

...Mr. Mornay brought Ariana to the door of the house. “The physician will be here shortly. Will you be all right?”

Her heart sank. He was leaving, and there was an uncustomary chasm between her heart and his. She longed for that feeling of closeness they had been enjoying, it seemed, only a week earlier. What had happened? Swallowing her tears, she nodded at him, and gave the briefest of curtseys. She would have turned but he stopped her by taking her hand, and lifted it to his lips.

It meant everything to her, the way he lingered his kiss upon her glove. Though there was fine satin between her skin and his mouth, her spirits lifted. *He still cares!*

He studied her with his dark eyes. “I think it best if we limit our contact until the wedding. I’ll escort you to anything at your request, but I have determined to pass the days until the wedding apart from you—” He stopped, seeing her face fall. Her eyes widened as though he’d said something terrible, and then she compressed her mouth as if holding back tears. He started, as if to speak, but Ariana turned and went in the house.

He entered behind her.

Haines was discomfited to see the young miss come into the house looking distraught, but merely stood aside helplessly as Ariana swept past, one hand to her mouth.

Mr. Mornay caught her on the stairs, ignoring the servant, and took her about the waist.

“Whyever are you ready to cry?” He spoke gently into her ear.

The sound of his voice, soft and intimate, brought forth a sob, but she turned and threw her arms about his neck, and loved doing so. “You break my heart!” she said, in a shaky whisper. He had received her with a tight embrace, but at her words he pulled away, looking thoroughly bewildered.

“You are changing!” she cried, admirably trying to suppress a sob. “You are determined to avoid me! You have hardly looked me in the eye this past week!”

He breathed a sigh and took her hand and turned without a word and led her up the stairs. He took her into the drawing room, his exquisite eyes upon hers in a look that she could not decipher. He did not appear angry. Neither did he seem sorrowful or upset. She tried to steel her heart against what she might be about to hear.

He closed the door behind them, turning to face her while he completed the task, making sure it was closed firmly. He said, “Come here,” and held out his hands to her. When she drew near him, he took her by both hands and pulled her toward him. “What on earth do you mean, ‘I am breaking your heart?’ Don’t you realize, my foolish darling, that I am having a devilish time of it?”

“*You* are? On what account?”

He pulled her closer. “On account of wanting this marriage yesterday! I am *living* for our

wedding!”

Ariana’s countenance lightened instantly. This was more like the man who loved her. She put her hands up and clasped his well-shaven face, avoiding the snowy white neckcloth that edged out beneath his chin.

“Oh, Phillip!” They kissed, and then they stopped. But he pulled her closer and kissed her again more passionately. Then he showered her face and forehead with kisses, then her neck. Then—

He froze.

He released her.

“This is precisely why I must keep my distance from you! Do not mistake my meaning, or lessen my resolve. I am only thinking of your honour.”

She frowned, but nodded.

“Do not look so troubled,” he said, almost smiling. “If I did not *adore* you I would have no need for such caution.” These words filled her heart and she impulsively threw her arms back around his neck. “I *love* you!”

He sighed, for her enthusiasm did little to help his state of mind, but his eyes held a sparkle as he answered, “And I love you, Miss Forsythe.”

The use of her formal name made her smile. Still with her arms about his neck, she said, “I can only allow and bear this separation because it is what you wish, and for your sake.”

He chuckled. “I have your permission? You little minx!”

Ariana drew back and smoothed his snowy cravat with her hands. “I always want to touch your neckcloths. You do them so beautifully. You have the perfect neck, and the way your face is framed is so exactly—”

He took hold of her hands and stopped her. “Unless you wish to leave for Scotland this minute, I must go.” But he bent his head and planted a quick last kiss on her lips.

Just then they heard Mrs. Bentley’s voice. “What? *Where* are they?”

Mr. Mornay stroked Ariana’s hair, taking a long last look at her. Then he took her hand with one of his, while opening the door with his other. Mrs. Bentley was coming toward the room in a nightdress, robe, and mob-cap. She held a candle in one hand, and Haines was with her.

“Why, Mornay, how do you do? I hadn’t thought to see you in the house.”

He bowed politely. “I was just leaving.” The memory of Ariana’s near-abduction came to the fore and that he was supposed to be searching for the criminals. “In fact,” he said to Ariana, “I’ll never catch those dashed coves if I’m not off, directly!”

Their eyes met; a silent message of love passed between them. He reached down just to place a quick, chaste kiss on her lips, and then bowed again at her aunt and turned to leave. Mrs. Bentley saw his hurry to be off, or she would have stopped him to answer her questions, but instead she plied them at Ariana.

“He left rather hastily! What was he talking about? What dashed coves? Did something happen? You weren’t alone with him very long, were you? A man gets bold before a wedding, I dare say.”

“Aunt!”

“Well, what was he talking about? Come, tell me everything.” She motioned for Ariana to accompany her. Thankfully she headed to Ariana’s bedchamber and listened while Harrietta helped the younger girl with her clothing. Mrs. Bentley was indignant to be sure, at the near

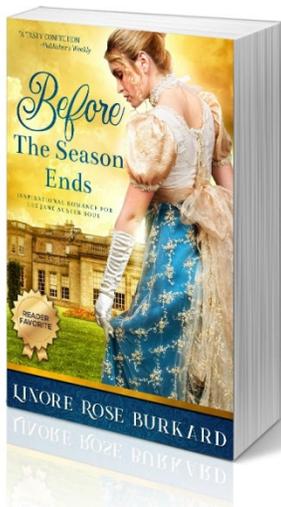
disaster, but not nearly as vocal or reprimanding as Ariana feared. Finally she was alone in a white chemise nightdress and cap. A single candle glowed softly on the table beside the bed. At last. Alone with God.

She hadn't read the day's collect, and so she started to now. Her soul felt dry, but of course, as such things are bound to happen, that is when the doctor arrived. He'd gone first to Merrilton House, and then was directed to Hanover Square. After hearing the account of what had befallen Ariana, he did his usual ministrations: listened to her heart, felt her pulse, and recommended a diluted mixture with laudanum. Then, if she did not feel better with the morning, he said he would return with leeches for blood-letting, which was sure to do the trick.

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