

# *A Second Season*



*Katherine Langton*

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*by Katherine Langton*

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## **CONTENTS**

[Chapter One](#)  
[Chapter Two](#)  
[Chapter Three](#)  
[Chapter Four](#)  
[Chapter Five](#)  
[Chapter Six](#)  
[Chapter Seven](#)  
[Chapter Eight](#)  
[Chapter Nine](#)  
[Chapter Ten](#)  
[Chapter Eleven](#)  
[Chapter Twelve](#)  
[Chapter Thirteen](#)  
[Chapter Fourteen](#)

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## A SECOND SEASON

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## Chapter One

*March 1819*

Francesca Ashton stood at her bedroom window, staring glumly at the passers-by and traffic passing below on South Audley Street. She heartily wished she wasn't in London; she yearned to be back home in the Lake District, tucked away in the safety of the cozy family house.

She should have put up more of a fight against Mama and Phyllida, her younger sister! For Francesca, London was a reminder of a painful past that she would far rather forget.

As if thinking about her sister had conjured her up, Phyllida Ashton suddenly burst into the room. As fair as her elder sister Francesca was dark, Phyllida glowed with enthusiasm and happiness.

Phyl has clearly enjoyed her morning's shopping with Mama, Francesca thought, and sighed wistfully, recalling her own excitement on her first visit to London four years ago.

How naive she had been!

"My gown for my come-out ball is nearly ready, Fran!" Phyllida announced. "They're just finishing sewing in the seed pearls around the neckline." Phyllida had indeed spent a delightful morning shopping, and had had the final fitting for her ball gown. It would be delivered any day now.

Phyllida had fallen in love with London within a day of their arrival, and was eagerly looking forward to when the Season would start in earnest. That was now only a week away, and

all the balls and parties and other delights would begin. She could hardly wait.

Suddenly noticing her elder sister's despondency, Phyllida gave Francesca a stern look. "Still sulking, Fran? And why are you standing by the window? Are you hoping to see Mr. Winter pass by?"

Francesca hastily moved away from the window. "I most certainly am not, Phyl! Whatever gave you that idea? And I'm not sulking!"

Phyllida smiled mischievously. "You are. But if you're still worried about seeing Mr. Landon, you mustn't be, Fran. He's living on the Continent and likely to stay there, according to Mama."

Francesca didn't want to think or talk about either Mr. Winter or Mr. Landon—but especially Thomas Landon, the man who had broken her heart. He was the reason why she hadn't wanted to return to London.

As for Mr. Winter, Francesca was unsure what her feelings were towards him.

The Ashton family had made Hugo Winter's acquaintance shortly after their arrival in town, when Francesca, Mama and Phyllida had visited the circulating library. Francesca had been reaching for a book on a high shelf. Unable to touch it even when she stood on tiptoes, she was about to call for the assistant's help when a masculine hand had fetched it down for her.

The gentleman had introduced himself as Mr. Hugo Winter, and a conversation was struck up. Since that initial meeting, Mr. Winter had paid several visits to the Ashton household in

A Second Season  
*by Katherine Langton*

South Audley Street, and Phyllida had been assiduously teasing Francesca about her new beau, much to her annoyance.

"More and more people are arriving in town every day," Phyllida was now chattering. "And Mama's received yet more invitations, Fran!" Her blue eyes sparkled with anticipation. "We've now been invited to visit the theatre with a friend of Mama's, and to a soiree, although we can't go to any balls yet until I have my come-out, of course. But now you must come downstairs—tea is about to be served."

Francesca accompanied her sister downstairs to the sitting room, where the tea things were laid out. Sitting beside Lady Ashton on the sofa was an unknown lady. The two girls, who had not been expecting any visitors, stopped short in surprise.

"Ah, here are my daughters, Lady Helmswich," Lady Ashton announced. "This is Francesca, my elder daughter, and my younger daughter, Phyllida. Girls, this is an old friend of mine, Lady Helmswich."

"Pleased to meet you, girls!" boomed Lady Helmswich, a lady of generous proportions. She was also clearly possessed of a dominating nature, as her powerful voice indicated. "I knew your mama when she made her come-out more than... well, never mind how many years ago it was. What very pretty girls, Anna," she remarked, turning back to Lady Ashton. "You shouldn't have any trouble firing them off, even if this will be Francesca's second Season!"

Francesca, taken aback, dropped onto a nearby chair. Who was this Lady Helmswich, discussing with her mother her first

disastrous Season? And how did she know about it? Francesca was certain she hadn't met Lady Helmswich before. She wasn't a person one would easily forget!

"There's been many a scandal come and gone," Lady Helmswich went on loudly. Her voice was so powerful that Francesca wouldn't be surprised if she could be heard in Green Park. "Her broken engagement is nothing that anyone would recall now, although it was certainly discussed to death at the time! But if anyone does dare to mention it, I'll put them in their place, never you fear." She gave Lady Ashton a conspiratorial look. "I'm sure both girls will be suitably affianced before the Season's end, Anna."

"Yes..." Lady Ashton looked uncertain. Then she sat up straighter. "But I won't have my girls bullied into accepting anyone they dislike, Martha," she added, more forcefully.

Lady Helmswich's eyes opened very wide. "Of course not, my dear Anna. Unthinkable!" She then abruptly changed the subject. "Now, don't forget, you are to be my guests at my dinner and soiree next week. Nothing too fancy, understand, just my friends and some young people for the girls to befriend. It's an excellent function to begin the Season, if I do say so myself."

Lady Ashton graciously accepted, as Francesca had known she would, and soon afterwards Lady Helmswich took her leave.

After seeing her out, Lady Ashton returned to the sitting room. She dropped onto the sofa with a sigh of exhaustion. "Good heavens! Lady Helmswich hasn't changed a bit from when I was a girl!"



"But who is Lady Helmswich?" Phyllida enquired. "She must be someone important. I don't know whether I like her. She's a bit frightening."

"She's *very* frightening," Lady Ashton corrected her younger daughter. "But yes, Phyllida, she is a very important lady. Lady Helmswich knows everyone and everything about Society. I met her when I made my own come-out, and she introduced me to your father. I've kept up the acquaintance ever since, although it's been a great many years since I've actually seen Martha."

She paused, and both girls were silent. Their father had died when they were quite young, and Lady Ashton had never remarried.

"Do we have to go to Lady Helmswich's dinner, Mama?" Francesca asked after a while.

Lady Ashton looked at her, frowning slightly. "We do indeed, Fran. As her ladyship said, it's just the thing to start the Season, and the sooner we begin to attend functions, the sooner you'll begin to enjoy the Season! And I'm sure we'll enjoy the evening; Lady Helmswich is a renowned hostess."

"I wish you had let me stay at home," Francesca muttered mutinously. "Someone's bound to remember my first Season and the end of my engagement. It was talked about enough at the time!"

"Now, now," Lady Ashton reproved, although she wasn't entirely unsympathetic towards her elder daughter. "Lady Helmswich is right. There have been any number of scandals these past four years, Fran, and just as many broken engagements, I dare say. *Your* broken engagement would

have been but a nine days' wonder until the next sensation came along. And as neither we—nor Mr. Landon himself, come to that—can boast of connections to the more exalted circles of Society, a broken engagement between two lesser members of the *ton* is hardly likely to be dragged out all over again. So forget the past Fran, and enjoy the Season—and as I told Martha, I have no intention of bullying either you or Phyllida into an unwanted betrothal, although of course if either of you were to form an attachment to a congenial gentleman, I would be delighted."

As Lady Ashton talked on, Francesca's thoughts turned to her first Season... and her broken engagement.

Four years before, she and Mama had come to London so Francesca could be presented to Society. She was yet to make her official come-out when she had fallen in love, at first sight, with Thomas Landon.

It had happened during a visit to the Royal Academy. She had been temporarily left alone, as Lady Ashton had met a friend and was deep in conversation with her. Francesca didn't mind, as it gave her an opportunity to examine more closely the painting that had caught her interest.

She had become so engrossed in her study of the portrait of the important personage—Francesca couldn't now remember who the personage had been—that she had forgotten that there were other people close around her. Wishing to study the portrait from a slightly different angle, and without checking to see if there was anyone behind her, Francesca took a backward step. She felt herself trod awkwardly onto someone's foot.

A Second Season  
*by Katherine Langton*

Hearing a grunt of pain, Francesca spun around. Deeply mortified, she apologized to the tall dark gentleman whose toes she had trampled. The gentleman had demurred, accepting the blame and saying it was his own fault for standing so close behind her.

Francesca thought this very gallant of him, especially when she realized that he was walking with the aid of a stick. She had a sneaking suspicion that she had caused him more pain than he revealed, although he assured her otherwise, pointing out that her soft leather walking shoes were unlikely to cause him any lasting damage.

Introducing himself as Thomas Landon, Francesca discovered that he had been a soldier and had seen action in Spain, which was where he had received his leg injury—a wound he was recovering well from, he hastened to assure her when Francesca apologized for her clumsiness yet again. They then fell into a lively discussion about the various artworks on display. When Lady Ashton presently rejoined her daughter, Francesca introduced Thomas to her.

When he eventually made his farewells, Francesca was delighted to hear Mama say what a very pleasant young man he was.

To her surprise and delight, Francesca met Thomas again that very night at a concert party, and again the following day in the park, where she and Mama were taking a leisurely afternoon stroll.

As the Season progressed, Mr. Landon and Francesca spent more and more time together. They went for carriage rides in the park, and he escorted her and her mother to the

theatre and opera. They spent hours talking, discussing everything under the sun, and discovering each other's likes and dislikes.

Thomas's injury had put paid to his military career, but by the night of Francesca's come-out ball, he didn't need the assistance of the walking stick anymore. He wrote his name in her dance card for three dances, including the supper dance and a waltz. That he was now courting her, Francesca had no doubt.

She was dazzled and in love; and best of all, Lady Ashton liked and approved of Thomas—Francesca wouldn't have been able to bear it if Mama had taken him in dislike!

Fortunately, that was not the case. Thomas Landon was eligible in every way. He came from a good gentry family, and was in possession of a modest property and a comfortable income.

But Francesca was certain that she would have loved Thomas whatever his status.

When the Season was drawing to a close, Thomas asked Francesca to marry him. Without a second's hesitation, she accepted.

A delighted Lady Ashton arranged another ball, this one to formally announce the engagement. Francesca's younger sister Phyllida, although still in the schoolroom, was to travel to London with her governess to help them celebrate.

Francesca felt herself to be the luckiest girl in the world, and was certain that she and Thomas were destined to live happily ever after.

Alas, it was not to be.

Francesca's dream came to an abrupt end at her engagement ball—the ball that was supposed to celebrate the start of the life she and Thomas were to share.

The Ashton family lawyer had called unexpectedly that evening, needing to clarify some final details of the marriage settlement with Lady Ashton and Thomas. Lady Ashton had soon left the gentlemen to complete the business, eager to return to her duties as hostess of the ball.

Some time passed and Francesca, thinking that the lawyer must have completed the business by now, went in search of Thomas. A manservant told her that the lawyer had indeed departed some time before, but that Mr. Landon himself was still in the library, reading over some papers. Pleased to learn that Thomas was alone, Francesca headed in that direction. Without knocking, she opened the door to the library.

The sight that met her eyes almost caused Francesca to faint with shock. Her betrothed, far from poring over dreary legal papers, was locked in an embrace with Lady Bernice Lexham.

Francesca didn't know Lady Bernice very well. She was aware only that she was an impoverished earl's daughter, a few years older than herself but still unmarried. She had heard rumors that Lady Bernice was determined to marry a rich man.

Lady Bernice hadn't received an invitation to Francesca's ball, but as the lady had a reputation for attending functions uninvited, Lady Ashton and Francesca weren't surprised when the butler announced Lady Bernice's arrival.

Francesca herself didn't care for Lady Bernice, finding her brazen and loud, although she had always been polite when the lady spoke with her.

But seeing Thomas, the man she loved, with his arms wrapped around Lady Bernice's lush figure was another thing altogether. Francesca, young and inexperienced, reacted instinctively. She turned and fled.

She heard Thomas cry out to her, but Francesca ignored him. Like a child, she sought the comfort only her mother could give.

Running straight to the ballroom, uncaring that Lady Ashton was deep in conversation with a pair of London's worst gossips, Francesca promptly threw herself into her arms. Within seconds, she had sobbed out the whole sorry tale.

Such bizarre behavior from a well brought up young lady—in whose honor the ball was being held—created a stir. But Francesca, in the throes of grief, didn't notice that the dancing had come to a stop, nor that all the guests were staring, pointing, whispering, and giggling.

In a matter of moments, Francesca's broken engagement had become the scandal of the Season. Less than an hour before, her engagement to Thomas Landon had been proudly announced—and now it was most publicly broken!

The town tabbies were overcome with delight at the unexpected turn of events, and added their own comments and opinions to the mix. A young lady making an exhibition of herself in public! How very vulgar, the gossips pronounced, even if the gentleman in question had behaved disgracefully! Gently brought up young ladies should never behave in such

a fashion! Emotions were never displayed; they were to be kept private behind closed doors, where they belonged.

The combination of her broken engagement and the escalating gossip proved too much for Francesca. She begged her mother to take her home.

Lady Ashton, equally distraught, did so the very next day.

Thomas wrote letter after letter to Francesca, but she returned all his missives to him unopened. The only direct communication she had with him was to post his ring back to him, and after that, Thomas wrote no more.

After a period of four years, Francesca was able to look back at her younger self with some amazement. She was now twenty-two, a woman, and she knew she would now handle the situation with more maturity.

She pictured in her mind how she would do it. Firstly, she would have floored Thomas Landon with a cutting remark. Secondly, she would have taken his ring off her finger and cast it in his face. Thirdly, with her chin held high, she would have given him a look of icy disdain and swept from the room as proudly as a duchess.

Her heart would still have been broken, of course, but her pride would have been left intact.

Still, Francesca could not regret her broken engagement. Thomas Landon had betrayed her and broken her heart, and she would never, ever forgive him.

Francesca resigned herself to attending Lady Helmswich's dinner and soiree. It would be but the first of many such functions, she knew, and it was better to yield with grace.

Lady Helmswich had paid the Ashton family another two visits before the night of the soiree, and Francesca and Phyllida were beginning to lose their fear of her. Despite her loud voice and domineering manner, she was a kindly lady, and revealed a liking for poetry, art, and music.

When the Ashtons arrived at Lady Helmswich's town house, they were shown into a large salon where they were greeted warmly by their hostess. Introducing Francesca and Phyllida to some young people, Lady Helmswich then bore Lady Ashton away to introduce her to some older guests. Francesca, chatting to her new acquaintances, glimpsed Hugo Winter's handsome blond head in the crowd. She wondered if he would approach her and engage her in conversation during the evening.

