

Welcome and Not

It was a bright, clear morning when the hansom cab rolled up the gravel drive in front of Exton Hall. Jessica Cobb, just shy of twenty and clutching her mother's tattered suitcase, looked up fearfully as the coach began to slow and eventually stopped in front of a large, polished oak door.

The driver didn't offer her a hand as she climbed down and whipped the horse almost as soon as she had alighted, causing her to trip. She threw out her hands to break her fall and dropped the case, which slid away across the gravel. She landed hard on all fours, skinning her knees, and was momentarily blind as her hat came loose and fell down over her eyes.

"Are you alright, ma'am?"

She looked up, pushing her hat clumsily back onto her head, and saw a young man wearing the smart livery of a footman hurrying over.

"I'm fine," Jessica lied, scrambling to her feet. She bent to pick up her case, but the footman was quicker and already had it in his hands.

"Ah, thank you." Jessica reached out to take it from him, but he did not hand it over.

"Are you Miss Cobb, ma'am?"

Jessica nodded. "Yes. May I -?"

"You don't have to carry your case, ma'am," the footman said, smiling slightly awkwardly. "That's why I'm here."

"Oh." Jessica lowered her hand, feeling rather foolish.

"If you'd like to follow me, they're all waiting for you inside."

Very aware of her skinned knees, mussed hair and displaced hat, Jessica followed the servant through the front door and into a spacious entrance hall. A sweeping wooden staircase dominated the space and the gilded bannisters glowed in the mid-morning sun. Jessica swallowed; she felt extraordinarily out of place in her heavy boots and plain, brown frock.

As the footman shut the door behind her, a man with greying hair and wearing a freshly pressed and brushed suit stepped into the hall from a doorway on the left. He was carrying a silver tea tray which had been laid for three and glanced up as he noticed the two newcomers.

“Ah, Matthew, excellent.” He put the tea tray down and then looked past the young man to fix a slightly suspicious gaze on Jessica. “And you must be Miss Cobb.”

Jessica nodded again, her throat feeling rather dry.

“Miss Cobb had a fall as she was getting out of her cab, Mr. Lawrence,” Matthew said hastily. Jessica could feel the older man’s judgement as he took in her skinned knees and upset hat. “The driver didn’t wait for -”

“Yes, I’m sure the journey was tiresome,” Mr. Lawrence interjected and Jessica had a feeling he hadn’t listened to a word. “Take the case upstairs, Matthew; the room’s been prepared.”

“Yes, Mr. Lawrence.”

The butler turned to Jessica. “If you’d like to come with me, Miss Cobb,” he said, with a supercilious air, “they’re expecting you.”

Jessica followed the man through a set of French doors and down a short passageway. She could hear a low murmur of conversation coming from nearby and then the butler stopped so suddenly that she almost walked into him. He gave her a

nasty look, before he stepped through an open door and announced, “Miss Jessica Cobb.”

As he stepped aside, Jessica glimpsed a well-proportioned room, painted a restful turquoise and gilt with gold, before she was suddenly swept into a stranger’s embrace.

“Jessica!” exclaimed a woman’s voice. “How wonderful to see you again.”

She returned the embrace half-heartedly and was quite pleased when the woman stepped back. As she did so, Jessica recognised her Aunt Cissy, who had come to visit her mother, Harry, at the workhouse. Cissy and Harry were twins, although Cissy had done much better in life than Harry had. Her hair was not as grey, her hands had not withered into arthritic claws, her face was softer at the edges, and she was wearing an expensive gown of lilac silk with lace trim.

“Dear me,” Cissy said, looking at Jessica with some concern. “You look as if you’ve had quite the journey.”

Jessica nodded, not sure what else to say and Cissy clucked sympathetically before turning to introduce her to the men in the room.

“Jessica, this is your Uncle Billy -” Cissy gestured to the man sitting closest to the door with a stiff, straight-backed posture. “- and your Uncle Tom.” The second man had one leg stretched out in front of him and a cane resting against the arm of his chair. Both were looking at Jessica with obvious dislike.

“Now, let’s get you tidied up before we have tea, shall we?” Cissy suggested, steering Jessica out of the room. As she did so, she shot a venomous look over her shoulder at her brothers and mouthed *Be nice!* Both ignored her.

“I haven’t had time to hire a maid for you,” Cissy explained as she led Jessica upstairs, “but I’ve asked Kent to look after you in the meantime.”

Kent turned out to be Cissy’s maid; a middle-aged woman who gave Jessica a polite smile as she was introduced.

“Kent, this is Miss Cobb. I’ll need you to draw her a bath and help her change for tea.”

“Very good, Miss Breckinridge.”

Cissy turned back to her niece. “I’ll see you downstairs when you’re ready.”

“A-Aunt Cissy,” Jessica stammered and the older woman turned back with a kindly smile.

“Yes, darling?”

“I... I don’t think I should come down for tea -”

“Nonsense.”

“But Uncle Billy and Uncle Tom -”

“Ignore them, my dear.”

Jessica nodded and Kent held open a side door for her. “You can change in here, ma’am; I’ll be back with hot water in a moment.”

As soon as the door had closed behind her, Kent turned to Cissy.

“What are you going to do, madam?” she asked and Cissy sighed.

“I’m going to knock my brothers’ heads against the wall until they behave, then I’m going to ensure that poor girl has everything she needs to be comfortable here.” She looked at the maid. “Will you assist me, Kent?”

“Only if I get to knock the colonel’s head against the wall at least once myself,” the maid replied and the two women laughed.

“Please be kind to her,” Cissy said, becoming serious again. “She didn’t ask to be born, after all.”

“I will be,” Kent assured her, “and I’ll bring her down to tea as soon as she’s ready.”

“Excellent, and don’t worry if you hear a few loud thuds from downstairs.”