

The Vanishing Volume

Chapter One

London, late April 1810
A Monday Morning

On Monday morning Annabel, Lady Fellbridge, left for the weekly meeting of Almack's Lady Patronesses a little early in order to accomplish an important errand. She was slowly clopping around the corner onto Old Bond Street (or rather, her carriage was) when she noticed a familiar figure hurrying in the same direction on the pavement.

"Pull up, please, Thomas," she called to her coachman, then more loudly, "Frances! May I offer you a ride?"

Lady Frances Dalrymple, one of Annabel's fellow Lady Patronesses, looked up and smiled. "Annabel! Thank you, but I've a stop to make before I go on to King Street." She held up a book. "I must just run into Hookham's."

Annabel held up her own book. "So must I."

Frances' smile widened. "*The Fifty Shades?*"

"What else? Climb in!"

As the groom helped Frances up, Annabel glanced at the blue sky above the buildings around them. Sometimes, being in London on a warm day in late April just seemed *wrong*. "Back at home, my narcissus beds are probably in their glory," she observed with a small sigh.

"Back at *my* home, the flowerbeds—not that we have many because my father doesn't approve of them—might still be under six inches of snow. Of course, that's Scotland for you," Frances added philosophically.

"Your father doesn't approve of flowerbeds?"

"They make him sneeze. And..." Frances hunched her shoulders. "Flowerbeds would mean hiring more gardeners than are needed to just keep the grass scythed and the kitchen gardens growing."

"Ah." Annabel could sympathize with that. Only the knowledge that their families would likely starve if she didn't keep the gardeners at Chalfont employed had prevented her from reducing the outdoor staff.

"But I know what you mean," Frances continued, hurriedly. "Spring does seem rather wasted on the Season, doesn't it? Then again, if we were in the country, neither of us would likely have a circulating library close by. I do hope they have two copies of the third volume available," she added, patting her book.

"So do I, or one of us will have to call the other out. Pistols at dawn and everything." Annabel chuckled. "Except that our seconds will be too busy themselves, fighting over who gets to read it first."

It had been more than a week since her sons Will and Martin and their friend Gus had returned to Eton, and to keep from missing them too much, Annabel had plunged into an orgy of novel-reading in her free time, visiting Hookham's Circulating Library almost every other day. Emily Cowper had told her she simply *had* to read E.C. Spruce's latest, *The Fifty Shades of Udolpho*, which had come out just a few weeks before and had taken the reading public of London by storm.

"Have you read *The Fifty Shades* yet?" had replaced "good morning" as a greeting among her acquaintances. Conversations everywhere, from chance encounters in the street to dinners in the houses of the *Ton*, revolved around whether the lovers Ermentrudina and Osberto would be able to escape the horde of dread phantoms—the "Fifty Shades" of the title—that plagued the ruinous Apennine castle in which they had taken refuge whilst fleeing Ermentrudina's sinister suitor, Count Atroccio, and her equally sinister stepmother, the Marchesa dell'Obesa. Annabel had devoured those first two volumes in two days, and was now bent on the devouring the third, as was Frances...hence the threat of pistols at dawn if only one copy were available.

As they drew up in front of Hookham's Circulating Library, Frances glanced at the watch at her waist. "We should just have time before the meeting starts...and wasn't I clever, being on the right side of the street just as your carriage went by? Because now I can get out and into Hookham's first!"

Annabel laughed. "O, thou fiend! O, I am undone!" she quoted. They were the last words of volume two, uttered by Ermentrudina as the Count bundled her into a antique coach at the height of a furious tempest, while the Marchesa lured Osberto into a death-like stupor with her seductive but poisonous perfume.

"Do you think he'll *ravish* her?" Frances asked anxiously as they entered the shop.

"Who? Osberto? I'm not sure he'd be capable at the moment—"

Frances giggled. "No! The Count and Ermentrudina."

"Oh. I shouldn't think so. An old, badly sprung traveling carriage is hardly a conducive setting for a ravishment. On the other hand, the use of the word 'undone' does make one wonder about the state of her stays... But this *is* E.C. Spruce, so who knows?"

They approached the counter, where a harried-looking young man was talking to another subscriber, an older woman in a velvet turban adorned with down-sweeping lavender-dyed ostrich feathers. "What do you mean, you don't have it?" the lady was saying, her plumes quivering with the force of her indignation.

"I'm sorry, your ladyship, but they're all out. Several are overdue, in fact. If you wish, I shall add your name to our list to be informed as soon as a copy is available—"

"But you do not understand—I cannot wait that long!" her ladyship cried. "Or rather, it's...it's my elderly mother. Yes, my dearest mama. She is on her deathbed, you see, and only my reading *The Fifty Shades of Udolpho* to her can soothe her dying sufferings! Will you condemn poor mama to such a fate? I must have a copy *now*!"

The clerk looked appropriately sympathetic, but Annabel noticed the way his lips twitched before he mastered his expression. "Madam, were it in my power, I should provide it to you

immediately. But I cannot give you what I do not have. I am certain a copy will come in later—or tomorrow. Perhaps these ladies—?” He looked at Annabel and Frances hopefully.

They shook their heads. “Volume two,” Frances said, raising her book.

“Ah.” He turned back to the woman. “In the meanwhile, perhaps your mother might enjoy a nice book of sermons? In such extremity, they might prove a comfort—”

The woman drew herself up. “If you will not have mercy on a dying woman, perhaps another library will.” She turned and swept toward the door, barely allowing her footman time to open it for her and get out of her way.

“Oh, dear,” Frances said, coming up to the counter after she was gone. “We could not help overhearing—”

The clerk struggled manfully for a moment, then grinned. “That was the best reason I’ve heard today. A dying mother...” He shook his head, then looked at them suspiciously. “You aren’t here for the third volume of *The Fifty Shades of Udolpho*, are you?”