After a sumptuous dinner, the guests returned to the salon. There was to be poetry recitals by a few of the guests. Francesca, who had not been looking forward to attending the soiree, somewhat to her surprise found that she was finding the evening quite pleasurable and that she was actually enjoying herself.

"Viscount Lyndhurst," Francesca heard the butler announce. She saw Lady Helmswich abruptly break off her conversation with one of her guests to go and greet the viscount.

As the name meant nothing to her, Francesca herself didn't turn around to look at the viscount, assuming him to be a tardy guest. Other people, more curious, stretched their necks for a glimpse of the viscount.



A Second Season  
*by Katherine Langton*

Suddenly an excited whisper rippled through the salon. Ladies, fans fluttering, gathered in tight little groups to murmur excitedly. Speculation intensified.

Francesca managed to overhear disjointed sentences, from which she gathered that Lord Lyndhurst had recently, and most unexpectedly, come into the title.

Now infected by curiosity herself, Francesca turned around to look at Lord Lyndhurst... and found herself staring at Thomas Landon, her erstwhile fiance.

Her heart gave an odd little skip, then seemed to stop beating altogether as realization sank in.

Viscount Lyndhurst and Thomas Landon were one and the same.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## **Chapter Two**

Francesca froze, transfixed by the sight of Thomas Landon after so many years. Lady Helmswich was still chatting to him, but seeing Francesca looking at them, her ladyship waved her fan at her. Setting her gloved hand firmly in the crook of Thomas's elbow, her ladyship, with some authority, began to lead him in Francesca's direction.

Francesca was paralyzed with shock. She tried to think, but her thought processes seemed to have ground to a complete halt.

This couldn't be happening! Thomas was on the Continent, Mama had said so...

Dressed suitably for the evening, in severe black and white, he was as handsome as he had been four years ago, Francesca noticed distractedly. But now that he was older, he was possessed of a new assurance that was plain to see.

Some months after her return home to the Lake District, Lady Ashton had informed her that Thomas had gained a diplomatic post that required him to live on the Continent. It was an experience that was sure to leave its mark on any man, with Europe in turmoil after the late war, and so it had plainly done with Thomas.

Francesca realized the shock that was still reverberating through her body had stopped her breath. By breathing out, and then in again more slowly, she managed to bring it under control...

Alas, there was no way she could control her racing heart, nor the trembling of her hands. She opened her fan and waved it in front of her face, sure that beads of unladylike perspiration dotted her brow. It was vital that she maintain her veneer of town sophistication!

This was the man who had betrayed her and broken her heart, Francesca reminded herself harshly. She must not fall to pieces; she must get a grip of her feelings.

Yet Francesca was cross with Lady Helmswich. Her ladyship was aware of the circumstances of her broken engagement, and it was inconceivable that she was unaware of the fact that the new Viscount Lyndhurst was Francesca's erstwhile fiancé, Thomas Landon.

So why had Lady Helmswich invited him to her soiree? For it was hardly likely that the Thomas Landon Francesca had once known would attend a private function uninvited.

Lady Helmswich and Thomas were now only a yard away.

Suddenly looking uncertain, he stopped short. For a long moment, Thomas and Francesca stared at one another; then, tearing his eyes from hers, he leaned down to murmur something in Lady Helmswich's ear.

To Francesca's utter astonishment, she heard Lady Helmswich give an unladylike snort and sharply rap Thomas's knuckles with her fan.

Her ladyship almost dragged the new Lord Lyndhurst forward. "Thomas, of course you remember Miss Francesca Ashton? And Lady Ashton, too. I'm not sure whether you'll remember Phyllida. She's no longer a child, as you can see, but all grown up and about to make her curtsy to Society."

Thomas Landon, Viscount Lyndhurst, bowed. He appeared poised and calm, seemingly having cast away his brief uncertainty as if it had never been.

"Of course I remember the Ashton family," he said evenly. His tones were as polished as any viscount born to the title, revealing nothing of his emotions. "Good evening, Lady Ashton, Miss Ashton, Miss Phyllida. Please believe me when I say I'm delighted to renew your acquaintance."

Lady Ashton's reply was equally polished, and Phyllida managed a polite greeting, but Francesca was unable to say a word. Realizing that she had been staring at Thomas, she dragged her gaze away and stared at the floor instead.

Thomas didn't wonder at Francesca's demeanor. The sorry end of their engagement was forever etched in his memory. He had never been able to forgive himself for the hurt and embarrassment Francesca had suffered, and when his Aunt Martha, Lady Helmswich, had told him that the Ashton family were back in London, he had immediately resolved to repair his damaged relationship with Francesca.

Exactly how he would accomplish this reconciliation, he was not exactly sure.

It wasn't a promising beginning. His Aunt Martha should have informed him that Francesca was to be here tonight! She was giving no indication that she would speak to him—let alone look at him again.

Becoming a viscount did not fulfill all of one's wishes, Thomas thought wryly.

Francesca, after a strained silence, finally forced herself to meet Thomas's gaze.

"Good evening, Lord Lyndhurst," she said stiffly, and with a polite curtsey, her grey eyes cold and glacial, she returned her gaze to the floor.

Thomas realized that she hadn't forgiven him. Indeed, why would she? He hadn't forgiven himself for hurting her.

The sight of Francesca brought the past rushing back. He recalled their first meeting at the Royal Academy; their growing attachment, and finally, the evening when he had asked her to marry him...

"Thomas has returned to England permanently to take up his duties as viscount," Lady Helmswich explained, returning Thomas to the present. "His second cousin, the previous viscount, died unexpectedly early last year. As the new Lord Lyndhurst, it is imperative that Thomas reacquaints himself with the ways of Society."

"I'm sorry to hear of the death of your cousin," Lady Ashton said. "Although I did not know him, Lord Lyndhurst, please accept my condolences."

"Thank you, Lady Ashton. He was a good man, and his loss was a great shock."

"When did you arrive in England, my lord?"

"I arrived just before Christmas, Lady Ashton," Thomas explained. "I've been staying at my new estate, The Pines, which is in Cheshire. This is the first time I've been away from it. I had a sudden desire to see London again."

Francesca made no contribution to the conversation. After a few more pleasantries, to her relief Lord Lyndhurst and Lady Helmswich then left them to mingle with other guests.

Phyllida was agog. "Oh, Mama, a viscount, just think! Fran could have been Lady Lyndhurst!"

Lady Ashton was shaking her head. "Oh, dear, we could do without this complication! Mr. Landon a viscount! I had no idea he had such illustrious connections—although it seems to me that becoming a viscount has been as much a shock to him as it has been to us! I truly believed he was still on the Continent. My dear..." Lady Ashton turned her elder daughter, her brow creased with concern. "If you don't wish to stay, we can give our regrets to Martha and go home."

Francesca rallied. "No, of course we shan't go home, Mama. Lady Helmswich invited us to her soiree, and here we shall stay until it is time for us to leave. I refuse to let Thomas Landon spoil my evening. Indeed, I refuse to let him spoil my Season!"

Her voice gave no hint of the anger she felt at herself for her reaction at meeting him again. Why did her knees continue to shake so? *Cease that nonsense at once!* she silently ordered herself.

The nerve of Lord Lyndhurst! How dare he address her! She resolved to stay well away from him for the remainder of the Season. She wanted nothing to do with him, and hoped he would not approach her again.

Phyllida plainly wanted to speak further of Lord Lyndhurst but as Lady Helmswich just then clapped her hands and announced the first of the poetry readings, the topic was, to Francesca's relief, abandoned.

Seeing off the last of her guests, Lady Helmswich repaired to her comfortable sitting room. Pouring out two generous

glasses of sherry, she passed one to her nephew, the new Viscount Lyndhurst, before settling back in her favorite armchair.

Fixing Thomas with a gimlet stare, she said, "It's that Winter fellow I'm worried about. For some reason, Francesca seems to have taken a liking to him. I have to confess I find the man charming myself—he's so very handsome and witty, and I do enjoy having handsome and witty young men in my house. Yet Hugo Winter's a loose fish, that I can't deny."

"So what do you recommend I do?" Thomas had observed the handsome, witty and charming Mr. Winter conversing with Francesca after the poetry readings. He had even seen her smile at him—which was more than she had done him! "She was most careful to keep her distance from me. Indeed, she didn't even look at me again."

"Yes, she did," Lady Helmswich contradicted, much to Thomas's surprise. "Not when you were looking in her direction, of course, but she was most definitely looking at you!" Then she frowned. "It's most unfortunate that I decided to travel to Italy four years ago. If I had been here, Thomas, I would have sent that minx Lady Bernice Lexham to the rightabout! Really, nephew, what on earth were you thinking of, to let her paw you about like that?"

Thomas was indignant. "I didn't, Aunt! I barely knew the woman, let alone encouraged her—in fact, she wasn't even invited to the ball! Lady Bernice sneaked into the library and caught me off guard. She was amusing herself, no more—as I would have explained to Francesca. But she fled home and refused to answer my letters."

"Yes, I know." Lady Helmswich held up a hand as Thomas prepared to argue further. "It's not me you have to convince of your sincerity, Thomas, but Francesca. She's an excellent young woman, and will make you an excellent viscountess." Taking another sip of sherry, she contemplated the situation.

There was nothing Martha Helmswich liked better than a spot of matchmaking, and she had her mind set on a match between her favorite nephew and her friend Anna Ashton's elder daughter.

Now that her nephew had become Lord Lyndhurst, she was even more determined that this marriage take place. Every conniving minx in London would be setting their cap at Thomas. Quick action, Martha decided, was needed in order to keep him from their clutches.

To that end, she had pointedly reintroduced Francesca and her nephew that very evening—although she had given poor Thomas a shock, she knew... and Francesca an even greater one! Neither of them had known that the other was to be present at her soiree, but if Martha had let them know, she was certain that neither of them would have attended... which would not have done at all! How would she get them married if they refused to speak to one another? Indeed, Martha had had to almost forcibly drag Thomas towards Francesca!

It was not an auspicious start, but a start nonetheless, and Martha Helmswich was nothing if not determined.

"Francesca being an excellent viscountess has nothing to do with it; that's by the way, Aunt," Thomas now said. "I just want her as my wife. But at the moment, I cannot see it



happening. My becoming a viscount hasn't softened her feelings towards me!"

Thomas suddenly looked bleak, and Lady Helmswich patted his hand in sympathy. She was well aware that Thomas's feelings for Francesca had never waned.

"Francesca will come around," Lady Helmswich said comfortably. "Let her become used to the idea of you returning to her life, and eventually she will think less badly of you. It might take some time however—and that young Hugo Winter is being so very attentive towards her, drat the young scoundrel!"

"What do you know of Hugo Winter?" Thomas asked, curious to know more about his rival.

"He's a gentleman," his aunt replied, "but as I said, there's something a little havey-cavey about him. I believe he was left an estate in Surrey and a large sum of money by a great aunt, which he's steadily gambling away. I've heard tell that he's on the lookout for a rich wife."

"But the Ashtons aren't rich," Thomas protested. "So why would he be interested in Francesca?"

"Why indeed? I know Anna was left a comfortable income, and I assume the girls have respectable portions, but heiresses they are most definitely not." Lady Helmswich shook her head. Taking another sip of sherry, she went on. "That's why I'm a little uneasy, Thomas. I fear that Hugo Winter is out to amuse himself with Francesca. His intentions cannot be honorable."

Thomas went cold at the thought.

A Second Season  
*by Katherine Langton*

Lady Helmswich gave him a sharp look. "So I suggest, nephew, that you begin your courtship without delay!"

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

### Chapter Three

After breakfast the following morning, Francesca suggested to her sister that they take a walk. Lady Ashton was amenable, provided they not stay out too long, and so Phyllida and Francesca, accompanied by their maid Mattie, headed for the direction of Hyde Park.

Francesca's emotions were still disordered after meeting Thomas Landon so unexpectedly the previous evening. Hopefully the brisk walk would shake the cobwebs from her mind and restore her equanimity.

She knew it was inevitable that she would meet Thomas again. They would attend many different functions over the coming weeks, and sooner or later, they would meet again. And not only that, but she would have to speak to him—and politely, or she would disgrace herself and Phyllida in the eyes of the *ton*! It could not be avoided, short of running away home—and that, Francesca vowed, she would not do. Not only would her running away spoil things for Phyllida, but it would show her up as nothing but a coward.

And Francesca Ashton, the grown woman, was no coward!

Yet she remained firm in her determination not to speak to Thomas; and if he did have the temerity to address her, she would present herself as an ice queen. She would say all that was polite, and nothing more. Hopefully he would soon get the message that she wanted no further contact with him, and he would then leave her alone.

It was a dull morning. Rain had fallen during the early hours of the morning, and the pavements were still wet. There was a chilly breeze, and heavy grey clouds obscured the sun.

"I still cannot believe it!" Phyllida rubbed her gloved hands briskly, hoping to restore some warmth into her numbed digits. "Meeting Mr. Landon—I mean, Lord Lyndhurst, like that. To discover that he's a viscount... it's simply unbelievable!"

"Pray, Phyl, I don't wish to discuss the man!"

"Well, I do. And we're bound to meet him again, Fran, sooner or later. You'll have to get used to the idea."

"Yes, I know." Despite her private determination to treat Thomas with haughty disdain, Francesca's spirits plummeted, in tune with the miserable weather. Why did he have to visit London? Why couldn't he have stayed at his new estate? She could have begun to enjoy the Season if Thomas hadn't returned...

*Perhaps I should return home, she thought. Mama and Phyllida will be hurt and disappointed, but...*

"Speaking of Lord Lyndhurst, I learned something rather interesting last night." Phyllida's chirpy voice ploughed into her sister's bleak thoughts. "Remember the gossipy lady we met last night, the one wearing the striped black and yellow gown with the matching turban? You said she made you think of a wasp."

Despite herself, Francesca grinned. "Yes, Lady Felpham. I rather liked her actually, although she is a dreadful gossip."

"Yes, she is, but she's a *useful* gossip, if you know what I mean. She knows everything about everybody, and she told me that Lady Bernice Lexham married."

Francesca wanted to discuss Lady Bernice even less than she wanted to discuss Lord Lyndhurst.

"Really?" she said, her tone uninviting.

Phyllida nodded eagerly. "Yes. She married an old man. For his money, according to Lady Felpham." Her eyes widened at the unpalatable thought of marrying an old man. "Imagine that, Fran! He was Lord Whitham, who was believed to be monstrously rich, but when he died last year he left Lady Bernice not a penny! Serves her right, don't you think?"

"Oh, Phyllida, you know I don't want you discussing my past—or anybody involved in it! How could you? Does Mama know you've been listening to such gossip?"

"No, of course she doesn't," Phyllida said. "But Lady Felpham is not a nasty gossip—indeed, she said nothing at all about your engagement, but she had plenty to say about Lady Bernice! And if Lady Felpham is willing to tell me, then I am willing to listen. And besides, shouldn't you learn all you can about the enemy?"

