head. “I suspect she had anticipated my need for them.”

“And what could possibly require you looking like the Duchess you are in Berwickshire, my dear?” Audrey asked eagerly.

Jemma fixed her friend with a look. “You perceived before I did, Audrey, that Manderston House would become a sight of significance in my life.”

Her friend clapped her hands. “Oh, Philip shall be delighted to hear of this development!”

Jemma shook her head. “There has as yet been no development, Audrey. Unless you count the developments still occurring even now within my own heart and mind.”

Her friend considered her for a moment. “Tell me about Mr Leopold Fitz, Your Grace,” she said, assuming an affected manner. “I do not believe I have had the pleasure of an introduction.”

Jemma rolled her eyes but her friend prompted her reply with an expressive gesture of her hands and an expectant look.

“Well, Audrey,” she replied, resignedly playing along, “he is exceedingly handsome.”

“Is he now?” asked Audrey with a knowing look. “Describe him to me.”

Jemma sighed, already sensing the danger in allowing herself to articulate her feelings aloud. “He is far more handsome that should be usually permitted,” she continued honestly. “How is a local midwife to go about her duties unaffected when he keeps appearing about the place with his curls and his whiskers and his forearms and, oh, his staggeringly blue eyes.”

“He does sound rather a pleasing sight,” Audrey agreed with a giggle.

“But it is not merely the sight of him that is the problem,” Jemma continued. “He is sensible and intelligent and compassionate.”

“Oh, dear,” laughed Audrey. “How dare he?”

“I know!” Jemma laughed along, shaking her head. “And though at first he found that the topics that fascinated me quite repulsed him, over time he has showed the rare intellectual and emotional humility and maturity to demonstrably change his mind!”

“Not maturity too?” Audrey cried. “How is such a man to be resisted?”

“Perhaps once I could have advised you,” Jemma replied. “But now I no longer know!”

“And how did Mr Fitz treat you when you happened upon him in London?” her friend enquired.

“With eager courtesy, with deferential thoughtfulness and with gallant heroism!”

“Gallant heroism?” Audrey repeated. “You quite failed to mention that duels were fought over you, my dear.”
“He slayed me a dragon of sorts,” Jemma laughed. “A veritable fire-breathing dragon in a floral gown!”

“Miss Triplett was that combative?” Audrey asked.

“If it were in her power, she would have done far worse than singeing my eyebrows, I assure you, Audrey!”

“And Mr Fitz swooped in on his white horse?” her friend asked eagerly.

Jemma felt herself blushing at the memory. “In a manner of speaking,” she replied.

“He defended your honour?”

“And the entire premise of my existence,” she said quietly, “elevating my work to the level of protecting the very bedrock of society, likening my service to that of the Lord’s.”

Audrey grinned. “Oh, please tell me you are reconsidering his offer, Jemma! I so want to see you letting yourself be loved by this man who undoubtedly loves you so well!”

Jemma thought of the moments that she could never divulge to Audrey, the fleeting minutes and the long hours behind closed doors when she had learned how it felt in her body to be held and caressed and even, unforgettably, kissed by this same man. Audrey was entirely correct. Mr Fitz did love her so well.

“Whatsoever shall I do?” she whispered.

Audrey laughed. “You’ve hardly been one to wait upon convention, my dear. Why don’t you simply tell him you have changed your mind? After all,” she added knowingly, “Mr Fitz changing his mind is one of the points you are quick to chalk up in his favour. I have no doubt he would appreciate the same demonstration of humility and maturity in you, especially as it regards the matter of whether or not you’ll become his wife!”

Jemma pondered this a moment. “I suppose I have a few weeks in which to prepare a little speech,” she mused.

“Oh course,” Audrey laughed. “But how far through it Mr Fitz will let you get once he grasps the general thrust of your argument remains to be seen!”

Jemma found herself drifting back in her mind to the sensation of Mr Fitz’s lips against hers.

Was that what Audrey meant?

Jemma sincerely hoped that it was.
The green dress: https://augusta-auction.com/search-past-sales?
view=lot&id=18380&auction_file_id=50

Also, I am SO excited to announce that this fic is ALMOST finished. Love to hear what you think of this one and then tune in next chapter to see our beloveds united once more!!!

Thanks to my ten faithful readers who’ve stuck with me this far! You deserve a medal for enduring such a slog!!!
Though the days outside grew steadily warmer, it seemed it would be some weeks yet before the internal temperature of the little stone church began to reflect the brilliant change of season outside. Glancing around the building while Mr Koenig delivered his Easter Sunday sermon, Jemma spotted a number of the newly expectant mothers who had been keeping herself and Maria busy. Beside her, Audrey was now proudly showing and her little bump provided a source of intense fascination for Beth who, though she had been repeatedly told it held the promise of a new sister or brother, could not stop insisting it housed a badger and that she would call it Biscuit.

Jemma found her eye drawn to where the Manderston staff sat huddled together for warmth. Mack functioned as a landmark in the crowded sanctuary, towering head and shoulders above the rest, the grey wool of his Sunday suit stretched taut across his enormous shoulders. Beside him on one side sat Cook with Mrs Hartley on the other, who continued to always made a point of chatting with her after the service and whenever she found her about the parish.

