



ELIZABETH HANBURY

Wickedly Captivating Historical Romance

Excerpt from **ICE ANGEL**

By Elizabeth Hanbury

Newly arrived in London, Isabella has reluctantly agreed to attend Lady Pargeter's evening party with her aunt Harriet. There she meets wealthy Sir Seymour Dinniscombe. And someone else....

Isabella saw a tall, broad-shouldered man who was indeed staring at them, but most particularly at her. He, too, was dressed in the normal evening attire of long-tailed coat, waistcoat and satin knee breeches, but he wore them with a nonchalant grace completely at odds with Sir Seymour's extravagant style. Dark hair fell across his brow, giving him a rakish appearance and his eyes scanned Isabella's features intently. Under his scrutiny, Isabella felt strangely breathless and colour warmed her cheeks. The more he stared, the more her anger rose; if he were rude enough to study her like a specimen under a magnifying glass, he would only succeed in earning her contempt. She was careful to show no outward signs of annoyance, having become skilled at concealing her feelings during her marriage.

'That is the Earl of Bramwell, who is at this moment being joined by Mr. Frederick Isherwood,' explained Sir Seymour, observing the second gentleman who had come to stand next to Lord Bramwell. 'It is unusual to see either at an event like this, but Mr. Isherwood is Lady Pargeter's nephew so that must be the reason for their attendance this evening.'

'Lord Bramwell cuts a very handsome figure,' said Harriet in a low voice.

'He is considered a Corinthian, a man who excels in every sporting pursuit, but I think him a little reckless,' remarked Sir Seymour. 'He has a devil-may-care approach to life which seems attractive to ladies. However, it would be injurious to my health to indulge in the ill-advised escapades which appeal to Lord Bramwell.'

'Ill-advised escapades?' echoed Harriet, intrigued.

'Oh, nothing too serious, you understand — he is a leader of the *ton*, after all — but Lord Bramwell is usually to be found at the centre of some harebrained scheme

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or sporting bet,' explained Sir Seymour. 'I hear he intends to drive down to Brighton tomorrow in his curricle in less than four and a half hours, simply to answer a wager. Madness! I should be confined to bed for a week if I attempted such a feat.'

'Any reasonable person would not attempt it,' agreed Isabella vehemently. She was aware of Harriet's look of surprise — this was severe criticism for an activity which most young men of the day took part in and was generally considered harmless — but as far as Isabella was concerned, Lord Bramwell had already earned her scorn. She had endured enough reckless and inconsiderate behaviour to last a lifetime and had no desire to become acquainted with anyone who followed that path.

This stern resolution was destined to be quickly broken: Isabella, alone for a few moments some time later, found Lord Bramwell's tall figure had suddenly appeared at her side.

'I have appealed to Lady Pargeter for the last hour to introduce me, but either you are engaged or her attention is diverted before she can do so, and I can wait no longer,' he said. 'May I introduce myself and hope that you will excuse my abominable lack of manners? It is only because I am impatient to meet you.' He bowed and smiled engagingly. 'Lord Bramwell, at your service, Lady Vane.'

Forced to acknowledge him, Isabella turned to look up into his face. Lord Bramwell was undeniably handsome. His features were well defined and attractive, there was no dandyish affectation in his courteous manner and his physique was clearly that of a sportsman. A smile lurked in the grey eyes which gazed down into hers and he was close enough for Isabella to have momentarily felt his warm breath on her cheek as he spoke. The smooth rich timbre of his voice washed over her and, unbidden, the thought flashed into her mind that Lord Bramwell was the embodiment of her ideal. She pushed it away ruthlessly; having already been introduced to Sir Seymour and the amiable Mr. Isherwood, who was quite as handsome as Lord Bramwell, with no similar effects, Isabella felt annoyed at her reaction.

Reluctantly, she gave him her hand, aware of the latent strength in his grasp. A quiver ran through her as he unexpectedly bent his head to brush his lips over her knuckles. 'Good evening, Lord Bramwell,' she replied in a voice of cool disdain and snatched her hand away.

He raised his brows at her icy tone, but merely said, 'Are you enjoying Lady Pargeter's hospitality?'

'She has been most kind; Lady Pargeter is an old acquaintance of my aunt's.'

'I see. I understand that you are newly arrived in London and have taken a house in Curzon Street?'