"The enemy? Really, Phyllida, Lady Bernice is hardly my enemy. She's not a friend—nor is Lord Lyndhurst—but that is all. They are as strangers to me. What either of them choose to do does not interest me in the slightest! Now, I will hear no more. What will Mama say when she learns you've been listening to gossip—and repeating it?"

"Lady Felpham also told me that Lord Lyndhurst is unmarried," Phyllida went on as if Francesca had not spoken.

"She believes, now that he has come into an estate and title, that he will be looking for a wife."

"He will have to look elsewhere. I said, Phyl, that I am not interested. I have no intention of speaking to him ever again, let alone of being his wife!"

They were nearing Hyde Park; Francesca could see the entrance gates. Not wishing to hear another word about either Lady Bernice or Lord Lyndhurst, she hurried forward.

"Please, miss, can you spare a shilling?"

A man who had been leaning against the gates held out a shaking hand to her. Francesca stopped short and looked at him.

He was wearing an old, shabby military uniform. It hung loosely on his gaunt frame. His heavy boots looked old and worn and were caked with mud. She guessed he was an ex-soldier; she had seen many destitute former soldiers begging on street corners in her short time in London. Since the war had ended, many returning soldiers found it difficult to obtain work and live a normal civilian life. Those who had suffered an injury, as this man plainly had, Francesca observed, must find it doubly difficult. She thought again what a disgrace it was that her own country should turn its back on their brave ex-soldiers.

The ex-soldier had managed to push himself from the gate and, walking with the aid of a stick, ventured a little closer.

"Please miss, a shilling. For pity's sake."

His face was pale, etched with lines of pain as he endeavored to hold himself upright. Francesca was reminded forcibly of her first meeting with Thomas, and how proudly he

had held himself despite being compelled to walk with a stick. She opened her reticule.

Behind her, Mattie protested, "Oh, miss, should you?"

"Hush, Mattie! I can always spare a shilling for a brave man who needs it."

Phyllida was also digging into her reticule. She dropped a shilling into the man's palm, her coin clinking against the one that Francesca had given him.

The man gave a smile of thanks, and touched a hand to his forehead. "Thank you, misses. A bed for the night, and a hot meal will..." He suddenly bent over, doubled up with a cough that visibly shook his entire body.

Francesca hurried to him. "Oh, you shouldn't be standing about in the cold like this!" Close to, she saw how thin he was, and as she briefly touched the ex-soldier's arm, she realized his old army overcoat was distinctly damp.

She was overcome with compassion; he had clearly spent the night in the open, possibly under a bush somewhere in the park. The nights were still very cold at this time of year. The ex-soldier's health wouldn't improve living under such circumstances.

What could she do to help? Francesca felt helpless. He was but one of hundreds, she knew, but this man was standing before her right now and he needed her assistance.

Impulsively she said, "You shall come with us. Our cook can give you a warm meal, and you can sit and rest, and dry your coat by the kitchen fire..."

Phyllida gasped. "Oh, Fran, I don't think..."

Mattie's voice was even louder. "Oh, Miss Fran! Cook will never countenance that! Never! And what will Lady Ashton say?"

The ex-soldier made his protests too, but weakly, coughing all the while.

"Miss Ashton!"

Francesca spun around. A carriage had pulled up beside them, and Thomas was alighting. He looked angry.

"Is this man accosting you?" he demanded.

"He most certainly is not!" Francesca protested. Accosted, indeed! Did Lord Lyndhurst walk around with his eyes and ears shut? Or was poverty beneath his lordly notice?

Becoming a viscount had clearly made him arrogant!

"This man is ill and hungry, as anyone can see, Lord Lyndhurst," Francesca said. "I'm going to take him home. He needs a meal and a chance to warm and rest himself. I don't need your approval for that, my lord!"

*This man needs far more than one meal and a sit down,* Thomas thought. His eyes travelled over the ragged form before him. An ex-soldier, he saw, fallen on hard times. He softened with compassion.

Thomas had been alarmed when, glancing out of his carriage window, he had glimpsed Francesca engaged in what appeared to be an altercation with an importunate beggar.

"What is your name and rank?" Thomas asked the ex-soldier, unconsciously reverting to the tone he had used when addressing the men in his regiment.



The ex-soldier responded to it. Straightening his shoulders as best as he could, he answered, "Farley, sir. Sergeant Farley."

"You're looking for work?"

"That I am, sir." Sergeant Farley coughed again. He staggered, reaching out to grab the railings. Francesca moved to steady him, but Thomas got there first.

"Really, my lord! This man needs food and rest, not an inquisition," Francesca protested.

"Hear me out, Miss Ashton!" Thomas turned back to Sergeant Farley. "Before you were in the army, what work did you do?"

"I were a groom, sir. But no one will employ me with my gammy leg." He tapped his thigh. "I've been hoping it might improve but..." Sergeant Farley didn't complete the rest of the sentence. He averted his face in shame. "The ladies have been more than kind, and I've taken up enough of their time, and yours, sir. But thankee for your concern." He began to move off.

"A moment, Sergeant Farley."

The sergeant turned back. His expression was now suspicious.

Francesca was just as confused. She looked quizzically at Lord Lyndhurst.

"Where are you living? Do you have family?"

Sergeant Farley looked guarded, but he shook his head. "No family, sir. I sometimes get a room, if I'm lucky, and a warm meal now and then. I get by, mostly."

Francesca doubted it. Lord Lyndhurst looked as though he didn't believe it either, but he only nodded and didn't press the point.

"I've come into some property," Thomas went on, "and I'm searching for suitable staff. It's in Cheshire but..."

A hopeful glint came into Sergeant Farley's eyes. "Cheshire! But I'm from near those parts, sir!"

"Excellent! I'm happy to offer you employment. I'll let you rest and recuperate at my town house, and perhaps in a week or two you can travel up to Cheshire at your leisure."

Thomas led him to the carriage. Francesca and Phyllida followed close behind, watching as he settled the ex-soldier into his carriage. He even took off his own greatcoat, tucking it carefully around Sergeant Farley's legs.

Once Sergeant Farley was comfortable, Thomas turned back to them.

"Thank you for your kindness, Miss Ashton. You and your sister have been more than kind."

Francesca shook her head. "It's you who has been kind, Lord Lyndhurst. At best, I could have only offered a meal and some time by the kitchen fire."

Thomas looked kindly at her. "It's more than some would have done, Miss Ashton, and I'm sure Sergeant Farley would have been grateful. But it's not only out of kindness that I'm offering him a job. I do need staff for my estate. My late uncle lived very quietly, and although I'm loath to admit it, he did allow the house and grounds to deteriorate somewhat, so there is plenty of work available. And it pleases me to help a fellow soldier. I know of a few places that ex-soldiers can go

to, to receive help and advice, but there's not enough of them around. I wish I could do more."

"I think you've saved Sergeant Farley's life, giving him a job. And he looks so pleased at the prospect of returning to Cheshire."

Thomas smiled at her. "Ah, do I finally detect a spark of approval, Miss Ashton?" His voice was gently teasing, and Francesca was jolted by memory. She realized yet again how handsome he was, how tall, how dark his hair and eyes were, just as she remembered them. He was her Thomas, only older.

Francesca's breath caught.

"Now, if you will excuse me, Miss Ashton, I had better get Sergeant Farley home and settled," Thomas said. "I hope to see you again soon, and you, Miss Phyllida." And with that he got into his carriage. A moment later it drove off.

"Well!" Mattie breathed, once the carriage was out of sight. "Lord Lyndhurst is a gent, there's no mistake about that. There's not many as would put themselves out like that."

"Yes, it was kind of him, Mattie," Francesca was forced to concede. "Very kind."

Phyllida added her praises. She couldn't resist adding, "And to think only moments ago you were vowing not to speak to Lord Lyndhurst, Fran. My, my, how things do change!"

But for once, Francesca did not rise to her sister's baiting.

"Come, let us continue our walk," she said, turning in the direction of the gates to the park.

A Second Season  
*by Katherine Langton*

Keeping up a brisk pace so that she was slightly ahead of Phyllida and Mattie, Francesca's thoughts were in a whirl.

Lord Lyndhurst's actions towards Sergeant Farley could not be faulted, yet she was still unable to put her own treatment at his hands out of her mind. She must not, Francesca reminded herself, be seduced by him again.

Because if she wasn't careful, Thomas Landon could hurt her a second time.

And that she must not allow.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Four

Lady Bernice Whitham, formerly Lady Bernice Lexham, had just completed her morning's toilette when her butler announced the arrival of Mr. Hugo Winter.

She swept downstairs to the drawing room. "Well?" she demanded of her crony.

"I've bad news for you, my dear," Hugo drawled. "Lyndhurst hasn't forgotten Miss Francesca Ashton; indeed, I do believe he's actively pursuing her. What are you going to do about it?"

Lady Bernice ground her teeth, but she had to concede that her friend had a point. What, exactly, was she going to do about it?

Hugo, without asking and despite the relatively early hour of the morning, helped himself to a large brandy. Lady Bernice didn't protest; Hugo was a regular visitor to her house and she was familiar with his habits.

Making himself comfortable on the sofa, Hugo continued. "If Miss Ashton were in possession of a fortune, I'd marry her myself, Bernie. She's a pretty and charming girl, and despite that air of assurance she puts on, delightfully innocent and naive. Last night at Lady Belmont's card party, Lyndhurst could hardly tear his eyes off her. I don't blame him. She really is very lovely..."

"Be quiet!" Lady Bernice snarled. For the past week, Hugo had been telling her the same story. Wherever the Ashtons went, there was Lord Lyndhurst.

Not for the first time, Lady Bernice cursed the late Lord Whitham. What a simpleton she had been to marry him, for far from being the wealthy old fool she had thought him, Lord Whitham had been a poor old fool, as Lady Bernice discovered, far too late. Upon his death, instead of the huge inheritance she had been expecting, all he had bequeathed her were debts.

She wished she had made a play for Thomas Landon. He had no title or fortune back then, of course, nor any expectation of one. And four years ago Lady Bernice had been actively seeking a husband in possession of both a title and wealth. Thomas, who was then a plain Mister with only a modest income, did not feature on her list of potential husbands.

Lady Bernice had always enjoyed flirting with gentleman, rich and poor, young and old, and when she had followed Thomas into the library on the night of his engagement ball, flirting and amusement was all she had in mind.

How was she to know that Thomas Landon had a cousin who was a viscount? And that the cousin would die, making Thomas the new viscount, in possession of an estate and all the wealth that went with it?

Lady Bernice could scream at the injustice!

However, the new Lord Lyndhurst, unlike the former Mr. Landon, was now very definitely on Lady Bernice's list of possible husbands—and she was determined to secure him before anyone else did.

When she had heard the gossips mention that that there was a new and very rich viscount come onto the scene, Lady

Bernice had made enquiries. She had been delighted to discover that Lord Lyndhurst was none other than Thomas Landon.

It was so much more convenient that he was known to her—and surely, Thomas wouldn't have forgotten her!

Lady Bernice eyed her old friend, Hugo Winter, wondering just how much she could rely on his help to secure Lord Lyndhurst as her second husband.

She had met Hugo three years ago at a disreputable gaming party. He had been intrigued by her masked beauty—she always wore masks to gambling parties in a vain attempt to remain incognito, although everyone knew it was the notorious Lady Bernice Whitham—and they had begun a flirtation. Lady Bernice had finished the evening losing every penny she had gambled, but Hugo had honored her gaming debts.

Afterwards, they had become as close as two people of their character could ever be, and although Lady Bernice was now widowed, they knew they would never marry. Nor had they any wish to marry; it suited both Lady Bernice and Hugo to remain friends and allies.

"I can still get myself married to Thomas," Lady Bernice told Hugo with confidence. "He liked me back then, I know he did."

"He may have liked you well enough, but he was in love with Miss Ashton and was engaged to her," Hugo reminded his friend. "And don't forget you caused the end of their engagement! If Miss Ashton hadn't been so stubborn as to refuse to speak to Landon, preferring to bury herself at some

godforsaken place in Cumberland, they would be married now, depend upon it."

"Well, they're not married," Lady Bernice stated. After a moment she tentatively asked the question Hugo had been waiting for. "How did Miss Ashton treat Thomas last night?"

"With cold politeness, as always," Hugo answered. "But I'd be cautious, Bernie. Miss Ashton's not as indifferent to Lyndhurst as she makes out. I sense a definite thawing."

"Oh, pooh." Lady Bernice dismissed this information with an airy wave. Never having been in love in her life, she couldn't ever imagine herself distraught over a man, as Francesca had been when she believed that Thomas had betrayed her. Wealth and a position in Society was what Lady Bernice craved for, and it was what she aimed to have.

"Charm Miss Ashton, Hugo. Be attentive to her. Take her out to the park, escort her to the theatre. Waltz with her, moon over her. Write her sickly love sonnets. Do everything you can think of to make her fall in love with you. Please, Hugo. I'm counting on you!"

"I wonder what being in love is like," mused Hugo. "I imagine it must be a most inconvenient emotion, from what I've observed." Then he shrugged, dismissing the topic. "Well, Bernie, I'll do my best."

"Do," Lady Bernice said, her voice now cold. "Otherwise I won't help you find a wealthy heiress. I still have connections, don't forget, despite my lack of funds."

She rang the bellpull for her butler to show Hugo out, thinking of the pile of unpaid bills pushed to the very back of her desk drawer. The lease on the house too, she recalled,



was due to expire at the end of the month, and without funds, she wouldn't be able to renew it.

Lady Bernice shuddered. It was imperative that she betroth herself to the rich Lord Lyndhurst—and as quickly as possible!

"Before your come-out ball, Phyllida, which I will sponsor," Lady Helmswich proclaimed on yet another call to the Ashtons, "you must first be presented at Almack's."

Lady Helmswich had become a daily visitor at South Audley Street, and Francesca and Phyllida joked that you could almost set the clocks by her visits.

Francesca made a face. Lady Helmswich reached out and tapped her wrist with her fan. "Yes, I know it's overrated and shabby, Francesca, but it's the most important club in London, and one must be seen there. It's imperative!"

Lady Ashton was nodding in agreement. "Yes, indeed, Martha. Its importance cannot be understated!"

Phyllida was beginning to look nervous.

"Once you get there you'll be mightily disappointed," Francesca told her sister. "The place was shabby when I last saw it four years ago. Its condition has probably deteriorated."

"It has," Lady Helmswich confirmed. "Indeed, only last night I espied some cobwebs up in a corner." Phyllida laughed, as she had known she would. Lady Helmswich patted her hand reassuringly. "Now, you mustn't be nervous, my dear. Leave it all to me! Lady Jersey is a friend of mine, and she has promised me the vouchers. All you have to do is to ensure you be there by eleven, be polite and ladylike, don't

A Second Season  
*by Katherine Langton*

waltz until you are given permission to do so, and you'll be as right as a trivet!"