Jemma was increasingly aware of the degree to which she missed the Manderston party. She and Daisy has been apart for a month when last she’d seen her in London but now a further six weeks has elapsed and still they did not come. Mr Fitz’s absence caused her a good deal more in the way of impatience. Having allowed herself to finally acknowledge the force of her feelings for him, she now found herself actively pining, a trait she found highly unattractive in herself and which she would admit to no one. In the evenings, by the fire, the speech she’d prepared for him became ever more refined. Now all she lacked was the opportunity to deliver it.

After a lusty singing of *Thine Be The Glory, Risen Conquering Son*, the parishioners rushed out of the freezing church and into the warm Spring sunshine.

Jemma and Maria huddled for their now customary weekly meeting with Callie, sharing notes on their cases and determining which midwife Callie would accompany for their various appointments in the week ahead. She was proving to be a wonderful assistant and Jemma had high hopes for her.

After farewelling them, Jemma found herself directly applied to by Mrs Hartley.

“Shall we at last have that cup of tea that we’ve been talking about today, Miss Simmons?” the housekeeper enquired. “I am quite at my leisure.”

Jemma thought with pleasure of seeing the grounds of Manderston again after her long absence. The practical and easy company of Mrs Hartley would also be welcome.

“That would be lovely, Mrs Hartley,” she said. “Let me just inform Audrey of my plans and I shall be along shortly.”

As it was, Jemma was ready to leave in time to ride Xochi alongside the Manderston party for the short distance to the estate, exclaiming aloud at the abundant return of the lush foliage on the horse-chestnuts lining the avenue down to the house.

“It is stunning, isn’t it?” Mrs Hartley agreed. “That Hunter knows what he is about.”

“Any word as to young Lance’s return?” asked Jemma innocently, seizing on her opportunity to learn anything of when she might be reunited with Mr Fitz.
Mack turned to her with some interest. “You didn’t mention it, Mrs Hartley?” he asked.

Did Jemma imagine it, or was Mrs Hartley glaring daggers at the big man?

“Soon, my dear,” she replied airily. “I am very sure it must be soon.”

Mack shook his head, smiling, and turned his attention back to the horses. Jemma wondered if she’d find a chance to get the groom alone to find out what he knew.

…

The spread of little cakes and pastries Mrs Hartley offered to go with her tea seemed extravagant for a period in which the family was not at home but Jemma imagined Cook must have to try out new recipes now and again.

“How have you been, Mrs Hartley?” she asked. “I imagine this last week has been one of relief now that Mr and Mrs Fitz have at last made their return to Bath.”

Mrs Hartley smiled somewhat nervously. “Yes, though you know how I feel about having family in the house. This place seems so cavernously empty without them.”

“But you do not anticipate having long to wait until more family arrives?” she asked again.

“No, not long at all,” was Mrs Hartley’s infuriatingly vague reply.

“How were Mr and Mrs Fitz when they left?” Jemma enquired politely. “Were they satisfied with their Christmas celebrations?”

“Oh, yes,” Mrs Hartley nodded. “They felt everything went very well. Except of course…” she trailed off tellingly.

Jemma was not certain how to reply. She imagined it must have caused Mrs Hartley some pain to hear that her beloved Leo has been refused. Perhaps it was that she had also approved of his choice and keenly felt his disappointment. Jemma hoped that was the case considering the speech she’d spent no small amount of time composing and committing to memory.

“Mr and Mrs Fitz took it quite badly,” the housekeeper confided. “They had their hearts set on acquiring a Duchess.”

Jemma laughed sadly. “Though I am not sure that they actually cared very much for me.”

“You are an unconventional Duchess, you must admit, Miss Simmons,” the lady agreed, “though they would certainly have come around to liking you in time.”

“Were you ever married, Mrs Hartley?” she asked suddenly, “or are you Mrs on account of your position.”

Mrs Hartley smiled softly at her. “I was married,” she replied. “Bert was the best man I ever knew.”

“How long were you married for?”

“Two years before he died,” she said wistfully, “and short though it was, I wouldn’t exchange those
years for anything.”

“But you never thought to remarry?” Jemma asked.

“Marriage is a gift and singleness is a gift,” Mrs Hartley replied simply. “I always feel sad when I see a young girl yearning to be married as though her life cannot begin until it happens. There are just as many married women who are equally uncertain and unfulfilled.”

“Is it about knowing our own selves then, Mrs Hartley?” she asked. “Is that the secret to happiness?”

“I think so,” she agreed, “ourselves and the God who made us in his image. One can’t be single and happy without it, and one can’t be married and happy without it either!”

“And in the case of the woman who knows both?”

“Well,” Mrs Hartley laughed. “She would be a fearsome woman to behold!”

“And what should such a fearsome woman do?” Jemma insisted, in some desperation for certainty regarding the plan she was soon to put into place. “Stay single or marry?”

Mrs Hartley fixed her with a determined look. “Why, Miss Simmons,” she said, “Such a woman should do whatever on earth she pleases!”

