

A Heart's Rebellion

A REGENCY ROMANCE



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For Tom,
my Lancelot



*There is therefore now no condemnation to
them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk
not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.*

Romans 8:1



APRIL 1815

“If this is what a London season is, I’d say it’s a silly waste of time.” Jessamine Barry folded her arms in front of her, frowning at the hordes of people milling past her in the Grecian-style drawing room, their edges slightly blurred since she was forbidden to wear her spectacles in society.

“It is rather difficult to speak to anyone in this situation,” admitted her closest friend, Megan Phillips.

If it weren’t for Megan, Jessamine would know not a soul in this mass of glistening, gleaming faces. Her handkerchief was already limp from patting it against her forehead and neck. “All this trouble to dress one’s finest just to be ignored. I don’t know how long I shall be able to stand it.”

Megan turned worried eyes toward her. “Don’t say that. You know it’s such an opportunity we’ve been given by your godmother. I’m sure things will soon improve.” Megan craned her neck above the crowd. “Where did she go? I haven’t seen her since we arrived.”

“In the card room, I would say,” Jessamine said dryly. The picture Lady Bess had painted Jessamine’s father of a London season was far from the reality. If her father could see her now, he’d utter

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a Scripture verse on man's vanity; her mother would lament the cost of her gowns and all the other furbelows to accompany them.

Jessamine flicked open her fan, eyeing the ivory brisé sticks as she remembered how dearly it had cost, and stirred some of the warm air against her face.

"Look at that gentleman there." She snapped the fan closed and pointed it toward a young man whose florid jaws bulged over his neck cloth. "He looks close to asphyxiating any moment from his own cravat. How can men be so ridiculous?"

Megan swallowed a giggle behind her own fan. "Careful, he'll hear you."

"How anyone can hear anyone in this babble is beyond me, yet they all go on as if anyone cares what they say." She narrowed her eyes at the ladies and gentlemen making a slow progression past her, bringing them into sharper focus. As far as she could make out, a rout was merely a place to see and be seen. No one seemed to be listening to anyone, yet their mouths kept moving, their smiles pasted on their faces like painted dolls.

She shuddered at the amount of rouge she observed on women's faces both young and old. What went on in London! And the gentlemen were worse, dressed like popinjays with more jewelry flashing from them than the women.

"Perhaps if we smile at some of the young ladies our age, we'll be able to meet them."

"My lips hurt from all the smiling I've done since arriving in London," Jessamine muttered. "I refuse to do so any longer, since it hasn't done us a bit of good." To illustrate her point, she scowled at a lady sporting an emerald-green turban with three pink ostrich plumes thrusting themselves against her male companion's upswept curls, curls so full of pomade they reflected the light from the chandeliers hanging above them.

"I know you're not in the best frame of mind, but things will get better, I'm sure. Things just . . . take time."

Jessamine's lips tightened in displeasure at Megan's reminder. How she wished on occasion Megan weren't her closest friend. It would have made things easier. To be constantly reminded—but no, she would not think about *him!* *He* was as good as dead to her.

She felt like one of those families that had exorcised a wayward son from their midst, the father banning the mere mention of the loved one's name in his hearing.

It would be humorous if it still didn't hurt so much—and weren't nigh on impossible to avoid hearing her beloved's name, since he was Megan's brother. Thank goodness he was no longer in England.

This should have been the happiest time of her life, yet she was miserable. A year and a half ago she would scarce have imagined herself among the fashionable world in a London drawing room, enjoying a season. Indeed, she'd never wanted a London season, even when Mama and Papa had broached the subject. At eighteen she'd pooh-poohed such a notion as frivolous. What need had she to parade around London drawing rooms, advertising herself to eligible young bachelors, when her heart was faithfully committed to a man far superior to any simpering dandy?

How little she'd imagined that a few months shy of one-and-twenty, she'd leap at her godmother's invitation to London, proving herself no better than any young miss hanging out for a husband.

The tears that were never far threatened to cloud the vision of the glittering array of ladies and gentlemen parading before her.

A year and a half ago, she'd envisioned herself betrothed by now, perhaps even married, to the finest, handsomest—no! The streak of rebellion and bitterness—a streak new and foreign to her which had invaded her nature when she'd heard of Rees's marriage and poisoned everything around her—reasserted itself.

The man in question—Rees Phillips—was not the finest, handsomest, noblest gentleman. He was the lowest, most despicable, shabbiest cad she'd ever known! He had no right to be happy when he had made her so miserable.

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“Your frown could crack marble.”

Jessamine jumped at the low masculine tone. Turning, she glared to see if the gentleman standing beside her had indeed had the temerity to address her.

