



**JEN TURANO**



**BETHANYHOUSE**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Jen Turano, *After a Fashion*  
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2015. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

© 2015 by Jennifer L. Turano

Published by Bethany House Publishers  
11400 Hampshire Avenue South  
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438  
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of  
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

ISBN 978-0-7642-1275-8

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover design by Paul Higdon  
Cover photography by Brandon Hill Photos

15 16 17 18 19 20 21      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Jen Turano, *After a Fashion*  
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2015. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

*For Tricia*



Jen Turano, *After a Fashion*  
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2015. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)



## NEW YORK CITY, 1882

Miss Peabody, I do so hate to interrupt your work, but an urgent message has just arrived that requires immediate attention. Would you join me for a moment so we may speak privately?”

Setting aside the feather she'd been about to attach to a delightful monstrosity of a hat, Harriet Peabody rose to her feet and hurried after her employer, Mrs. Fienman, who'd disappeared through the office door. Realizing that what Mrs. Fienman needed to disclose was unlikely to be of a pleasant nature, Harriet stepped into the office and pulled the door firmly shut. After dodging numerous hats lying about the floor, she stopped in front of the desk and resisted the urge to fidget when Mrs. Fienman simply stared at her.

“Would you like a cup of tea, dear?” Mrs. Fienman finally asked, causing sweat to immediately bead Harriet's forehead.

Mrs. Fienman had never offered her tea, not once in all the time she'd worked for the lady.

“Thank you, but I’m not actually thirsty,” she managed to get out of a mouth that had turned remarkably dry.

“I insist.” Mrs. Fienman nodded toward a tea set.

“I’d love some tea.” Harriet moved to the teapot and poured out a cup, wincing when droplets of tea splashed onto the table, a result no doubt of hands that had taken to trembling. Brushing the droplets aside with a corner of her sleeve, she picked up the cup, turned, and noticed the odd circumstance of Mrs. Fienman thumbing through a copy of the latest fashion magazine. She cleared her throat. “The urgent message, Mrs. Fienman?”

“Ah, yes, quite right.” Mrs. Fienman stopped thumbing and nodded to a chair stacked high with hats. “Have a seat.”

Harriet edged gingerly down on the very front of the chair, desperately hoping that no hats were being squashed by the fashionable bustle attached to her backside. It truly was unfortunate she had not yet perfected the collapsible bustle she’d been attempting to create. Such a bustle would have come in remarkably handy at that particular moment.

“Now then,” Mrs. Fienman began, “I need you to make a delivery for me.”

Pausing with the teacup halfway to her lips, Harriet frowned. “A delivery?”

“Indeed, and I must state most emphatically that it’s a very important delivery, one that I wouldn’t trust to just anyone.”

Setting the cup aside, Harriet rose to her feet, taking a brief second to collect her thoughts before she dared speak. “I do hope you won’t take offense at this, Mrs. Fienman, but I wouldn’t be comfortable delivering anything of a . . . shall we say, shady nature.”

Mrs. Fienman’s jowls began to quiver, she turned an interesting shade of purple, and then, to Harriet’s amazement, the lady gave a loud hoot of laughter. Mrs. Fienman chortled for a full minute before she finally gave a last hiccup of amusement and

motioned Harriet back to the chair. “How amusing to learn you find me capable of ‘shady’ dealings, Miss Peabody, but I assure you, nothing could be further from the truth.” She tapped a finger against one of her many chins. “Although, I have often thought that if I did possess a mysterious attitude—which again, I don’t—it might be helpful for drumming up business.”

Unable to summon up a suitable response to that peculiar remark, Harriet moved back to the chair, sat down, and immediately sucked in a sharp breath when she heard an ominous *crunch*. Knowing without a doubt she was sitting on top of what had to be a ruined hat, she couldn’t help wonder how much Mrs. Fienman was going to insist she hand over to compensate for the damage done. Harriet did have a few extra dollars at her disposal, but they had been painstakingly saved with the intent of splurging on a lovely birthday dinner—not a crushed hat.

