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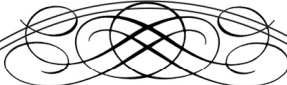
— JESSICA FELLOWES,
New York Times bestselling author

ACT LIKE A LADY, THINK LIKE A LORD.

CELESTE
CONNALLY

A MYSTERY





ACT LIKE
A LADY,
THINK LIKE
A LORD



CELESTE
CONNALLY



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For my friends who have been there for me since we were kids



ONE

*Monday, 17 April 1815
Buckfields, seat of the fifth Earl of Holbrook
Newmarket, Suffolk*

“May I remind you, my lady, that daughters of earls are not normally dressed by their lady’s maids amongst the saddles and bridles of a harness room.”

Lady Petra Forsyth, seated on a large wooden trunk painted with the Earl of Holbrook’s coat of arms, held out her booted foot and wiggled it for Annie to grasp. “Yes, but at least this time I did not walk through muck in the stable yard first.”

Annie took the heel of the knee-length boot with both hands, pulling with an indulgent roll of her eyes. “A small consolation, my lady. You do smell mightily of horses.”

“This is to be expected after one has been on a horse all day, is it not?” Petra replied while holding out her other boot, the pair of which once belonged to her older brother, Alexander. As had the buckskin breeches still hugging her legs, the black frock coat with gold buttons she had shrugged out of moments earlier, and the frilled white shirt and cravat, both now loosened at the neck.

“And I would still be on my horse if it were not for my uncle,” she added. “To believe he arrived four hours earlier than scheduled! Disagreeable man.” Then, as Annie pulled her second boot, Petra’s eyes widened. “But, oh, my poor papa! His injured ankle continues to pain him, and now he will have Uncle Tobias strutting about to add to his vexation.”

“This is why we must hurry and get you into your riding habit, my lady,” Annie said, panting slightly as Petra’s leg was finally freed. “For both his lordship and Lord Allington will be awaiting you.”

Indeed, upon the next trunk was a lady’s riding ensemble. The soft blue of the long skirt and matching fitted jacket were embellished with embroidery in a deep cobalt, all of which would set Petra’s eyes, coloring, and figure to their best advantage. The garments were also constricting and impractical, which was why Petra preferred to ride in her brother’s old togs. When safely on her father’s lands, of course.

“At least my *parfum de cheval* will serve to distract my uncle from noticing my riding habit will not have the smallest amount of dirt on it,” Petra said, frowning over

at the costume.

“I should hope it is pristine, my lady.” Annie’s reply was quick, and affronted.

Petra dipped her chin, lips pursed, but her tone was kind. “Dearest Annie, I know you take my meaning. You always ensure I am most beautifully turned out, but in this case it is less desirable that I should appear so clean.”

A mollified Annie helped Petra stand and step out of her breeches. Petra’s cravat was then pulled away, and over her head came the white shirt in a rush. Reddish-blond curls, having escaped her plait during her brisk ride, flew forward, sticking to her cheeks. Petra pushed them away irritably.

“Damn and blast! Why did my uncle have to arrive early?”

“My lady, your language does deteriorate with each visit home to Buckfields,” Annie said, though this time her reproach was tinged with amusement as she helped Petra slip on a chemise. Then she held out the riding stays.

Though quite an adult at four and twenty, Petra allowed herself the childish act of pulling a face at the garment. Despite its lovely primrose-pink sateen and a higher cut at the hips, allowing for more comfort while riding sidesaddle, the boning still made her chemise bunch uncomfortably, leaving red marks on her skin.

“If only stays, and all like it, would deteriorate at the same rate as my language, we women would rejoice.”

Yet Petra slid her arms through, then allowed Annie to lace it tight. A high-collared shirt of cambric was added, then a petticoat, before Petra was finally donning the riding skirt and jacket, both constructed from a merino wool that was suitable for the still-cool spring weather. As with all her daytime dresses, discreet pockets were sewn into the skirt rather than relying on those separate pockets attached to strings and tied about her waist under her dress. Though her modiste continued to be remonstrative of these requests, Lady Petra would not be swayed. Pockets were simply a necessity.

“The post boy arrived nearly the same time as Lord Allington,” Annie was saying as she worked the laces of Petra’s half boots, each with blue tassels at the ankles. “You received three more invitations.” She lifted clear hazel eyes briefly to Petra’s, adding, “I brought them directly to your bedchamber.”