…

After further tea and chit-chat, Jemma became aware of an increased bustling about by the staff around them and a number of them had to apologetically interrupt to hold whispered conversations with the housekeeper.

“Are you sure you are at your leisure, Mrs Hartley?” she asked. “It seems like quite a hive of activity this afternoon. Perhaps I should be on my way.”

The lady looked back at her sheepishly. “It is not that I had not planned on inviting you back for tea as we’d often spoken of, Miss Simmons,” she said. “But today I will confess to being rather calculated in my planning. Allow me at last to give you an honest answer to the question you have now asked me twice. With regard to when I anticipate the return of Mr Fitz, Mrs Ward and their London party, I must finally admit that I anticipate them at any moment.”

Jemma gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. “Today?” she demanded.

“This very hour!” Mrs Hartley replied.

Jemma hurriedly scrambled to her feet, not at all willing to face him without the proper preparation. “Then I really must depart, Mrs Hartley!” she cried. “Think of all you must have to do. I am ever so sorry to have delayed you!”

Mrs Hartley walked out with her into the beautiful Spring green of the Manderston gardens. Eager as she was to be away before the family returned, Jemma tried to walk quite quickly for the stables but was at every moment thwarted by Mrs Hartley’s insistence that she admire a crocus here or a snapdragon there until she was almost forced to be rude.

An exclamation from Mrs Hartley that considerably exceeded in both volume and enthusiasm her
prior expressions of delight at flora informed Jemma that the worst had befallen. She had not managed to achieve her desperate ambition and flee Manderston before the family returned.

Regretfully raising her gaze from the jonquils and following where Mrs Hartley pointed up the tree-lined drive she first spotted Triplet’s chaise and four. It would at least be lovely to see Antoine and Daisy, she reasoned with herself. Perhaps she could simply greet them both and be on her way before any other travellers appeared.

However, before the first horse of the four had so much as put a hoof past the last chestnut in the avenue she spotted not one but two pairs of riders following along behind.

The statuesque Miss Morse was unmistakable and beside her, unsurprisingly, was the somewhat more squat stature of her fiancé, Mr Hunter.

It was with considerable dread that Jemma looked to the pair riding behind them, seemingly engrossed in one another’s conversation.

Beside Mr Fitz, her Mr Fitz, rode another woman of extremely elegant bearing. Her figure was pleasing, her hair was dark and though she was still too far off for Jemma to be certain, she did not think she recognised the lady at all.

Jemma stood in the lush, green garden surrounded by blooms and birdsong, the blue of the sky and the white of the clouds reflected in Manderston’s ornamental lake, and found that it was all she could do not to burst into tears.

Who on earth was this woman? Had Mr Fitz made staggering progress in his stated undertaking since she farewelled him only a month or so before? And how was she to stand there and be introduced to her without causing a terrible scene?

She had only herself to blame. She had hoped that perhaps Mr Fitz might not move so efficiently in his project to find an appropriate lady. She had hoped that perhaps she might find an opportunity to once more recommend herself to him, if he were still amenable to the idea but, alas, this was proof. He had told her he would find someone and he had succeeded.

How wholly had this woman won his affections she wondered bitterly. Would her very presence at the end of his driveway be enough to cause him to waver or had he, in fact, found not only a woman who would suffice, but a woman who could be even more to him than she herself had ever been? Would his affection for herself prove to be a mere infatuation in comparison to what he had discovered with this dark-haired beauty? Would what he had found with her prove to be genuine, soul-shaking love of the kind she had come to realise at last that she felt for Mr Fitz?

Before she had even struggled her way through the full catalogue of her fears, the chaise and four was pulling up almost directly in front of her and Daisy was descending to embrace her, a mix of happiness and anxiety in her expression.

“Jemma!” she cried. “I never anticipated seeing you here to welcome us home!”

Behind her, Antoine stepped out of the carriage holding Jemima in his arms.

“Your Grace,” he said with a warm smile, but he also noticeably glanced behind them, perhaps to check if Fitz and his lady friend were in view.

“You are returned!” Jemma said to Daisy, her befuddlement reducing her to a mere stating of the obvious. “Mrs Hartley invited me to tea after church today but only just now admitted that all along she has at any moment anticipated your arrival.”
The housekeeper looked back at her with concern. Daisy’s anxiety was contagious.

Daisy gave Mrs Hartley a tight little smile. “It is so kind of you to have held Jemma captive for us, Mrs Hartley” she said, “but I do wish we’d had some notice to expect her.”

Daisy was trying to communicate some discomfort to Jemma with her eyes but Jemma was uncertain how to interpret it. More than anything she wished she could flee.

Before that was remotely possible, Miss Morse was calling a greeting to her as she rode over, the same slight unease tempering her obvious joy in seeing her.

Hunter, already on the ground, attempted to gallantly assist his fiancé down from her horse, a somewhat comical sight that did not do enough to distract Jemma from the inevitable encounter with this woman who, in the moments since she had appeared on her white palfrey, had come to entirely represent Jemma’s failure to know her own heart.

Mack emerged from the stables, still in the grey suit he wore to church, and was jovially greeting the new arrivals.