She didn’t really *need* a savory steak to celebrate the day of her birth. No, enjoying the company of her friends would suffice, but . . . a steak would have added a nice touch of extravagance to the evening, and she hadn’t savored a tasty piece of beef for months.

“. . . so I need you to take the carriage and see to it that Mr. Addleshaw’s fiancée is satisfied with the hats we’ve created for her.”

All thoughts of tasty beef evaporated in a split second. “Am I to understand the urgent situation you’re facing is due to your need for a delivery of hats?”

“Too right it is, and not just any hats, but hats specifically created for Miss Birmingham. She has only recently arrived in town, and is newly engaged to Mr. Oliver Addleshaw, one of the wealthiest gentlemen in America.”

Mrs. Fienman sent Harriet a wink. “Word about the city has it he’s made an obscene fortune through some manner of finance. It’s my dearest hope to grab a piece of that fortune through

return business from the gentleman's fiancée." She picked up a letter lying on her desk and began fanning her face with it. "This note from Miss Birmingham, while being somewhat hysterical in nature, states that the lady is concerned the hats she ordered might not complement some of the pieces of a wardrobe she had delivered to her this morning."

Harriet's mouth dropped open. In her world, *urgent* meant someone had died, the rent was overdue, or dinner could not be served due to lack of funds. It never meant one was anxious for a delivery of hats.

"I've sent Timothy off to get the carriage," Mrs. Fienman continued briskly, "and he'll be back directly. All you need to do is help Miss Birmingham sort through the hats, and soothe any ruffled feathers she might have if some of the styles don't exactly complement her gowns."

"I do beg your pardon, Mrs. Fienman, but I must inquire as to why you're not personally seeing to this situation, considering it seems to be of a delicate nature."

Mrs. Fienman's expression turned a little shifty. "I thought it was past time we got you out of the back room and mingling with clients."

"And you believe my 'mingling' should begin with the fiancée of one of the wealthiest gentlemen in America?"

"You, Miss Peabody, are made of stern stuff, which is why I've chosen you for this unpleasant . . . or rather, *delightful* task. I cannot send Gladys or Peggy because Miss Birmingham is possessed of a slightly tumultuous personality. She would have those two in tears within minutes. Why, I wouldn't imagine you'd even cry if your dog died."

"I don't have a dog."

"Well, no matter. I'm certain if you did own a dog and it tragically died, you wouldn't shed a single tear, would you?"

Harriet forced a smile. "While I certainly appreciate your



confidence in me, I must remind you that, when you hired me, you specifically told me I was to keep to the back room and not mingle with our clients. Because of that, I am not being modest when I say I'm not exactly equipped to deal with a member of the quality."

"My reasoning behind banishing you to the workroom was not because I ever doubted your ability to mingle with clients, Miss Peabody. It stemmed more from the fact that with your all-too-pretty face, unusual violet eyes, and luscious black hair, you'd cast our customers in the shade. However . . ." She released a dramatic breath. "Miss Birmingham is not one of our usual clients. She apparently took issue with my rather large figure, and has specifically requested her hats be delivered by a person possessed of a pleasant and slender appearance." Mrs. Fienman waved a hand at Harriet. "Since you're the only person available with those qualifications, you'll have to make the delivery."

Alarm began to ooze from Harriet's every pore. While she was perfectly aware she possessed a slender figure, brought on by a distinct lack of food on a regular basis, she was fairly sure she'd detected a faint trace of glee in Mrs. Fienman's voice. She had the sneaking suspicion the glee was a direct result of her employer hoping she would cast this Miss Birmingham in the shade, which certainly wasn't going to help her deal with the lady. Before she could voice a protest, though, Mrs. Fienman leaned forward.

"I must admit I've been most curious about where you obtained such stellar good looks. Do you take after your mother or your father?"