“Away from the prying eyes of my uncle, and his like-minded valet,” Petra said approvingly. “Well done. And were there no letters?”

Annie shook her head. “Were you expecting one from Lady Caroline?”

“No, not at all. Lady Caroline was only due back in London today from seeing her Captain Smythe off at Portsmouth. And as much as my dearest friend excels at accumulating new gossip and passing it on to me, I must allow her a modicum of time to apply it to paper.”

Petra picked up her hat, which was small with a flat top and short brim, and matched her riding habit perfectly, down to a cobalt tassel at the crown’s center. “I

may guess that one of the invitations is from Lady Milford for a picnic at Strand Hill. When we had tea after Easter, she was a bit poorly, suffering with her nerves again, and said she wished to invite me for a meal out in the spring air when she felt better. As the days have been so grand and much warmer lately, with the daffodils coming up all over, I cannot help but think her spirits may be lifting.”

“A picnic does sound lovely, but I’m afraid an invitation from Lady Milford has not yet arrived,” replied Annie as she selected a boar-bristle hairbrush and began to gently work out a tangle in one of Petra’s curls. “Of the three, one is from Lady Watson, and another is from Lady Wyncroft.”

Petra, who had been frowning thoughtfully at hearing her friend Gwen had not yet written to set a day for her picnic, now lifted her eyes heavenward at hearing Lady Wyncroft’s name. “It is likely another of my cousin Lynley’s tedious teas. However, Lady Watson’s is no doubt for her annual masque, which will make up for having to be in the company of Lady Wyncroft on some other date. And what of the third?”

“It bears the Duchess of Hillmorton’s seal,” replied Annie. “And I would wager it to be to her spring ball.”

“How lovely,” Petra said. “It was kind of Her Grace to send another invitation to me here at Buckfields after the first was sent to Forsyth House. And if I recall from Lady Caroline’s last letter, the ball is to take place this week—on Thursday, I believe. Caroline said she would gladly accompany me if I arrive in London in time, for her Captain Smythe will be at sea for some months and she will be free to be my companion.”

“Have you decided whether or not we will be returning to town for the remaining season?” asked Annie as she smoothed Petra’s plait.

“Not yet, I fear,” Petra replied. “Just this morning, the earl’s ankle was pronounced properly mended, but his physician recommended Papa wait another fortnight before riding out with the string. I confess I have been rather enjoying riding in his stead and taking notes on how his horses go each morning. Continuing for another two weeks would be a great pleasure—and you know I do enjoy being in the countryside.” Giving the tassel on her hat a flip, she added, “Of course, London is always a delight to me as well. I understand the British Museum will be displaying Titian’s *Diana and Actaeon*, in fact, which I would quite like to see again.”

“And you do enjoy a good ball, my lady,” Annie said, working Petra’s plait into an appropriately ladylike coiffure.

Petra, who had pulled off one riding glove, clapped her bare hand to her still-gloved other. “Oh, I do. I have not danced once since just after the New Year, before Papa became injured. I should love to dance again.” She paused, glancing over her shoulder at Annie. “And I think you would enjoy seeing a certain footman in the halls

of Forsyth House once more. Maybe have another early morning dance in the library, when no one else is about?"

"You mean to tease me, my lady, but I will not have it," Annie replied crisply, but her cheeks had a pretty flush to them. "Now sit still, if you please. The earl wishes you to help him entertain your uncle, and we are already late."

Dutifully, Petra sat still as Annie inserted the first hairpins, but held her tongue only briefly.

"Since I am dreading spending time with my uncle and have had no gossip from London for almost a month, you must tell me what you have learned as of late. Oh, come now, do not be silent in an attempt to persuade me I am mistaken. I saw you reading a letter with great interest yesterday. And I think I have done rather well to wait a full day before asking you what news."

"My lady, sometimes you are quiet as a cat and I could not say how you manage it."

Petra heard the familiar sound of Annie's good humor. She only had to display a bit of patience now. Annie would first need to act as if revealing such information was beneath the code of a proper lady's maid. It was the done thing. Yet anyone who claimed they did not need to unburden themselves to at least one other person could not be considered wholly in their right mind, in Petra's opinion. And Annie was as steady as any person Petra had ever known.

