

The Forgery Furore

Chapter One

*Almack's Assembly Rooms
King Street, London
April 1810
A Thursday morning*

The ormolu clock on the chimneypiece was striking seven as Annabel, Lady Fellbridge, slipped into her seat in the white-and-gold paneled room and glanced around the table, taking a quick count. Ah, good—she was not the last to arrive. Even after more than a year, being the newest member of the Lady Patronesses of Almack's still made her feel like a young girl allowed to dine with the adults for the first time: she'd thought about sneaking in under a concealing shadow in case she was late, but fortunately that had not been necessary.

"Good morning, Emily," she murmured, untying her hat. Seven o'clock! A bracing cup of coffee would be very welcome just now, even though she'd retired early last night.

Next to her, Lady Emily Cowper brightened. "Oh, coffee is an excellent idea, Annabel. Might we order some, Sally?"

"Hmm?" Lady Jersey looked up from the paper she'd been studying. Her forehead was uncharacteristically creased with worry lines. "Coffee? Oh goodness, yes. Indeed, I should have thought of it." She rang the bell on the table in front of her.

Annabel gave her friend a small smile. Emily was usually very good about staying out of her friends' minds, but it *was* seven in the morning, after all.

"I know," Emily whispered. "I do beg your pardon. I had just been hoping that someone would suggest coffee and forgot myself."

The door banged open, and Countess Dorothea Lieven stalked into the room. "At seven o'clock of a morning I am usually still asleep," she announced, glaring around the table—besides Annabel and Emily and Sally, there was Lady Sefton, Mrs. Drummond-Burrell (who looked exhausted, Annabel thought), Lady Frances Dalrymple, and grim-faced Lady Bathurst. "I trust that there is a good reason for me to be so rudely drawn from my bed at this barbaric hour."

"I enjoy getting up early." Maria Sefton smiled her sweet but rather silly smile. "The birds are more willing to talk to me then. Very important source of news, the birds."

Dorothea snorted and sat down. Despite her complaints about the hour, she was as elegantly turned out as always in a corded muslin walking dress and Pomona green spencer. Her black curls bristled around her face like Medusa's snakes. One of them stirred and hissed, and she flicked it with a finger. "Hush. You could still be asleep, unlike me."

The curl subsided.

“I think you’ll find that there’s an excellent reason for our meeting so early, and not on a Monday.” Unlike Dorothea, Sally looked tired and rumped. “Ah,” she said, as a footman scratched at the door. “Come in. Coffee for eight, if you will. And bring an extra cup.”

Emily raised an eyebrow. When the footman had left she asked, “Are we expecting a guest?”

“Not quite.” Sally glanced at the watch pinned to her gown. “Mr. Almack will be joining us this morning.”

Annabel sat up a little straighter, as did the other ladies around the table. Mr. Almack was retired from the management of the assembly rooms which bore his name and where they sat today—in fact, he’d died nearly thirty years before. But he still kept a firm (if spectral) hand on the other, more covert side of his business. Even so, he did not attend every meeting. If he were coming today, whatever was going on must be serious.

“*Can Mr. Almack drink coffee?*” Frances Dalrymple, on Annabel’s other side, whispered to her. Her blue eyes were even wider than usual. “I don’t see how a ghost—”

“I expect he enjoys the scent,” Annabel murmured back.

“Once he arrives, we can proceed.” Sally sighed and tapped her pencil on the table.

Clementina Drummond-Burrell cocked her head. “He’s already here.”

“William?” Sally frowned.

A deep chuckle came from the seemingly empty chair next to Maria, who jumped. “My apologies. I didna mean to startle you, Lady Sefton.”

Georgiana Bathurst frowned. “Hmmp.”

The coffee arrived. After Sally had poured for everyone, an expectant silence fell. She cleared her throat. “Thank you all for coming on such short notice. You will, I think, forgive me for using the new warning messenger when you hear why we have gathered.”

“Doubtful,” Dorothea muttered.

Annabel couldn’t help agreeing with her a little. Having a ghostly footman appear in one’s bedroom to urgently request her attendance at a special meeting at Almack’s was a bit of a shock, though it was marginally better than the talking pigeons that had done the job last year, when Annabel first joined. They had frequently been incomprehensible and almost always left messes on the windowsills—

“Annabel?”

She started. “I’m sorry, Sally. Waiting for the coffee to take effect.”

Mr. Almack chuckled again. Annabel wondered if he’d been so jolly whilst in corporeal form. “So am I, Lady Fellbridge, though I expect my wait will be a wee bit longer than yours. Pray begin again, Lady Jersey.”

Sally sighed. “Very well. You weren’t at last night’s ball, Annabel—we understand, of course.”

“Thank you.” *Last night’s ball* was one of Almack’s regular Wednesday night subscription balls. It was also the anniversary of poor Freddy’s death, and while she had long since left off wearing black for her late husband, she had not felt a busy social evening to be quite the thing, even after three years.

“You’re welcome. Those of us who did attend, however, were appalled to notice a number of persons who should not have been there.”

Good heavens. “What persons?”

Clementina Drummond-Burrell looked as though there were a bad smell in the room. “Mushrooms. Cits. Merchants, and a—a *fishmonger!*”

“A *very* wealthy one,” Maria assured Annabel. “I doubt he actually sells the fish himself anymore. But still...” She shook her head.

“You are *très énérvé* because he asked you to dance,” Dorothea said with what could only be called malicious glee. “Were you afraid he still smelt of fish?”