Fitz, whom Jemma had not yet forced herself to look in the eye, did not similarly dismount and assist his lady friend. Instead he hung somewhat back as the lady rode forward.

Jemma wondered if he had been struck dumb by the sight of a Duchess standing awkwardly on his lawn. She at last snuck a glance at him but, no, it was not her to whom he looked. He seemed transfixed by the woman on the horse ahead of him. Jemma felt a stab of pain to her heart and she similarly turned to watch the woman riding on.

Mack, it seemed, had suddenly stuttered into total inertia beside the chaise.

The lady drew her horse to a halt almost at Mack’s feet and when Jemma looked more closely she could see tear tracks on his face, sparkling in the bright sunlight.

The big man strode around to assist the lady down from her horse, his deep brown eyes never straying from her face.

No words were spoken between them but there was a startling intimacy in the way the lady slid from her animal into Mack’s arms, her gaze similarly locked on him.

Even as they all watched on, his hold on her became an embrace, the lady throwing her arms around his neck as he dropped his head and wept into her shoulder.

At last Mack carefully lowered the lady to the ground. They smiled tremulously at one another for a moment before he leaned down, and she surged up on her toes, so that their lips could meet in a tender kiss.

Jemma glanced around at the other faces that were similarly watching this surprising scene unfold, quite unable to process what this latest development might mean.

Daisy and Barbara looked at one another, distinctly relieved, Mrs Hartley, Triplett and Hunter were grinning and Fitz was looking exceedingly pleased with himself.

Mack spoke at last, his voice a gentle rumble. “Elena?” he said. “Can it really be you?”

The lady gazed up at him, awed. “I’ve found you at last, Turtle Man,” she replied.
He looked confused. “You’ve been looking for me?”

She nodded. “Almost since the very moment I let you go.”

Mack’s tears fell afresh. “How long will you stay this time?” he asked, a desperation in his tone.

The lady, Elena, smiled. “As long as you’ll have me.”

“How does forever sound?” Mack asked, laughing.

The lady sighed happily. “Forever with you sounds like perfection to me.”

As the couple resumed their passionate reunion, the onlookers began to glance around about them, catching one another’s eye.

Fitz, still grinning from ear to ear, dismounted and led Franklin over to where Jemma was standing, greeting her with his customary bow.

“It did not for one moment occur to me to imagine that you might be at Manderston awaiting our return, Your Grace,” he said quietly. “To what do we owe this very great honour?”

Fitz’s words and the warmth in his blue gaze immediately alleviated her every fear. This was not the manner of a man in love with another.

She laughed, almost giddy with relief. “I was trying to go home after taking tea with Mrs Hartley but I feel like I have been held hostage and tricked into forming your reception party,” she whispered back. “However, I did not anticipate being treated to anything like this romantic performance.”

“And what do you think of my little triumph?” Fitz enquired.

“Your triumph?” she asked. “I rather wonder what Mack or this fine lady would think if they heard you describing it thus.”

Fitz chuckled, nodding towards where the couple remained locked in one another’s embrace. “They are not hearing anyone describe anything at the present moment, Your Grace.”

He gave her another little bow and walked away. “Look to your own animals,” he whispered loudly to the rest of the party, sauntering past the kissing couple to lead Franklin to the stable.

Jemma watched as he stopped briefly and muttered something to Daisy before striding out of view.

Daisy grinned at her brother and then approached.

“It has just occurred to me, Jemma, like a bolt of inspiration from entirely out of the blue,” she said exaggeratedly, “that you should join us at Manderston for dinner tonight. Leo obviously has a no-doubt entertaining tale to tell us all and, besides that, we have missed you terribly since you left London. Might I persuade you?”

Knowing precisely where the invitation had come from and how neatly it aligned with her burgeoning hopes, Jemma wasted no time in graciously accepting. Something about Mr Fitz’s easy, confident manner caused her to suspect that both his sister and his friend had betrayed her confidences but, having only just lived through the terror of believing him lost to another and then thankfully proven mistaken, she could barely bring herself to mind.

“We shall see you this evening then,” Daisy said, over her shoulder as she walked towards the house. “And tonight there can be no excuse I shall accept that shall save you from having to play and

...
To her surprise, Mr. Fitz had reemerged from the stable, his coat off and his sleeves rolled to the elbow in the manner she found so compelling. He was walking towards her, grinning broadly, this time leading Xochi behind him.

“Did I overhear Daisy inviting you to join us for dinner just now?” he asked.
“Perhaps you did, Mr. Fitz,” she replied, smiling. “Though your hearing must be very keen.”

“Well, it was an inspired idea on her part,” he said. “For I can think of no other way I’d rather spend the evening than listening to you play and sing for us.”

Jemma laughed. “Oddly enough, your sister has suggested that also.”

“Great minds tend to run in families, Your Grace,” he replied. “Or so I’ve heard it said.”

A loud cough garnered the attention of the party gathered on the lawn.

Mack addressed the group, his arm around the beautiful woman at his side.

