



## Epilogue

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*Ten years later*

IT HAD TAKEN LADY JESSICA TURNER years to understand her place in London society.

On the one hand, she was entirely comfortable. Her husband was well-respected; therefore, most people pooh-poohed the underhanded gossip that occasionally drifted up like so much scandalous miasma from the high society rumor brigade.

Instead, their love story, carefully sanitized and removed of its more salacious elements, was widely believed. Other women regularly told Jessica how jealous they were of her romantic life and her doting husband. There was no reason to fear, no reason to doubt. Jessica could bask in comfort for the remainder of her days.

On the other hand, no number of newspaper stories could take away the experience Jessica had gone through in her early years. No matter what people believed, *she* knew the truth.

Every truth had two sides. One side was about herself

—and she'd discarded every bit of shame she'd once carried.

The other side was about everyone else.

Over the years, she'd discussed the matter multiple times with her sister-in-law, Margaret, the Duchess of Parford.

"What is there to worry about?" Margaret would ask. "Nobody will say anything if you don't bring attention to it."

"Yes, but..." Jessica had always had a *but* initially. Then, as Jessica came to believe her sister-in-law's words with the trust that only time could give, she'd said only, "Yes..." with all her doubts left trailing into the nothingness that had come of her worries.

Jessica thought of those trailing doubts now, ten years after her wildly romantic wedding and reinvention by means of Parret's newspaper account.

She was standing in the corner of the London salon where Margaret presided. The gathering was some sort of political thing, the kind where well-meaning folk argued over treaties and statutes, then slapped Mark on the shoulder and asked if he was writing a companion to the Gentleman's Guide.

For many years, he would answer vaguely. "I will if I'm inspired. For now, though..." Then he would smile lovingly at Jessica.

People had taken from that that he was spending his time in a state of newly wedded bliss. As years passed, and his smiles hadn't changed, they'd had to adjust. The marriage had become old, and still it was bliss.

Then Mark stopped saying that he was waiting for inspiration. Instead, he said nothing at all.

Rumors arose: Sir Mark was writing again.

Naturally, Jessica fielded the vast majority of the ques-

tions about his work. "Oh," she would say whenever someone slyly inquired, "I've been engaged in philanthropic work of my own, providing opportunities to women in need. It leaves me with so little time."

"How very noble!" they all would say. What they'd actually meant was that it was a shame she wouldn't gossip.

Which just went to show: It had taken Jessica years to understand her place. To understand that her conversations with Margaret had given voice to the otherwise silent bargain between her and the few men who remembered her as Jess Farleigh. So long as she didn't expose them and their numerous sins, they wouldn't expose her.

She was safe.

Especially here at Ash and Margaret's salon. Here she was in the company of family. Ash was powerful; he'd never let harm befall his beloved youngest brother, and that protection extended to his youngest brother's wife.

No matter who else attended, no matter what Jessica made of them as a person, here, she was safe.

Or she would have been, were it not for one person.

Herself.

The person Jessica was, the experiences she'd gone through... She could not help but notice that something was off when Lord Ambersleigh arrived with his wife and a maid in tow.

There was the short, scathing look the wife gave the maid, the alacrity with which the girl vanished towards the back rooms where the servants congregated. There was the way Lord Ambersleigh's eyes followed her. Idly. Contemplatively.

That long, lingering gaze of his put Jessica in mind of a man eyeing the last slice of cake: good manners dictated one not take the final piece, but truly, would one lapse pose such terrible difficulties, when there was cake to be had?

Jessica had never associated with Lord Ambersleigh, but she had heard of him.

Jessica touched Mark's arm where they stood at the side of the salon. "Dearest."

He looked at her. He was engaged in conversation with someone who was involved in one of his charities.

"Yes?"

"My apologies. I'll be back. Ten minutes?"

He must have seen something in her eyes, or perhaps the tension of her fingertips on his wrist told the truth of her trepidation. He set his gloved fingers over hers for a few seconds. Their eyes met; his head tilted in a silent question. She gave a quick shake of her head, and he responded with a small shrug.

"Very well. I shall be waiting."

He did not say *stay safe*. Safety was not what it had once seemed to her.

Jessica took her temporary leave of the company and slipped behind the servants' doors.

The guests' servants had congregated in a handful of rooms where they were airing out cloaks, scrubbing out mud spots, and otherwise engaging in gossip. It took Jessica a few moments to find the girl she'd seen earlier. She'd taken off her outer wraps and was waiting near the fire.

"Good day," Jessica said pleasantly. "Would you mind if I joined you?"

The maid jumped at being addressed. She looked up at Jessica, down at her gown—silk and lace, as befitted the wife of a knight at a family event. Her face made a complicated wiggle somewhere between a terrified smile and a grimace.

The girl had dark black hair, straight and twisted into a bun; dark brown eyes, tilted; and a snub nose that set her out of the ordinary.

"I'm Lady Turner," Jessica offered.

The girl dropped her eyes and bent over in something close to a seated curtsy. "Milady." This came out in an anguished whisper. "If I've offended you, I'm terribly sorry—"

Jessica shook her head. "It's nothing like that. What's your name?"

"Isabelle. Isabelle Lee." She bit her lip. "Everyone calls me Izzy, though."

"Miss Lee." Jessica sat near her. "It's nice to meet you."

Overly formal, she had found, helped make her intentions clear. She wasn't going to encroach or demand unearned intimacies. She'd respect the boundaries of society because Miss Lee deserved to have them respected.

