

“From its delicious title to an intriguing plot involving spies and secret codes in 19th-century England, *The Debutante’s Code* kicks off Erica Vetsch’s new Thorndike & Swann Regency Mysteries with action, humor, and the promise of romance.”

—Julie Klassen, author of *Shadows of Swanford Abbey*

“Intrigue abounds in this thrilling tale of a debutante turned spy. Amidst the whirl of stolen art pieces and murder, heroine Juliette Thorndike takes on a dangerous role to break a code before the villains discover it . . . and before the swoon-worthy Officer Daniel Swann figures out she’s involved. Author Erica Vetsch once again pens a winner in *The Debutante’s Code* . . . a must-read for Regency and mystery lovers!”

—Michelle Griep, Christy Award–winning author of
Once Upon a Dickens Christmas

“Erica Vetsch has done it again, bringing the reader an exciting Regency historical romance, but this time with the twist of a delicious mystery. *The Debutante’s Code* is completely entertaining, with the promise of more delights to come in the rest of the Thorndike & Swann series.”

—Jan Drexler, award-winning author of *Softly Blows the Bugle*

“A mystery within a mystery within a mystery. Inventive!”

—Regina Scott, award-winning author

“A compelling, enchanting work of art filled with wit, danger, and clever plot twists, *The Debutante’s Code* kept me turning pages well into the night. A cast of richly sculpted characters, an expertly woven tapestry of mystery and intrigue, and beautifully drawn spiritual truths set against the glittering backdrop of Regency England combine to make Erica Vetsch’s latest creation a true masterpiece.”

—Amanda Wen, author of *Roots of Wood and Stone*

“I am a big Regency romance fan, and I love what Erica Vetsch brings to this genre. The suspense on top of the lords and ladies is just excellent fun. And this one, *The Debutante’s Code*, is the best so far. Absolutely impossible to put down once I started.”

—Mary Connealy, best-selling author of *The Accidental Guardian* and the High Sierra Sweethearts series

“Erica Vetsch delivers a fast-paced and utterly riveting read set against the elegance and intrigue of Regency high society, destined to captivate longtime fans and capture the hearts of new readers. I’m eagerly anticipating Lady Juliette Thorndike and Daniel Swann’s next adventure.”

—Amanda Barratt, author of *My Dearest Dietrich* and *The White Rose Resists*

“*The Debutante’s Code* is a delightful and fast-paced visit to the undercover world of espionage in Regency England. Vetsch offers all that we love about her writing in this twisting story: historical details, compelling characters, and an intriguing plot. This is the first in a fascinating new series, and I did not want it to end! I’m thrilled to know we will continue this journey with Lady Juliette Thorndike and Detective Daniel Swann in the next installment.”

—Gabrielle Meyer, author of *When the Day Comes*

“The Sanditon and Bridgerton–loving crowd will fall hard for this delightful heroine and dashing hero and the ease with which they appropriate the London *ton* on their pursuit of growing attraction and twisting and turning adventure. I look forward to many more installments in this exciting new series. Erica Vetsch is at the top of her game!”

—Rachel McMillan, author of *The London Restoration* and *The Mozart Code*



THORNDIKE & SWANN REGENCY MYSTERIES

The Debutante's Code

Millstone of Doubt

Children of the Shadows

SERENDIPITY AND SECRETS

The Lost Lieutenant

The Gentleman Spy

The Indebted Earl

THORNDIKE & SWANN
REGENCY MYSTERIES

The
Debutante's
Code

ERICA VETSCH



The Debutante's Code

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Chapter 1

London Docks
January 31, 1816

“IF YOU LEAN OUT ANY farther, you’ll wind up in the drink. Which, I suppose, would be a fitting end to this disaster of a trip.” Lady Juliette Thorndike ducked her chin and turned away from the fresh breeze, the deck rocking gently under her feet. Her heart pounded beneath her woolen cloak as she reached the end of one journey and anticipated embarking on a wholly new one.

“I just want to be there. The last twenty yards is taking longer than the entire voyage.” As always when in high emotion, Agatha Montgomery, Juliette’s best friend, used her adept skills in hyperbole. She leaned over the taffrail of the *Adventuress* as the ship eased into its berth, and her wide green eyes bounced from the wharf to the cranes to the warehouses. “I cannot believe we made it. I never want to endure a journey like this again.”

Nor did Juliette. Their trip from Switzerland to London had been fraught with delays and discomforts, putting them a fortnight behind their expected arrival date.

But now they were moments from stepping on their native heath. Her beloved England. She was finally home. Searching the quayside, she hoped to see a familiar face, but though people thronged the wharf,

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all were strangers. Not that she was completely *au fait* with the family she hoped would meet her, having been away from home for so long. She had completed her schooling and would within the hour be back in the embrace of her parents, ready to begin her new life.

Men shouted, flinging ropes across the narrowing expanse of water, and with a jolting bump, the *Adventuress* docked. Juliette inhaled the scents of tar, hemp, wet wood, and smoke. The rigging creaked, and waves lapped against the pilings. Cold mist hung in the air, remnants of last night's fog, no doubt. But the sun, weak as it was on this last day of January, hovered overhead as if determined to burn off the dampness.

"Ladies, the gangway will be fixed soon, and your belongings will be the first off, as I promised." The captain, a desiccated stick of a man with so many creases on his sea-weathered face it was difficult to make out his features, paused on his way forward. "If you'll remain here out of the way, we'll see you off right smart." He touched his hat brim and sketched a small bow.

The *Adventuress* was a cargo ship, ill equipped for passengers, but the captain had made an exception for them in Genoa when they'd discovered their original vessel had sailed without them. The first mate had vacated his tiny cabin—albeit with poor grace—to accommodate the girls. Juliette had joked that the berth was so small, they had to go out into the corridor to change their minds.

"You do think someone will be here to greet us, don't you? Even though we're late and on the wrong ship?" Agatha's brow puckered. She'd voiced the same concern throughout the journey.

"If no one is there to meet us, we'll get ourselves home. We're grown women now and certainly capable of getting from one side of London to the other." Juliette raised her chin. "If we can live in a foreign country for years and travel alone from Switzerland to England, we can navigate the last short stretch." Weariness dragged at her heart. It seemed she had been on her own for such a long time. She longed to be in the care of someone else for a while, to have her parents there to look after her, to help guide her in decision-making, to give her the

feeling of home and comfort she had missed since the moment she'd left Heild House, their country estate in Worcestershire, for school seven long years ago.