"I never met my parents, Mrs. Fienman. My mother died giving birth to me, and my father, well . . ."

Mrs. Fienman's eyes turned considering. "Do forgive me, Miss Peabody. I should know better than to ask questions of a personal nature, especially from a lady forced to make her own

way in the world. But, ancestry aside, you're a lovely young lady, which is exactly what Miss Birmingham requested and exactly what I'm going to give her." She wrinkled her nose. "A word of warning, though, before you depart—Miss Birmingham seems to make a habit of throwing things when she's annoyed, so watch out for flying shoes."

A droplet of perspiration trickled down Harriet's back. "While this Miss Birmingham sounds like a *charming* sort, I honestly don't believe I'm equipped with the social rules and expected manners to deal with her."

"Your manners are perfectly adequate for this appointment. It's not as if you should expect Miss Birmingham to invite you to sit down and enjoy a cup of tea with her."

"What if she goes beyond shoe chucking and attacks me? Am I allowed to defend myself?"

"Certainly not." Mrs. Fienman shook a plump finger in Harriet's direction. "Defending yourself against a society lady would definitely sully the good name of my business. If that were to happen, I would terminate your position immediately."

"But . . ." Harriet began as she struggled to come up with a plausible reason not to take on what was surely going to be a daunting task. "What about Mrs. Wilhelm's hat? I've only put on ten of the fifty feathers she's requested, and she's expecting delivery of that hat tomorrow."

"You'll have plenty of time to finish Mrs. Wilhelm's hat after you get back from dealing with Miss Birmingham."

Harriet glanced at the clock, saw that it was after two, and felt a sliver of disappointment steal over her. By the time she got back from making the delivery *and* finished Mrs. Wilhelm's hat, there would be no time left to celebrate her birthday.

Drawing in a steadying breath, she decided to throw caution to the wind and appeal to what little kindness Mrs. Fienman might actually possess. "I wasn't going to mention this, not

wanting anyone to feel compelled to make a fuss, but today is my birthday. While I normally don't mind working extra hours, I was hoping I wouldn't have to work those hours today, since my two best friends have made arrangements to have dinner with me."

"Ah, your birthday. How marvelous!" Mrs. Fienman exclaimed. "Why, I adore birthdays, and if I'd known today was yours, I would have ordered you a pastry." She rooted around the papers strewn across her desk and pulled out a crumbly piece of dough that might have, at one time, been a tart. "Here, have what's left of the pastry I got this morning."

For a second, Harriet remained frozen in place, but since Mrs. Fienman was now waving the pastry determinedly at her, she had no choice but to rise to her feet and accept the woman's offering. A sticky mess of frosting immediately coated her fingers. "Thank you. I'm sure this will be delicious."

Mrs. Fienman beamed back at her. "You're most welcome. Now then, you'd best be on your way." She put a finger to her jowl. "Tell you what, don't bother coming back to finish Mrs. Wilhelm's hat today. You can come in early tomorrow morning and finish the job. Won't that be lovely?"

Not giving Harriet an opportunity to respond, Mrs. Fienman gestured toward the door. "Timothy should be out front by now. Remember, be pleasant, and duck if you see shoes flying your way."

"Ahh . . ."

"No dawdling now, Miss Peabody. Unpleasant matters are best dealt with quickly. Enjoy your tart."

Harriet couldn't find the incentive to move. She looked at Mrs. Fienman, who was once again thumbing through the magazine, then at the mess of a pastry clutched in her hand, and swallowed a sigh when she remembered her prayer only that morning.

It was a tradition, her birthday prayer.