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Five

The night at Almack's went as well as Lady Helmswich had foretold. Lady Jersey welcomed the Ashtons warmly, and they were introduced to a number of suitable gentlemen. Permission was granted for Francesca to accept a waltz if a gentleman should ask. Phyllida couldn't waltz until her come-out—to her disappointment—but she could partake in other dances.

Lady Helmswich presented a tall, blond young gentleman by the name of Lord Adey as a suitable dancing partner for Phyllida. Francesca saw the pair take to each other immediately. She turned away, feeling sad, remembering the day when she had first seen Thomas Landon, and falling in love with him on the spot. The memory brought hot tears to her eyes, which she blinked away furiously.

Thomas was lost to her now!

"Now, now, no tears in Almack's! What would Lady Jersey say?"

Francesca gave a little laugh. "It was just seeing Lord Adey with Phyllida, Lady Helmswich. Look at them! They've only just met and can't take their eyes off each other." She sighed. "I doubt I'll ever marry."

"Rubbish," her ladyship retorted. "Why, you have any number of admirers. There's Lord Lyndhurst, for one." Francesca blushed. Lady Helmswich, she had noticed, was always mentioning Thomas to her, and she wished she wouldn't. She didn't want to think of Thomas; seeing him

about London was bad enough. "And you've got Hugo Winter trailing after you, the young scoundrel, although I don't recommend you encourage him. He hasn't a penny and..."

Lady Helmswich was about to expound further on the iniquities of Hugo, when she gasped. "Lady Bernice Whitham! What is *she* doing at Almack's? Who gave her vouchers? And she's being escorted by Sir William Greentree, the silly old fool!"

Francesca spun around. It was indeed Lady Bernice. Her arm was enfolded with that of an elderly gentleman Francesca had never seen before, who was plainly the Sir William Greentree Lady Helmswich had designated a silly old fool.

Sir William was looking as pleased as punch to be escorting a beautiful woman young enough to be his granddaughter. Despite her arm being linked with Sir William's, Lady Bernice openly flirted with every gentleman, young or old, who happened to be standing nearby.

"I doubt she will speak to you, Francesca, but if she does, be polite and when you can, walk away." With this sage advice, Lady Helmswich tucked Francesca's arm firmly in hers, and presented her to yet another eligible young gentleman.

Francesca was sitting beside her mother, watching Phyllida dance a second time with Lord Adey when she was approached by Hugo Winter.

"The next dance is a waltz, Miss Ashton. I believe Lady Jersey has granted you permission. Will you do me the honor?"

Francesca hesitated.

"Sorry, Winter. Miss Ashton has promised this waltz to me." And before Francesca had a chance to refuse, Thomas Landon had taken her hand. She was out of her seat and swept onto the dance floor in a matter of moments.

The musicians struck up the first notes of a waltz.

Francesca was outraged by Thomas's audacity. "Lord Lyndhurst, return me to my mother at once! I have not promised you this waltz—or indeed any dance at all!"

"I most certainly will not return you to your mother, Francesca—or not yet, anyway! You have been avoiding me, and I intend to repair the omission."

Francesca had indeed been avoiding Thomas. She must not let herself be drawn to him, not again. "We have nothing to say to one another, Lord Lyndhurst." Francesca injected a note of tartness into her voice. "And I prefer to be addressed as Miss Ashton."

"I beg to differ. We have many things to say to one another. And my name is Thomas, as you very well know, and I prefer to call you Francesca. It is a lovely name, and I intend to use it often."

Francesca ignored his raillery. "I have promised this dance to Mr. Winter."

"You have not. If you had, Francesca, you wouldn't have hesitated in taking his arm and we wouldn't be here now, enjoying a most..." Thomas paused meaningfully. "Delightful waltz."

Francesca was at a loss to reply. Her anger had dissipated, and she now felt as if she was floating on air as Thomas's arm tightened about her waist.

She mustn't succumb, she reminded herself yet again. She mustn't let her heart be broken a second time...

"How is Sergeant Farley?" Francesca asked. She endeavored to ignore the beguiling sensation of Thomas's right arm clasped about her waist, her own right hand engulfed in his left, and failed. She felt warm all over and distractedly wondered if her face was becoming flushed. She was sure it was.

"He will be travelling up to The Pines tomorrow. His leg hasn't healed fully, and I doubt whether he will ever regain the full strength of it, but if he travels slowly, taking frequent rests, he should be fine. Farley will make an excellent groom, from what I've observed of him in my stables at my town house. He has an affinity for horses, and they for him."

"It's good to hear that for one brave soldier at least, there is a happy ending."

"It pleases me too, Francesca. It's a national disgrace, with Napoleon safely imprisoned on St Helena Island, that our country sees fit to ignore the plight of our brave soldiers who brought the war to an end. Yet it is a sad fact of life that we cannot help everyone. We can only help where we can, be it ever so little."

His voice was so kind that Francesca felt her throat constrict. He was tugging her heart strings, the cad! It wasn't fair!

Thomas hadn't been so kind to her, she fiercely reminded herself. He had treated her shabbily, and she had better not forget it...

Francesca realized just how often she was having to remind herself of that fact... almost as if she were trying to convince herself of its truthfulness.

The dance concluded. Thomas, with Francesca's hand firmly tucked in the crook of his elbow, returned her to where her mother was sitting. She was beginning to realize that all her silent reminders to herself had fallen on deaf ears, so to speak. It was too late; the damage was done.

They reached the chairs. As Thomas held her hand as though reluctant to release it, Francesca gazed up into his dark brown eyes. She finally acknowledged the truth that she had spent weeks denying.

She had not fallen out of love with Thomas Landon; Francesca realized she probably never had. The emotion had simply been lying dormant in her heart all these years, and now that she was reunited with Thomas, her love for him was flowering to life once again.

Hugo Winter and Lady Bernice, standing side by side, watched Lord Lyndhurst return Francesca to her mother's side.

Both observed the way Thomas and Francesca gazed at each other as if no one else existed in the world; and if others remarked on what was happening between them, neither Hugo nor Lady Bernice fully comprehended the meaning of what they were seeing.

Yet both sensed that their plans regarding Thomas and Francesca had suddenly, somehow, gone astray.

Frustrated and baffled, and feeling a little bereft without understanding why, the two heartless friends stood silent as they watched love unfold before their very eyes.

"Well, I can see I'm wasting my time here," pronounced Hugo after a lengthy and somewhat uncomfortable silence. "Miss Ashton has clearly forgotten my very existence. Think I'll go to Boodle's—hopefully I'll win something this evening. Wish me luck, Bernie, would you?"

Lady Bernice waved her friend away. She ruthlessly crushed the slight feeling of loneliness she had briefly felt, and fastened her greedy gaze on Thomas. Her beautiful green eyes narrowed like a cat's as she saw Francesca give a shy smile at something he murmured to her. She watched as Thomas gave Lady Ashton a little bow, and watched as he took his leave of Phyllida Ashton. Her eyes continued to follow him as he made his farewells to both Lady Helmswich and Lady Jersey, and she was still staring after him as he departed Almack's.

Bitter gall rose in Lady Bernice's throat. She twisted her fan with angry fingers. She had spent hours getting ready for this evening, and it was all to waste! Thomas had danced one dance with Francesca Ashton, and now he was gone. The message he had left behind him couldn't have been more pointed than if he had strung up a banner across the room announcing his intentions.

He was pursuing Francesca Ashton!

Maintaining her watch on the Ashton family, Lady Bernice's eyes suddenly took on a more calculating look. When she



A Second Season  
*by Katherine Langton*

wanted something, Lady Bernice generally got it, and she was determined to get Thomas.

Thomas's heart may lie with Francesca, but Lady Bernice wasn't interested in his heart. She wanted his name, his ring on her finger—and most importantly, his fortune in her hands. And she was determined to get it, whatever it cost.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Six

The Ashton family rose late the following morning. Over a leisurely breakfast, Lady Ashton observed the changes that had taken place in her two daughters. If she wasn't mistaken, Phyllida was already in love with Lord Adey, while Francesca had just made the startling discovery that she hadn't ceased to love Thomas Landon.

Of the two, it was Francesca who gave Lady Ashton the most concern. With Phyllida and Lord Adey, it was early days yet and she would let their relationship proceed at its own pace.

But Francesca was another matter.

"They're in dire need of assistance," Lady Helmswich boomed over the tea cups and sponge cake when Lady Ashton paid her friend a visit later that afternoon to discuss the situation. Phyllida and Francesca, accompanied by their maid, Mattie, had gone to the circulating library.

"Left to himself, Thomas will make a mull of his courtship. Men always do, the clumsy creatures." With this pithy pronouncement on the abilities of the male sex, Lady Helmswich settled back in her favorite chair, a glass of sherry in her hand—she rarely drank tea, although it was always offered to her guests—her mind whirling with plans. "We must contrive to throw Thomas and Francesca together at every opportunity, Anna. Yet we mustn't be seen to push. This is a delicate situation requiring subtlety."

Lady Ashton looked dubious; Lady Helmswich was as subtle as a draught horse in a drawing room!

"I won't have Francesca hurt," she said worriedly. "I don't care if Thomas Landon is now the Viscount Lyndhurst and wealthy. I'd rather Francesca marry a country parson, if he would make her happy."

"Thomas will make her happy, Anna. He loves her, and always has. And don't forget—he's my nephew, and I know him better than anyone."

Lady Ashton wondered how long it would be before Francesca discovered that fact—and what her reaction would be when she found out that not only was Lady Helmswich Thomas's aunt, but was, in fact, intent on matchmaking them!

"He was very foolish, letting himself be distracted by that minx Lady Bernice," Lady Helmswich went on, "but he's now outgrown such foolishness, thank heavens, and won't be caught like that again. Thomas was as genuinely upset by the end of their engagement as Francesca was. If the pair of them had simply communicated, they would be married by now and contently raising a brood of children."

Lady Ashton believed this as well, but shook her head doubtfully. "Francesca fears to be hurt again. It's the reason why she's still so guarded whenever she meets Thomas. But she's a grown woman, Martha, and although it was plain last night that she realizes she still loves him, I can hardly force the matter! I don't know what to do for the best."

"We aren't forcing the matter, Anna. We're simply trying to reconcile two people who are in love with each other and who

ought to be together, but are yet too wary to admit it." Taking another sip of sherry, Lady Helmswich looked determined. "Leave it to me. Last night was a new beginning for both of them. I'll ensure that there's a betrothal by the end of the Season, however Thomas drags his feet. You mark my words!"

Lord Adey also happened to paying a visit to the circulating library, but Francesca doubted that this was mere coincidence. No doubt Phyllida had dropped a heavy hint the previous evening that that was to be their destination this afternoon!

When they finally departed the library, each of them carrying several books, Francesca let Phyllida and Lord Adey walk ahead. She followed a little way behind, with Mattie trailing after her.

"Why, Miss Ashton! What a pleasant surprise!"

Francesca stopped and turned around, letting Hugo Winter catch up with her. Mattie retreated a further step as Mr. Winter walked abreast with Francesca.

Without asking her permission, Hugo took Francesca's arm, tucking it close to his body. "A lovely day, is it not, Miss Ashton?"

Francesca conceded that it was, agreeing that spring had finally made its tardy appearance. She felt slightly uncomfortable being in such close proximity with Hugo, but the conversation, such as it was, was all that was proper. Small talk about the weather was a guaranteed safe topic.

But she was not enjoying Mr. Winter's company as much as she used to. For the first time, Francesca realized that

there was something insincere about Hugo. She also noticed he was looking pale and rather tired, as if he hadn't slept.

Which was very likely the case!

Francesca wondered why Hugo sought her out. What was it about her that interested him so?

Or didn't she really interest him at all, and he sought her out for another reason altogether?

Francesca suddenly shuddered.

"Are you cold?" Mr. Winter asked, a look of concern on his handsome face.

"A little," she lied. "I find the breeze a mite chilly." Although it was not the sudden cool breeze that had made her shiver, but a sudden awareness. Mr. Winter was not all he seemed to be. She was foolish to have encouraged him!

Thankfully they were not far from South Audley Street. Soon she would be able to bade Mr. Winter farewell, and Francesca resolved to have less to do with him in future.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Seven

They were almost home when Francesca saw a carriage pull up outside their house. Out stepped Thomas. He ran up the steps and knocked on the door.

Francesca's heart leapt. He was paying a call on her! He had danced with her, and only her, at Almack's last night, and now he was paying her a call!

All thoughts of Hugo were swept from her mind. Swiftly disengaging herself from his arm—in fact, hardly realizing that she did so—and without so much as a goodbye, Francesca hurried forward, overtaking Phyllida and Lord Adey. She ran up the steps in time to hear the butler inform Lord Lyndhurst that the Ashton family were not at home.

"It's all right, Nicholls. Show Lord Lyndhurst into the sitting room."

"Very good, Miss Ashton," Nicholls said. "This way, my lord."

Francesca paused only long enough to drop her books onto a side table, pull off her gloves and bonnet, and remove her cloak before following Thomas into the sitting room. It wasn't proper to receive a gentleman all alone without a chaperone, Francesca knew, but suddenly she didn't care. Besides, she would only be alone with him a short while. It wouldn't be long before Phyllida and Lord Adey arrived.

"Would you like some refreshment, my lord?" Francesca offered, suddenly shy. Nicholls had taken Thomas's greatcoat

and hat, and she saw he was wearing a dark blue jacket and grey trousers. Appropriate attire for day time visiting.

Francesca's throat felt dry. How should she begin a conversation with him?

"If you don't disapprove, Francesca, I wouldn't mind a sherry, although perhaps a small one." Thomas smiled kindly at her, and Francesca instantly relaxed.

Francesca nodded at Nicholls, and the butler turned and left the room to fetch the sherry. "That's Lady Helmswich's favorite refreshment." She didn't notice Thomas start at the remark. "She invariably has a sherry whenever she calls—and sometimes more than one! I believe Mama has been forced to order a fresh supply."

"I hope you don't mind me calling upon you like this, Francesca. I venture to hope that as we are no longer sworn enemies, we can now be friends."

"Of course we can be friends, Lord Lyndhurst," she replied carefully, disappointing Thomas who had been hoping that Francesca would now address him by his name.

There was a moment's silence, then Francesca said, "Phyllida and I have been to the circulating library. We met with Lord Adey, and he..."

Just then Phyllida came bursting into the room, almost knocking aside Nicholls, who was entering at the same moment with the sherry.

Lord Adey followed, although more hesitatingly. A conventional young man of the utmost propriety, he was clearly wondering if he were wise to be calling with Lady Ashton absent. He stood silently next to Phyllida, nervously

clasping his hands behind his back and looking slightly uncomfortable.

"And what books did you choose?" Thomas asked Francesca. When she told him they were Gothics, Thomas smiled. "Still the same Francesca."

"Yes, I still enjoy reading frightening tales, my lord. I find it very comforting, somehow, to be tucked up safely in bed while reading a scary story."