"But we're not *supposed* to be traveling on our own. That's the problem. Our chaperone abandoning us partway to the port was a near disaster. What my father will say, I'm sure I don't know. He paid good money for an escort, and look what happened." Agatha's mouth tightened, as it often did when speaking of her father. From her description he was a man of moods and given to expressing them boldly. His rare letters to his daughter over the years had been terse and more often than not dictated to his secretary at one of the mills he owned.

"He cannot blame either of us, and if he's thinking at all, he should applaud our independence and bravery. Frau Hecht was not a good choice of chaperone, and I'm sure our parents will communicate their displeasure to the academy." Frau Hecht and the three men hired to take the girls to the port city of Genoa and aboard the correct ship had been in league with one another. They had taken their fees and money for traveling expenses and then abandoned their charges in the city of Turin, forcing the girls to find their own way from there.

"Ladies." The first mate, who always spoke as if clenching a mouthful of nails in his teeth, stuck out his arm, stiff as a spar, pointing to the gangway. There had been quite a set-to when the captain had agreed to take them on as passengers, led by the first mate. Something about women on a ship being bad luck? Tosh and twaddle. Juliette would be glad to see the back of him.

Holding her skirt with one hand and anchoring her hat with the other, Juliette made her way down the wooden slope that had no rails, her mouth in her throat until her feet touched the rimed cobbles of the wharf.

The sense of peace she had anticipated didn't come. Instead, the anxiety that had dogged her every mile of the journey remained. There were still so many questions, so much to do until she could feel settled at home. Her parents had expected her to arrive a fortnight ago. They couldn't know of all the troubles that had waylaid the girls. Had her

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parents come to the dock day after day hoping for her arrival, or had they dispatched someone to look for her?

Agatha bumped into Juliette's back. "Your pardon. The stones are slippery." She righted her bonnet. Lean and coltish, Agatha stood six inches taller than Juliette, and she constantly hunched her shoulders, keeping her head bowed in an effort to disguise her height. "Do you see anyone we know?"

Stevedores, teamsters, and sailors abounded. Bales, barrels, and bundles blocked anyone from walking in a straight path. "No."

"What should we do?" Agatha clutched Juliette's arm.

What indeed? Juliette had talked a good yarn about getting themselves across London, but how did one go about it? "We can inquire at the shipping office, I suppose. To see if our families have sent word or instructions."

Which only left the small issue of finding the headquarters for the ship they had been scheduled to travel upon but which had left them behind when they didn't arrive on time.

Before she could take a step, a long hand snaked out of the jostling crowd and latched onto her wrist. Startled, she jerked back, bundling into Agatha, who shrieked. Heads swiveled and bodies jostled, and Juliette whacked down on the clutching hand with an instinctive chop.

"Stop it, child." A man eeled between a pair of brawny stevedores, shaking his limp hand and scowling. "Don't you know your own uncle?"

She froze. "Uncle Bertie?" A flash of recognition from somewhere in her memory gave her pause. Of him laughing with her father, their profiles so similar.

"None other. How fortuitous to find you in this crush. I had business at the docks today." He smoothed the many capes on his cloak. Stepping back, he assessed the growing pile of baggage being offloaded from the *Adventuress*. "I assume these are your belongings? I'll have to see about hiring a luggage wagon. This will never fit in my coach."

"Of course." He had been at the docks for some other purpose? "Did Mother and Father come?"

“No, not today. Come along. I’ve wrung every bit of charm out of the dockyards over the past few days. I’m bored with the place.” He flipped his hand and shrugged. “So much work going on all the time. I find it tedious. No, I must tell you about your parents, but . . .” His gaze flicked to Agatha, who hovered behind Juliette, and he raised his brows. “A friend?”

He spoke like the dilettante Juliette had suspected he’d become, from reading her parents’ letters.

“Perhaps an introduction is in order, Juliette?” Agatha tried to sound polished, but her voice cracked.

“I’m sorry. Agatha, this is my uncle, Sir Bertrand Thorndike, my father’s younger brother. Uncle Bertie, this is Miss Agatha Montgomery. We can take her to her home, can we not? To Belgravia?”

“Yes, yes, child. But hurry along. It’s infernally cold, and this damp is wilting my cravat.” He touched the brim of his tall hat to Agatha, offered his arm to her, and then the other to Juliette. “The coach is just beyond this warehouse. I couldn’t get any closer, what with so many ships arriving today and all the bustle.”

“Were Mother and Father very worried when we didn’t arrive when expected?” Juliette held tight to his firm upper arm. Had he always been so fit? Her childhood memories of Uncle Bertie were of him coming and going and laughing. He gusted in at the family estate like a nor’easter, plied her with sweets, had once gifted her a puppy that proved to be endless trouble, only to sweep out again on adventures of his own. He never stayed longer than a few days, and no one seemed to know when he’d pop up again.

She knew he’d served in the army and was considered most eligible. He had been knighted by the Prince Regent some years ago, and he had an income from the family estate. His clothes were always fashionable and meticulous, and his manners precise. Beyond that, she didn’t know what he did to fill his time or what interested him. He was a bit of a cipher.

“We’ll get into all that later.” He moved swiftly, and the crowds parted before him. “There’s no time now. Things will be compressed

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because of the tardiness of your arrival. The house is in a bit of a dither. Your debut at court is tomorrow. If you hadn't shown up in time, it would have been embarrassing to have to inform the Queen you wouldn't be attending." A touch of censure brushed his voice.

A prickle of apprehension flickered across Juliette's skin. Court tomorrow. Making her curtsy before the Queen. Embarking upon her Season as a debutante. In less than twenty-four hours.

A footman opened the carriage door, and Uncle Bertie handed first Juliette and then Agatha inside. He swung aboard, graceful and lithe, and settled against the squabs opposite the girls. With the head of his cane, he tapped on the ceiling, and the coach lurched into motion.

Juliette grabbed the windowsill to steady herself. "After so many days at sea, it seems strange to be on land. I feel as if I don't know whether I'm coming or going."

