



# ELIZABETH HANBURY

*Wickedly Captivating Historical Romance*

Excerpt from **ICE ANGEL**

By Elizabeth Hanbury

## *Prologue*

*Yorkshire, England — January 1814*

A storm raged outside and torrential rain fell against the window pane, but the young woman waiting anxiously took little notice of these turbulent conditions, which were in stark contrast to the quiet bedchamber.

Having drawn up the sheet over the corpse, the doctor turned away from the bed and lifted his candle. The flame threw eerie shadows on the walls, and revealed both her startling beauty and the large expressive eyes regarding him gravely.

Giving a brief shake of his head in response to her unspoken question, he said, 'It is over, Isabella. He is gone from this life and you may rest easy; the end was peaceful when it came.' Observing that she pressed trembling fingertips against her lips and her eyes, full of indiscernible emotion, were now wet with unshed tears, the doctor touched her hand in a reassuring gesture. 'You must tell the boy in the morning. The sooner he is told, the better, and you must make plans for the future.'

Quiet as a sigh, her voice stirred the candle flame. 'I know, Dr Dalton, but it will be difficult. Sometimes I fear I shall never enjoy life again—'

'Isabella,' he interjected, 'you must not allow tonight's events and those of recent years to affect your judgement. There are many things to enjoy in this world. Take heart — you will come about.'

'I am too numb to think or feel anything after what I have endured,' she said, tears now falling down her pale cheeks, 'but I shall do my best for Dominic. He deserves to find some pleasure.'

'Do not channel all your energies into your child and neglect your own feelings, my dear; perhaps one day they can be awakened by the right person.'

'No!' she whispered fiercely. 'My very soul is frozen from the anguish I have suffered and I will never be beholden to a man again.'

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### *Chapter One*

*Spring 1815*

**O**n a damp evening, a mud-splattered post-chaise laden with portman-teaux came to a halt outside a fashionable town house in Curzon Street, Mayfair. Its sole occupant, a slim young woman dressed in a high poke bonnet and dark-blue pelisse, alighted a few moments later and, after thanking the postillion who had jumped down to assist her, she hurried through the drizzle to the front door.

It was opened by a smartly dressed servant. 'Welcome back to London, Lady Vane,' he said. 'Everything has been arranged just as you requested.'

'Thank you, Silwood,' she replied, in a lilting voice, stepping into the elegant, marble-floored entrance hall. 'The journey seemed to take an age although it is not so far in distance. I am anxious to see Dominic. Is he still awake or has Harriet already sent him to bed?'

Before Silwood could reply, there was a cry from the top of the staircase. 'Mama! Mama! You are here at last — I have been waiting this past hour and still you didn't come.' A fair-haired boy ran down the sweeping stairs and threw himself at his mother, putting his thin arms around her waist and burying his face in her skirts.

'Hello, my dearest.' Her expression softened as she returned his bearlike hug. 'I am late, but the coach was delayed for almost an hour and not much can be done to hurry sheep when they are blocking a country lane.'

'Sheep?' he said, looking up keenly into her face, having latched onto the only word in her explanation that interested him. 'Were there any lambs among them? If so, I hope you brought me one to keep, for I should like a lamb of my own very much.'

'No, Dominic,' she replied with a smile. 'It is not possible to travel in a post-chaise with a lamb. The poor thing would be quite distressed, you know, and miss its mother. Besides, you have enough animals here already.'

'Oh, well, I suppose if it would miss its mother, I could not keep it — I would not want anyone to take my mama away.'

'Of course you would not, love. Where is Aunt Harriet?' As she spoke, Lady Vane removed her gloves, pelisse and finally her bonnet to reveal glorious golden hair, pulled into a simple knot at the back of her head.

'Lying down in her room. She has a headache because Joshua scratched at her embroidery until it was ruined.' Dominic looked up in concern as he continued, 'Please don't be angry, Mama — I know Joshua shouldn't have done it, but he is playful and always finding mischief.'