Glaring in this case entailed craning her neck upward if she didn't want to waste the effort on a bleached white shirt front and pristine cravat.

“Are you speaking to me, sir?”

Amused blue eyes stared down into hers. They might have been attractive if the pale forehead hadn't been topped by a mop of light red hair—that shade that could not be described as anything but orange.

The gentleman's slim lips quirked upward. “You recognized the description of yourself?”

Jessamine drew herself up. How dare he mock her! “Excuse me, sir, we have not been introduced.” With that set down, she turned away, her chin in the air, and took Megan by the arm.

Before she could move, he stepped in front of her and bowed. “I beg your pardon.”

He turned and left her open-mouthed.

She fumed, watching him move with ease across the crowded drawing room.

Lancelot Marfleet strode away, seeking to put as much distance as possible between himself and the two young ladies he'd been listening to.

Eavesdropping, his mother would say.

He wouldn't have stooped to such behavior, much less spoken his thoughts aloud—he recoiled inwardly at his indecorous behavior—if he hadn't been so bored.

He'd been dragged to the rout by his elder brother, who had soon disappeared, leaving Lancelot to stand like a wallflower beside the profusion of potted greenery.

The young lady whose words had caught Lancelot's attention had moved to stand so close to him, it had been impossible not to overhear her complaints—remarks he heartily agreed with.

His mother would doubtless soon know of this latest social blunder from one of the dowagers who'd been standing near him. He could hear her aggrieved tone. "*You've been too long among the heathen. In England a gentleman does not address a young lady he has not been introduced to.*"

He'd thought by now he'd mastered his fault of speaking first and thinking later, but clearly he had a ways to go and was not ready for a London drawing room.

It wasn't the heathen of India among whom he'd spent the last two years who'd taught him to speak out of turn. If anything, he'd learned to listen and observe, hampered as he was by not speaking the language.

Speaking of observing, he dug into his coat pocket and drew out a pair of round, thin-rimmed, black metal spectacles. If he'd been fashionable, he'd have used only a quizzing glass, but he found the one-eyed look ridiculous and ineffective.

But now he needed to search for his hostess to rectify matters with the young miss before word of his ill manners reached his mother.

His eyes scanned the room, everything once more in sharp focus from the feathers atop ladies' headdresses to the fobs dangling from men's watch chains. His mother had forbidden him to wear the spectacles in public, but he was getting weary of nodding and smiling like a witless fool until the person drew near enough to be recognized.

Before searching for Lady Abernathy, he sought the young lady whom he'd insulted. It didn't take him long to spot the black-haired girl. He could feel his cheeks going ruddy as he identified her. The drawback of being a redhead—every emotion showed immediately on his cheeks.

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The young miss continued talking with her companion. The two appeared typical of all young ladies making their coming-out. They were dressed similarly in white muslin gowns, only their colored ribbons setting them apart.

She had a pretty, though dissatisfied, face. Slim, pert nose, decided little chin, smooth pale skin with rosy lips and cheeks, the latter more likely due to the stuffiness of the room than to a healthy glow.

As she faced forward again, he shifted his gaze away, searching for his hostess. Not seeing her, he headed to the card room.

After two years traveling from Andhra Pradesh to West Bengal, living in a variety of primitive conditions, he'd acquired a certain self-possession, but a few weeks in London drawing rooms had him feeling as awkward and ungainly as he had in his youth, trailing behind his elder brother. Harold, who was only three years his senior, delighted in ragging Lancelot over his clumsiness at sports and awkwardness with the fairer sex.

Pushing aside those memories with the same single-mindedness he used to push through the crowded drawing room, Lancelot arrived at the saloon filled with card tables.

He located his hostess, a tall, stately woman walking among the green baize tables and stopping to chat with the card players.

When he approached Lady Abernathy, she held out her hands to him. "Marfleet! How delightful to see you among us. I haven't had a chance to properly welcome you back. Your mother wrote that you were terribly ill and recuperating in Hampshire." His hostess's pale brow furrowed briefly as she scanned his face. "I must say you look in fine fettle now." She clucked her tongue. "We Europeans are not meant for those ferocious climes overseas, so I hope you are home for good."

"I'm much better now, thank you, ma'am."

She looked around the room. "What do you think of my little gathering?"

“You certainly draw a lot of people to your evenings.”

She laughed. “I like to think so.” She patted his hand. “Now, what may I do for you, dear?” Her light-blue eyes looked shrewdly into his. “Your mother has made it no secret that she and your father wish you to settle down. I’m surprised to see no bevy of young ladies on your arm.”