"What did happen to delay you? We were beginning to worry."

Again she had that sense that she had inconvenienced him. She shook her head and raised her hands, palms up. "If there was a possibility of something going wrong, it seemed to, from the moment we set out from the school. Terrible weather, a flood that took out a bridge, forcing us to add two days to our journey as we went downstream to the next crossing. A lame horse. And then the chaperone the school hired absconded before we arrived in Genoa. By the time we arrived at the port, our ship was gone, and we had to find another transport. Captain Prussel was finally persuaded, with a liberal application of pounds sterling, to accommodate us, though his ship was not equipped for passengers."

Uncle Bertie stared out the window, extreme ennui smoothing his features. Did he not care about their troubles? Or did he think her story an exaggeration?

"When you didn't arrive on the correct ship, I had to make enquiries into what vessels were expected from Italy. I watched as ship after ship came in, and I wasn't alone. There was talk up and down the wharf that the *Adventuress* was nearly a week overdue. Were you

delayed leaving Genoa, or was there trouble once you put to sea?" He flicked a bit of lint off his sleeve and shot his cuffs.

"There was a flap at the port. I thought it was something to do with the loading of cargo, but it was more sinister. The local magistrates, or whatever they call them in Italy, searched the *Adventuress*, made all of us vouch for our identities—though how they could verify who the crewmembers were, I don't know—and delayed us further. The captain finally told us someone had been killed in the town, and they thought the culprit could be attempting to flee aboard ship. We never did hear more details, because the moment the authorities allowed us to set sail, Captain Prussel weighed anchor."

Bertie's brows rose, and his dark eyes swiveled her way. "A murder? That's most unsavory. Hardly something your parents would want you involved with, even tangentially. I would suggest you not mention it in polite company."

"We can hardly be blamed or considered to be 'involved' with a murder. We were innocent bystanders. The authorities searched the ship, found nothing, and went on to the next. Once we finally put to sea, I thought it would be a quick trip around Gibraltar and then home, but we managed to encounter both a storm which blew us off course and a lack of breeze with which to fill the sails, one on the heels of the other." Puffing out a breath, she collapsed against the buttoned upholstery. "I feel I've aged a decade in the last month. I don't know what I would have done without Agatha for company. I'd most likely still be stranded in Turin, awaiting rescue."

Agatha fidgeted with the strings on her reticule. "I hardly contributed to our onward movements. That was all you and your determination to get home. I was the one you had to encourage and convince that we could go on." She turned her attention to Bertie. "Sir Bertrand, have you heard from my father? Was he very upset at our tardiness?"

Bertie spread his hands. "I understand he's most eager to see you, Miss Montgomery. The preparations for your dual debut were running apace the last I heard." He shrugged. "I know nothing about debutantes and entertaining, at least not from the perspective of a host

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though I've much practice being a guest. This process has been both exhausting and revelatory. I can only hope God spares me the need to ever bring a daughter out in society. Perhaps, if I should marry, He would bless me with only sons."

The carriage bundled along, and Juliette wanted to press her nose against the glass to catch glimpses of everything as they flashed by. London. England. At last she was home.

Though she wouldn't really be home until she was in her parents' arms. Every minute she had been away she had longed for them, and every delay on the journey home had chafed her homesick heart.

Seven years was far too long. When she had been sent away to school in Lucerne, she had never envisioned it would be such a stretch before she could come home. Her parents had decided that with the war raging in the Peninsula, she was far safer in the mountain stronghold of Switzerland than traveling home for the summer months. But with Napoleon finally defeated and exiled, and her last term completed, she was free.

They deposited Agatha at her father's Mayfair townhouse, and she hurried up the steps, stopping at the top to turn back and wave at Juliette. "I'll see you tomorrow." Her eyes looked enormous, and her lips trembled. The black lacquered door opened, and she hurried inside.

Bertie pinched the bridge of his nose as the carriage took off again for the short ride to Belgrave Square and the Thorndike residence. "Juliette, I have to tell you something, and I don't want histrionics of any kind. It's something you will not like, and I wish it was not my responsibility to tell you, but there it is. Tristan and Melisande charged me with the duty, and I will not shirk it."

Juliette frowned. "I am not given to histrionics, Uncle Bertie." Did he think her some spoiled miss who fainted onto the nearest couch at the hint of anything unpleasant? On the heels of her umbrage, her mind raced at notions of what her parents might have asked Bertie to say to her.

"You may be when I tell you that your parents are not in London. They were called away to the estate on urgent business." He dropped

his hand and regarded her with his dark eyes. “They left yesterday and are uncertain as to the date of their return.”

His pronouncement was a blow to her chest. “Not in London? But . . .” What urgent business could possibly be more important than being home when their daughter arrived after such a long time away? “Are we going on to Pensax then? What about the audience with the Queen?”

“You are to stay here, under my care, until they return. You will make your debut, attend the parties your mother has accepted invitations for on your behalf, and await their return.”

He looked as frustrated with the situation as she felt.

“What has happened at Heild that would trump their being here?”

Bertie shrugged. “Something to do with the house? Or the fields? Or perhaps the staff? I don’t know. All of that responsibility belongs to Tristan. He gets the title, he gets the hard work.”

She turned away from his disinterested expression to look out the window, struggling with the same sense of abandonment she’d wrestled with for the last seven years. Here she had been anticipating a joyous reunion, eager to deepen her relationship with the parents she knew so little of, while they had seen nothing amiss in leaving on the eve of her presentation, a mere forty-eight hours before her debut ball, with no notion of when they would return?

It was almost as if her parents didn’t want her.



The butler opened the door as Juliette came up the steps. She forced a smile. She’d known Mr. Pultney since she was a little girl. He had been her father’s valet for years and then received promotion to butler while Juliette was away at school. With silver-tinged temples, blue eyes that missed nothing, and a friendly-but-not-too-friendly-for-a-butler way about him, he had been a favorite with Juliette.

He bowed. “Welcome home, Lady Juliette. May I take your wraps?”

Bertie closed the door and unhooked the closure on his cape. “Have our guests arrived, Pultney?”

