

A letter. Who sent her letters? Who knew she was here? There could be only one. Every inch of her skin tingled. Time almost stood still. Anna gritted her teeth as she saw Clemence's eyes swoop upon the letter over her shoulder with interest. His brow hardened. She could swear she saw a flicker of recognition in those sapphire eyes.

That fool Annette! Damn her blind affection and over-flowing heart! Anna's eyes filled with dismay. Why did she write all the time? How could any person alive be so idiotic? The ruin of all her plans! To lose the advancement of a better life – to lose the esteem of Clemence! It would be like living without daylight.

Wondering, with all the activity her brain could command – what lies in the world would work upon him? – Anna turned her neck slowly to face the envelope, sure within her bleeding heart that all his regard had terminated the moment he glimpsed that fated letter.

The writing was black, in the hand of a neat lady. It was small, and clear.

It was not Annette's. Her breath flowed out of her like a hurricane. Assuming the greatest calm, trying to laugh at herself inside for being such a goose, she gave the servant a nod of the head and grasped the crinkling paper in her unsteady hands.

With four pairs of eyes upon her, she opened the red wax seal with difficulty, unfolding the paper.

No sooner had her eyes flitted over the first line than her body relaxed completely, and she exclaimed in tones of the highest bliss: "Oh! Now what can you guess? Mr. Skye, I bring you tidings of such – news of the very best kind!"

"Is there a marriage?" speculated Clemence, drumming his fingers on his red lips.

"No, no, not marriage." As if she would care for a marriage except her own!

"Perhaps," he tried again, just as tranquil, "a friend of yours has been so lucky as to come into a fortune."

"La! Surely a fortune and marriage are the same thing; do try a bit harder, Mr. Skye," Anna teased.

He smiled at her and held his hands up in surrender. "It looks like Miss Ouzel's writing; that is all I can tell."

"My dears, I suspect it is a birth," put in Mrs. Skye, very quietly, "a nice, healthy, strong baby boy." And why not; the Ouzel population of England was larger than the sheep population of Wales.

"My dear Mrs. Skye, I said *good* news," remarked Anna dryly. "Most of my acquaintance are ladies of fashion; none of them would take kindly to the emergence of a screaming child."

Clemence looked pensive, as if recognising this statement did not fit with his understanding of her. He began drawing with his fork on the Worcester Royal porcelain plate.

Anna was narrowly saved from his clear-sighted mind by Jack's input. "A death."

"Mr. Jack, you make me repeat it is good news," she explained, very patronisingly.

"Yes, I am aware of that," mumbled that merry soul.

"Good Heavens!" cried Anna in mock exasperation, "where is your understanding? Remind me never to engage this family in a game of charades; it would not end until two weeks later."

"Pray, what does your letter contain, Miss Eider?" asked Elliot gently. He plumed himself considerably on avoiding one of her cutting put-downs today.

She gathered her hands eagerly under her chin, and whispered very loudly:

"You will have to buy the book to find out!"