"I don't," Phyllida shuddered. She moved closer to Lord Adey and clutched his arm for dramatic effect. The unexpected movement forced Lord Adey to unclasp his hands from behind his back and take her arm in his.

Phyllida, looking smug, held his arm tightly. "I don't know why you like to read such horrid things, Fran."

"Because horrid things are fun, Phyl—or at least in fiction they are. And the tale always ends happily. The hero always saves the heroine, and the villains always receive their just desserts."

"I must confess I find such notions comforting too," Thomas concurred. "And you're right, Francesca. However dreadful the story, everything always ends happily."

The debate was still continuing when Lady Ashton returned. Far from expressing disapproval of her daughters entertaining young gentlemen without a chaperone, she was secretly pleased, and happily bade Nicholls fetch tea and refreshments.

Standing on the street, forgotten and abandoned, Hugo thoughtfully turned in the direction for home. Bernie, he knew, would not be pleased with his latest report! She was



not going to find it as easy as she had once thought to hook her fish.

In fact, Hugo was certain that Bernie was going to be absolutely furious! But what was he to do? Having not been invited into the Ashton house, he could hardly barge his way inside. Nor did Hugo fancy an afternoon of pacing up and down South Audley Street, affecting lovesickness for Francesca—no matter how Bernie might wish him to do just that!

For all his faults—and they were many—Hugo was not a stupid man. He was acutely aware that Francesca had forgotten his very existence the minute she laid eyes on Lord Lyndhurst, so it would be futile foisting his company where it was clearly not wanted.

Hugo suddenly smiled as he remembered he had a fish of his own to hook. He had recently made the acquaintance of a rich widow, a Lady Sambourne. She didn't seem averse to his company, and might even welcome him paying her an unexpected call.

Hugo changed direction. Yes, visiting Lady Sambourne was a better—and possibly a more profitable—way of spending an afternoon.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Eight

Lady Bernice, after smashing several ornaments against the wall, found her anger burned as hot as ever. Her maid and butler had fled at the first signs of her wrath, but Hugo, made of sterner stuff, was unmoved, contentedly sipping brandy from the comfort of a settee.

"That isn't going to help, my dear," he counseled, as Lady Bernice picked up yet another china ornament to throw against the wall. "Do you think Lyndhurst would fall into your arms had he been treated to that intemperate display?"

Reining in her temper with difficulty, Lady Bernice took a calming breath and set the ornament back in its place on the mantelpiece. She turned to her friend in despair. "What shall I do, Hugo? Thomas is unfailingly polite. We chat about the weather and the latest plays and novels. And that's as far as it goes."

"You should be pleased that it has reached that far, Bernie. Lyndhurst is far too much the gentleman to give you the cut direct," stated Hugo. He gave a sigh of exasperation. "Really, my love, this scheme of yours is never going to work. You should turn your efforts in another direction. Sir William Greentree shows a gratifying interest in you. He's as rich as Croesus, elderly, and with that dreadful cough of his..." Hugo tutted with false sympathy. "Well, in no time at all you will once again be a merry widow, and this time a far richer one!"

"I want Thomas Landon," said Lady Bernice sulkily, sounding like the spoilt child she still was. "And I intend to

have him—and I refuse to allow some chit from the country to snatch him away from me!"

Hugo, unable to find a suitable response, only shook his head and refilled his brandy glass.

Thomas, having completed some outstanding business affairs, got up from his desk and stretched his back. It was the night of Phyllida's come-out ball, and he had better get ready or he would be late—which wouldn't endear him to Francesca!

Was Hugo Winter invited? He understood that balls were planned weeks in advance, so he assumed that Lady Ashton would have issued Winter with an invitation.

Given his aunt's warnings, Thomas had been keeping an eagle eye on that particular gentleman, although he was almost certain that Francesca's interest in him, however mild it had been, was waning. For certain, she was giving him no encouragement!

Yet there was something about Hugo Winter that Thomas still distrusted.

Thomas's brow furrowed as he recalled the discussions he had had with his aunt about Hugo Winter; besides which, he had seen for himself how protective the mamas of heiresses became whenever Hugo was nearby.

Not for the first time, Thomas wondered what his interest was with Francesca. Her family weren't rich. Thomas doubted that what Francesca possessed would stretch beyond an evening's dedicated gambling at Boodle's.

His face became grim as he remembered something else. Hugo Winter was a friend of Lady Bernice, a very close friend.

Thomas's expression became even grimmer as he recalled Lady Bernice's behavior towards himself.

He had at first thought that he was imagining it, but Thomas was now certain that Lady Bernice was actively pursuing him. How else to explain her appearance at every function he attended? She sought his company the moment she laid eyes on him, and no matter who it was he happened to be talking to, she would rudely interrupt the conversation, take his arm and steer him away, all the while fluttering her lashes and simpering.

Thomas had been polite to her and gently discouraging, but still the lady persisted.

Was there a connection between Lady Bernice's pursuit of himself, and Hugo Winter's of Francesca? he wondered. It couldn't be a coincidence that Winter was doing everything he could to keep Francesca away from him, while Lady Bernice tried desperately to engage his interest!

Until he had proof to the contrary, Thomas resolved to strengthen his guard whenever Hugo Winter and Lady Bernice Whitham were around!

Lady Ashton was intensely annoyed when Nicholls announced the arrival of Lady Bernice Whitham. Despite not being sent an invitation, Lady Ashton did not turn her away and, being the excellent hostess she was, she even gave the lady a warm welcome.

Lady Ashton hoped Francesca wouldn't be too annoyed. Thankfully, Sir William Greentree was amongst the crowd. With any luck, Lady Bernice would spend most of the evening

with him—and if not, then with some other hapless gentleman!

Lady Ashton's humor revived when Nicholls announced the name of a more congenial guest. "Lord Lyndhurst, how pleasant it is to see you!" She held out her hand in welcome.

Thomas accepted it and bowed over it. "I wouldn't miss Miss Phyllida's come-out ball for the world, Lady Ashton." He caught a glimpse of Phyllida gliding about the ballroom.

Clad in debutante white, her only jewelry a string of pearls around her neck, Phyllida looked deliriously happy at being whirled about the dance floor in the arms of Lord Adey. Thomas couldn't help smiling at the sight.

Lady Ashton noticed the direction of his gaze and looked vaguely worried. "You would be doing me a favor, Lord Lyndhurst, if you would beg Phyllida for a dance. It isn't proper for her to... well, to spend the entire evening exclusively in Lord Adey's company. This is her come-out ball, after all, and she must grant other gentlemen dances."

Thomas bowed again. "Leave it with me, Lady Ashton."

Lady Ashton smiled. "Thank you." Other guests were arriving, so Thomas proceeded into the ballroom.

To his dismay, he saw that Francesca was dancing with Hugo Winter.

"They make a charming pair, don't you think?" Lady Bernice suddenly materialized at Thomas's side.

Recalling his earlier thoughts, Thomas immediately moved a step away from her. "I fear I must disagree with you, my lady," he said repressively. "Nor do I believe that Miss Ashton would share your sentiments."

Lady Bernice fluttered her lashes and gave his arm a flirtatious tap with her fan. She looked exquisite, dressed in rose satin. She wore no jewelry, her only ornament being a satin ribbon around her throat. Her lack of jewelry was no detraction to her appearance, however; looking at her, one would never suspect her straitened circumstances.

Lady Bernice was certainly a beautiful woman, Thomas thought, but her beauty left him unmoved. His heart lay with Francesca.

"Come now, my lord... Thomas," Lady Bernice cooed. "It's as plain as the nose on your face how fond Miss Ashton and Hugo are of each other!"

Thomas was about to demur once again, this time more forcefully, and move away from Lady Bernice totally when he looked again at the couple on the floor. He paused.

Francesca, to Thomas's loving eyes, easily outshone every other woman in the room, including Lady Bernice and her own sister Phyllida, whose come-out ball it was. Her beaded apricot silk gown, although plain in cut, suited both her rounded figure and dark hair.

Thomas noted Francesca's wariness towards Hugo. She held herself stiffly in his arms and there was a sizeable gap between their bodies. Hugo, Thomas was pleased to see, looked rather disgruntled.

The dance finally came to an end. He watched Hugo escort Francesca back to the chairs. A young man approached Francesca and she hurriedly stood up with him as if eager to get away from Hugo.

Hugo, giving a slight shrug, picked up a glass from the tray a hovering footman held out to him

Thomas smiled. *Fond of each other my foot!* he thought. Then, seeing Phyllida hovering nearby without the attentive Lord Adey by her side, and recalling Lady Ashton's request of him, Thomas took his chance. Giving a curt nod to Lady Bernice, he walked away.

Lady Bernice stared after him, seething.

Swirling in the arms of her partner, Mr. Bates, Francesca saw with surprise her sister doing the same with Thomas. *How had he managed that?* she thought. He was full of surprises!

Mr. Bates, instead of focusing his attention on Francesca, as he ought, was staring after Phyllida. For the second time his foot caught in Francesca's hem, and once again, he did not notice.

"I've been hoping for a dance with your sister, Miss Ashton," Mr. Bates said mournfully. "I did ask, but I'm afraid she turned me down. I do think Miss Phyllida is the most beautiful girl in the room," he added, completely unaware of how ungallant he was being to Francesca. "How did Lyndhurst secure a dance with her? I'm afraid I stammered when I asked her. Perhaps that's why Miss Phyllida refused me."

"Well, Lord Lyndhurst is an acquaintance of ours, Mr. Bates," Francesca explained kindly. Despite his ungallantry towards herself, she was unwilling to hurt the unworldly Mr. Bates. After all, he would discover the truth soon enough! "That gives him an advantage. Phyllida could hardly refuse."

Mr. Bates sighed, his expression becoming ever more forlorn. "Miss Phyllida really is the most beautiful girl I've ever met. I'll ask her again. I must dance at least once with her, Miss Ashton, or my evening will be spoiled. Quite spoiled!"

Francesca did not know whether to be offended or amused by Mr. Bates. She decided to be amused; after all, the poor boy did not intend any offence to her, although she did think the way he abandoned her the moment the dance concluded—without even a pretence of escorting her back to the chairs—was a bit much, even if he was crossed in love.

Somewhat to her annoyance, she found Hugo standing by her chair. He held out a hand to assist her to sit, which Francesca adroitly evaded.

"You must be thirsty after all that dancing, Miss Ashton," Hugo said, not at all offended by Francesca's brush off. "Shall I fetch you a drink?"

Francesca hesitated. She was indeed thirsty, and had been intending to ask Mr. Bates to fetch her a drink when he escorted her back to the chairs. But she was disinclined to encourage Hugo even the slightest.

Hugo settled the matter. "I'll fetch you a drink, Miss Ashton. You'll die of thirst waiting for Bates to recall his manners. Will orgeat do?"

Francesca assented weakly, and Hugo went off to the refreshment room.

Francesca fanned herself and scanned the ballroom. Poor Mr. Bates, she saw, was thwarted yet again—Phyllida was dancing a third time with Lord Adey.



But now Lord Adey was looking a trifle uncomfortable. Francesca doubted that he had been the instigator of the third dance, as she knew him to be an honorable young man who was very conscious of the proprieties. He would be aware that a third dance with the same lady was frowned upon, unless there was an understanding between the couple.

Phyllida and Lord Adey had not yet reached that stage in their relationship. Mama, Francesca was aware, was already rather cross with Phyllida for monopolizing Lord Adey. Unfortunately, Lady Ashton had been so taken up with her duties as hostess that she hadn't yet had a chance to speak with her errant daughter. Francesca had attempted to, but Phyllida had only laughed away her sister's concerns.

And Francesca was concerned. If Phyllida truly wanted Lord Adey, she had best mind her manners!

Phyllida's behavior had been the topic of some discussion amongst the more disapproving matrons. She had openly snubbed a number of perfectly respectable gentleman who had asked her for dances, preferring to sit them out and chat to Lord Adey.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Nine

The dance came to an end. Francesca saw Lady Helmswich—who was plainly fearing that Phyllida would irremediably disgrace herself at her own come-out ball—bustle up and whisper forcefully in her ear. Phyllida blushed at the reprimand.

Francesca smiled. Despite her disapproval of her sister's behavior, to see how she felt about Lord Adey made her feel wistful. Her eyes swept the crowd. Where was Thomas? He would surely ask her for a dance...

"Here you are, Miss Ashton." Hugo's voice interrupted Francesca's musing. He passed her a glass.

Francesca sipped the cool orgeat, while Hugo drank his brandy. She frowned. Hugo had a liking for brandy—and for gambling, she had heard.

She put the thought aside. What Hugo Winter did was nothing to her.

Hugo remained by her side, chatting idly about the various guests. Despite herself, Francesca laughed. Although he disquieted her, she couldn't deny that he was an amusing and rather likable fellow.

Lady Helmswich, resplendent in a satin gown of eye catching scarlet with matching turban, suddenly lumbered up to them. "There you are, young man. I believe this is our dance."

Hugo looked askance. "Our dance, Lady Helmswich? I don't believe..." The first bars of a waltz sounded. He blanched.

Francesca stifled a laugh.

"Come, come, I know it's not the done thing for a lady to beg a gentleman for a dance, Hugo," Lady Helmswich boomed, "but when have you ever known me to abide by Society's rules?" Rapping his wrist with her fan, she held out her arm pointedly.

Heads turned to stare at them. One or two people standing nearby began to giggle at Hugo's discomfiture.

Hugo was cornered and he knew it. He yielded. "Why... er, certainly, your ladyship. It will be a pleasure to take a turn about the floor with you." Setting his empty glass on a nearby table, Hugo gallantly swept Lady Helmswich onto the dance floor.

Only then did Francesca openly laugh. They made an incongruous sight, the plump, overdressed, middle aged lady clasped in the arms of the tall, impeccably dressed young gentleman. The feathers adorning Lady Helmswich's frightful turban brushed Hugo's face every so often, making his nose twitch.

"I'm glad to see you're enjoying yourself, Francesca."

It was Thomas. In contrast to many of the gentlemen present, who were wearing black, his evening jacket and trousers were dark blue. His white cravat was fastened in place with a sapphire pin.

Francesca's fingers loosened around her glass.

Before she could drop it, Thomas deftly took the glass from her, placing it on the side table. Then he held out his hand. "Shall we join them in the dance, Francesca?"

Shyly, Francesca rose. Thomas swept her onto the dance floor. She didn't think it possible, but this waltz was even more wonderful than the one they had shared at Almack's. She wished it never to end.

Of course it did, but instead of returning her to the chairs, Thomas guided Francesca in the direction of the terrace.

Seeing her surprised face, he said, "I think both of us need a little fresh air."

Unfortunately, a number of other people had the same idea. Couples were strolling up and down the terrace, enjoying the cool evening air.