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“Yes, Sir Bertrand. Their Graces are in the drawing room.” The butler took their cloaks. “I have served them tea, but shall I bring a new pot for you and Lady Juliette?” He phrased his intentions as a question, as he was wont to do, and Bertie nodded.

Juliette paused in untying her bonnet ribbons. “Guests?” Though she was perishing for a cup of tea, the last thing she wanted was to greet guests. Her world had been in upheaval for weeks, and now, when she should be welcomed into the bosom of her family, they had absconded to the countryside without a backward glance. She needed time to assess this change and come to terms with it.

“I’m afraid so. Your mother’s departure has put us on the spot, as it were, and I called in reinforcements.” Bertie checked his reflection in the mirror beside the door and smoothed his hair where his hat had mussed it. “Come along. I don’t want to keep them waiting any longer. I’m only glad you arrived when you did, because otherwise they would have visited for nothing.”

Juliette followed him into the drawing room, noting at first that the entire space had been redecorated. A trivial thought, but it gave her a heart pang. Did the décor reflect her mother’s taste and preferences? If her parents had bothered to be here, she could ask.

A tall, handsome man rose from his chair, a half smile on his pleasant features. He wore his hair long, clubbed back in a queue at the nape of his neck, and the style, though out of fashion, suited him.

An older woman in a lace cap, with gray curls clustered about her temples, remained seated opposite him. Her sharp eyes took in Juliette, and Juliette stopped, aware of her travel garments and less-than-fresh appearance. The older woman was clad in black from her cap to her slippers. Was this a fashion decision like the man’s hair, or was she in deep mourning?

Bertie nudged Juliette ahead. “Good afternoon, Your Grace. May I present my niece, Lady Juliette Thorndike? Juliette, this is His Grace, the Duke of Haverly, and the duke’s mother, Her Grace, the dowager duchess.”

A duke. In the drawing room. Her debut season was certainly set-

ting off with a bang. She curtsied. “Your Grace. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“You’ve informed her?” the duke asked Bertie. He bent to set his empty teacup on a tray, next to a plate with two remaining biscuits on it.

“I have. She now knows that her parents have been called away to the country unexpectedly to deal with a situation at their estate.”

Something in Bertie’s tone caught Juliette’s attention, and she witnessed a long look between him and the duke. Puzzled by an undercurrent she couldn’t fathom, she twisted the gold and garnet ring on her right hand. A gift from her parents on her thirteenth birthday, the ring never came off her finger. Family legend had it that the gold had come from a Roman mine in Wales and that the ring itself was more than a thousand years old. It had passed down through her mother’s family for generations, and Juliette prized it, not only because it had been a gift but because it anchored her, gave her a feeling of family and permanence, of tradition and the desire to carry those traditions forward.

“Yes, yes, we know all that.” The dowager harrumphed, setting her own cup down. “We must get to the germane issue. Lady Juliette . . . Oh, do stop hovering there and sit down properly.” She flapped her hand.

Juliette plopped into the nearest chair in a most unladylike manner. *Compose yourself, girl.* She arranged her skirts and folded her hands in her lap, keeping her back straight, trying to remember the countless deportment lessons she’d had. *Get this visit completed so you can run to your room and begin to sort yourself out.*

Bertie took a seat, leaning back, as if completely comfortable in spite of the dowager’s curt tone.

Pultney entered with a tray and set it before Lady Juliette. Tea, a plate of tiny cakes, and some biscuits. Fresh cups for everyone. The butler took the used tray with him, unobtrusive and professional, just as Juliette remembered him to be.

She picked up the teapot and raised her brows in the dowager’s direction. The dowager and the duke both shook their heads, but

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Bertie nodded. She handed him a steaming, fragrant cup and poured for herself. The hot tea warmed her, and she realized how chilled she had been aboard the ship, in the carriage, and from the inside when Bertie had told her of her parents' priorities.

"Now, in your mother's absence, Lady Juliette, I will be serving as your chaperone and your sponsor tomorrow at court." The dowager nodded, as if completely satisfied with her ability and qualifications for the office, and as if Juliette could have no quibble herself. "I understand your court gown is ready and that you've had some instruction in the proper etiquette for one of the Queen's drawing room sessions?"

"Yes, Your Grace." The words came out tightly around the constriction in her throat. This was all wrong. This should be her mother giving gentle guidance and with happy anticipation. The dowager looked as if she were a sergeant addressing a raw recruit.

"Very good. We will get along very well if you only do exactly as I say. Good manners, little speaking, and a well-presented appearance will take you far this Season. You are pleasant featured, and your pedigree is impeccable. Yes, I can definitely work with this." She gave Juliette a raking look from toes to hairline, as if totting up her debits and credits. "Once I've brought you out at court, we can move on to the debut ball. I understand it is to be at the Montgomery house and held in conjunction with the debut of . . ." She looked to the duke and beckoned him to fill in the missing name.

"Miss Agatha Montgomery." The duke had resumed his seat, and most casually he'd crossed his legs. His booted foot swung ever so slightly, the white tassel on the front of his Hessian sliding in rhythm. He appeared to take his mother's forceful manner in stride.

"That's right. I'm to take her under my wing, as it were, too. When we leave here, we'll stop by her home for the introductions and for me to assess the situation."

Poor Agatha. Barely home a minute and a dragon comes breathing fire through the door.

"Your help is most appreciated." Bertie inclined his head. "I don't know the first thing about bringing out a debutante, and Melisande's

departure left us as sixes and sevens. Thank you for answering my distress signal.”

“I’m looking forward to the experience. My daughter, the Countess of Rothwell, managed to do me out of the experience of her debut season by marrying without the honor of being ‘brought out.’ This will, I’m sure, be a pleasure. I’m glad you thought to ask me to fill in. It shows good judgment on your part.” A cat with cream on its whiskers couldn’t look more satisfied.

“The debut ball is being handled by Montgomery’s staff for the most part, I believe, and Tristan and Melisande engaged someone to be Lady Juliette’s first dance partner. After the debut, you’ll have to coordinate with my brother’s secretary as to which invitations were accepted and where you will be needed.”

“Of course. We’ll liaise.” The dowager sounded supremely confident.