His cheeks warmed, but she had given him the opening he needed. “Well, it’s precisely to beg an introduction that I come to you.”

Her finely plucked eyebrows rose a fraction. “Oho, which of our young ladies has caught your interest? I shall present her to you forthwith.”

He cleared his throat. “There are two young ladies in your drawing room. I’m not familiar with them, so I thought perhaps . . . ?” He left the request dangling, his heart thumping.

He had no need to say more. She tucked her hand in his arm and began to steer him back the way he’d come. “Show me. I am all curiosity.”

When they stood in the doorway of the drawing room, he said, “Over there, straight in front of us, the two brunettes in the white gowns.”

“Yes, I see them. They are new in town. I am not acquainted with them personally. Lady Beasinger brought them. She is sponsoring their season.” Lady Abernathy turned to him, her eyes serious. “They have nothing to speak of. One is a vicar’s daughter from some little village, I forget which Lady Beasinger mentioned; the other a merchant’s daughter.” Her fine lips thinned. “With little dowry since he died bankrupt.” She gave him an appraising look. “Are you still interested in an introduction?”

A vicar’s daughter? His interest rose as he wondered which of the two. “Yes, very much so.”

She straightened her shoulders as if resigned. “Ah, love is blind to those practical matters a parent thinks about.”

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He said nothing, his gaze on the young lady he'd offended.
"Very well, since you remain silent, let us hence."

On their way, she caught her butler's attention and whispered something to him. He replied and she nodded. "Ah yes, I remember now. Miss Jessamine Barry and Miss Megan Phillips," she said to herself as if to memorize the names.

The first name caught Lancelot's attention. Jessamine. *Gelsemium sempervirens*, yellow jasmine. Would it be the one he'd spoken to, with her dark curls set off so appropriately by yellow ribbons?

It took a few moments to navigate across the room, but finally they stood in front of the two young ladies, who looked wide-eyed at them, their glances shifting from him to Lady Abernathy. Finally, the one Lancelot had not spoken to smiled. The other remained serious.

"My dear Miss Barry, Miss Phillips"—Lady Abernathy nodded to each in turn—"Mr. Lancelot Marfleet begs an introduction." As their gazes fixed on him, she addressed him. "May I present Miss Jessamine Barry." With a flourish of her hand toward the young lady in yellow ribbons, she paused before proceeding to the other young lady. "And Miss Megan Phillips."

They each curtsied as Lancelot bowed.

"Well, I shall leave you to become acquainted. Pity we have no dancing this evening," his hostess murmured as she departed.

"Thank you, my lady," he said to her retreating back.

Feeling as awkward as at his first dancing lesson, he turned to the two young ladies. Now what? He didn't even remember why he'd wanted an introduction.

Ah yes, so his mother would have nothing to reproach him with on the morrow. "I . . . beg your pardon for addressing you so rudely a few moments ago," he said to Miss Barry as she stared back at him.

She had green eyes, he noticed, fringed by black lashes. Her dark hair caught the light from the chandeliers and reflected like

the polished gaboon ebony cut and shipped from West Africa and made into chess pieces and piano keys for Europeans.

She only tipped her head in acknowledgment.

Fiddling with his watch chain, he found nothing more to say. He'd always found small talk excruciatingly difficult. Flippancy came more easily to him, as evidenced by his first remarks to her, which had led him to this awkward situation.

He cleared his throat. "Lady Abernathy said you are lately come to town?"

She nodded.

As if embarrassed by her companion's reticence, the other young lady volunteered, "Yes, sir, we've been in London but a fortnight."

She was a pretty girl, her countenance friendly. Although of similar build and coloring as Miss Barry, the likeness ended there. Her chin was squarer, her nose straighter, her eyes gray, her hair dark brown.

"You have been in town about the same amount of time as I. I haven't seen you, though, until this evening," he said in stilted tones.

"That is not strange," Miss Phillips replied with a little laugh. "We spent our first week sightseeing with a guidebook and know scarce anyone in London so have attended few parties."

His lips quirked upward, feeling a little more at ease by her friendly candor. He chanced a glance at Miss Frosty, as he was beginning to call her. Instead of smiling, she was looking fixedly at her companion as if trying to transmit a message without words. Surely, she couldn't object to Miss Phillips's attempt to make conversation?

"Where do you hail from?" This time he addressed Miss Barry directly to see if she would deign to speak to him.

"Alston Green," she murmured, barely moving her lips.

"In Horsham," Miss Phillips added helpfully.

"Ah yes, West Sussex. Pretty country round about there. My family is from a little west of there, in Hampshire."