“I suppose by now most of you must have met Miss Elena Rodriguez,” he said, turning to gaze at the lady adoringly as she smiled around at his gathered friends. “She and I have been apart for ten years and I had almost lost hope of ever seeing her again.” He looked to where Fitz stood at Jemma’s side. “I understand it is thanks to you, Fitz, that I have Elena back again.”

Elena nodded. “We are indebted to you, Mr. Fitz. Thank you.”

Fitz grinned bashfully, and Jemma found he was turning to look at her, perhaps to see if she approved.

She smiled warmly at him and whispered. “So it is your triumph after all, Mr. Fitz. Well done.”

The pride with which he’d been carrying himself since the moment of Mack and Miss Rodriguez’s reunion seemed to increase tenfold at her words.

Rather than let him stand there all afternoon grinning at her and holding onto her horse, she decided she might take her leave of him and spend the afternoon doing all the things Audrey would be amazed to think had occurred to her all by herself in preparation for her evening return to Manderston.

“I shall say farewell for now, Mr. Fitz,” she said, preparing to mount Xochi. “But I promise I shall listen very diligently to your tale of success over dinner tonight.”

He took her hand to aid her and when she looked down at him from the advantage of Xochi’s saddle she was struck again by the seemingly ceaseless novelty of the blue of his eyes as he gazed up at her.

“I am all impatience until then, Your Grace,” Fitz replied and stood back, watching as she rode away.
Mr everyl1ttleth1ng’s suggestions as I told him about my failed attempt to draw extra attention to the hotness of Mack in his Sunday suit were: “just insert the word ‘handsomely’ in there” and “In slacks he sure could fill out.” I demurred.

Some of you will say “everyl1ttleth1ng, you are just dragging this out now!” but I say to you, imagine if I had done what I originally intended to do and have a number of chapters in which Jemma believed herself thrown over for this mysterious Elena Rodriquez. The pining would have been exquisite! Think of Anne Elliot, think of Elinor Dashwood et al. But I sensed my few remaining readers’ impatience and got it all done and dusted in a couple of paragraphs. So YES, I am dragging this out but not nearly as badly as I COULD be!

Will our lovers be together next chapter? The answer is both YES and NOT QUITE!

I don’t think the hymn was written until 1904 but I’m sticking with my Regency-Lite, Research-Lite approach (all of the privileges, none of the responsibility) and claiming that this just is THE Easter Sunday hymn and somehow they would have sung it anyway (Refer Dr B. Banner for his theories pertaining to time travel. Where there’s a will, there’s a way, especially in the Marvel universe.)

Lo! Jesus meets us, risen from the tomb;
lovingly he greets us, scatters fear and gloom;
let the church with gladness, hymns of triumph sing,
for her Lord now liveth, death hath lost its sting.
Thine be the glory, risen, conqu'ring Son;
endless is the vict'ry thou o'er death hast won.

Happy Easter for a few weeks ago. He is risen indeed!
In the blessed provision of their new arrangement, Jemma agreed without hesitation to Mrs Coulson’s too-strongly-worded insistence that she take the carriage for her journey to Manderston.

“And here was I expecting an argument!” said Audrey, clearly shocked by Jemma’s transformation.

“But, Audrey, this is the very wonder of our clinic,” the duchess explained, adjusting the sparkling rope of diamonds she had never before thought she’d display in the parish. “When any of us make an appointment of any kind, even a social engagement, we merely discuss it with the other members of the practice, and, provided we are not run off our feet, we come to an arrangement by which the appointment can be met. As it happened, Maria and I had already planned the week ahead and while she is to be on call today and tomorrow, with Callie arranged to assist where needed, I shall relieve her later in the week.”

“It seems very enlightened, this manner of working that allows all you women both the contribution you crave and the leisure with which to enjoy it,” Audrey replied.

“I will admit to being difficult to persuade at first,” said Jemma. “Sharing it all so evenly seemed to strike at my very reason for existing.”

“But you obviously came to your senses. One of your aunts’ pep-talks?”

“They are very well-practiced, you’ll agree,” observed Jemma wryly.

Audrey laughed. “I imagine I would be quite powerless against the force of their conviction.”

“As was I,” said Jemma, nodding.

“And so you dine with Mr Fitz tonight,” said Audrey. “I cannot help but notice that you seem to be approaching the evening with quite a transformed attitude. This gown for a start!”

Jemma smiled and gave a little turn, showing her ivory moiré silk faille gown to its best advantage. The gold embroidery richly embellishing the base of the skirt and the lines of the bodice gleamed in the dying light of the spring afternoon.

“It is not only Mr Fitz, of course, Audrey,” Jemma added, almost as an afterthought. “Daisy and Antoine shall be there too and, oh… no… It has just occurred to me that Barbara and Hunter will most likely not be there. They will almost certainly be dining with the Hunters or perhaps at Miss Morse’s home. And I do not imagine Mack has been persuaded to share his lady love with all of us just yet.”

“Just the four of you then,” Audrey observed. “What a cosy little party you shall make.”

…

It did feel like it would be a cosy little party as Fitz took his seat beside the glowing duchess and
across the table from his sister and his best friend who had both solemnly promised him that they would do their very best not to make eyes at one another all night.