Juliette felt too unnecessary for her own liking. It had been one thing when it was her mother accepting invitations on her behalf and planning the beginning of Juliette’s debut season, but when it was her uncle and a stranger discussing and organizing her activities without even consulting her, her hackles rose.

The duke turned his attention her way and rose. “I believe we should make our departure, Mother. Lady Juliette has traveled a long way and must be tired. We’ve other calls to make, and I promised Charlotte I would be home in time to visit the nursery and help with the teatime rituals with the boys.”

“Of course. We shall see you, Lady Juliette, at St. James’s Palace on the morrow. Whatever you do, do not be late. I’ll meet you in the anteroom and give you final instructions before you are presented.” The dowager rose to her feet, and Juliette and Bertie did as well.

Pultney met them at the door, and a footman stood nearby with the duke’s and dowager’s garments. With a practiced swirl, the duke donned his cloak, and as he tugged on his gloves, he frowned at Bertie. “I can’t say I’m happy with the way you’ve decided to approach this challenge, but for now, I will go along with it. I still think you’re underestimating her.”

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Juliette's interest was momentarily piqued, but she was too tired and dispirited to inquire as to whether they were speaking of her.

The dowager, ignoring her son, allowed Pultney to settle her fur-lined cape on her rounded shoulders. "As I said, Lady Juliette, if you will follow my instructions to the letter, you will be a triumph this Season. I know it's only temporary, until your mother returns, but we'll make a good fist of it. You are surely disappointed that obligation has called your parents away, but my dear, that's what being a member of the nobility means. You must do your duty when duty calls, no matter the sacrifice." She put on her gloves and raised the hood on her cape to cover her lace cap. The black of her attire suited her, highlighting the silver in her hair and the faded blue of her eyes.

Duty. It was a lesson often covered in the curriculum at the academy. Duty to one's parents, duty to one's class, duty to one's lineage. Obey your elders. Marry well. Carry on the name of the family you would marry into.

What about duty to one's children? What about making them feel loved and secure and an important part of your life? Or is it the right and just thing to shuttle your children out of your way so that they cannot even recall the timbre of your voice?

Was she wrong to want more? To desire a rich, meaningful relationship with her parents, beyond letters?

It seemed for now she would have to continue to hope that eventually their reunion would be all she envisioned.



Montgomery Residence in Belgravia, London
February 2, 1816

"If I make a cake of myself during the debut dance, I will absolutely perish with embarrassment. Please bury me in the family plot, and have lots of flowers." Agatha put her hand to her forehead.

"Aren't you being a teensy bit dramatic?" Juliette asked. "You should

audition for a role in a theater production.” The buzz of voices drifted up the staircase from the grand foyer of the Montgomery townhouse, guests who awaited the arrival of the debutants before the party could truly begin.

Agatha shook her head, eyes round and face paler than usual as she stared fixedly at the far wall. “Do you not realize we are standing on the precipice of the rest of our lives?” Agatha fidgeted with the ribbon at her rounded neckline. “Everything will change forever over the next few weeks, and we’ll never be the same. Everything hinges on what happens tonight.”

“Surely not *everything*?” Juliette kept her tone light, though she felt as if she were garbed in lead sheets rather than a gossamer debut gown. Nothing was going according to her plans. There had been no word from her parents, not even a note apologizing for their absence. “We’re meant to enjoy ourselves at our debut. You look as if you’re headed to the gallows.” *If someone slammed a door right now, you’d go straight up into the air.*

Juliette rested a hand on her friend’s delicate shoulder.

Agatha jerked at the contact, her wide gaze clashing with Juliette’s. “What?”

“Never mind. Are we going to stay up here all night, or should we think about going downstairs? The dowager will be after us if we don’t appear soon.”

“The dowager.” Agatha groaned. “She took one look at me and I know her first thought was that I’ve the figure of a flagpole, and I’m nearly as tall. She couldn’t stop staring at my red hair as if it was a puzzle she’d have to solve.”

“Did she actually say anything rude?” Juliette’s outrage gathered.

“No, but she didn’t say anything flattering either. Between her and my father, it’s as if neither knows exactly what to do with me.” Unhappiness painted Agatha’s face. “But then, that’s been the case with my father since my mother died. He wants to be kind, but he has no notion of how to go about it.”

“Then they’re both lacking in common sense and imagination.”

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Juliette looped her arm through Agatha's. If she focused on her friend's distress, she could quell her own. "You look lovely, just as you always do. We're going downstairs, and we're going to make a wonderful first impression on our guests. They'll be so enamored of us, they won't be able to talk about anything else for the rest of the night."

"I wish our journey hadn't been delayed. And that your parents could be here. This all feels so rushed." Agatha paused. "I really am sorry they had to leave so quickly."

Juliette nodded, swallowing against the lump that wanted to lodge in her throat. "They have no timetable for their return, so it's best not to delay or back out of the invitations we've sent and accepted. To quote Shakespeare, 'If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly.'" After all, if her parents didn't care to be at her debut, then she shouldn't care that they weren't there, right?

"Wasn't that in reference to regicide?" Agatha sent her a skeptical look. "Our debut ball might be fraught with nerves and portent, but I don't think it's that bad."

Juliette nodded. "Quite right. Therefore, we should march downstairs and captivate with our wit and charm and stop dithering here on the landing like lost sheep."

Descending the stairs, her enthusiasm hovered near the floor. They were supposed to meet the dowager and Mr. Montgomery to be introduced to the guests and receive their well-wishes. To smile and greet people and pretend an excitement she now no longer felt. But she would do it because of . . . duty.

Agatha bit her lip. "I'm just glad our presentations to the Queen are over. You don't know how many nightmares I had of falling on my face when I made my curtsy or tripping over my train and landing on my"—she lowered her voice—"posterior . . . as I backed away." She reached the last stair but continued to clutch the newel post as if she would float into the sky if she lost contact with the ornate wooden sphere.

Mr. Montgomery, a towering man even beside his tall daughter, strode over. "There you are, my girl. 'Bout time you stopped primping

upstairs and made your appearance. We can't start the party without you, you know. Why is it that women are always late for the very thing they've been anticipating most?"

To soften his chiding, he patted her shoulder, but with enough force to make her lurch forward.