Every year—well, for the past six years—she’d asked God to send her something wonderful. He hadn’t always sent what she asked for, but one year He’d sent her unexpected money to pay the rent when she’d thought she’d be out on the streets. Another year, He’d led her to Mrs. Fienman, which had given Harriet stable employment. Last year, when she’d turned twenty-one, she’d asked for a gentleman, and while she hadn’t received that particular request, her aunt Jane had given her—rather grudgingly, of course—a gown that had once belonged to her mother. Since she’d never met her mother, had never even seen a portrait of her, the gown had afforded her a glimpse of her mother’s slender figure. The fact that the silk was a delicate shade of violet had given Harriet no small sense of delight, given that violet was her very favorite color.

This year she’d decided to keep her prayer simple and had only asked God to send her something of His choosing, something she would find wonderful.

Surely His idea of wonderful couldn’t constitute a half-eaten tart and dealing with an overly emotional society lady, could it?

“Miss Peabody!” Mrs. Fienman suddenly yelled, raising her head from the magazine and causing Harriet to jump. “Oh, you’re still here . . . Good. Although I would have thought you’d gone to fetch your reticule, but . . . no matter. I almost forgot something.”

She pushed aside some papers, extracted one and held it up. “I need you to present Miss Birmingham with the bill—unless, of course, Mr. Addleshaw is in residence. He wasn’t in town when I met with his fiancée last week, but was off doing whatever it is important gentlemen do to earn their vast amounts of money. Make certain you make it clear that full payment is expected in a timely fashion.”

“You want me to give this bill to either Mr. Addleshaw or Miss Birmingham *and* inform them to pay it promptly?”

“Neither one of them will take issue with the request, if that’s your concern.” She glanced at the bill, smiled, and then lifted her head. “Good heavens, you’ll need to change that hat.”

“Change my hat?”

“Indeed. Not that there is anything remotely wrong with the hat you’re wearing, other than it’s entirely too tempting a piece to be anywhere near Miss Birmingham. I wouldn’t put it past the lady to snatch it right off your head, and we wouldn’t want that, would we? Especially since it’s your birthday.” Her expression turned calculating. “I’ll tell you what we’ll do. You may give me your hat in exchange for the one you so carelessly sat on. That way, I won’t be forced to extract your hard-earned money from you. You may think of it as yet another birthday treat.”

Pushing aside the pesky notion that the day was quickly turning disappointing, Harriet turned and eyed what remained of the hat she’d squashed. “Are those . . . birds?”

“They were,” Mrs. Fienman corrected, “before you sat on them. Now I’m afraid they resemble mice, and sickly looking ones at that.”

“And you believe it would be for the best if I dealt with Miss Birmingham while wearing sickly looking mice on my head?”

“Miss Peabody, you’re stalling again.”

“Too right, I am,” she muttered before she set down the remains of the tart on the edge of Mrs. Fienman’s desk. Reaching up, she pulled out a few hat pins, lifted her hat off, handed it to Mrs. Fienman, and turned and scooped up what remained of the bird hat. Plopping it on her head, she made short shrift of securing it, refusing to shudder when a mangled bird dangled over her left eye, obscuring her view.

“I don’t believe you’ll need to worry about Miss Birmingham snatching that hat off your head,” Mrs. Fienman said as she began twirling the hat Harriet had been forced to part with. “This really is a creative design, Miss Peabody. It’s the perfect

size for a lady who wants to look fashionable, yet it won't hinder a lady as she goes about her day. Tell me, would you happen to have other hats crafted in this particular style, ones that might be put up for sale here at the shop?"

"I'm afraid that even though I do have an abundant supply of hats at home, none of them would be appropriate to sell here. The materials I use are scavenged from hats society ladies have abandoned to the poor boxes in churches throughout the city."

"You take hats from the poor boxes?"

"I don't steal them," Harriet said quickly. "I have permission from the ministers to take whatever fancy hats or clothing I might have a use for because their donation bins were overflowing with far too many extravagant pieces." She shrugged. "Ever since gentlemen have begun to amass such huge fortunes, their wives and daughters have become somewhat fickle when it comes to their fashions and are abandoning those fashions faster than ever. Unfortunately for the poor, though, they really don't have any need for such luxurious items—which is why I'm permitted to take them." She smiled. "I redesign the gowns, cut out any stains that might be marring the fabric, and then I provide ladies with limited funds a nice outfit they can wear to a special occasion, but for only a small fee."