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‘That kitten of yours will have to learn better manners if he is to live in London,’ replied Lady Vane, amusement in her voice. ‘Was Aunt Harriet angry?’

‘Oh, no! She never is. She just sighed, like this,’ — Dominic imitated a faint sigh of resignation — ‘and said “that is the trouble in sharing a house in the city with so many creatures”.’

‘Poor Harriet! I’ll speak to her, and perhaps her headache will improve when I give her my news.’

‘Is it good news then?’ he asked eagerly.

‘Yes, it is, Dominic,’ she replied. ‘Go and find Mary and when you are ready for bed, I’ll come and share my secret.’

He whooped with excitement and ran back up the stairs, holding onto the handrail and taking the steps as fast as his legs would allow. She smiled as she watched him, relieved to see her son in such high spirits.

‘Will you be requiring dinner in the dining-room this evening, Lady Vane?’ queried her butler, who was still awaiting further instructions.

‘I’m not certain, Silwood — has Mrs Forster already eaten?’

He gave a small, deprecating cough. ‘Er, no, Lady Vane — that is, she was upset following the incident Master Dominic has described and said she did not desire food.’

‘I understand,’ said Isabella, with a knowing look at the fleeting expression that crossed Silwood’s features. ‘Perhaps I can coax her out of her megrims. See that my luggage is dealt with and arrange for dinner to be served in half an hour; Mrs. Forster and I shall dine together if I can persuade her to come downstairs.’

‘Very good, ma’am.’

Silwood went away, and Lady Vane made her way upstairs to her aunt’s chamber to knock on the door. A feeble voice bade her enter and she went in to find Harriet sitting up in bed and sipping a cup of tea, a fetching lace cap set slightly askew on her soft brown hair.

At the sight of her niece, Harriet replaced her cup on the china saucer too quickly, spilling some of its contents on the pristine white sheet, but she did not appear to regard it as important and held out her hand in greeting. ‘Isabella! Thank goodness you are back. My head aches and it is the fault of that silly kitten — my embroidery is quite ruined.’ She sniffed in a prosaic fashion. ‘Of course, I did not chastize Dominic because Joshua always manages to escape from wherever one puts him. However, that is not the whole of it: you will not believe what that parrot has learnt to say while you have been in Sussex, and what it has done to the curtains in Dominic’s room—!’

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‘Oh, Harriet,’ interjected Isabella, laughing as she squeezed her aunt’s slim fingers and bestowed a kiss on one delicately perfumed cheek. ‘I see you have endured a trying time while I have been at Haystacks, but let me give you my news for I shall burst if I do not tell someone soon.’

Harriet sat forward and opened velvet brown eyes wider in anticipation. ‘You have met Mr. Longville then?’ she asked urgently. ‘How are things situated — is the house fit to live in, or is it in bad repair?’

‘Everything is settled,’ replied Isabella, sitting on the edge of the bed. ‘The property has three acres of ground which will be perfect for Dominic to explore and it is near to the coast, so that, too, will be excellent for the summer. The only problem is the state of the house; Great Uncle James did not keep it in good repair, and although the exterior is reasonably sound, the rooms will need attention before we can occupy it. I stayed there while I have been away, but it was not comfortable, even though Mr. and Mrs. Johnson, Uncle James’s old servants, did their best.’

‘But what shall we do for funds?’ queried Harriet, a note of despair in her voice. ‘You know that we have none.’

‘That is my good news. It seems that Great Uncle James lived a parsimonious existence, and consequently he had a respectable fortune to his name. Mr. Longville informed me that Uncle James bequeathed his money to me, as well as Haystacks.’ Isabella’s luminous blue gaze rested on her aunt, a glow of pleasure briefly replacing the wary look that lurked there. ‘Now we are independent, Harriet. We have enough money to be comfortable, and to provide for Dominic’s future. All the arrangements are in place and Mr. Longville has agreed to oversee the repairs.’