"The letter was from Maggie, Lady Sloan's lady's maid, if you must know," Annie said finally, as if she would face the pillory otherwise. Yet her tongue was duly loosened, and she began to chatter away as she continued pinning Petra's hair.

"It seems Lady Sloan hired away her sister Lady Elizabeth's underbutler," Annie began. "Lady Elizabeth then responded by offering two of Lady Sloan's housemaids better wages—and only days before Lady Sloan was due to host the entire sixteen-member party that is her husband's family."

"Those two are *shocking*," Petra said, making Annie giggle.

"Maggie also wrote that Lady Sloan hired a new gardener for their estate in Oxfordshire," Annie continued. "He is said to be quite handsome and previously improved the gardens of Sir Hugh and the late Lady Thacker. Did you know her ladyship had passed? Maggie wrote that it was said to be some sort of a miasma, possibly from traveling in late February."

"No, I had not heard this sad news," Petra said. "But I was little acquainted with Lady Thacker, though I always felt her to be a kind, gentle sort. Sir Hugh I know a bit more as he is often at the Rowley Mile races—though he rarely gambles more than a shilling on any horse. I shall remember to send him a letter of condolence on the earl's and my behalf." Removing her second glove, she said, "Have you any other news, then? Maybe some of a happier variety?"

Annie eagerly complied, recounting Maggie's story of her mistress, Lady Sloan, being gifted a new spaniel puppy who had wreaked havoc on her mistress's rugs, counterpanes, and any piece of wood the little dog could discover.

"Oh, Lady Sloan was at her wit's end! But having instantly adored the puppy, could not give it up. Then her ladyship was told of a young gentleman's daughter from Yorkshire—a Miss Reed, as I recall—who has such a way with dogs, and who was currently ensconced at her family's London home. The puppy was sent to Miss Reed, and her ladyship and Maggie both look forward to its return. Is that not diverting, my lady? A young woman who trains dogs?"

"I think it is wonderful," Petra said, handing her riding hat to Annie to pin into place.

Annie paused, not yet placing the hat on Petra's head. "Maggie wrote that it was Mr. Shawcross who recommended Miss Reed to Lady Sloan, as he has sent a puppy intended for the Duchess of Hillmorton for training."

"*Duncan?*" Petra said, rather too quickly. She ignored the vexing little frisson that came with hearing his name again. "Has he returned to England?"

"Last week, my lady, as I understand it," answered Annie. "In time to celebrate the wedding of his brother the marquess. Though Maggie claims she heard Mr. Shawcross say he has returned for good. That the work he has done on the Continent over the last three years in securing and improving the Duke of Hillmorton's lands is now complete, and local men have been hired to protect His Grace's interests. I expect Mr. Shawcross shall be at Her Grace's ball, too, considering he is her grandson and she dotes upon him."

"Hmph," Petra replied. "And *I* expect he should count himself lucky that he has Her Grace's favor, considering he has not had mine for some time."

There was a silence of two heartbeats while Annie slowly began pinning the hat into place. Her voice was filled with hesitation when she spoke.

"My lady," she began. "I have been at your side since you were a girl of fourteen and I barely seventeen. I know you to be compassionate and forgiving, even when someone close to you has behaved unkindly..."

Petra arched one eyebrow, yet mild was her reply. "Though your words are appreciated, Annie, it is not like you to express unnecessary praise—especially when I am not always deserving of it. If you have something you wish to say, I would prefer that you do as normal and simply speak your mind. I daresay I find it much less disconcerting."

"Indeed I will then," Annie said, her confidence returning. "It is true you and Mr. Shawcross had a terrible row the day he left for the Continent, but so much time has passed since then. Three years, in fact. What are a few harsh words surely neither of

you meant compared to the extraordinary friendship the two of you have enjoyed since almost your earliest days?"

Mulishly, Petra wished to refute these claims of a long-lasting affinity, and knew she could not. Especially now that she was here, at Buckfields. For throughout the earl's ten thousand acres, with its eighteen buildings that included expansive, Palladian-inspired stables, private gallops, and the twenty-eight-room house that had been the seat of the Earl of Holbrook since 1633, there was not one square foot where Petra and Duncan had not played together and tormented each other in equal measure. Since she was four and he a year older, to be precise, making Annie's words maddeningly true.