Miss Phillips nodded, then with a glance at Miss Barry, volunteered,

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“Jessamine—Miss Barry—was born and bred there, but I moved there with my mother and brother almost fifteen years ago. My mother is originally from the village.”

Miss Barry’s compressed lips and flared nostrils confirmed her displeasure at her friend’s offering of information.

“But we’ve been the best of friends ever since. I can hardly remember a time I didn’t know Jessamine—Miss Barry—so feel as if I’m originally from the village.”

He nodded. “Where did you live beforehand?”

A shadow crossed Miss Phillips’s pretty gray eyes. “Bristol.”

He raised his eyebrows. “That must have been a change for you from the city to a village.”

“Yes, though meeting Miss Barry, who is our nearest neighbor, made all the difference.” Her expression sobered. “My father was a merchant in Bristol, until he passed away.”

“I’m sorry.” He remembered Lady Abernathy’s words. Miss Phillips’s father had died bankrupt. Bristol, a city dependent on its seafaring trade, had been hard hit from so many years of the blockade with France.

“It was a difficult time for my mother, brother, and I. Of course, I was but a child so do not remember it so well as they. It happened many years ago.”

“Still, the loss of one’s father must be a terrible blow.” He was grateful he still had both of his parents even when they didn’t always see eye to eye on his way of life. Thankfully, being the younger son put him under no undo obligation to conform to their manner of life—until lately.

“Do you live in London?” Miss Phillips asked him in friendly inquiry.

His nervousness disappeared. It wasn’t hard to feel at ease with Miss Phillips. She had a generous smile that bordered on the saucy but didn’t cross over into flirtatious. “No, my parents have a place in town—on Grafton Street—so I have spent a fair amount of time

here, though not lately.” He cleared his throat again, reluctant to offer any more about himself, afraid he’d appear to be boasting. “I’ve been in India the last two years.”

That got Miss Barry’s attention, but it was Miss Phillips who expressed her curiosity. “India? What took you there, the East India Company?”

“I went out with the Church Missionary Society.” He looked down, experiencing the familiar hesitancy at explaining. “I’m a vicar and felt called to go as a missionary.” He raised his gaze as he finished, curious to gauge Miss Barry’s reaction. Experience had taught him he’d either face disbelief or embarrassed silence.

His words appeared to have neither effect. Miss Barry’s green eyes narrowed as if she were assessing him. Miss Phillips’s eyes shone. “A missionary, how exciting! You must tell us about your time there.”

He shrugged, feeling ill at ease again. “It was not an easy task,” he said slowly, finding it hard to encapsulate his experience in a few sentences, which was all people usually wanted to hear.

In an effort to turn the topic, he addressed Miss Barry, remembering her words of dissatisfaction. “You are enjoying your season thus far?”

“It is certainly different from what we’re used to in Alston Green,” she answered in a careful tone.

“We attended assemblies there and in neighboring Billingshurst, but they were nothing like these parties,” added Miss Phillips when Miss Barry said nothing more. “It is a bit difficult to fully appreciate these great houses when one is a stranger in town.”

He nodded, his sympathy engaged. Even when one had grown up among the “ten thousand,” the parties of the ton were intimidating. “I daresay. Your patroness is—”

“Lady Beasinger,” Miss Phillips finished for him. “She’s Miss Barry’s godmother. It was very sweet of her to include me in her invitation to Miss Barry.”

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Lancelot nodded. "Yes, my mother knows her. She seems a kindly person. She's a bit on in years, though, and perhaps is not acquainted with the younger set."

Miss Phillips nodded eagerly. "That's precisely so. She goes out very little in society these days except to a few card parties among her small circle." She indicated the crowd around them. "This is our first evening at a real society event. Unfortunately, she left us here for the card room and thinks just by standing around, young gentlemen will come flocking to us." Her cheeks dimpled again. "But it seems to have worked."

He couldn't help chuckling, but he saw that Miss Barry didn't share the joke.

Before he could think of some appropriate rejoinder, Miss Barry spoke to him directly. "If you will excuse us, Mr. Marfleet, I believe I see someone we must greet."

He swiveled around.

"Oh? Who?" Miss Phillips asked.

Miss Barry gave her companion a sharp look.

Realizing Miss Barry was only trying to get rid of him, he stepped back. He had probably overstayed his welcome in any case. "I shall not keep you. It was a pleasure meeting you both."

Miss Phillips looked disappointed but said nothing to contradict her friend. She held out her hand. "It was a pleasure indeed. I hope we see you again."

He bowed over her hand and then turned to Miss Barry. But she neither offered her hand nor smiled. "I look forward to it," he murmured, moving out of their way.