"Lady Juliette. You look most fetching. The pair of you will be turning heads and stirring up the young bucks here tonight, eh?" His voice boomed in the atrium, bouncing off the marble floor and ricocheting off the high ceiling. Guests who were still arriving paused to catch a glimpse of the debutantes.

"Thank you, Mr. Montgomery. I am sorry we're behind our time. It's my fault. Agatha was helping me with my hair." Juliette touched the white bandeau holding her brown curls. "Have you seen my uncle Bertie?" She stood on tiptoe, looking over the crowd that was growing by the minute.

Mr. Montgomery frowned. "I fear he has been a bit in his cups already this evening. My butler was dealing with him, but I suggested he find Sir Bertrand's carriage and return him to his home."

Agatha touched Juliette's arm, her brows pinched and her eyes clouded. "Oh no."

"He's drunk?" At her debut ball? Before the ball even began? Heat raced into her cheeks.

"I am sorry, my dear, but lately your uncle has been hitting the liquor cabinet quite strongly. It's a shame, really, on what was supposed to be your special night. I tried to get him out of the house quietly, but he made a bit of a scene on the front steps, and I'm afraid several of our guests saw it." Mr. Montgomery's moustache twitched, his mouth set at an annoyed angle. "Has he always been like this?"

Juliette had no idea. Uncle Bertie had always been such fun, so dashing, first in his military uniform and then, according to her parents' letters, practically rivaling Beau Brummell in popularity and sartorial elegance. He'd been one of the most sought-after bachelors in the city, despite the fact that as a second son, he had no title beyond his knighthood. But she had been a child the last time she'd spent any

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time with him, and her parents would have hidden a drinking problem from her at such a tender age.

“Let’s find your chaperone, shall we? It’s high time you two ladies were introduced properly into society.” Mr. Montgomery offered his arms. “Wouldn’t surprise me a bit if I wasn’t entertaining offers for you, Agatha darling, by morning, and you, Lady Juliette, will no doubt be deluged in tomorrow’s post with posies, poems, chocolates, and invitations to trot along Rotten Row in some swain’s carriage.”

Juliette had no desire for such things herself, at least not yet, but she hoped it was true where Agatha was concerned. Her friend fretted about being ignored, or worse singled out for petty amusement, because of her height, her red hair, her angular features. But her greatest fear was that someone would marry her for her considerable inheritance rather than for herself.

Juliette only prayed that the young men of the *ton* would realize what a beautiful heart Agatha had, generous, loyal, sweet. And she had luminous skin, bright eyes, and a quick smile. Perhaps not conventionally pretty, but lovely all the same if anyone cared to look.

Somehow, Juliette had always felt rather plain and nondescript in comparison to her vibrant friend, who, when not overcome by anxiety, was vivacious and good fun. But Juliette’s West Wales heritage gave her brown eyes and brown hair and skin that tended to tan in even the slightest bit of sunshine. Juliette had never been teased for her looks, but she’d never been praised either. Her complexion was a trial and a blessing. She loved riding and boating and archery and most every outdoor activity, and she never sunburned. Current fashion said a woman’s complexion should be pale with just a hint of rose at the cheeks. Some women even went so far as to take tiny amounts of arsenic in order to keep their skin milk-white, which seemed ludicrous, not to mention dangerous.

Frankly it had only been in the last year or so that her features had homogenized into something more pleasant and adult looking than her awkward, adolescent self, and she had gained more confidence in social situations. Pray that held true for this evening.

Mr. Montgomery led them through the throng toward the ballroom, which took up most of the back of the house on the first floor. A small orchestra played a lively tune, and guests mingled and talked above the music. Greenery decorated the tables, and tall vases of flowers must have cost the earth and depleted greenhouses across the city.

"I see the dowager is beckoning. Are you girls ready?" Mr. Montgomery waved to the black-clad woman. "It's time to meet your fate." He grinned.

Mouth dry, Juliette nodded. She had looked forward to this day, the day of her debut, but more than being introduced into society, she had longed to be reunited with her parents. With them not here, and her uncle sent home in disgrace, the evening felt as flat as the dance floor. Yet she must pretend to enjoy herself, for the sake of her guests and the Montgomerys.

"You look very nice, girls." The dowager raised her lorgnette and studied them. "Very appropriate." Her appraisal halted on Juliette's ring. "Debutantes are not to wear jewelry. Give it to me for safekeeping." She let the lorgnette drop on the ribbon pinned to her collar and held out her hand.

Juliette covered the ring she wore atop her white gloves. "No, thank you. I will keep it. It was a gift from my parents, and I never take it off."

"But it is not the done thing, child. I do know best." The dowager flapped her hand again.

"Oh, let the girl keep her token. It's a little thing, and no use straining at a gnat, and all that. Let's line up, shall we?" Mr. Montgomery ushered them into a row, but the dowager humphed.

"I'm certain your mother would not want you wearing that at your debut," she said from the side of her mouth, which was a feat, considering how pinched it was.

"I have no idea what my mother would want, since she isn't here." Juliette offered her hand to the guests Mr. Montgomery presented to her. The niggle of resentment she'd carried from the moment Bertie gave her the news poked at her heart.

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When the guests had finally filed through the line with plentiful well-wishes and myriad names and faces, Mr. Montgomery signaled the musicians. The orchestra played a short tattoo to get everyone's attention. Conversations ceased, and heads turned as the bluff, burly man made his way to the center of the dance floor as guests moved to the perimeter.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome. We're delighted to have you here on such an auspicious occasion." His voice commanded attention, as did his mane of auburn hair. "It is with great pleasure that I present to you my daughter, Miss Agatha Montgomery."

He held out his hand, and Agatha gulped. She seemed frozen in place, and Juliette gave her a little shove to get her started toward him.

Agatha only tripped once and then remembered to lift her hem. With coltish grace she finally crossed the open space and took her father's hand.

Juliette joined in the applause as red suffused Agatha's cheeks, clashing with her hair.

Then it was her turn. Without her father there to present her, and with Uncle Bertie gone, the duty fell to Mr. Montgomery.

"And it is my honor to also present Lady Juliette Thorndike."

Juliette kept her composure, nodding to the guests, smiling, even as she reached for Agatha's hand.

The music began, and two men approached. Thankfully, one was well over six feet tall, and he bowed before Agatha and offered his hand.