The only daughter of Thaddeus Forsyth, the fifth Earl of Holbrook, and Lady Maria, née Allington, Petra was born ten years after her brother Alexander, long after the earl and his countess had given up hope of another child, and was thus treated from her inception as the happiest of surprises. Yet before Petra could even begin to toddle about on pudgy legs, she was left motherless, Lady Maria having contracted consumption not long after Petra's birth.

By contrast, Duncan was not to know his true surname until the age of five, when Robert Shawcross, sixth Marquess of Langford and heir of the Duke of Hillmorton, once more rode into the tiny Perthshire hamlet of Struan in the Scottish Highlands. A restless soul who traveled often, Langford had come back to Struan after nearly six years with two thoughts on his mind: to find the ideal parcel of land on which to build himself a house, and to once more tup the pretty lass with auburn hair he'd enjoyed on his last visit.

Instead, Langford would find the lass now wedded to a burly, fair-haired Highlander who cared not for the English. Especially not for a marquess whose thick dark hair and eyes a distinctive shade of green were repeated with uncanny perfection in the first child his wife had borne five years previous.

In one of Langford's few moments of selflessness, he offered to take Duncan to London, promising to raise him as a Shawcross alongside James, his younger son by his marchioness. Duncan's mother, with child again for the third time and wishing for a better life for her eldest, had tearfully encouraged her son to claim his birthright and become a gentleman.

The Marchioness of Langford, however, was said to have flown into a tear-filled rage. She refused to allow her James to be passed over for the marquessate by her husband's Scottish by-blow, and told Langford that Duncan should never return to Langford House so long as the boy lived, or risk her wrath. Because Lady Langford was not known to make idle threats, Duncan was quickly shunted off to Hillmorton House.

To the surprise of every servant employed by Their Graces, the duke and duchess quickly took to their young grandson. Nevertheless, Her Grace felt it best to send the charming but unmannered Duncan out of London to begin his education. As Her Grace had recently assisted the widower Earl of Holbrook in acquiring a new nursemaid for his young daughter, she looked no further than Newmarket and Buckfields. She felt Duncan would do best in the fresh air, and Lady Petra—one of Her Grace's many goddaughters—would thrive with the company of another child of about her own age.

Whether or not the duchess had anticipated how quickly Petra and Duncan would go from warily eyeing each other to escaping the nursery in an attempt to discover if a secret glade existed in the earl's forest, Petra had never asked. An excellent tutor was brought on for Duncan and gradually he learned to suppress his Scottish burr in favor of the round tones of an educated Englishman. And along with Petra, who soon had the first of several governesses, he would also learn his letters, as well as read, write, and speak French, German, Greek, and Latin.

These accomplishments, however, did little more than allow the two children to taunt each other in multiple languages, much to the chagrin of their perpetually exhausted nursemaid.

Further worrying Nanny, as they called her, their brickbats almost always ended in one challenging the other to a race on their respective ponies. Duncan and his chestnut pony called Pirate would attempt to best Petra and Rhubarb, her brave little bay with a white blaze down his face, as they galloped across the fields for the line of pear trees at the edge of the earl's forest. Victory spoils were varied and usually inventive, occasionally resulting in further challenges that had poor Nanny clutching at her heart. But most often, the loser was required to engage in a spot of petty theft. Specifically, of the confectionary drops made in the earl's kitchens, Petra's choice always being chocolate, while Duncan unfailingly preferred lemon.

To Petra, those were halcyon days, but soon Duncan was sent away to Eton while she continued her education at Buckfields through a series of governesses. Each was more dour than the one before, and none approved of the earl allowing his daughter to spend as much time as she liked riding horses.

Only when Annie was taken on as Petra's lady's maid and showed herself willing to bring her darning out to the stables to keep an eye on her young mistress—more than once poking a stable lad with her needle when he forgot his manners in Lady Petra's presence—did Petra feel as if she had found something of an ally. With Annie to talk to, her days were a little less tiresome while waiting for Duncan to return and assume his role of sparring partner.