Clementina scowled. Her preternaturally acute senses would probably have detected if the man had even *thought* about fish that evening. “You’re just annoyed because his wife got her gown from your mantua-maker.”

“Now, ladies—” Sally began.

“A fishmonger?” Annabel interrupted, to head off any further quarreling. “But how?”

“That’s what we’re here to find out. This may seem like a small matter, but you all must understand its potential import.” Sally looked at each of them, her expression somber. “Much is at stake here.”

Annabel nodded. The Wednesday night balls at Almack’s in King Street were *the* most exclusive social events of the London season. Only those of superior birth and breeding were given the vouchers that permitted them to purchase tickets, and the vouchers were only bestowed by the Lady Patronesses—the ladies now assembled in this room. Almack’s reputation as “the Marriage Mart,” the place where the sons and daughters of the upper classes could meet and conduct courtships under the protective gaze of their mamas and of the Lady Patronesses, was an important one. No one wanted their gently-bred offspring to fall for someone not of their sphere, so this matter of strangers at a ball was a serious one: Almack’s very *raison d’être* was being threatened. Without its reputation there would be no point to Almack’s, and Almack’s Lady Patronesses would not be needed and unable to use the cover of Almack’s to fulfill their other mission—the guarding of London society from supernatural dangers.

“You are very right, Sally, but I don’t understand,” Maria said. “None of us gave vouchers to these people—”

“Are we certain of that?” Georgiana Bathurst interrupted. Annabel winced at her acid tone; perhaps her sciatica was troubling her again. Being able to change one’s body to take the shape of any animal seemed to lead to a tendency to rheumatism. Or it might just have been Georgiana being Georgiana.

“They certainly weren’t on the voucher list,” Sally replied, almost as acidly. “I checked. Would you care to corroborate?” She indicated a thick pile of paper on the table in front of her.

Georgiana grimaced and shook her head.

“They weren’t at the ball last week.” Emily sipped her coffee thoughtfully. “So that means something happened over this past week to enable them to get vouchers and purchase their tickets.”

“What do you mean, ‘something happened?’” Georgiana snapped.

“Well, isn’t it obvious? Someone must be forging vouchers.”

There was a momentary stunned silence.

“Forging vouchers?” Maria Sefton finally said. “But...but that’s *wicked!*”

Dorothea groaned and leaned her forehead in her hand. A few of her curls writhed in protest.

“Indeed, Maria. But that is what appears to have occurred.” Sally glanced at Mr. Almack—or the chair his incorporeal form occupied—and nodded. “Annabel, I believe you’re probably the best person to take this on. Your shadow-shaping will no doubt prove useful in an investigation where stealth will doubtless be required.”

“Me?” Annabel’s voice squeaked. Surely one of the older, more experienced ladies should lead an investigation of such importance to their organization. “That is, thank you, Sally. I shall do my best.”

“I’m sure you will. Frances would be a good choice to assist you.” Frances was a spinster in her thirties, eldest daughter of the Duke of Carrick, and devoted to her King Charles spaniels and to reading three-volume novels—and anything else that came her way; she could hold an object and sense its origins or who had last touched it. “We’ll meet again Monday, an hour earlier than usual. That is all for today. Thank you for coming on such short notice. Annabel, a word before you go?”

Annabel waited while the other ladies gathered their wraps and left the room. Sally probably wanted to have an encouraging chat to prepare her for her first investigation. But Sally’s face when she turned to her was anything but encouraging. “Please be seated, Annabel. I wanted to explain why I gave you this investigation.”

“I am aware it is a great honor to lead my first,” Annabel said cautiously.

“Of course it is,” Sally agreed. “But it’s not just that. Forging vouchers strikes at the very heart of Almack’s. If this isn’t stopped, its reputation might be irretrievably ruined. Customarily

a more senior lady might have been expected to take this investigation. I might have myself, except for one thing.”

“Yes?”

Sally fixed her with an unwavering look. “According to Mr. Willis, all the questionable vouchers have been signed by you.”

“I b-beg your pardon?” Annabel swallowed hard. *Her* name. On the vouchers. Someone had used *her name*— “You can’t think—you don’t really believe I would—”

Sally reached out and touched her hand. “No, Annabel, I don’t. I should have said that straight away. I know you well enough to be perfectly certain that you would never do such a thing. And that’s why I want you to investigate this. You should be allowed to clear your own name—hopefully before next Wednesday’s ball.”

Annabel took a deep breath, and then another. “Why did Mr. Willis give tickets to whoever came for them if he suspected the authenticity of the vouchers that were presented to him?” she asked, her voice mostly steady.

“He didn’t have any doubts at the time. It was only when I spoke to him this morning that he recalled anything out of the ordinary—and that was merely that some of the footmen who came to purchase the tickets wore unfamiliar livery. When he thought about it further, he realized that all the unfamiliar footmen bore vouchers signed by you. I think that in the future we must supply him with a voucher list to check names against.” She sighed. “*More* paperwork.”

Now that the initial shock was past, it was easier to think. “If they all had my name on them, that suggests they came from the same source.”

“And probably a not very experienced criminal one,” Sally added. “A cleverer person would have used more than one of our names to avoid notice.”

“Yes.” Annabel swallowed. “But why me?”

“That is the interesting question. Do you have any notion why someone would have chosen to use *your* name on their forged vouchers?”

“I haven’t the faintest—oh, *no*...” Annabel closed her eyes. Because suddenly she was sure she knew *precisely* why her name had been used on the forged vouchers.

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