Juliette's partner was shorter, darker, and had a calm, sophisticated look about him. He had to be somewhere in his mid-thirties. He seemed confident.

"Lady Juliette." Her partner bowed.

"Sir." Juliette curtsied, bending her knees deeply, as she had been taught.

Within moments the dancers chosen to perform the new and intricate quadrille had joined them on the dance floor. Thanks to her many hours of instruction with the dancing master at school, and her private

lessons in deportment and ballet, Juliette was at home with the complicated steps. Dancing at a ball was much to be preferred to practicing in the schoolroom, she discovered.

“My name is Mr. John Selby. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lady Juliette. I am honored to partner you at your first dance.” He held her fingertips lightly as they turned a circle. His eyes never left her face, and he smiled down at her.

He was very polished. Light on his feet. Though too old for her to be sure, he was a pleasant partner for her first dance. He had been chosen by her parents for this first outing, and she wondered where they had met. Was he the son of a friend? Was he a business associate?

Why couldn’t they be here so she could ask them?

“Mr. Selby.” She inclined her head.

He didn’t speak again during the quadrille, for which Juliette was grateful. She couldn’t abide a chatty partner, especially when the conversation must be conducted through several separations and rejoins as they followed the dance patterns. The quadrille was still new in England, but the dancers acquitted themselves well through the many phases.

The music finally came to an end, and the couples bowed and curtsied to one another while the spectators applauded politely. Mr. Selby offered Juliette his arm.

“That was most entertaining, Lady Juliette. I hope you enjoyed it as well. You are most accomplished, and I am thankful that I sought tutoring in these new steps. I shall have to thank your father for requesting I partner you for your debut dance.”

They threaded their way through the crowd, and Juliette searched for Agatha. She had made it through the quadrille without tripping on her hem or forgetting any of the patterns, so perhaps now she could relax and enjoy the party. What was the name of the young man who had partnered her? Had she enjoyed herself? Juliette checked her thoughts. Agatha was a grown woman now, and she didn’t need Juliette’s mothering . . . though the habit of so many years would be difficult to break.

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“Ah, Selby, well done.” Mr. Montgomery stood beside the dowager, a glass in his hand, looking pleased. “Juliette, enjoying yourself?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Selby here took good care of you, I see. Did you know he’s an art and antiques dealer? Buys and sells paintings and sculptures, brings them over from the Continent.”

Juliette’s brows rose. An art dealer? Juliette loved art, especially paintings. Her classes in art history had been among her favorites at school.

“He’s procured several pieces for me, one in particular, which is the reason he’s here tonight.” Mr. Montgomery coughed. “That and to partner you for your debut dance, of course.”

A stir near the door turned heads. An entourage entered, at its center a lean man in military dress. He stood so stiffly, Juliette wondered if he had a stair rod up his back. Thirtyish, with an air about him that said he wasn’t British. Surely he was from the Continent, of the breed of men to which Juliette had become accustomed during her time in Switzerland.

“Ah, he’s here. I must go greet him.” Mr. Montgomery handed his glass to a passing footman.

The newcomer’s eyes surveyed the room, and the lamplight shone off his precisely parted blond hair. A red sash crossed his chest, and medals winked on his tunic.

“Who is that?” a woman near Juliette asked.

“Duke Heinrich von Lowe. He’s from somewhere in Brandenburg, I believe,” a man next to the woman said. “A war hero as well. Fought bravely at Leipzig and was present when Paris fell. There was a column about him in the paper last week.”

“What brings him to London?” a woman with quizzing glasses raised asked.

People leaned in to listen while they watched Mr. Montgomery approach the duke with his hand outstretched.

When they greeted one another, the partygoers hummed with speculation and opinions.

“He’s part of a delegation sent on behalf of his country. Official business with the Home Secretary or something of that nature. Probably to do with setting new boundaries in Europe now that Old Boney is defeated.”

“I heard he was sent by his family to find a wife from the British aristocracy.”

“I was told he came to observe our textile and grist mills so he could take our advancements back to his country.”

The rumors swirled around them. Which one was true? Or were any of them? Juliette twisted the garnet ring, merely to have something to do with her hands. Imagine having such an important person as a foreign duke at your debut.

Mr. Selby turned from staring at von Lowe. “Your Grace.” He bowed to the dowager. “Thank you for the honor of sharing Lady Juliette’s first dance. I do hope you will pass along my best wishes to your son. If the Duke of Haverly is ever in the market for new artwork, I hope he will think of me and my little gallery. I’ve just taken delivery of some very unique pieces. I delivered many of them to their owners today, I was that excited, but there are a few I bought on speculation, and perhaps there would be one or two things that might interest him?”

The dowager’s brow darkened. “I do not pretend to speak for my son. Marcus, if he wants to delve into the art world, has his own contacts, I am sure. It is unseemly for you to be ‘hawking your wares,’ as it were, to me or any other lady at this function.”

Mr. Selby winced, and Juliette bit her lip. It had been forward of him to pitch his business to the dowager, but she had certainly given him a setback.

“I beg your pardon, Your Grace. Lady Juliette?” He bowed and all but scurried away.

“I don’t know what your parents were thinking, asking that man to partner you in your first dance. I’m certain I could have engaged someone more of your class. Really, a common tradesman? I’ve heard your parents have eclectic taste when it comes to friends and acquaintances, but you can take liberality of mind too far.” The dowager sniffed. “I’ve

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already taken requests from several young men to partner you tonight that would be far more acceptable.”

She knew her parents had a wide range of friends, and her father had always maintained that entertaining poets and artists and businessmen made for a lively dinner party and a broadening of the mind. Juliette had so been looking forward to evenings such as he had described in his letters.

“Juliette, this is Viscount Swayford. Swayford, Lady Juliette Thorn-dike.” The dowager waved her hand toward Juliette. “Enjoy yourselves. I shall locate myself with the other chaperones, and I will expect you to return her to me after your dance.”

Juliette partook of every dance in the first set. She caught glimpses of Agatha in the crush and was happy to see her engaged for every dance as well. Keeping her smile in place, Juliette was ever aware of the watching eyes, especially the dowager's.