"How do you do?" Jessica asked.

"I—ah." Miss Lee was clearly flustered. "I... Well. Thank you. How do you do?"

"Also well." Jessica smiled at her. "Are you able to read? No shame if you cannot."

Miss Lee nodded, so Jessica handed her a card.

"I've been in your shoes before," Jessica said. "You have choices."

The girl glanced at her, then away to the door where the gentry had gathered.

Jessica spoke in a low voice. "Many years ago, my dearest friend was a woman named Amalie. She was a ladies' maid—French, much sought after—until she was sought after so much that she ended up not much of a ladies' anything."

Miss Lee inhaled.

"Haven't you heard the rumors?" Jessica asked in a low voice. "I was a courtesan."

The maid flushed heavily. "They're true? You're saying it right out? Aren't you afraid?"

Jessica had been for a very long time. She still was in the corners of her soul. Admitting her past sent little spikes of fear up and down her spine.

Jessica shook her head. “Afraid of what? That you’ll tell people? People already know. It’s not as if I can *stop* anyone from knowing. Just as they can’t stop *me* from knowing. You have choices.” She folded the girl’s hand around her card. “This is one of them.”



“WE SHOULD PUT THAT IN THE BOOK,” Jessica said later that evening. She was lying in bed with her husband, hands clasped together, her mind too busy to sleep despite the activity they’d just engaged in.

“What?” He turned toward her. “About Lord Ambersleigh?”

“Of course not. The only specifics that need to be told are the ones about me.”

His fingers played with hers. “Then...”

“But I was thinking about the choices we can make. The silent bargains we all wrestle with,” Jessica said. “You know the one. The one where I won’t tell what I know if they won’t tell what they know.”

He turned to look at her. In the decade since they’d married, he had changed in so many minute ways. Physically, he was just a little softer. There were lines at the corners of his eyes and the first hints of white in his blond hair.

Five years into their marriage, he’d listened to her first tentative comments on the question of what to do about *other* women.

“How can it be right,” she had asked him on that long ago evening, after he’d made love to her as if she were

something precious, “for me to have *this*—this comfort, this safety, this *love*—if the price is that I never say a word in support of so many others who will never get what I have?”

He had looked at her in the darkness, and what he’d said on that evening had stuck in her soul.

“Jessica,” he had said. “Those two things are not related. It is right for you to have comfort. It is right for you to have love. It is your God-given right to be adored, and I will never stop being grateful that I am the one allowed to do that.”

Thinking of those words now still made saltwater prick at the corner of her eyes. Back then, she’d wept openly.

He had kissed her tears away. “You are not the only one with those rights,” he had whispered. “And you are right. Not everyone gets what they deserve. But it is not your fault that it is so. You should bear no guilt in being loved. I have none in loving you.”

Jessica had needed someone to tell her that, had needed someone to love her, the *real* her, not the version that Mr. Parrett and the newspapers had created. She’d needed Mark’s intensity, his *certainty* in his love, so that she could grow to be certain in her own choices.

Sometime after that, they had started this project.

Everyone wanted another volume from Sir Mark; they still talked of the last one, even now, so long after his first.

This second book they were writing between the two of them was the much-awaited companion to the *Gentleman’s Guide*.

Jessica had needed time to be quiet. To be *safe*. To have excuses. To heal and grow strong and believe herself to be loved so fiercely that she could be brave.

She’d had enough. She looked into her husband’s eyes

and walked her fingers up his inner wrist. “Silent bargains are a method of silencing.”

“My sweet Jessica.”

They had chosen a title for their work yesterday: *A Gentlewoman’s Practical Guide to Navigating Male Hypocrisy*. It was going to change everything—the envious sighs, the proclamations of jealousy, and most of all, the times when she saw someone like Miss Isabelle Lee and had some sense of what the girl was facing. She’d swallowed her words far too many times, telling herself that safety required her silence.

She *was* safe no matter where it went from here. Her husband was here; he knew the truth. He loved her ferociously, and that would not change, no matter what anyone else thought.

It had taken ten years for Jessica to know her place, and it was here at the heart of London society, breaking every silent bargain open.



## Author's Note

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I am writing this particular author's note ten years after this book was originally published, and so this author's note—unlike my more recent ones—won't go into details of this book.

(Something that is more like my traditional author's note is contained in my notes for the enhanced edition, which are available for free on my website at <https://www.courtneymilan.com/unclaimed-enhanced-content/>.)

So this is really an author's note on the epilogue. I hadn't written an epilogue for *Unclaimed*—I believe the only full-length historical that I've written that hasn't gotten an epilogue—mostly because after I finished this, I still had to write Smite's book, and I was not yet sure how much Smite's story would intersect with Mark's. I didn't want to write anything that would box me into a corner, and so I didn't write anything at all.

When I got the rights to republish this book ten years after the original publication date, I originally wanted to write an epilogue that would be light-hearted and frothy and fun.

But in preparing for the writing of that epilogue, I re-read this book, and I was struck a little by the ending—happy, triumphant, powerful...

And yet.

In the decade that's passed, I've become less accepting of the bargain that exchanges silence for comfort. When I wrote this book in 2010 (with subsequent publication in 2011), I was still deeply enmeshed in my own silence-for-comfort exchange (content note on the attached link: abusive employment, sexual harassment).

When I wrote this book, I thought *my* happy ending was simply that I got out. I had not yet learned how far it was possible to come.

In 2021, I am delighted to be able to return to Jessica and give her the ending I could not see in 2010.