

A SCANDAL IN PRINT

The Unclaimed Waltz

Eleanor Vale & Julian Ash

SAMPLE EDITION

The Unclaimed Waltz

Bath, 1814

At ten minutes past nine, Eleanor Vale discovered that the committee had auctioned off her next dance. At eleven minutes past nine, she discovered who had bought it. The second discovery was considerably worse.

Julian Ash stood by the ballroom doors, looking as though he had paid five guineas for the pleasure of being disliked in person. He was holding her dance card. Someone had tied it to his wrist with pink ribbon.

“Before you say anything,” he said, “the ribbon was compulsory.”

“The five guineas, I presume, were voluntary.”

“Four. Your aunt bid the fifth on my behalf when I hesitated.”

Eleanor looked across the room. Aunt Lydia, who had spent all afternoon complaining that the charity auction was in poor taste, raised her glass.

“I intended to buy the first edition of the small book by the door,” Julian said. “The auctioneer heard ‘first dance.’”

“You could have corrected him.”

“Of course. And then everyone would have known I would rather spend the evening with a book.”

Eleanor almost smiled. It troubled her that Julian could make her almost smile while committing a public nuisance. She concentrated on the ribbon.

“You know it is tied in a slipknot,” she said.

“I've known for twenty minutes. I wanted you to see it.”

The musicians struck up. Eleanor took the dance card, loosened the knot, and handed him the ribbon. “You had better dance well enough to justify my aunt's guinea.”

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They made it through one circuit of the ballroom before Julian said, “You have ink on your thumb.”

“I was making a list.”

“Of my offenses?”

“Of the things I am taking when I leave Bath tomorrow.”

His hand shifted against her back. Anyone watching would have called it an adjustment for the turn.

“Tomorrow,” he said.

“I have taken a little house in Lyme. There is a room facing the sea with enough light to write in all morning. I shall go before somebody puts me on another committee.”

“Does it have a room with poor light? I am excellent company in poor light. In good light my deficiencies are plain.”

She missed a step. For two years Julian had visited her every Thursday and stayed until the fire went out. He had brought books, an apple tart once, and on a famously cold evening two pieces of wood under his coat. Neither of them had ever said why he came.

“There is a kitchen,” she said. “The window faces a wall.”

“Splendid.”

“Julian. Are you asking if you may visit?”

He looked down at her then, with an earnestness that she could not remember seeing on him at any auction, dinner, or Thursday tea.

“I have been asking for nearly two years. I thought this was the first time you might let me finish.”

The music ended. Eleanor kept her hand on his sleeve.

“I have a rule about visitors,” she said. “They must bring their own books.”

“I know. I bought you one.”

“The first edition by the door?”

“The very one. The auctioneer has agreed to sell it to me privately. He says I may collect it as soon as your aunt stops bidding.”

They found Aunt Lydia at the refreshments table, eating a slice of cake with the quiet satisfaction of someone whose evening had gone entirely according to plan. The book was under her elbow.

“Three guineas,” she said, “or an invitation to Lyme.”

Eleanor took a piece of cake. “They both seem rather dear.”

Julian laughed, and because there was still music to come, and because nobody had bought her next dance, she asked him for it herself.