Thomas drew Francesca away to a quieter corner. A tendril of Francesca's dark hair had fallen loose onto her left shoulder, and Thomas, unable to stop himself, briefly touched it. "I hope you're not encouraging Hugo Winter, Francesca."

"Encouraging Mr. Winter?" Francesca stared at him. Thomas's touching her had caused her to tremble, yet his opening words bewildered her. She had forgotten Hugo's existence the moment Thomas had taken her in his arms for the waltz. "I don't know what you mean, Lord Lyndhurst. He is merely an acquaintance."

"You seem to enjoy his company."

"As does Lady Helmswich."

"My aunt is a different matter..." Realizing what he had just revealed, Thomas stopped.

There was a moment of telling silence.

"Lady Helmswich is your aunt?" Francesca finally forced out the words. She felt as if her heart had stopped beating. "I had no idea. Why hasn't she told me?"

"Does it matter? She probably just overlooked... Francesca, where are you going?"

Francesca had turned from Thomas. She quickly walked down the steps that led down into the garden. For some unaccountable reason, the fact that Lady Helmswich was Thomas's aunt perturbed her.

No wonder Lady Helmswich was constantly singing his praises! She was his aunt—and she was matchmaking them!

Francesca was suddenly assailed with doubts. Was Thomas seeking her out, charming her, making her fall in love with him on the bidding of his aunt?

The possibility both saddened and annoyed Francesca. She quickened her pace, yearning to find a dark corner in the garden to be by herself, to give herself time to assimilate this information.

Lady Helmswich was Thomas's aunt, and she was matchmaking them. He was courting her at the behest of his aunt... The words whirled in her head, again and again.

"Francesca, stop! You mustn't wander about the gardens in the dark all by yourself." Thomas, catching her up, tried to take her arm.

Francesca stepped nimbly out of his reach. "This is the house Mama has rented for the Season, I'll have you remember, my lord. I know every inch of this garden."

"That may be so, but there are also a good many gentlemen wandering about this evening."

A Second Season  
*by Katherine Langton*

Francesca gave him a steady look. "Gentlemen such as yourself, sir? Gentlemen who..."

"Will do this." Abruptly taking her in his arms, Thomas kissed her. It lasted but a moment, but Francesca, taken by surprise, backed from him. Not knowing what to think, how to react, she did the only thing that sprang to mind.

She turned and ran for the safety of the house.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Ten

Entering the ballroom, flustered and upset, Francesca wondered if her expression revealed her emotions, but thankfully no one seemed to notice. When a footman approached her, bearing a tray of lemonade, Francesca took one quickly and sipped it, welcoming the cool sweet drink.

She tried to calm herself, to slow her breathing. She mustn't show herself to be distressed, she mustn't cry! This was her sister's ball, she reminded herself harshly. She must do nothing to attract undue attention to herself... although all Francesca yearned to do now was to escape to the privacy of her bedchamber, crawl into bed and cry herself to sleep!

Thomas was courting her at the behest of his aunt, Lady Helmswich.

Francesca tried suppress the words, but they crowded her mind to the exclusion of all else. Thomas was courting her at behest of his aunt, and the kiss meant nothing. No more than a handshake, really. It was just a kiss. Thomas was courting her because his aunt wished him to...

Francesca shook herself. She was a woman of twenty-two, not the shy, inexperienced debutante she had been all those years before! Surely she could brush aside something as meaningless as a kiss from a man who did not love her, who was courting her at the direction of his aunt...

Despite this resolve, Francesca felt tears sting her eyes. Why couldn't Thomas have kissed because he was falling in love with her? Because he wanted to? She didn't want him to

court her because his aunt had bade him to. Lady Helmswich might mean well, wishing to rectify the damage that had occurred four years before, but Francesca wanted Thomas to fall in love with her because he couldn't help it—just as she couldn't help loving him.

Francesca knew the damage to her heart would never be rectified... not this time. She should have stuck to the resolve she had made when she was first reunited with Thomas. To keep him at a distance, to not speak to him—and above all, not to let her defenses down!

She had done all of those things, and look where it had led her! She was hurt for the second time. Running home to Cumberland would not serve now, Francesca thought bleakly. This time the damage to her heart was irreparable.

Worst of all was the fact that she had no one but her own foolishness to blame! Thomas had paid a number of visits to their house, and he had danced with her. He had sought her company, and tonight he had kissed her.

But had he given her any indication that he was in love with her? Francesca was forced to admit that he hadn't. She had no doubt that Thomas liked her well enough, and considered her suitable to be his viscountess... and perhaps, being the gentleman he was, he was prepared to honor their long ago engagement to marry.

But did he love her? He did not.

How Francesca wished it were otherwise!

Phyllida came off the dance floor, flushed and happy, and dropped into the seat beside Francesca. Despite her own



happiness, she soon noticed Francesca's despondency. "Are you all right Fran? Is something the matter?"

Francesca looked at her sister's flushed and happy face, her blue eyes sparkling with love.

She summoned up a smile. "I'm perfectly all right, Phyl. I think I may just be tired. Attending so many functions every night of the week is so very wearing. Lady Helmswich mentioned earlier that the last guest may not take their leave until four o'clock—or later—and the thought is positively fatiguing!"

"Perhaps, but it's very exciting, is it not?" A young gentleman approached to claim a dance with Phyllida, but as she was led away in the direction of the dance floor, she managed to give her sister a searching glance over her shoulder.

Francesca looked down at her dance card. A Mr. Payler had engaged himself for this dance. She glanced around. There was no sign of him.

Nor was there any sign of Thomas.

Francesca wasn't displeased that Mr. Payler had failed to claim his dance with her. She was definitely feeling out of sorts.

She stood up. Perhaps a dash of cool water on her face would restore her equilibrium.

Francesca slipped upstairs to the room allocated as the ladies' retiring room, hoping it would be empty.

To her dismay, it wasn't. Lady Bernice was there. A maid, brush in hand, was attending to her hair.

Seeing Francesca, Lady Bernice shooed the maid away.

"Ah, Miss Ashton, the belle of the ball."

"It is my sister's ball, not mine, your ladyship."

"Of course, of course. I well remember *your* engagement ball four years ago!"

"As do I." Francesca looked steadily at the lady, suddenly sensing that Lady Bernice wasn't as confident as she outwardly appeared to be. There was something... Francesca searched for an adequate description. There was an air of desperation about Lady Bernice, Francesca decided.

For her part, Lady Bernice carefully studied the younger woman she considered her rival. She had tried to engage Thomas in conversation, all but threw herself at him, and all to no avail. He hadn't even signed his name in her dance card, although she had made sure that he had seen it.

Fury and disappointment made Lady Bernice's voice sharp. "A word, Miss Ashton. Thomas Landon is mine... he always was. He has never forgotten me. He told me so just recently—when we were private together." Lady Bernice smiled cattily, although Francesca saw how she twisted her fan in her lap. "Why don't you choose another gentleman? Hugo, for instance? Why, you're friends already."

"Mr. Winter doesn't interest me, your ladyship," Francesca retorted. Lady Bernice is lying, she thought; I know she is. Thomas may not be in love with me, but I'm as certain as I can be that he's not in love with her! With her own eyes, she had seen Thomas give Lady Bernice the brush off on more than one occasion.

"And I doubt whether Mr. Winter is particularly interested in me," Francesca added. "In fact, it's not escaped my notice how much time you and he spend together!"

And, refusing to rise to the bait anymore, Francesca turned her back on Lady Bernice and went to the washing stand. Picking up the jug, she poured water into the bowl. Behind her, Francesca heard Lady Bernice give an angry hiss, and a moment later the rustling of her gown as she left.

Francesca was patting her face dry when Lady Ashton came in search of her. "Fran! I passed Lady Bernice on the stairs. She looked as cross as crabs. She didn't say anything to you?"

"Nothing of any consequence, Mama."

Lady Ashton gave her daughter a hard look. "Are you sure?"

Francesca nodded. "Yes, Mama. What she said was of no consequence."

Lady Ashton gave her another searching look, but only said, "Young Mr. Payler has been searching for you, Fran. I believe he's engaged to dance with you."

"Oh, Mr. Payler." Francesca had completely forgotten him. "He didn't collect me, so I came up here to splash my face. I was feeling a little hot."

As they walked downstairs together, Francesca said, "Mama, you never told me that Lady Helmswich is Lord Lyndhurst's aunt."

"Oh, dear, I knew I should have mentioned it! I only found out myself recently. I believe Martha was intending to tell you herself at some point."

Francesca's voice was soft. "She's not trying to match us, is she? Lord Lyndhurst and myself?"

Lady Ashton gave a start. "Not exactly. That is, she has hopes that..." She trailed to a stop, wishing she had chosen her words with more care.

"I don't want Thomas... Lord Lyndhurst to court me just because his aunt desires it," Francesca said firmly.

"I'm sure he's not being led by the nose by his aunt," Lady Ashton reassured her. "Lord Lyndhurst is a grown man, and he wouldn't let himself be bullied by his aunt—even if she is a dragon of the first water!" She looked searchingly at her daughter; her mother's instinct was telling her that something was amiss. "Has something happened between you and Lord Lyndhurst? I saw you dancing earlier, and I thought you seemed happy. Did you have a disagreement? Is that why he has left?"

"Thomas has left?" Francesca's voice revealed her dismay.

"Something has happened between you! What is it, Fran? Tell me."

"Nothing happened, Mama." Francesca spoke sadly.  
"Nothing at all."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Eleven

"I've discovered that the morning rides Miss Ashton habitually takes is the only time when she is alone—besides the groom, that is. But I'm sure he can be distracted in some fashion while you entice the girl into your carriage, Hugo." Lady Bernice spoke evenly as she imparted to her friend the plan she had laboriously worked out. She could have been discussing plans for afternoon tea.

"And how am I to accomplish that, Bernie?" Hugo asked. He had known his friend was planning something, but this took him by surprise. "Francesca's becoming wary of me; she'll hardly step into my carriage voluntarily—and if I use force, the groom may put up a fight, not to mention Francesca herself!"

"You're a clever man, Hugo. Think of something!" Lady Bernice jumped from her chair and flounced to the empty fireplace. She tapped the mantel with nervous fingers. She was making no headway with Thomas, and with bills continually piling up, desperate measures were called for. If she didn't announce her engagement to the wealthy Lord Lyndhurst soon, she would have the bailiffs knocking on her door.

Lady Bernice shuddered at the thought. All the neighbors would be sure to gather in the street to watch and hear what was being said and done to her. Her furniture and belongings would be taken away to be sold to pay her debts. She would be hounded out of Society; Lady Jersey would rescind her

Almack's voucher. She would be obliged to retire to the country, there to live in genteel poverty in a shabby cottage. Her only neighbors would be yokels and bumpkins. She might call herself Lady Bernice, but she would be a nobody.

The prospect appalled her.

"Tell Miss Ashton that you saw her sister faint at the shops or in the street and you're on your way to South Audley Street to inform Lady Ashton of what has happened. Or say that her sister has eloped with a chimney sweep, and you're about to fetch her back. Invent a tale—use your imagination, Hugo!"

Lady Bernice began to pace backwards and forwards in front of the fireplace.

"Get Miss Ashton into your carriage and out of London," she continued. "Keep her in your house in Surrey—locked up, if needs be—and make sure she stays there for at least a week. That's all I ask, and I'll drop a favorable word in Lady Sambourne's ear for you." She stopped, and again drummed her fingers on the mantelpiece. "Thomas will be distraught at the ensuing scandal, and I'll make sure that he falls into my arms. This estrangement that has sprung up between him and Miss Ashton helps enormously. It is a gift, Hugo! A positive gift, and I intend to make full use of it."

Lady Bernice had realized, with great elation, that all was not well between Francesca and Thomas. She had seen with her own eyes Francesca avoiding him during various functions, and Thomas looking strained and miserable.

Whatever had caused the estrangement—and Lady Bernice didn't much care what it was—she intended to take advantage of it.

"Thomas will surely look kindly on me, and by the time I'm finished with him, he'll be mine," Lady Bernice gloated. "I'll offer him comfort; he will be grateful to me and propose marriage—which I will be sure to publicly announce at the first opportunity! By the time Miss Ashton returns, Thomas and I will be engaged. Do this for me, Hugo, and I'll be forever in your debt."

"You do realize that Miss Ashton will be ruined, Bernie?" Hugo drawled, "because I certainly won't be able to marry her, even supposing that she would accept me—which she won't."

Lady Bernice shrugged. "Too bad."

Even Hugo was a little shocked by her callousness; but he only said, "Very well, Bernie. When is it to be?"

"Tomorrow morning. I know the Ashtons have been invited to Lady Girton's musicale tonight, and as everyone knows, Lady Girton always ensures her guests take their leave well before midnight. Miss Ashton will surely take her morning ride tomorrow."

Hugo took a large gulp of brandy. He viewed the task Bernie had set him with little enthusiasm, but if it meant that she would put in a favorable word for him with Lady Sambourne—who was very a rich widow indeed!—he would do it.

"Very well, Bernie," Hugo agreed reluctantly. "Tomorrow morning it is, then."

Thomas was also a guest at Lady Girton's musicale, but instead of listening to the entertainment on offer, he gazed at Francesca, who was seated just two seats ahead.

He couldn't tear his eyes from her. To his loving eyes, she looked beautiful in a high-waisted gown of apple green satin. A strand of her dark hair had escaped from the severe Grecian knot it had been styled in, curling enchantingly upon her right shoulder. Alas, Thomas also noted how stiffly she held her shoulders, and how careful she was to avoid looking in his direction.

When his name had been announced by the butler, she had quickly averted her gaze from him, taking a step back to stand behind her sister and mother.

Thomas's heart ached. He couldn't forget kissing her on the night of Phyllida's come-out ball. He loved her so much it hurt.

But that should have come as no surprise! Thomas had thought about Francesca so often in the four years they had been apart. His Aunt Martha was right. Francesca was perfect for him, and would make him the perfect viscountess, the perfect wife. There was no other woman for him.

But what were her feelings towards him? Thomas was racked with uncertainty.

After he had kissed her, she had fled before he had had a chance to frame that very question. After a moment's reflection, Thomas decided not to chase after her to demand an answer. Making his farewells to Lady Ashton—who, unbeknownst to him, was thrown into a state of bewilderment



almost the equal of her daughter's at his early departure—he had departed the ball.

At the time, Thomas had congratulated himself on his tact. Francesca would no doubt think over what had happened and she would come to realize that he loved her—as she loved him...

Or at least he hoped she did! He was almost certain, yet there remained an element of doubt, and while that element of doubt existed, Thomas wouldn't push her. He wanted their relationship to develop steadily, and if Francesca wanted more time, she would have it. He would never push her, or distress her in any way.

Yet he had distressed her; something had gone awry. Somewhere along the way Thomas had miscalculated badly.

In the week that had passed, far from freeing Thomas of his doubts, Francesca had been meticulously avoiding him. He hadn't been granted an opportunity to speak privately with her to discover what was wrong. It was as if a wall had suddenly descended between them—and Thomas didn't know how to breach it.