He had no sense of what to expect from the evening. He hadn’t known earlier that day when he’d suggested the plan to Daisy either but he did know that the weeks after the Duchess left London had been terribly slow and terribly dull and anything, even, or perhaps especially, the unique pain of allowing himself to indulge once more in her company, was better than that. However, certain hints dropped by both Daisy and Antoine had taught him to hope as he had scarcely ever allowed himself to hope before.

“I have been quite in suspense to hear how it is you that are the one who bears responsibility for Mack’s earlier euphoria, Mr Fitz,” the Duchess asked him as the soup was served.

Fitz grinned. “I don’t even recall if I mentioned to you, Your Grace, that I spent a good deal of my time in London sequestered in the London library.”

“I had imagined it would have to have been something like that that enabled you to do all that magnificent work on my behalf, Mr Fitz,” she replied, her honey eyes on him. “Thank you.”

“When my brother says he spent ‘a good deal’ of his time in the library, Jemma,” added Daisy with a withering look in his direction, “what he means to say is that he practically lived there all of the hours it was open. The times that you saw him at Wimpole Street were the rare occasions the rest of us had the joy of his company also.”

“Then I must thank you also, Daisy, for it is clear that your unwilling sacrifice was obviously keenly felt.”

He sensed the Duchess’ reproachful eyes on him. “I hope you have found a way to make it up to your sister, Mr Fitz,” she said.

Fitz knew that in her extremely contented station in life, the one additional thing for which Daisy yearned was the lady to whom he was speaking for a sister-in-law.

“I have promised her that I am working on it, Your Grace,” he replied, daring a glance at his sister who shot him back an encouraging smile.

“So you were in the London Library,” said Triplett, picking up his wine glass, “but there must be a good number of details with which you must provide us to fill the gaps between the library and this afternoon!”

Fitz thought of the long night he had passed between his proposal and Jemma’s refusal. “I should first say that I had once had an occasion to have a talk with Mack in which he divulged the name of his long-lost sweetheart and showed me her portrait which he carries with him inside his pocket watch.”

Daisy pressed her hand to her sternum, her head cocked to one side.

“Once I finished my initial project, as you know, Mack brought me his designs. Elena and I met when she saw them and more or less accused me of theft.”

“Of theft?” Triplett repeated incredulously, eyes wide. “That would have been a first for you, Fitz! I have never known a more law-abiding citizen.”

“Ha!” Daisy scoffed. “You have clearly not lived your whole life down the hall from him, Antoine!”
Fitz let himself glance to his left, enjoying the intimacy of the laughter shared between the four of them.

“Anyway,” he said emphatically, “I had gone to fetch a book I needed to consult and when I returned, this woman, who I thought I might vaguely recognise, was standing over my desk. She declared that she would know Alphonso Mackenzie’s work anywhere!”

“They have been apart ten years and she still recognised the way he drew a carriage?” Daisy cooed.

Fitz rolled his eyes. “Our friend does have an extraordinary gift, Daisy,” he said. “Not many could come up with magic like his. I too would recognise his work anywhere and I do not have to be in love with him for that. It is utterly distinctive!”

His companions all burst into laughter again, and this time he let himself turn more fully in his seat to enjoy the sight of the Duchess’ mirth and watch her wiping the tears from her eyes with her napkin.

“And so once you established that this lady was the same as the lady Mack had mentioned to you, you suggested that she make the return journey with you to Manderston to facilitate their reunion, Mr Fitz?” she asked once she’d recovered her composure. “No wonder you give yourself so much credit!”

“We were quite concerned, weren’t we, Antoine?” Daisy interjected. “All we knew was that Leo insisted upon this unknown woman accompanying us home to Manderston and that he seemed to somehow know her quite well though none of us had so much as laid eyes on her. We didn’t know if she had been invited to stay with us or what the nature of the relationship was between you.”

Fitz felt his eyes widening as the implications rained down. “You thought what …?”

“I too had wondered as to the nature of the relationship between you, Mr Fitz,” the Duchess admitted, not meeting his eye.

“Honestly, Fitz, what did you imagine we’d think?” his sister queried. “I had asked you how you’d feel about arriving home to Manderston with two engaged couples and you’d answered directly, without any hesitation, that you planned to do your best to increase the number to three.”

“And you assumed…?”

“That you were talking about yourself, Leo. Yes! What else, pray, was I supposed to assume?”

“But…” Fitz found himself gesturing wordlessly to the Duchess.

Daisy looked back at him in some concern, trying to ask him with her eyes what on earth he was playing at.

“I am sorry,” interjected Jemma, “but I feel like I might have missed an important announcement. Did you say that your party of six returned to Manderston with two engaged couples?”

Daisy’s eyes widened even further at being thus caught out sharing Antoine’s secrets with her brother. Fitz was at a loss how to assist her out of her muddle, he was far too concerned with how best to help himself in his.

“I believe I can at least answer that question, Your Grace,” Antoine intervened, his tone easy, and Fitz watched his sister as she turned in amazement to listen to him. “You will not be at all surprised to hear that I am in love with Daisy. While we were in London, I asked her to be my wife and I have good reason to believe she will accept me in time.”
“Antoine!” Daisy cried. “You know very well that I have accepted you!”