Time and time again, Duncan traveled to Buckfields in between terms at Oxford, where he was proving himself to be a Shawcross worthy of the name and illustrious

lineage. Though it was here, Petra knew, that Duncan had never felt any pretense were required of him. Even now, she could recall the visit where Duncan learned his father died, the marquess having succumbed to malaria during his travels to South America. In the company of the earl and Petra, Duncan freely mourned his father's passing, but the loss of the marquessate to his younger brother, James, not at all.

While the relationship between Duncan and James remained tenuous—largely by the design of the dowager marchioness—Petra and Duncan's once-forced companionship had evolved into a unique but close bond. So much so that, just after Petra's twentieth birthday, Duncan made introductions between Petra and Emerson, Viscount Ingersoll, who was Duncan's most trusted friend from Oxford. The introduction swiftly became a love match, and soon Petra was to become the luckiest viscountess in all of Britain, in her opinion—and even more so due to the generosity of her late mama.

For Maria, Lady Holbrook, had left her daughter a gift the likes of which few women would ever know: an inheritance. Not a dowry to be settled onto Petra at the time of marriage, but monies that would belong to her no matter her circumstances. The earl had even duly promised his countess that any man who wished to marry their daughter would be required to sign away his rights to Petra's inheritance or receive her hand not at all. And he would stay true to his word, along with offering a generous dowry in the marriage contract between Lady Petra and the handsome, blue-eyed, broad-grinned Lord Ingersoll.

No one, however, could have foreseen that neither provision would be needed. For the viscount's life was lost to a tragic fall down a set of town house stairs mere weeks before the nuptials.

There were only three people who would know that at the moment Emerson died from a broken neck, Petra had been upstairs, asleep, covered only by a linen sheet, not yet cognizant that the warmth of her beloved's arms was no longer enveloping her. One was Annie, who had continued to be the most loyal of lady's maids. Another was Lady Caroline, the most steadfast of confidantes. The third was Duncan, who had been a true friend to both betrothed, lending his London town house as a place of privacy for the young couple. That night, Duncan came running as soon as he was summoned by Petra, whisking her to the safety of Forsyth House at the south end of Berkeley Square before she could be seen. His quick and admirable actions freed Petra to do nothing but feel her grief and be pitied by the ton for her great loss, without a whisper of scandal or ruination floating about her.

Though Duncan, too, would soon be gone from Petra's life, leaving for the Continent and his new role as the duke's agent only a day after Emerson's funeral.

Petra, still pale and drawn with mourning, had accompanied Duncan on a ride at Buckfields when he delivered the news. Even now, she could still feel how her brow

had furrowed with disbelief. How could Duncan leave her when she most needed his friendship? His rakish sense of humor to make her laugh? As she hotly questioned his decision, Duncan responded by questioning her right to do so, his Scottish vowels reappearing like they always did when he was under strain. Tempers that had been taut on both sides in recent days then became rapidly untethered, their voices rising with each moment.

Their horses unnerved by the shouting, the two friends had circled each other on their prancing steeds, like opposing warriors moments before battle. Verbal spears made of the harshest words were thrown, faults of the other hurled back and forth, the row like no other they had ever had, each feeling they were being used most grievously.

In the end, Petra, her blue eyes blazing, would demand that Duncan be gone from Buckfields by the time she returned from her ride.

“If you wish it, my lady,” Duncan had said with the utmost formality. He was galloping from Petra’s sight in moments, and was gone from Buckfields within the hour. Petra was left feeling angry, terribly bruised on the inside, and truly unmoored for the first time in her life.

Before losing so much so quickly, Petra had never thought overly much on her inheritance, having never felt she would require it with such an amiable future husband as Emerson. The altering of her views on the matter did not come as a result of her mourning period, however. Rather, because of her contemplations that began a year later, when she finally felt ready to reenter society. At almost the same time her naturally buoyant disposition began to overtake the darker days, a notion had begun to slowly take seed. So slowly, in fact, that when it finally became a fully fledged thought, the guilt that would naturally accompany it was tempered with a curiosity to know if it would have merit.

That was, Petra began to wonder if having lost her chance of being advantageously married, if she might have—in a way—been given an opportunity. One that would allow her to view her inheritance through new eyes. Specifically, as it pertained to what was afforded to her as a woman; to what it could afford her life going forward.