'Yes.' Isabella felt her animosity rise. Had he been making enquiries about her? She knew she was being unjust. His comments were innocuous to say the least, but she only felt secure if the relative anonymity she had built around herself and her

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family remained intact, and Lord Bramwell's keen gaze seemed to reach into her innermost thoughts.

'Lady Pargeter informed me earlier when I asked to be introduced; I was not aware that you were staying in Town,' he explained. 'Do you intend to stay for the season?'

'I cannot say. The length of our stay will depend on other circumstances,' she replied, feeling a little contrite; whatever else Lord Bramwell was, it appeared he was not a tattle-monger.

'Your presence will grace London society however long you are here.'

Isabella blushed. 'There is no need to offer me approbation,' she replied sharply.

'But it is not empty praise: I merely speak the truth.' His expression suddenly became quizzical and he added, 'Have I offended you in some way, Lady Vane? I suspect that you do not look upon me kindly, although I cannot think why as we have only just met. That is unfortunate because I feel an overwhelming desire at this moment to kiss you thoroughly and restore your good humour. And in case you think me mad, I assure you such disregard for the proprieties is entirely out of character.'

Isabella stared at him, at a loss how to reply to this direct and wholly unexpected speech. She quickly decided he was making fun of her – it must be an agreeable form of verbal dalliance in London to suggest kissing a lady one had just met. Her annoyance towards Lord Bramwell grew, as did her indignation at his ill-judged humour. 'Are you enjoying a joke at my expense, Lord Bramwell?' she asked curtly. 'If so, I find it most distasteful.'

A tinge of colour crept into his lean cheeks. 'No, indeed. Forgive me — that was a foolish thing to say, and I certainly did not mean to embarrass you. What a graceless fellow you must think me now!'

Isabella observed, not entirely truthfully, 'But how could I reach any opinion of you in such a short time?'

'I hardly know — I have already begged your pardon and tried to excuse any possible incivility in the manner of my introduction,' he said, with the ghost of a smile. 'Perhaps my supposed reputation has gone before me; Sir Seymour, although harmless, is always ready with his opinions.'

Isabella coloured deliciously as this accurate observation hit home. She tried to appease her conscience by saying, 'Whatever opinions Sir Seymour may have, I would try not to let them influence mine.'

'I simply ask that you form an opinion based on what you see, and not on my reputation.' He hesitated and then continued, 'Please excuse my forthright manner, but I should like permission to call upon you in Curzon Street in the near future.'

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She turned her clear gaze fully upon him and, in an unguarded moment, evinced surprise and confusion.

‘W-Why ever would you want to—?’ stammered Isabella. ‘That is, I suppose, you may call if you wish, but I-I might be engaged and unable to receive you.’

‘I quite understand,’ he said, smiling, ‘and I should not wish to intrude upon your time too greatly, but my sister, Lady Julia Cavanagh, arrives in London next week for her first season and I cannot help but think that she would be as pleased to make your acquaintance as I have been. Would you be prepared to meet her? I am persuaded she would think it delightful if you could.’

Shocked by this request, Isabella regarded him in silence. Not an hour before, she had determined never to have any conversation with Lord Bramwell, a devil-may-care Corinthian whose way of life was abhorrent to her. Now, he had introduced himself, declared his desire to kiss her soundly and wanted her to meet his sister!

Compelled to answer as he stood waiting for her response, she cast about in her mind for an excuse but could see no way of extricating herself without being abominably rude. Isabella consoled herself with the thought that perhaps he did not intend to carry out his threat of calling in Curzon Street.

‘Very well,’ she replied, ‘if you insist upon it, we shall be happy to receive you and your sister, but I fear you will both find it tedious.’

He smiled and said cryptically, ‘I thought this evening would be tedious and I have been proved quite wrong. Please excuse me, Lady Vane; Mr. Isherwood is searching for me and it appears he is ready to leave. I look forward to calling on you in the near future.’ He bowed once more and moved away to join his friend.

Isabella’s heart sank as she stared at his retreating figure. Her attendance here had resulted in exactly the situation she was most afraid of and now she must endure visits from Sir Seymour and Lord Bramwell. The first did not concern her unduly and she would look forward to with some amusement; the second was an entirely different matter and filled her with trepidation. It seemed Lord Bramwell had the ability to jeopardize her carefully schooled emotions and it was imperative she did not allow that to happen.

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