He grinned. “Well, there you have it,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “And that, I believe, makes two engaged couples.”

Fitz pushed back his chair and walked around the table. “Let me be the first to congratulate you both,” he said, holding his arms out to Daisy but her eyes were fixed on her newly announced fiancé.

“It doesn’t feel quite right for my first embrace as an engaged woman to be with my brother, would you not agree, Antoine?”

Fitz laughed, dropping his arms to his side. “Would you two like to take a moment then?”

Antoine and Daisy looked at each other eagerly.

“Just a brief turn about the hallway?” Antoine suggested, pushing back his chair.

Daisy glanced apologetically at Fitz and then at the duchess. “We shan’t be more than a minute.”

Fitz chuckled to himself as the two of them scurried hand-in-hand from the room. He made his way back around the table to take his seat beside the Duchess. She watched him from beneath her eyelashes, a high colour on her cheeks.

He wasn’t quite sure what to say.

“I imagine this is a development that brings you a great deal of pleasure, Mr Fitz,” she said eventually.

“Daisy and Antoine?” Fitz replied. “I’ve always wanted to try a passionfruit.”

She looked back at him in some confusion.

“For Christmas, Daisy presented Antoine with the invitation she had written to their wedding. She was seven years old at the time and she had determined that I was to be Antoine’s best man, that I was to wear blue, and that there would be passionfruits served at the wedding breakfast.”

Jemma grinned. “Passionfruits are delightful,” she said. “And you do look reliably handsome in blue, Mr Fitz. Not that I have ever seen you look otherwise.”

Fitz found himself rendered unable to do anything but blink repeatedly at her while she simply smiled serenely back at him.

Something had certainly changed.

He found his voice. “I suppose that I myself have come full circle. You know I did not have to work hard to convince Daisy during Jemima’s birth that I vastly preferred life at Manderston with her home.” He sighed. “I have not been permitted to enjoy the idea of it for very long, have I, Your Grace.”

“I am sure there shall be other compensations, Mr Fitz,” she was saying as the dining room door opened once more and Antoine and Daisy returned, their cheeks pink, wide smiles on their faces.

“Now you must allow me to congratulate you,” Fitz said, crossing the room and embracing first his sister and then the man who had always been his brother, regardless of the law.

Behind him he sensed the Duchess taking her turn to warmly embrace his sister and hoped that he could soon similarly harness the law for Daisy’s sake also.
The evening felt to Fitz like a dream. Even the music room to which the four of them retired after dinner seemed to glow with golden fire.

The Duchess was persuaded by Daisy to take her place at the pianoforte and he watched, heart pounding, as she rose from her seat and made her way to the instrument, the gold decoration on her ivory gown gleaming in the light. She seemed to him more like a queen than an ordinary woman who rode a horse and laughed at his jokes and delivered the parish babies. He admired her perfect poise, her shapely form, her nimble fingers and that was all before she began to sing.

Once before, in that very room, she had fixed her gaze upon him as she exhibited and he could still remember the rush of sensation. Again he found himself the object of her single focus, the one to whom she sang, the one for whom she smiled, the one, perhaps, if Daisy and Antoine had been correct, to whom she was beginning at last to incline her heart. He had been there before in the figurative sense as well, hanging on her every look, every gesture, every word for signs of her regard.

Where in the past he had concluded she was innocent in provoking his response, now he was certain she was not. If the Duchess could behave towards him in this manner, in the full knowledge of the desires of his heart and not want him, she was not the woman he knew her to be. Other compensations indeed, he thought to himself, smiling warmly at her.

When would be the right moment to try his luck once more and ask her? If only she could somehow tell him. The etiquette of the day might frown upon it, but the etiquette of the day was not a living, breathing man with a fragile ego and a once-bruised heart.

The song she played came to an end and somehow she was calling him to her side.

"Would you come and sit by me, Mr Fitz?" she asked sweetly. "Perhaps Daisy and Antoine could have a little dance if you might agree to assist me with the page turning."

Fitz recalled Daisy's little scheme of old and appreciated Jemma's attempt to reciprocate. He eagerly pushed himself out of his chair barely able to comprehend the gift she offered him in a much more intimate seat, sidling to one end of the piano stool so that he might perch himself beside her.

He barely noticed Triplett and his sister take to the floor as the duchess whispered in his ear.

"Do you read music, Mr Fitz? Or shall you require me to prompt you?" she asked.

"I am sorry to admit that I shall require prompting," he whispered back. "I am entirely dependent on the kindness of friends like yourself for this calibre of entertainment."

"I shall have to teach you, Mr Fitz," she replied. "I imagine you'd prove a quick study in music like you are in everything else you turn your hand to."

"Perhaps not music, Your Grace," he said, chuckling. "I believe that to be an area of accomplishment quite out of my grasp."

"Nonsense," she whispered, her hands flying over the keys. "I have had the pleasure of dancing in your arms if you recall, Mr Fitz, on more than one occasion so I am uniquely equipped to judge."
There is a true musicality inherent in your form and your manner of movement. Far more than in many young men I have been forced to partner.”