He observed them crossing the room, delayed several times by the throng. Miss Barry was in the lead, her hand upon her friend's arm as if she were towing her along.

Only when they reached the doorway did he realize he was still wearing his spectacles. His face heated up and he swallowed, imagining the sport Harold would have if he were with him.

Sir Lancelot, you managed to converse for a quarter of an hour with not one but two pretty ladies, and you ruined it all with those spectacles.

Then he'd throw back his blond head and roar with laughter.

Hang it all! What did Lancelot care what Miss Barry and Miss Phillips thought of his appearance? It was worth it to see them both clearly. And *clearly*, Miss Barry didn't care if she ever saw him again.

Miss Phillips hadn't seemed to notice his spectacles at all.

Remembering his brother, Lancelot decided it was time to hunt for him.

After searching all the public rooms in the elegant town house, he realized Harold had left, probably as soon as he'd deposited him here. No doubt to some gaming den.

Jessamine bit back her annoyance as she pushed herself in front of a bejeweled lady, ignoring the lady's exclamation as she accidentally trod on her satin slippers.

"Impertinent chit," the lady said to her escort. "I vow, Lady Abernathy is allowing all sorts of nobodies at her routs these days. Probably a mushroom's daughter by the looks of her."

"Did you hear that?" Megan whispered.

Jessamine nodded abruptly, keeping her pace up. All she wanted was to exit this room with its odious people. Never had she felt so out of place. "Some people, even in London's best homes, have no manners," she said shortly.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" Megan asked when they were halfway across the room.

"I wanted to get away from that impertinent gentleman."

Megan stared at her. "Mr. Marfleet? I thought he was quite charming."

"Charming? With all that red hair and—and spectacles?"

Megan's gray eyes twinkled. "Spectacles?"

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Jessamine felt herself blush to the roots of her hair, thinking of the pair she carried in the leather case in her reticule. "But no one wears them in public like that, not to a rout!"

"I thought it showed a refreshing honesty. He's a vicar and a missionary. He probably doesn't care about his appearance."

"Yes, a vicar."

"What's wrong with being a vicar? Your father is one."

Jessamine shuddered. "I'm not interested in meeting a vicar." Nor in giving her heart to anyone else.

"But to think he's been to India. I wonder who his family is," Megan mused, "if they have a house in town and in Hampshire."

Jessamine concentrated on maneuvering past a dawdling couple in front of them before she replied. "He can be the Duke of Marlborough's son for all I care. His hair is unruly, he has a bran-faced complexion, and he sports his spectacles at a rout!" A vicar was the last man she would look at. Not after having lived life by the rules and having it turn to ashes. With her words, she reached the doorway and grabbed the jamb as if arriving at a finish line.

Megan looked around. "I thought you wanted to greet someone?"

Jessamine blushed again, looking away, ashamed of having told a fib to her friend. "It was just an excuse to get away from Mr. Marfleet."

Megan's eyes widened. It was no wonder. Jessamine had never told such a fib. But those days were over. Being good got one nowhere.

"I'm sorry," Megan said. "I didn't realize you were uncomfortable with him. I was so relieved to be talking to someone closer to our age."

"He looked closer to Rees's age—" she blurted out then stopped, realizing she was the one who had brought up Megan's brother this time.

Megan laid a hand on her arm. "I'm sorry. I didn't think. He just seems so different from Rees. I didn't think he resembled him at all."

He didn't. Mr. Marfleet was nowhere near as handsome as Rees Phillips with his dark looks and gray eyes, so like his sister Megan, but in a tall, masculine form. Try as she would to blot out the hurt, it still lay behind her heart like a smoldering acid and turned her every thought acrimonious.

"I found him old," she said abruptly, turning away from Megan. "How long do you think Lady Bess will be?"

"A few hours if we're fortunate."

Jessamine's lips turned downward. "Too bad she has nowhere else to visit tonight."

"It would only mean hopping in and out of a hackney in the rain to do the same thing we're doing now."

The night loomed before them. Jessamine's shoulders slumped as she admitted defeat in the face of her friend's realistic assessment. "I wish we could play cards."

"It wouldn't matter. Young ladies are not expected to sit like dowagers at the card table here in London the way we do back home."

"Instead we are supposed to be standing like storks, to be seen by eligible bachelors who happen by." She pasted a false smile on her face and batted her eyelashes.

Only to have her glance land squarely on that odious redhead and find him observing her across the room. She flushed, realizing her falsehood had been discovered.

Once again, she took Megan by the elbow. "Come along, let's find Lady Bess and pray she's on a losing streak."