He recalled her reaction at discovering that Lady Helmswich was his aunt. He berated himself. He should have told her the truth about his Aunt Martha weeks ago. Nor should he have left the ball, he realized. He should have stayed and spoken to Francesca, and danced with her again.

He should have told her how he felt about her...

Thomas's shoulders slumped. His Aunt Martha was right. He was making a complete mull of his courtship of Francesca!

He was a useless male. Aunt Martha was always saying how useless and foolish men were, and he was the living proof...

Lady Helmswich poked Thomas in the ribs with her fan.

"Sit up straight, nephew!" she said in a fierce whisper.

"This caterwauling will soon cease, and then we can adjourn to the refreshment room. And for heaven's sake, speak to Francesca! What has got into the pair of you, I don't know. But speak to her!"

A lady seated behind them urged Lady Helmswich to shush.

Lady Helmswich turned around to glare at her.

Having reduced the lady to a quivering silence, Lady Helmswich resumed her whispered conversation with her nephew. "And keep Hugo Winter away from Francesca! I don't like the way he's been eyeing her. His behavior this evening is decidedly odd."

In the refreshment room, Thomas made straight for Francesca.

"Miss Ashton... Francesca..."

"Lord Lyndhurst. I trust your aunt is enjoying the evening?"

"Not much, I'm afraid." He gave a wry smile. "She doesn't care to hear songs mauled like that."

"The torture won't last. I understand Lady Girton likes to bid her guests farewell before midnight, my lord." So saying, Francesca promptly turned her back on him.

"Francesca, look at me." Thomas sounded so mournful that Francesca, despite her intention to keep him at arm's length, turned back to face him. "I'd simply forgotten that you were

unaware that Lady Helmswich is my aunt. I admit that she is indulging in a little matchmaking..." When Francesca gasped, he held up a hand. "Oh, I know my aunt! She can't help herself. If she sees a couple that she thinks should be together, she matches them. Nothing can stop her. But I swear to you, Francesca, that I seek you out because I wish to seek you out, and I would do so with my aunt's approval or not. May I call upon you tomorrow, so we can talk properly? Can we start again?"

"Do you mean it?" Francesca trembled, hardly daring to believe what Thomas was telling her. "You aren't seeking me out because Lady Helmswich wishes it?"

"The only role my Aunt Martha has played in this was in reintroducing us, Francesca, that I swear. You must believe me. I've never forgotten you in the past four years. Never. Nor have I ceased to love you."

His voice resonated with sincerity, and Francesca let herself believe.

"Oh!" It was all she could manage to say.

"I intend to court you properly, Francesca, however long it takes," Thomas went on. "And I shan't let you flee to the north—or anywhere else for that matter—ever again, and so I warn you. Should you dare to flee, you can expect to see me hot on your heels!"

Francesca gave Thomas a quizzical smile. "Are you saying, Lord Lyndhurst, that you are paying me your addresses?"

"That I am, Francesca. And I would much prefer it if you call me Thomas."

Francesca blushed. "Thomas."

A Second Season  
*by Katherine Langton*

Lady Girton was calling her guests back into the music room. Francesca let Thomas take her arm.

"It does make it easier though, Francesca," he murmured in her ear, "to have my aunt's approval. She likes you very much, you know."

Francesca blushed again. Her blush deepened when Lady Helmswich, seeing them together at last, bestowed upon them an approving wink.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Twelve

Pulling her mare to a stop, Francesca allowed her mount to lower her head so she could nibble the dew wet grass. Closing her eyes, Francesca lifted her face to the sun. For a moment she stayed like that, enjoying the sun's gentle warmth caressing her skin.

It was the most perfect morning, and although Francesca couldn't forget completely that she was in Hyde Park, London, by exerting a little imagination she could almost believe herself back in the country—as, until recently, she had pretended during her morning rides.

Yet the yearning to be home had considerably lessened, and Francesca didn't have far to search to discover the reason—Thomas Landon.

She smiled as she surveyed her surroundings. Today the grass seemed greener than usual, the flowers bright in their color, the sun pleasantly warm. There was only the slightest of breezes. Her smile widened. She had felt like this four years ago, Francesca recalled, when she was first in love and thinking what a wonderful place the world was.

And she was in love again—and this time, as in the novels she loved reading, there would be a happy ending for her and Thomas.

He would be calling on her this afternoon, having warned her that he would be most assiduous in paying court to her.

Francesca trembled. She would be seeing Thomas every day from now on, and every evening too. Their courtship was

official. They would be able to dance three dances every night, and the sternest matron would not lift a disapproving eyebrow. In a month—or maybe less!—Thomas would speak to her mother, and he and Francesca would become engaged.

Then would come the formal announcement of their engagement at a ball—and this time, Francesca vowed, there would no necessity to flee home!

Lightly touching her heels to her mare's flanks, Francesca moved forward. There was a carriage trundling down the pathway towards her. If it was someone she knew, she would be obliged to stop and exchange idle pleasantries with them.

Francesca felt a little flicker of resentment that her blissful solitude was about to be interrupted. She glanced behind her; Simmons the groom was some distance away.

When the carriage stopped beside her, Francesca saw it was indeed someone she knew—although Hugo Winter was the last person she expected to see, as she was well aware that he was a man not fond of early mornings!

To her surprise, Hugo was looking somewhat agitated.

"Why, Mr. Winter, what brings you into the park this early in the day?" Francesca's voice showed her surprise.

Hugo distractedly waved her query aside. "You must come with me at once, Miss Ashton. Your sister Phyllida has had an accident."

Francesca's heart lurched. "Phyllida? But she's still in bed. What do you mean? What has happened?"

"The accident happened but a few moments ago, Miss Ashton. I was driving down Bond Street, and I saw your sister and her maid out walking. I called out a greeting. She was

approaching my carriage, but unfortunately she crossed the road without looking, and was struck by a carriage coming the other way. She fell to the ground, hitting her head. I assisted her home. Your mother told me you were out riding, and I offered to fetch you home."

"Oh!" Francesca, alarmed, began to turn her horse.

"No, it's best if you come with me, Miss Ashton. You can hitch your horse to the back of my carriage."

Francesca was so concerned about Phyllida's welfare that she didn't question this odd request. Without waiting for her groom to catch her up, she slid from the saddle and tied the reins to the back of Hugo's carriage. She was desperate to return home.

All the happy thoughts she had been indulging in just minutes ago were banished from her mind. All she could think about was Phyllida. How badly was she hurt? Had the doctor been sent for? But of course a doctor would be sent for! That would be the first thing Mama would do...

The groom reached them just as Francesca was settling herself on the seat in Hugo's carriage.

"Simmons, I will see you at South Audley Street," she told him, her hand on the door.

For a moment Simmons just gaped at Francesca. Why on earth was Miss Ashton in Mr. Winter's carriage? He was so astonished at this turn of events that it took him a moment for his brain to unscramble.

When his thoughts cleared, Simmons began to remonstrate. "Miss, come out, do. You mustn't..."

But Francesca, frantic with worry, didn't wait to hear what her groom was saying. She had slammed shut the door, and Hugo had given the signal to drive off before Simmons could react.

The groom was struck dumb. What the devil had possessed Miss Francesca, normally a most sensible young woman, to get into Mr. Winter's carriage? It didn't make sense, and Simmons liked it even less. Mr. Winter, he knew, was a rum cove.

But he mustn't waste valuable time speculating. Turning his horse, Simmons dug in his heels. Lady Ashton must be informed at once, and she would send for Viscount Lyndhurst. He would know what action to take.

"I beg your pardon? Francesca went off in a carriage with Mr. Winter? Are you all about in the head, Simmons?"

"No, my lady, begging your pardon. Miss Fran did go off in the gentleman's carriage. No question about it. Saw it with my own two eyes."

"And you didn't try to stop her?" Lady Helmswich glared at the hapless groom.

Simmons stood his ground. "She was in the carriage and they were off before I fully realized what was happening. I returned here immediately to raise the alarm."

Lady Helmswich turned to Lady Ashton. "I knew the young scoundrel was up to something! His behavior last night at Lady Girton's was deuced strange." She was so perturbed that she was unaware of her use of the unladylike term. "What on earth does Hugo think he's doing? Fortunately, it



but happened a short while ago. They can't have got far. We will catch him and bring Francesca back."

Lady Ashton, although alarmed, tried to put her thoughts into some semblance of order. Dissolving into a bout of hysterics would help no one, least of all her daughter. "What would a penniless man gain by kidnapping Fran? It makes no sense, Martha!"

Lady Helmswich's expression was grim. "It makes sense if you take Lady Bernice into the equation. You!" She turned back to the groom, transfixing him with a glare that would melt ice. "I want you to go at once to Berkeley Square and fetch Lord Lyndhurst. Tell him he is to ready his travelling carriage and hitch his fastest horses."

"At once, my lady," said Simmons and immediately left the room, more than glad to escape Lady Helmswich's overpowering presence.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Thirteen

Thomas arrived at South Audley Street within minutes. His expression was grim as Lady Ashton expanded on what Simmons had already told him.

"Francesca's not a silly girl, so Hugo has obviously tricked her in some fashion," Lady Helmswich concluded. "No doubt he's spun her some fanciful, if plausible tale. But that is neither here nor there. Now, if either of you were Hugo, where would you take Francesca?"

"I have no idea," wailed Lady Ashton. Despite herself, she began to wring her hands.

"I may have an idea," Thomas answered. "If I were in Hugo's shoes, I would take her straight to the country. He has an estate somewhere... where is it? It isn't very far..." He racked his brains, trying to recall where it was.

"What if he's taking her to Gretna Green?" Lady Ashton's voice became even more of a wail, her efforts at keeping calm slowly evaporating.

Lady Helmswich took her hand and patted it. "Calm yourself, Anna! We know Hugo is a very self-centered, selfish young man. He has no money and no connections of note. Now, Francesca is a very nice girl, and very pretty, but she hasn't any money and aside from myself as a family friend, no connections. Hugo has nothing to gain by marrying her."

She gave Lady Ashton's hand another reassuring pat. "No, I believe he has other reasons, and if it's of any comfort, Anna, I don't believe he has any nefarious purpose in mind.

He won't harm her. I believe his intent is to simply take her away from Thomas."

"Take her away from Thomas? But why? How will that benefit Mr. Winter? I don't understand!" Once again, Lady Ashton's voice rose in distress.

Lady Helmswich patted her hand a third time. "So Lady Bernice Whitham has a chance with Thomas—or so she fondly imagines!" She looked up at her nephew. "The minx has obviously noticed your recent rift with Francesca and plans to widen it. She hopes you'll think that Francesca has eloped with Hugo, and you, in despair, will turn to her."

Lady Ashton was completely baffled, but Thomas was not. He remembered the week just past when he had thought Francesca lost to him.

How Lady Bernice had flirted with him, batting her eyelashes and fluttering her fan for all she was worth—and all to no avail, because although there was a breach between himself and Francesca, he had every intention of closing it. He had not stopped loving her.

But that fact obviously meant nothing to the cold-hearted Lady Bernice!

Thomas was angry with himself. He had been so anxious about losing Francesca that he had all but forgotten Hugo Winter and Lady Bernice.

Thomas had heard the gossip that Lady Bernice's financial difficulties were coming to a head, and that she was in imminent danger of losing her house and her position in Society. But never for a moment had he expected her to take such a drastic course; in fact, as Lady Bernice had been

spending so much time in Sir William Greentree's company, Thomas had assumed that she would eventually give up on any hope of securing himself as a husband, and would decide to settle on a gentleman who seemed more promising.

How wrong he had been! He should have taken more notice of that amoral pair!

"That's a very drastic measure for even Lady Bernice to take," Thomas commented. "But one I should have foreseen, Aunt. I'm afraid she's going to receive a nasty shock at the failure of her plan. I'm going to bring Francesca back—and when I return, I'll pay a call on Lady Bernice—to wring her pretty neck!"

"Don't be too hard on her, Thomas," Lady Helmswich counseled. She looked grave. "Her financial position is, I believe, even more precarious than Hugo's. But even I never expected that she would take this course. I believed that eventually she would realize she had no chance with you and would fix on Sir William, or some other rich fool."

"As did I." Thomas briefly wondered how Lady Bernice had persuaded Hugo to such a course, but then set it aside. He didn't want to waste any more time discussing the topic. He must set out as soon as possible, and bring Francesca home. "Winter's estate is in Surrey, I now recall. Not far from Epsom."

"You had better go then, nephew, and fetch Francesca back. The sooner this trouble is nipped in the bud, the better," Lady Helmswich pronounced. "We don't want every gossip in London to get wind of it. Francesca's reputation will be damaged beyond repair."

Thomas, his hand on the door handle, briefly turned back to face his aunt and Lady Ashton. On his face was an expression that Lady Helmswich had never seen before.

"You can be assured of one thing, Aunt," he said, his voice grave. "If by chance Francesca's reputation is torn to shreds by every gossip in London, I will still marry her. That is my solemn promise."

When Francesca finally realized that she was being abducted by Hugo Winter, initially the notion seemed too absurd to contemplate.

Yet it was undoubtedly true—and she was helpless to do anything about it!

Having long left London behind, the carriage was now travelling at a speed that would cause her serious injury, at the very least, if she were to risk throwing herself out. Francesca was also hampered by her inability to physically attack Hugo—although she would have dearly liked to! As all her pleas and entreaties to be taken home had fallen on deaf ears, slapping Hugo's handsome face would have afforded Francesca some satisfaction, however minor.

She regarded the man sitting opposite her in the carriage with suppressed indignation. Seated on the forward facing seat, she had settled herself near the right hand window, which was as far away from Hugo as she could manage, given the confines of the carriage.

Seated by the window on his own right hand side, Hugo was asleep, or feigning sleep, his hat over his eyes. His earlier agitation had disappeared, and he now seemed

relaxed. Just as if they were on their way to a picnic, Francesca thought, fuming.

She returned her gaze to the passing scenery, blinking away incipient tears; dissolving into a sobbing mess would not assist her in her predicament. She must think what to do.

Where was Hugo taking her? And why had he abducted her?

It made no sense!

Try as Francesca would, nothing plausible came to mind. She had only a small dowry. She possessed no title and no estate to call her own. She had no rich relatives who would in the future bequeath her an inheritance.

Hugo needed money, that Francesca knew. Gossip had reached her ears that he was on the hunt for a rich wife.

Surely, if Hugo wished to abduct a young woman, he would abduct an heiress, not plain, ordinary Miss Francesca Ashton!

And she was certain that he wasn't in love with her—besides, even if Hugo were overcome with love for her and had suddenly taken it into his head to whisk her away to Gretna Green to force her to marry him, they would be travelling north, not south!

So she could safely assume that she wasn't about to be married against her will. But it still made no sense.

"Mr. Winter!" Francesca said.