Over the next year and some months, Petra contented herself with enjoying society, never eschewing dancing or the introduction to a gentleman, while her mind quietly considered other matters. Namely, what women were allowed and not allowed to do—both legally and according to the standards of feminine etiquette established by society. And with each topic on which she ruminated, Petra made certain she thought on both sides equally—often debating them with Caroline, who was always willing to take the opposing side for the sake of argument.

The earl, whose only thoughts on eligible matches centered on which of his thoroughbred stallions and mares would best produce a winning foal, never insisted

Petra entertain suitors if she did not care to. And as eligible gentlemen came her way—two of whom proposed marriage, leading Petra to swiftly but kindly refuse—she was left in no doubt of one thing. That the freedom to remain her own woman—to hold her own reins instead of having them legally in the grip of a husband—had become of the utmost importance to her. And thanks to her mother’s gift, it was a freedom she did not have to relinquish.

But it was not until June of 1814 when, surprising even herself, Petra finally announced her decision to society. It was at the Countess of Ardley’s ball, a mere quarter of an hour after Petra had turned down her second proposal—this one from Lady Ardley’s sweet if rather totty-headed son, a viscount whom everyone called Tibby. When Lady Ardley, not yet knowing Tibby had proposed, insinuated she knew Petra’s surname would soon become Wyncroft, what Petra had been feeling manifested into words that somehow managed to sound both respectful and laced with a strength of conviction.

“Lady Ardley, as much as I respect your distinguished family and surname, I can truthfully say I have never found another man I love as much as my late Lord Ingersoll. And, as I am possessed of my own fortune courtesy of my late mama’s will, I intend upon my own eventual death to be referred to as the late Lady Petra Forsyth, and by no other name.”

And then like flames hitting kindling, her news spread throughout *le beau monde*.

“My lady? Did you hear me? I rather wonder if your head hasn’t been in the clouds these past moments. Or were you simply conducting a quiet diatribe against Mr. Shawcross?”

Petra gave her head a tiny shake as Annie’s voice broke through her memories, then heaved a sigh with deliberate theatrics.

“You must know I have never been able to call Duncan a sly boots or any other name that he deserves due to your sisterly tendresse for him. Even when he did not reply to my heartfelt apology letter, you would not join me in calling him a heartless cur.”

Annie knew of the letter Petra had written some weeks after her row with Duncan. Petra had even posted it in the way they had since childhood, as a locked letter, which used a thin strip cut from the writing paper itself that was then twisted and passed twice through a small hole made into the folded letter. Petra had confirmation that Duncan had received her letter, but no locked-letter reply ever arrived with Petra’s name scrawled in Duncan’s untidy hand.

“It is only because I felt you never truly wished to call Mr. Shawcross a heartless cur despite it all, my lady,” Annie said.

Petra looked over her shoulder at Annie, eyes narrowed. “*Hmph*. But to think you are just now disclosing your knowledge of his whereabouts. Maybe you are as sly as

he.”

“I knew at some point you would wish to hear the contents of my letter, my lady,” Annie said. “For you are not quite as light on your feet as all that, and you do so enjoy convincing me to divulge gossip.”

“Oh, Annie, you are wicked!”

As she knew they would, Annie’s cheeks rounded with a barely suppressed grin at Petra’s unconvincing exhortation.

Outside the harness room, clattering hooves reminded them of the time, and of Uncle Tobias waiting in the earl’s study, likely tapping his long fingers in impatience.

“My lady, I do not think I should be seen carrying your brother’s breeches, boots, and shirt inside,” Annie said. “What if Lord Allington’s valet sees and reports back to his lordship?”

“Mm, yes,” Petra mused, then dipped her head to look down at the trunk on which she sat. Rising, she then reached up into her now smartly coiffed hair and pulled out a hairpin, eliciting a sigh from Annie’s lips.

“My lady, must you have selected that one?”

“I shall endeavor to remove one less instrumental next time,” Petra said, as she felt a curl sag. Turning, her tongue between her teeth, she bent, inserted the hairpin in the iron lock, and gently worked it. The padlock obligingly opened to reveal the trunk was half filled with extra stirrups, bits, and various bridle parts. “In here should do nicely.”

Annie hurriedly folded and stored away all the unladylike riding clothes. Then Lady Petra faced front once more, smiling while Annie reinserted the hairpin and she put on a fresh pair of leather gloves in the same York tan as her first.