“Er, I’m afraid we are.”

“But we promise that neither of us has a dying mother,” Annabel added quickly. “Are you truly out of the third volume?”

He raised his eyes to the ceiling. “You’ve no idea. All our copies are out. Overdue, too, most of them. I guess that third volume must be an out-and-outer. I can take your names, same as I said to Lady Lyer.”

Frances sighed. “I suppose so.” She laid her copy of the second volume on the counter next to Annabel’s. “And I was so looking forward to reading it this evening! I said no to a rout at my cousin’s house tonight because of it.”

“I have Marjorie Banks Gilbert’s latest here,” the clerk said, picking a book from a shelf behind him and holding it out to her invitingly. “Came out just last Thursday—*The Noble Barbarian*. She’s supposed to be every bit as good as E.C. Spruce.”

Frances looked at it sadly and shook her head. “No, thank you. We really must be going, Annabel, if we don’t want to be late.”

“I should be happy to bring you to Earle’s or Booth’s Circulating Libraries after the meeting, if you like,” Annabel said as they regained the carriage. “Or we could stop at Hatchard’s or Ridgway’s and purchase it.”

Frances brightened. “If it wouldn’t be too much trouble...and if we end up at Hatchard’s, I will buy a copy and you shall be the first to read it when I am done. Which will probably be by tomorrow noon. Oh, where *do* you think the Count will take Ermentrudina?”

* * *

Dorothea was alighting from her carriage in King Street just as they arrived. She waited for them, and they ascended to the Special Committee meeting room together. Emily, Clementina, and Maria were already there, excitedly chattering at one end of the table. Annabel was pleased to see that Clementina looked much more animated than she had over the last weeks; perhaps she had left behind the difficult third month of her pregnancy.

“But will the perfume prove fatal to poor Osberto?” Maria was asking plaintively.

Clementina shook her head. "I rather doubt it, or the third volume won't be very long, will it?"

"Yes, and what about that? Why hasn't the Marchesa been poisoned by her own perfume?"

"Is it not obvious? She has been ingesting it in small amounts to build up her tolerance to it," Dorothea interjected, peeling off her gloves.

"Dorothea!" Frances exclaimed. "You've read *The Fifty Shades* too?"

Dorothea assumed her haughtiest expression. "Of course not. I do not have time to waste on foolish novels. I am bored to tears with the subject, but I have heard so much talk about it that I cannot help but know. It would merely seem to be the logical thing to do, that is all."

"We shan't ever know unless those of you who've got your hands on the third volume make haste to finish it and return it to Hookham's." Annabel sat down next to Emily and prodded her elbow in mock impatience. Emily had crowed to her at a ball on Saturday evening about having secured the third volume from the circulating library. "Well, how was it? Don't you dare say you were too busy yesterday to read it!"

Emily turned bright pink. "I wasn't, but...actually, I—er...I *haven't* read it."

Annabel groaned. "If you're not careful, you'll be drummed out of town. Very well, you'd better lock your doors and spend the rest of the day buried in it."

"I can't." Emily looked as though she were about to burst into tears. "It's gone."

"What? What do you mean, gone?"

"I planned to spend all morning in bed yesterday, reading it. It was on my bedside table, even. But when I woke up, it wasn't there!"

"Did your maid borrow it?"

"She swears she didn't. Everyone in the house swears they didn't touch it. And now darling Harry's cross with me because it turns out he was reading my copy when I wasn't watching, and he wants to know what happens, too." Harry was "Cupid", her lover Lord Palmerston.

"Then it fell behind the bed." Dorothea gestured impatiently. "Make him crawl under it and look."

"He did. He practically tore my room apart."

"Now, that is odd," Maria put in. "I can't find my copy, either. I was certain I'd left it in my morning room, but it wasn't there or anywhere else I looked."

"Oh, how very droll—I've mislaid mine as well," Clementina said. But her expression was thoughtful, not amused.

"But you haven't heard the all of it," Emily said. "I felt so badly about losing Hookham's copy that I went to Hatchard's this morning before coming here to buy a replacement, and they don't have any copies. None at all."

"Well, it *is* hugely popular," Frances said, with a disappointed look at Annabel. "I suppose we can cross them off our list."

"No—they had several copies yesterday when the shop closed. This morning, none. They're all gone!"

"Sold out that quickly? My goodness!" Maria marveled.

“But that’s it—they *didn’t* sell. Last night they were there, and this morning, they weren’t. They’ve just...disappeared.”

“It is far more likely some enterprising clerk took them to sell himself,” Dorothea put in, but Emily shook her head.

“I said as much to the head clerk, but he was quite certain that wasn’t the case. He was the last to leave the shop last night, and the books were all still there. And don’t say *he* took them, because he didn’t—I looked. Besides, the poor man was distraught.”

Annabel nodded. Emily rarely used her thought-reading abilities so directly, but this was clearly a special case.

“Who was distraught?” Sally Jersey had breezed in, followed by a footman carrying the usual baskets for the sorting of voucher petitions. He placed them on the table, bowed, and left.

“The head clerk at Hatchard’s. All their copies of the last volume of *The Fifty Shades of Udol*—”

“No, don’t tell me!” Sally clapped her hands over her ears. “I just started it yesterday! And besides, we need to get to work. There are a ridiculous number of voucher requests to go through—leftovers from poor Annabel’s adventure, I expect.”

“Frances and I are going to stop by a few more circulating libraries and bookstores after the meeting,” Annabel murmured to Emily as they took their seats. “Would you like to come?”

Emily’s face cleared. “Would I!”

* * *

Want to read more? [Get The Vanishing Volume now!](#)