He looked down, grinning to himself. A few more outrageously exaggerated compliments of that nature and he’d propose again in a heartbeat.

“The page, Mr Fitz!” she urged and he obediently reached across her to grasp at the sheet music, feeling her warm breath on his neck.

“Did I come to your aid in a timely enough manner, Your Grace?” he whispered once the papers were arranged, “or are you mid-original composition at this point?”

She laughed quietly. “You did very well, Mr Fitz. I shall have to ensure that I always have you sitting beside me.”

Fitz looked at her askance. Was she proposing to him?

He observed from this new vantage point just some of the benefits that married life might afford him. Sitting so close beside her as he was he could feel the warmth of where their bodies touched, her thigh against his, her elbow brushing occasionally against the silk of his waistcoat. All of this felt like affection intentionally bestowed, though of course it was nothing quite so scandalous. Even under the reduced supervision of four unmarried young people provided within his own home, all of this contact was at least technically within the realm of the permitted. But when all of those requirements and restrictions were at last done away with by vows of exclusivity and permanence made before God and the congregation, then what avenues of delight might be opened to them?

It did make him wonder what was in the mind of his beloved, how she received and interpreted his every gesture and word. Was she as inclined to dwell on the possibilities the future held? Was she as hungry for confirmation of his ongoing regard as he was of hers?

Surely not, he thought. He was an open book before her, an open book of the worst type of sentimental love poetry. But if she could have believed, just that afternoon, that his affections had been transferred to another, perhaps she could use a boost of confidence. Tonight would not be the night he would propose, no, he would ensure that there might be an occasion for that tomorrow. But tonight he would do all in his power to assure the Duchess that there had never been, that there never could be any woman who could so much as hold a candle to her in his eyes.

Having successfully obeyed her every prompt, the Duchess played the final refrain of the piece with a dazzling smile just for him.

And before Fitz so much as suggested it, Daisy and Triplett appeared behind them to assume their intimate seat on the piano stool so that it might be his turn to dance with the Duchess. He gave his sister’s shoulder a little squeeze as he took to the floor, his other hand holding the woman he loved.

…

Jemma had never floundered in a ballroom. Her movements were always graceful, her attention to her partner faultless, her conversation witty and diverting. But where had been the lessons regarding how to dance in the arms of a man with whom one had finally realised one was so wholly in love?
She wanted to smile but felt that she might cry. She wanted to speak but found herself breathless. She wanted to execute the steps with her accustomed poise but sensed her body trembling, every sensation acute.

Her little scheme of having Mr Fitz come and sit by her as she played had been all well and good in theory, but she had perhaps not quite remembered the extent of his effect on her and that he, by the force of his proximity alone, wielded the power to reduce her to trembling. All those moments where she recalled losing her composure in his presence - when she had attempted to demonstrate her Pinard horn on him, when he had appeared to her in the stables covered in grease, when she had rushed home to Audrey, feverish, concerned she was unwell and even a danger to Daisy - she now identified for what they truly signified - desire.

The warning of the Song of Songs that she had hitherto strictly heeded swam before her eyes. *I adjure you, O maidens of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the does of the field, do not arouse or awaken love until it pleases!* And yet here she was, in the very act of stoking the fire that was burning within herself and, patently, within her beloved. How right she felt, by all the beasts of the field and any flower she could name! Love was at last, at this perfect moment, pleased to be aroused and awoken within her.

Had she known herself better, she might have been his wife by now and together they might already have had weeks to navigate the extraordinary freedoms and responsibilities of the one-flesh union. As it was, all of that wonder lay yet ahead of her, almost in her reach.

With Daisy and Antoine so caught up in each other, could she not risk dropping the formality of her firmly held arms and the foot’s distance between them? Could she not melt into his embrace as Miss Rodriguez had done that afternoon with Mack and learn afresh how it felt to have Mr Fitz’s strong arms around her, how it felt to be kissed and caressed by him?

If she could have harnessed her voice to speak, perhaps even with their friends so very nearby, she would have undertaken to begin her speech, but all she could do was gaze at him, teary-eyed and deliriously happy to see in his blue eyes her every sentiment whole-heartedly reciprocated.

Jemma resolved within those few still-functioning recesses of her brain to let herself simply exist in his arms, treasuring the exquisite bliss of loving and being requited, and save the speech-making for the morrow.

Chapter End Notes

Note: “for the morrow” = “for the following chapter” because this one is already super long! EEEEEEEEEEK! ALMOST there, shippers!!! I THINK this next chapter will be the LAST! But I haven't finished writing it yet so who knows what might happen.

I am about to watch the new episode. Mr everyllttle1ng is loading it up right now! EEEEEEEEEEEK!!!

Jemma’s dress for dinner at Manderston
https://kentstateuniversitymuseum.wordpress.com/2014/09/26/gold-embroidery-on-a-
The “rope of diamonds” because, goodness, so pretty! And it can be yours for a mere £69,500.00! Bargain! https://www.bentley-skinner.co.uk/london/jewellery/43344-a-regency-diamond-and-blue-enamel-cluster-necklace/

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