Hugo didn't answer.

"Mr. Winter!"

"What?" To her astonishment, Hugo sounded rather annoyed. Just as if she had woken him up from a pleasant dream!

Francesca was now really angry. "I demand to know where you're taking me, and why."

"I'm taking you to my estate." Hugo pulled out his watch and glanced at it. "We should be there soon—it's not far from Epsom. As to why..." Suddenly Hugo seemed embarrassed. "I was ordered to."

"Ordered to?" Francesca was flummoxed. "By whom? And why?"

"Lady Bernice Whitham."

"Lady Bernice..." Francesca trailed to a stop, at a loss for words, but after a moment she managed to summon some up. "Is she really so very in love with Thomas that she would take this drastic step?"

"No, of course she isn't, although she does want to marry Lyndhurst. Because he's rich and has property, you see," Hugo explained apologetically. "He's titled, too, and she has a fancy to be called Lady Bernice Lyndhurst. Poor Bernie has no money and no property, and will soon have no standing in Society even though she's an earl's daughter. The poor thing's worse off than I am. I do feel rather sorry for her, actually..."

Hugo went on to explain about Sir William Greentree and how Lady Bernice should marry him, but Francesca ceased listening.

She felt as if she had stepped into a plot of one of the Gothic novels she loved reading—although Hugo really wasn't

so villainous, she had to concede. She knew he wouldn't physically harm her, and now that Hugo had explained his actions, it did make sense in a convoluted sort of way.

All Lady Bernice really meant was for Francesca to be separated from Thomas, leaving her a clear field. She must have noticed their silly disagreement, and remained unaware that they had made up their differences. Hugo wasn't the instigator of this ridiculous plot.

But that didn't mean that Francesca wasn't angry at being tricked and abducted by him. She had been truly worried over Phyllida. And soon, both Phyllida and Mama would be worried over *her* disappearance!

How dare Lady Bernice and Hugo put her and her family through this! Hugo should have flatly refused Lady Bernice's ridiculous orders!

Although she was in no physical or moral danger from Hugo, Francesca knew that if word got out about her escapade, her reputation would be torn to shreds. That none of it was of her own making would alter Society's opinion that Francesca Ashton was a loose woman.

A young lady's reputation was more precious than jewels, and was therefore closely guarded, for if her reputation were destroyed, so too was her family's reputation.

Any hopes that Phyllida cherished of a match with Lord Adey would be snuffed out. His family wouldn't wish a connection with the scandalous Ashton family!

And what would Thomas's reaction be? Francesca twisted her hands in her lap. Surely he wouldn't blame her—he loved her.



Yet no man, not even the most loving of men, would appreciate his bride-to-be jaunting about the countryside in a closed carriage with another man, being borne to his country estate to be kept there for who knew how long.

She had to escape!

Epsom wasn't so far from London. When they arrived at Hugo's estate, that would be the moment to make her escape, Francesca decided. Hugo couldn't watch her every move. Sooner or later, he would be forced to leave her alone.

And the moment Hugo's back was turned, no matter what the risk, Francesca would snatch the opportunity. She would need only a minute or two. She would unhitch her horse, mount it, and ride hell for leather to London...

"Ah, we're here."

Hugo's words interrupted Francesca's train of thought, and with a start she realized she had lost track of time. The carriage was turning into a weed infested driveway, and they pulled to a stop outside a dilapidated mansion.

Hugo opened the door and stepped down. He let down the steps, then held out his hand for Francesca to alight.

Francesca ignored his outstretched hand. "No, Mr. Winter, I am not leaving this carriage. You will instruct your driver to return me to London forthwith."

"Please, Miss Ashton. Stay for a little while at least. I can make you comfortable. I swear I mean you no harm. You only need to stay here a week or so, and I'll do my best to ensure your comfort. My house is better on the inside than it looks on the outside, I assure you. I have a housekeeper who has exacting standards despite the obvious deterioration and..."

"The condition of your house does not interest me in the slightest, Mr. Winter," Francesca replied primly. "Nor the exacting standards of your housekeeper." Straightening her shoulders and raising her chin, her hands neatly folded in her lap, her intention to remain in the carriage was all too clear. "I am not stepping foot inside your house. If you refuse to let me return to London, I will remain here in your carriage. I will even sleep here, if necessary. But make no mistake, Mr. Winter. The moment you leave my presence is the moment I make my escape. I intend to return to London, and will do so, even if I have to walk all the way."

"Miss Ashton, please be reasonable! Come inside and have a cup of tea. You can't possibly sit there all night..." Hugo continued to argue, but all his arguments and pleas fell on deaf ears. Francesca turned her head to stare steadfastly out the opposite window.

And there she remained. Hugo continued his entreaties, but Francesca said not another word. She did not know how long she sat there, but after what seemed like hours, she heard Hugo give an exasperated sigh. He had left the carriage door open, and she heard his feet crunch on the gravel as he moved away. Then she heard him confer in low tones with his driver.

Francesca cautiously slid along her seat to the open door. She strained her ears to try and hear what they were saying. If Hugo was planning to drag her out by force, she needed to be prepared. She would kick and scream and...

Suddenly her ears caught an entirely different sound.

It was the sound of carriage wheels on gravel! Francesca quickly slid back along the seat to look out of the opposite window.

It was a travelling carriage. Was it Thomas's? Francesca's heart began to beat heavily with hope.

The carriage hadn't fully come to a stop when Thomas himself leaped out.

"Francesca!" He called out. "Francesca!"

"Thomas!" Francesca opened the door and nimbly jumped out, not caring about the lack of steps on that side of the carriage. Behind her, she heard Hugo give an audible curse.

Francesca ran towards Thomas. He opened his arms and caught her to him.

"Francesca, are you all right?" Thomas breathed. His hands cupped her face, staring hungrily into her grey eyes to reassure himself that she was unharmed. He gently brushed back her hair with a hand that trembled slightly.

"I'm well and unharmed, only very angry at being tricked and abducted by Mr. Winter." Thomas clasped Francesca to him again. She buried her face in his shoulder. "How did you find me so quickly, Thomas?" Her voice was slightly muffled. "I was thinking of a way to escape, but I'm so glad you found me! I would have hated to have been forced to walk all the way to London."

"Your groom Simmons raised the alarm. I remembered Winter had an estate here, and set off as soon as I could."

Francesca had completely forgotten Simmons. "Oh, poor Simmons, what a shock I must have given him! He did try to warn me, I recall, but the thought of Phyllida lying injured so

unsettled me I wasn't thinking clearly. Is Mama terribly worried?"

"She was, as was your sister—who is hale and hearty, by the way!—but my aunt managed to calm them both."

Hugo had reached them. Over Francesca's head, Thomas glared at him. "I should call you out for this, Winter!"

"And you would be perfectly within your rights to do so, Lyndhurst. But as you can see, Miss Ashton is unharmed. I haven't touched so much as a strand of her hair."

"It would have been the worse for you if you had, although I suppose you weren't the instigator of this plot. I shall have words with Lady Bernice over this. If she tries any more tricks like this, I'll have the law on her, that I promise."

Francesca started, moving out of Thomas's arms. "So you know about Lady Bernice?"

Thomas looked down at her. "I guessed. I'll explain on the way home."

"Oh, yes, home. Please take me home, Thomas!"

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Fourteen

The journey back to London was a more leisurely and pleasant one with Thomas as Francesca's travelling companion.

"Poor Mr. Winter," Francesca said, when Thomas had finished explaining his suspicions of what Lady Bernice had had planned for her.

Resting her head on Thomas's shoulder, she went on, "Lady Bernice must have promised him something, although I cannot imagine what. She certainly cannot have promised to pay off his gaming debts!"

"It's more likely that she promised to help him find a rich wife. It's a pity those two cannot marry, Francesca. They make a pretty pair, to be sure."

Francesca gave a brief laugh, but then became serious again. Her hand was lying comfortably in Thomas's, and she gave it a little squeeze. "Although Lady Bernice did cause me a great deal of trouble, Thomas, I do feel sorry for her. Poor Lady Bernice! And she is an earl's daughter! I suppose that makes it so much worse. No one ever expects earl's daughters to be penniless, do they?"

Thomas turned his head to give his betrothed a wry look. "Save your sympathy, Francesca! Lady Bernice has brought much of her misfortune upon herself. I believe she did once inherit a modest sum of money from some distant cousin or another, but obviously it wasn't enough for her, for she gambled the lot in a vain attempt to double it. Of course she

lost every penny, and once again found herself in dire straits. Then she married Lord Whitham, who was reputed to be very wealthy. It must have come as a severe shock to discover that he wasn't."

Francesca sighed. "Even so, I can't help feeling sorry for her. What a predicament to be in!"

Thomas gave her a sardonic look. "Lady Bernice can look after herself, Francesca. You need have no worries on that score! I've seldom met a more... how shall I describe her? Resourceful lady!"

"I don't think poor Hugo is resourceful, though. What will he do?"

Thomas shook his head. "Francesca, will you cease worrying about those two? I'm sure Winter's quite capable of looking after himself if he puts his mind to it. His chief fault is laziness."

"I was very cross with Hugo, but then he looked so sad and forlorn when I refused to leave his carriage and rejected his offer of a cup of tea..."

"Francesca!" Then, when he saw she was about to say more, Thomas stopped her the only way he could think of. He took her chin in his hand, lifted her face, and kissed her.

After a while, they broke apart.

"You see I keep my promises, Francesca," Thomas said tenderly. "I promised to come after you if you should leave me, and so I did. I only wish I had done so four years ago!"

"And that was because of Lady Bernice too."

"Only this time she didn't succeed. Oh, Francesca, I was such a fool, and it was such a silly episode, yet it ended our

engagement. I hardly knew Lady Bernice, other than that she was an outrageous flirt. The lawyer had left, leaving me alone in the library, and I was just taking a final glance over the papers he had left with me when I felt a pair of arms go around my waist. Initially I thought it was you, Francesca. I laughed, but then I turned around and of course it was not you. Lady Bernice was laughing up at me. Before I realized what she was about, her arms were around my neck and I had my arms around her—to push her away, I hasten to add. That was what you saw, Francesca."

"And I believed what my eyes were telling me, not my heart. I loved you so much, Thomas, it hurt. I was crushed. But I should have trusted you, believed in you. I should have read your letters."

Thomas lifted her hand and kissed it. "You were very young, Francesca, and your reaction was instinctive. You were not to blame." He kissed her hand again. "And perhaps it's as well we did not marry four years ago. We were both young, with little life experience. Now we are more mature. We will never doubt each other again, no matter what troubles we are forced to face in the future."

"No, I will never doubt you again, Thomas—and that's my promise to you!"

"Well, you couldn't have expected it to work, Bernie. Stands to reason. Lyndhurst's positively nutty about Francesca. I thought he was going to knock me to the ground, and really, if he had, I wouldn't have blamed the fellow." Hugo sighed. "No, Lyndhurst's a lost cause. Forget him. Take my advice—Sir William Greentree is the man for

you, my dear. Indeed, I suspect he's as nutty about you as Lyndhurst is about Francesca Ashton."

After Hugo had left her, Lady Bernice thoughtfully went up to her bedchamber. Seating herself at her dressing table, she stared at her reflection in the mirror. She was forced to concede that Hugo was right. She had indeed lost Thomas.

No, she amended. She hadn't lost him; Thomas Landon had never been hers to start with.

Lady Bernice sighed. She couldn't help but feel disappointed. What woman would not be? Thomas was young and handsome. Sir William Greentree was neither, but he was rich. No, he was *very* rich, she reminded herself. Having been burnt once, Lady Bernice had had his credentials checked. Sir William was most definitely in possession of an estate and a gratifyingly large fortune!

At the thought of Sir William's riches, Lady Bernice cheered up considerably. She had an invitation to Lady Cahill's reception tonight—as did Sir William, she recalled.

Her mind busy with plans for the evening ahead, Lady Bernice rang the bellpull to summon her maid. She needed Milly's assistance to make her as beautiful as possible, for by the end of the evening, Lady Bernice was determined that Sir William wouldn't know what had hit him!

Three weeks later, Francesca walked with Thomas in the parkland of his large country estate, The Pines, her arm entwined with his.

Lady Helmswich, Lady Ashton, Phyllida and Lord Adey and a number of friends were also guests at The Pines, for the



wedding of Lord Lyndhurst and Miss Francesca Ashton was to take place in the chapel in two days' time.

"Then there's Phyllida's wedding in the autumn," Francesca was saying. "I never expected the Season to end so wonderfully, Thomas. When Mama told me we were to come down to London for Phyllida's come-out, I didn't want to come with them. I wanted to stay at home. I felt safe and secure there. I didn't want to return, remembering what had happened four years ago."

"That's now in the past, Francesca. We have the future to look forward to."

"Yes, we have the future to look forward to." After a pleasurable interval, Francesca said, "Thomas, did you see the engagement notice of Lady Bernice to Sir William Greentree in the *Morning Post*? Being so happy myself, I find myself wishing happiness for everybody else. But do you think Lady Bernice will be happy with Sir William? He seems kindly enough, but she can't possibly be in love with him. He's so very old..." Francesca shuddered.

"He may be old, but he's very rich, which is what Lady Bernice desires. I believe she'll be deliriously happy spending his money. She may not love him, Francesca, but Aunt Martha reports that Sir William is besotted with her." Thomas kissed Francesca's hand. "Each to their own."

"Indeed." Francesca knew she would never understand Lady Bernice and her motives. How could a woman marry a man she didn't love, be he never so rich? Francesca had fallen in love with Thomas when he had been plain Mr. Landon, and would still have loved him if he had never become a viscount.

"I do hope Hugo will be happy with Lady Sambourne..." Francesca sounded more doubtful about Hugo's choice of partner. Before leaving London, the Ashtons had met Hugo at a card party, where he had proudly presented his fiancée to them.

Francesca hadn't liked Lady Sambourne; she had seemed to her a rather cold and calculating woman. Lady Sambourne had held onto Hugo's arm tightly, much as she would a prize she had won, and had drawn him away from them as soon as politeness allowed.

Francesca suspected that Lady Sambourne would not be what Hugo was expecting at all!

"Serve him right," was Thomas's tart response when Francesca had imparted to him her impression of Hugo's fiancée. Lady Helmswich, not mincing her words, had described Lady Sambourne as a harpy who would have Hugo dancing on a string.

Poor Hugo!

"Now, I don't want to hear another word about Hugo Winter, nor Lady Bernice, nor their respective spouses," Thomas now said. "I want to discuss us, Francesca, and our future here at The Pines. Tell me, do you have any ideas about the garden? I definitely think it can be improved upon..."

Francesca was nothing loath. She looked at this man who in two days' time would be her wedded husband. Let others marry for wealth; she much preferred being in love, and marrying for love.

A Second Season  
*by Katherine Langton*

And Francesca knew herself to be the luckiest woman in the world.

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