"Fascinating," Mrs. Fienman exclaimed, "and a topic I'd love to explore further with you, but for now you'd best get on your way." She waved toward the door. "Good luck to you, and don't forget your pastry, but more importantly, the bill."

Picking up the bill and then, reluctantly, the tart, Harriet walked out of the office, trying to ignore the broken bird bouncing back and forth against her cheek. She stopped at her worktable and took off her apron before sliding her hands into gloves. Scooping up her reticule, she stuffed the bill inside, picked up the pastry, and then nodded to the three ladies who worked with her before heading for the door.

Stepping outside, she moved to Mrs. Fienman's carriage, the one pressed into service whenever a good impression needed to be made. When she opened the door, her gaze traveled over the stacks and stacks of hatboxes crammed into the interior. One quick glance upward explained why they weren't attached to the carriage roof. It looked ready to rain, and since there was no room for her in the carriage, she was probably going to get wet.

She was beginning to get the unpleasant feeling that nothing wonderful was going to happen to her today.

God, it seemed, had forgotten all about her and her tiny birthday request.

"I've saved a spot up here."

Harriet smiled. Timothy, a young man who worked as a driver for Mrs. Fienman, was grinning back at her with his hand held out. She took a second to throw the mangled pastry to a hungry-looking mutt sniffing around the sidewalk, moved to the carriage, and took Timothy's offered hand. Settling in right beside him, she found her mood improving rapidly as Timothy began to regale her with stories about his new wife as they trundled down street after street.

". . . so I made the small observation that the soup my mis-sus served me was cold, and she hit me upside the head with a soup bowl, one that was still filled to the brim with chilly soup."

Harriet laughed, but her laughter caught in her throat when Timothy steered the horses into a narrow alley. He pulled on the reins, and the carriage came to a halt, right in the midst of a large courtyard paved with brick, that brick leading up to the back of a formidable-looking mansion.

Craning her neck, Harriet took in the sight of four stories of superbly cut stone, inlaid with numerous stained-glass windows.

Her stomach immediately began to churn. She really *was* ill-equipped to deal with this particular situation, no matter that Mrs. Fienman seemed to think she'd handle it well. She wasn't

even certain if she was supposed to curtsy when she met Miss Birmingham, or maybe she was only expected to incline her head, but . . . what *was* an acceptable response if shoes came flinging her way?

“That sure is something, isn’t it—all that stained glass on a back of a house where hardly anyone will see it?” Timothy asked, pulling her abruptly back to the fact she was still sitting on the carriage seat while Timothy was on the ground, holding his hand out to her. She took the offered hand and landed lightly on the bricks.

“Good thing my Molly isn’t here with us,” Timothy continued with a grin. “She’d probably start getting ideas, but I’ll never be able to afford anything more than a hovel.”

Harriet returned the grin before she pulled the carriage door open. “I’ve always thought that hovels have a certain charm, whereas mansions . . . What would one do with all that space?” Turning, she stood on tiptoes and pulled out a few boxes, handing them to Timothy. She grabbed two more, wrapped her fingers around the strings tied around them, and headed toward the delivery entrance. She stumbled to an immediate stop, though, when a loud shriek pierced the air. Turning in the direction of the shriek, she blinked and then blinked again.

A young lady was storming around the side of the mansion, screaming at the top of her lungs. But what was even more disturbing than the screams was the manner in which the young lady was dressed.