With a cry of delight, Harriet embraced her niece. ‘My dear, such wonderful news! When shall we be able to leave London?’

‘Not for several weeks. The work will take time and we must manage here until then. It is not an ideal arrangement when we have Dominic’s animals for company, but we must endure it as best we can. In any event, the rent here is paid until September so we may as well take advantage of that.’

‘With these animals running wild, I shudder to think what state this house will be in by then,’ said Harriet, before adding bluntly, ‘or my nerves.’

A smile lit Isabella’s delicate features. ‘It is not for long, and I could not have asked Dominic to give up his pets; it would have been too much with the other distress he has had to deal with.’

‘How good it is to see you smile again,’ observed Harriet. ‘I declare it is an age since I have seen you as relaxed as you are at this moment — perhaps you are beginning to forget the past.’



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'I shall never forget, Harriet, since remembering makes me wary. Besides, it does not signify if I am more at ease: you know that I have no intention of entertaining or even going into society.'

'But you cannot live like a hermit while we are in London,' she replied, shocked. 'It is unnatural, and there will be talk if you do.'

Isabella gave an elegant shrug. 'I don't care. While we endure this short stay in Town, I have no wish to provide fodder for the tattlemongers, and certainly no desire to attract gentlemen — the reason why most young women come to London for the season.'

'I fear we will be considered eccentric if we do not attend a few functions,' said Harriet. 'Why, my old acquaintance Lady Pargeter called in your absence and was obliging enough to leave an invitation to her evening party. Shall we not attend, then?'

Looking at her aunt's forlorn expression, Isabella realized that although she preferred to keep society at bay, her aunt had a different opinion.

Harriet was the much younger sibling of William, Isabella's father. With her gregarious nature and attractive looks, she had made a creditable marriage and enjoyed an unassuming lifestyle in London. When her husband had died, leaving her a widow and childless at thirty-two, Harriet had responded with surprising fortitude and, notwithstanding her straitened financial circumstances, had contrived to live modestly with the assistance of friends.

Then, four years ago, Harriet had received Isabella's urgent plea. Knowing something of her niece's situation, Harriet had agreed to move to Yorkshire and in so doing, had effectively cut all her links with society. During that time, Isabella, who would always be grateful for the way Harriet had left her life in London behind without question or rancour, had come to regard her as a beloved older sister rather than an aunt.

From Harriet's tone of voice as she had asked this question, Isabella recognized that her aunt was yearning for company now it was once more available to her. Perhaps it was unfair to deny Harriet this pleasure when she had helped Isabella during her most desperate times.

With these considerations in mind, Isabella therefore replied, 'Well, you may go and enjoy yourself, Harriet, but I will not be tempted. Now, as your headache seems much better, come down to dinner.'

Harriet smiled and a short time afterwards went with her niece to the dining-room; she was already anticipating her reappearance in society at Lady Pargeter's evening party and secretly determined that Isabella would accompany her.

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Some time later, Isabella crept into her son's bedroom, but the scene that greeted her was not a slumberous one. Standing unobserved by the door, Isabella watched as Mary, her long-serving maid, remonstrated with an argumentative Dominic who was disinclined towards his bed.

'It's already past your bedtime and your mama is very tired, Master Dominic. Besides, I'm sure your mama's answer would be the same as mine: you cannot have that creature in bed with you,' said Mary, pointing her finger towards a large ornate cage which housed a squawking parrot. 'It's bad enough having Jemima in the room.'

'But Mary, I cannot go to bed yet — Mama promised to talk to me before I went to sleep.' He lowered his voice and adopted a conspiratorial tone. 'She has a secret to tell me.'

Isabella could not suppress a chuckle and Mary turned around, a smile spreading across her features when she saw her mistress. 'Miss Isabella, I am very glad you are back. I was telling Master Dominic that bedrooms are not the place for parrots, but he thinks Jemima will want to sleep in his bed rather than on a perch.'