At the end of the first set, Juliette perched on the edge of the settee beside the dowager, keeping her posture straight and her hands still in her lap. The dowager gave her an approving nod. “Someone is causing quite a stir, isn't he?” The dowager fingered her pearl choker. Across the way, several guests clustered around the German duke. He stood several inches taller than the rest, and while those around laughed and talked, he remained quiet. Did he speak English? Or was he just bored with the entire event?

“The bits of gossip I've heard tonight have centered on no other topic,” Juliette said. “You'd think it was the Prince Regent himself.” The duke hadn't taken to the dance floor yet, but that hadn't stopped people from whispering and speculating about him all the same.

“I heard he's looking for a bride.” The dowager's eyes flicked from the duke to Juliette. “Have your parents begun any negotiations in that direction? Not with the duke per se, but with someone in mind?”

“Not that I am aware.” And not, she hoped, at all. She intended to take this first Season to enjoy herself and to get to know her parents, not to shop for a suitable husband. There was plenty of time for all that later.

Agatha and a young gentleman approached—a gentleman impecca-

bly dressed, perhaps twenty-two or three? Color rode Agatha's cheeks, but she had a smile on her lips and stars in her eyes. "Your Grace, Juliette, may I present Lord Alonzo Darby, Viscount Coatsworth."

She nudged Juliette and leaned in to whisper, "I haven't tripped even once."

"Well done." Juliettes queezed her hand.

"Viscount Coatsworth, so nice you could attend tonight's party." The dowager offered her hand, and the viscount kissed the air above her knuckles. "How is your grandfather?"

"He's been a bit poorly recently. He's still of a sharp mind, though he rues the ravages of age." The viscount tucked his thumb under his lapel and raised his eyes to take in the mirrored walls, the frescoed ceiling, and the many chandeliers. "He is allowing me to take some of his burden finally, seconding responsibility for some of his vast holdings to my care."

Juliette paused. Something in the viscount's voice rubbed against her skin. His tone was condescending and more than a bit patronizing. And boastful. Was his family so wealthy? Vast holdings?

Agatha hung on his every word, keeping her hand through his elbow. Coatsworth didn't seem to mind.

"I've known your grandfather for more years than either of us would like to lay claim to. He pursued me once upon a time, but I was already spoken for. I'm sorry to hear he is ailing, but I suppose it comes to all of us eventually. I was laid low not long ago. I took a tumble down the stairs. It was such a blessing to have my family around to tend me as I recovered. I'm sure you are a comfort to the earl."

Before Coatsworth could answer, Mr. Montgomery's voice from the doorway drew their attention. "Ladies and Gentlemen, I know it is unusual, but as those who know me will say, I'm not much for conventions. I am thrilled that on the night of my daughter's debut, you all could be here to help us celebrate. And I have another reason to celebrate."

Heads turned.

"Before we go in to supper, I would ask you to please join me upstairs

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in the gallery. The new painting I purchased was delivered today.” He nodded toward his left, and Juliette spied Mr. Selby smiling broadly. “I would like you all to be present at the uncrating.”

Agatha rolled her eyes. “This is just like him. He’s forever collecting new paintings, and each one is ‘The best he’s ever had.’ Why can’t he let this evening be about our debut and not his artwork? The few letters he bothered to write to me while I was away were always more about his newest painting than about himself or wondering about me.”

“This won’t take long, I’m sure.” Juliette tried to placate her. “He’s proud of you, and he’s proud of his collection.”

“But can’t he be proud of them separately, if only for tonight?”

Viscount Coatsworth bowed to the dowager, took Agatha’s elbow, and led her toward her father.

Juliette and the dowager joined the stream leaving the ballroom and following Mr. Montgomery up the stairs to the long gallery. Skylights, dark now, would bathe the room in light during the day, but for this evening, wall sconces and standing candelabra illuminated the walls. Servants stood nearby with pitchers of water on the floor behind them, discreetly hidden but available if necessary. With so many people and so many candles, Mr. Montgomery wasn’t taking any chances of a fire.

Halfway down the wide hall, a wooden crate stenciled with arrows and the word “Fragile” stood alone before a blank space on the wall. Mr. Montgomery and Mr. Selby stopped there, allowing the crowd to pass and create a semicircle several people deep around them.

A footman stood ready with a pry bar.

Mr. Montgomery held up his hands, and the murmurs and whispers ceased. His eyes sparkled, and he rubbed his hands together, letting his anticipation build.

“I have long coveted having a Lotto in my collection, and this, *Messer Marsilio Cassotti and his Wife Faustina*, is one of my favorites of his work. Mr. Selby went to great lengths to procure it for me—at considerable expense, if I may say.” He sent a rueful nod in the direction of the art dealer. “It will be the centerpiece of my collection.”

With a wide gesture, he invited the footman to open the crate.

Juliette had to stand on tiptoe to look over the shoulder of the man in front of her. Candlelight flickered and reflected in Mr. Montgomery's eyes. She was happy for him, fulfilling a desire such as this.

"The portrait, as you will see, is of a young couple at their marriage, with the groom putting a ring on the bride's finger. Behind and between them, a cherub rises with outstretched wings, putting a yoke of leaves across their shoulders to symbolize their union."

The wood of the crate gave a final creak, and tufts of curled wood shavings burgeoned from the container.

"Here, let me." Mr. Montgomery stepped forward, eagerly swiping away the packing material. He paused. Scrabbling, he dug deeper.

"What is the meaning of this, Selby?" His voice filled the room, and even the candles seemed to stop flickering.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Montgomery?" The art dealer moved closer, peering into the narrow crate.

"It's not here. What have you done with it?" Mr. Montgomery looked close to grabbing Mr. Selby by the lapels and possibly hurling him over the banister.

"Sir, I assure you, the painting was in that crate when I delivered it. I boxed it myself this morning and brought it straight away." Selby puffed out his chest. "Has the painting been sitting here in the hallway all evening?"

The footman who had opened the crate stood with pry bar in hand. "The top was tight closed, sir. Undisturbed until I opened it."

A murmur went through the onlookers.

"It's been stolen!" Mr. Montgomery's voice must have been audible in the street three floors below.

Agatha clutched Juliette's shoulder. "We are never going to forget our debut ball."



"If I had even one other officer available, I wouldn't be forced to send you."