A frothy bit of green silk billowed out around the lady’s form, but it *wasn’t* a gown the lady wore—it was a wrapper. Sparkly green slippers with impractical high heels peeped out from under the hem with every stomp the lady took, and a long, feathery scarf, draped around the lady’s throat, trailed in the breeze behind her. Her brown hair was arranged in a knot on top of her head, but pieces of it were beginning to come loose



from the pins, brought about no doubt from the force of the lady's stomps. The woman clutched an unopened parasol, and she was waving it wildly through the air.

"He's a beast, a madman, and I'll never have anything to do with him again," the lady screeched to an older woman scurrying after her.

"You're allowing your emotions to cloud your judgment, Lily," the older lady returned in a voice more shrill than soothing. "Mr. Addleshaw was simply surprised by our unexpected appearance in his home. I'm sure once we explain matters to his satisfaction, he'll be more than mollified, and then the two of you will be in accord once again."

The lady named Lily stopped in her tracks. "I have no desire to be in accord with that man."

"That's ridiculous," the older woman argued. "You know your father and I are determined to see a union between our families."

"*You* marry him, then, Mother, because I certainly never will," Lily railed as she shook the parasol in her mother's direction before plowing forward.

"If I were a few years younger and *not* married to your father, believe me, I'd consider it." Lily's mother hustled after her daughter, grabbing the young lady's arm when she finally caught up with her. "You need to be reasonable about this, dear. We have a lot at stake here."

"I'm not feeling in a reasonable frame of mind, Mother." Lily shrugged out of her mother's hold, whacked the poor woman with the parasol, and then charged forward again. She came to an abrupt halt when her gaze settled on Harriet. Her lips thinned, her nostrils flared, and her brown eyes turned downright menacing. "Who are you?"

Harriet summoned up a smile. "I'm Miss Peabody."

Lily's eyes narrowed. "Are you here to see Mr. Addleshaw?"

Harriet took a step back. “Certainly not. I’m here at Mrs. Fienman’s request to deliver hats to Miss Birmingham.”

Lily looked Harriet up and down. “*You’re* a hat girl?” She let out a grunt as her attention settled on Harriet’s hat. “*You’re* obviously not a very good one.”

Reminding herself she desperately needed to keep her job, Harriet continued smiling. “I am indeed a . . . ah . . . hat girl, although I didn’t create the hat I’m . . . Well, never mind about that. All you probably want to know is that I’m here to help you sort through your purchases, if you are, in fact, Miss Birmingham.”

“Of course I’m Miss Birmingham.”

“Wonderful. May I say that it’s lovely to meet you, and—”

“I don’t exchange pleasantries with the help,” Miss Birmingham interrupted as she moved closer and jabbed a finger at one of the hatboxes. “Show me what’s in there.”

Glancing up at a sky that was turning more threatening by the second, Harriet was about to suggest they seek out a drier place to inspect the hats, but before she could speak, a gentleman’s voice distracted her.

“Miss Birmingham, you need to repair back into the house immediately. You’re certainly not dressed in a manner acceptable for strolling around in the open.”

Looking past Miss Birmingham, Harriet discovered a gentleman striding in their direction with a large hound of undetermined parentage loping at his side. Her eyes widened as she took in the man’s height, the breadth of his shoulders, and . . . the careless cut of his jacket, which strained against his chest and certainly hadn’t been cut to suit his powerful frame.

Strange as it seemed at that particular moment, she found herself contemplating who his tailor was and how much he’d given said tailor to create a jacket that fit him so poorly.

Shifting her attention to the gentleman’s face, she took in

hazel eyes and a sharp slash of a nose that gave the gentleman the appearance of a hawk, that appearance heightened by the fact his hair was nearly as black as her own. His lips appeared to be firm—what little she could see of them, considering they were currently drawn in a straight line—and his jaw was strong but rigidly set, giving testimony to the fact he was livid.

She looked back at Miss Birmingham, expecting her to be trembling on the spot, but instead, the woman was fairly bristling with rage as she swept the feathered scarf over her shoulder and sent the gentleman a look of deepest disdain.