'Dominic,' began Isabella, a note of censure in her voice as she came further into the room, 'Mary is right — Jemima is happier in her cage.'

Dominic furrowed his brow with the effort of explaining. 'Well, I only suggested it 'cause Mary told me before that my pillow is full of feathers and as Jemima has feathers, I thought she would feel more at home there.'

Isabella laughed. 'I can see why you might think so, love, but I assure you she wouldn't like it at all and would rip open the pillows with her sharp beak. I see the curtains have already suffered her attentions.' She raised her fine brows at the large tear in the fabric drawn across the window and then frowned when the parrot uttered 'bacon-brained' and 'gudgeon' in a loud clear voice. Hiding a smile, she added severely, 'And I also see what Aunt Harriet means about Jemima's new words.'

Colour rose to Dominic's cheeks. 'Sorry, Mama,' he said, with a guilty look. 'I only said those words twice and didn't mean for Jemina to hear them.'

'I see. Then we must hope that Jemima does not repeat them at an inconvenient moment,' replied his mother.

'Never fear about the curtain, miss,' said Mary, 'it will be fixed in a trice tomorrow. Now, Master Dominic, if you want your mama to tell you secrets, it's time for you and Jemima to go to bed.'

Dominic argued no further and watched as Mary threw a blanket over the parrot's cage. Then, he meekly climbed between the covers, folded his arms and lay still, his blue eyes wide with excitement. Isabella exchanged a wry glance with Mary as she left the room, then sat by the bed and grasped her son's hand.

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‘What is your secret, Mama,’ he asked. ‘Is it something I shall be pleased to hear?’

‘I believe so, love. Do you remember I told you Great Uncle James had died and left us a house in the country?’

‘Yes, but you thought it couldn’t be anything very special because Uncle James hadn’t seen you since you were a girl.’

‘I was mistaken; Uncle James has left us a delightful house and while you have been settling here in London, I have been looking at our new home which is called Haystacks.’

He sat up and said eagerly, ‘Is there room for a pony, if I only ask for a small one?’

‘Yes,’ replied Isabella, her mouth curving into a smile.

‘And a puppy?’

‘Of course!’

‘Then can we go tomorrow?’

‘We must wait a little while, but I promise it will not be long.’

‘Will Papa be there?’ he asked, after a pause.

Her heart went out to him. ‘Your father died, Dominic — he is not with us any longer.’

‘Oh,’ muttered Dominic, looking down and twisting the bed sheet between his fingers. ‘Well, I don’t mind because I can’t remember much about him, except that he was cross and made you cry.’

‘Your papa made himself sick and then he became cross,’ said Isabella gently.

‘I know — I heard Mary whispering to Aunt Harriet one day that Papa was in his cups and that’s what made him sick.’

Isabella raised her brows at his matter-of-fact tone — it seemed her son had overheard discussions the meaning of which he did not fully understand. ‘Yes, he did, but he can’t hurt himself, or us, any more,’ she murmured.

Dominic nodded, gave a huge yawn and lay back against the pillows. ‘I’m happy that you’re back, Mama.’ After a few moments, his eyelids began to drift downwards and Isabella watched in silence until slumber claimed him.

She kissed his flushed cheek and reached up to dash away the tears on her lashes; it did no good to dwell on the past. Her nightmares would stop eventually and time would heal her spirit, but, even though over a year had passed since Edward’s death, her anguish was still raw. She thanked God that Dominic had been



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too young to remember everything. Unsurprisingly, he showed little affection for his father's memory and no interest in enquiring further about what he had witnessed. All Dominic voiced was a desire for his current circumstances to continue and the occasional fear that his father would return. He dealt with both issues in a brisk, childlike fashion, and seemed able to dismiss unpleasant memories soon after they arose. Isabella wished that she could do the same.

She was desperate to retire to Sussex and provide as best she could for her son. At least now she had Uncle James to thank for making that task appear a little less daunting.

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