“You dare presume to order me about?” Miss Birmingham screeched. “You forget yourself, Mr. Addleshaw. I am Miss Lily Birmingham, daughter of the esteemed Mr. John Birmingham. And as such, I’ll stroll around outside dressed however I please.”

“You’re in a wrapper,” Mr. Addleshaw shot back. “Your father would hardly approve, and it’s rich you bring up presumption, considering you took it upon yourself to move into my home without my knowledge. I told you and your parents I’d secure you more than adequate rooms at a reputable hotel.”

Miss Birmingham lifted her pointy chin in the air. “This is exactly why I will no longer be marrying you. You’re a complete boor.”

“Forgive me, Miss Birmingham, but we’re not engaged, nor did I ever suggest we were soon to be. I invited you to the city for the express purpose of attending a few society events in the coming weeks, and I was completely upfront with you when I told you why I needed you in New York. If you will recall, the Duke of Westmoore will soon be in town, and I requested your company so that you could help me entertain the gentleman while I go about the delicate matter of negotiating a business deal with him. The very idea that you took it upon yourself to arrive in the city earlier than we discussed *and* took up residence in my home boggles my mind.”

Panic began pounding through Harriet's veins.

They were not engaged, had never been from what Mr. Addleshaw was saying. That meant the day was destined for disaster, since Harriet had the feeling neither of the two people arguing right in front of her was going to be receptive to her presenting them with a bill at this awkward moment in time.

". . . and you can forget about me helping you with the duke," Miss Birmingham howled. "You're mean and rude, and you've been yelling at me ever since you stepped foot in the house."

"Of course I've been yelling," Mr. Addleshaw said between lips that barely moved. "You converted my home office into your personal dressing room."

"The lighting suits my complexion better in that room than the dismal excuse for a room I was given by that dreadful housekeeper of yours."

Harriet watched as Mr. Addleshaw's mouth opened, closed, opened, and then closed again, as if he couldn't decide what he should say next.

She really couldn't say she blamed him.

It was quickly becoming clear Miss Birmingham was not a lady with whom one could reason with in a sensible manner.

"You! Hat girl!" Miss Birmingham suddenly snapped. "Make yourself useful and show me what you've got in those boxes you're holding."

"You want to look at hats right now?" was all Harriet could think to respond.

"That is why you're here, isn't it?"

"Well, yes, of course, but . . ."

"Stop being difficult, Miss Birmingham," Mr. Addleshaw interrupted before he nodded to Harriet. "You, my dear, may take yourself and your hats straight back to the shop you came from. Miss Birmingham will send for them once she gets settled into a hotel."

Before Harriet could respond, Miss Birmingham began screaming at Mr. Addleshaw—nasty, horrible accusations that really had no business spewing out of a lady’s mouth. Realizing it would not serve her well to remain in the woman’s presence another minute, Harriet decided to take Mr. Addleshaw’s suggestion and return to the shop. She knew she’d be facing Mrs. Fienman’s wrath once she arrived with no bill delivered and a carriage stuffed to the gills with expensive hats, but couldn’t see any benefit staying there, especially since Miss Birmingham’s screaming was escalating. She turned on her heel and had barely taken five steps when stars erupted behind her eyes. Her head began throbbing right before she felt what she thought was Miss Birmingham’s parasol poking her in the back.

“You’re not going anywhere with those hats,” Miss Birmingham hissed. “They’re mine, and I demand you give them to me.”

Harriet wasn’t afforded the simple courtesy of handing the boxes over to the obviously deranged Miss Birmingham. The woman took care of acquiring the hats on her own by ripping the boxes straight out of Harriet’s hands as she thrust the parasol directly into Harriet’s stomach. With her hands flapping wildly, Harriet tried to find her balance, but before she could get her feet firmly beneath her, a large furry form flew through the air, hit her squarely in the chest, and sent her tumbling backward. Hard bricks greeted her right before the sound of snarling settled in her ears.