

Betsy Ledbetter was nearly bursting with excitement as she drove her cadillac down the rarely traveled country road, chattering on to the woman in the passenger seat. "And the view from the back french doors is absolutely spectacular in the evenings, when the sun sets behind the mountains. Oh! You'll absolutely love it I'm sure."

Susan De'Call looked the old mansion up and down with a professional eye. She had renovated many old homes, but never a mansion. This one would prove to be thrilling. She didn't care about the view, all she cared about was that there was a giant, old mansion for her to remodel. Still, she would play the curious bartering, rich investor for a bit longer. "Hm. We shall see. Why don't we take a look inside, Miss Ledbetter, was it?"

"Ledbetter." Betsy said politely, parking the car in front of the large, old mansion. She inwardly crossed her fingers and hoped beyond all hopes that this was her lucky day that she could finally sell this house. She'd sold many houses in her time and when she'd seen how cheap this one was, she snatched it immediately. However, it hadn't sold so easily or readily as she planned. It was becoming quite a burden! "And yes, let's go right inside Ms. De'Call. This house is full of so much promise and possibility. I'm sure you'll fall right in love with it." "At least I hope so..." she added to herself. She walked up the front steps and unlocked the front door, swinging it open so the afternoon light could shine far into the front entry. "Where would you like to begin the tour? Ballroom? Kitchen? The upstairs bedrooms perhaps?"

"I was thinking more the cellar area, if you don't mind. I'd like to see every inch of this house." Susan De'Call stated skeptically, although she was already setting aside the money for the mansion in her mental bank account. Let Ms. Pencilbatter think she still had to sell the house to the client.

"An excellent choice Ms. De'Call-May I call you "Susan"? I always like the tour to feel like it's between two friends, not a customer and salesman-Come right this way to the cellar." This "De'Call" woman might be a little tougher to sell to than Betsy had hoped. It didn't matter, she told herself. She'd sold to much more cross and picky people before. She'd just have to find the right sales pitch for this one.

"Yes. Of course. Susan is acceptable, Ms. Letterbutler. Would you prefer I call you Betty, as we're being informal?" Shopping with a friend? If it was a friend, the lady would have given her the mansion for free. No. This was definitely a salesperson. No matter. She could call her Mr. Bean for all she cared as long as she got the mansion for the lowest price possible.

"It's Ledbetter and Betsy!" the slightly irritated saleswoman thought. Letterbutler? That barely even sounded like her name. The irritation didn't make it's way up to Betsy's grinning face though.

"You can call me Betsy or Ms. Ledbetter. Whichever makes you feel more comfortable Susan." Betsy twisted her head slightly as she started down the cellar stairs to make sure Ms. De'Call could hear her. She almost laughed that although she called the other woman "Susan" out loud, she still referred to her as a Ms. inwardly. Saying her first name somehow felt illegal. It had felt alright at first, a classic way to make touring more enjoyable, but now...Betsy almost wished she hadn't said anything.

"Very well, Ms. Latterbatter. Shall we see the cellar?" Susan replied, not paying

attention to the sale's-woman's correction of her name. She followed Betsy down the stairs, spying a beautiful old portrait of a young hunter and his hounds in a forest clearing as she descended. How quaint, she thought.

Betsy rolled her eyes, glad that she was facing away from Ms. De'Call as they descended into the darkness. "*Ledbetter. It's not that hard of a name to remember!*" she thought. She fumbled for a moment at the bottom of the staircase, reaching up to the ceiling to find the light. It was always so tricky to find. Ah! There it was! Betsy grabbed the little string and pulled. A single lightbulb crudely attached to the ceiling lit, casting a dim light over the dusty shelves and piles of paintings leaning against the walls and hastily covered with sheets.

"I'm afraid I didn't have time to come and clean it out for you. Business has been really packed lately." "*And you called me sort of short notice.*" she added to herself.

Just how I like it, though Ms. De'Call. Not all fancied up for the viewers. "Of course," she smiled pleasantly. "Of course, should I make a future visit, I expect this," she motioned vaguely to the room "shambles to be cleaned and polished to suit the society of the mansion's time. I am a very picky woman, Ms. Deadletter."

"Le-" Betsy locked in the rest of the correction with a smile and a nod. "*When you make your next visit Susan, I'll make sure it's taken care of. This house would be a true beauty all polished and shining wouldn't it?*" She dusted off one of the white sheets. "Well then. Are you ready to see the rest of the house?"

Susan ran her hand along one cold stone wall. "*Hm. Your job would be to make me think so, now wouldn't it, Ms. Bessy? Well, as it is not in a position to glimmer and shine now and as it is not yet guaranteed that I will be making a return trip, Ms. Littlebearor, you, and as a result, I, must make due with what we have given to us, mmmh?*"

This woman could be a little terror couldn't she? Some sort of saleswoman instinct told Betsy that Ms. De'Call didn't hate the house as much as she protested, but the majority of Betsy's brain was fighting between the desire to start yelling at the woman and shoving her out, or begging her to take the house.

"Well, if you feel like viewing the house in the present condition is a waste of time and would rather reschedule your visit so we could properly prepare the home Susan, I would be more than happy to provide you with another tour in a day or two."

Susan could almost taste victory. This woman was falling into her hands faster than anticipated. She smiled, let the woman take the smile as she would or would not. "I did not say it displeased me, Ms. Ledworse. I did not say that I wished to view the house another day. I am sorry for your poor planning, however I am a very busy woman. So, shall we continue, or would you rather I step out now and save you embarrassment? The choice is yours, but I warn you, if I leave now, I will not be coming back. Nor will this." She patted her overly large pocketbook, stuffed conveniently with handkerchiefs and monopoly money for effect. "*What will it be, Madam?*"

Betsy tried not to stare at the pocketbook by averting her gaze to her dusty hands. She also tried hard not to think of all the rotten things she wanted to say to dear Susan right now. "*MY poor planning? LedWORSE? save EMBARRASSMENT?*" the nerve! Betsy tried to push it out of her thoughts. She had to be pleasant if she wanted this house sold!

And she did, very badly. But very more button pushing and she was going to lose it! "I just don't want you to feel as if your time has been wasted." Betsy said, pretending that they were actually having a civil conversation. "After all, if you aren't happy. I can't be happy." *"Especially if you leave without buying."*

"Very well, Ms. Bedwetter. I should like to view the rest of the mansion. Consider yourself warned. Good money goes to good products, you know." She smiled a blindly white smile and turned about. "The next floor now, I think."

"Of course Susan! I can't wait to show you around the ground floor. That's where the large library, kitchen, french doors, and many other fabulous things await us!" Betsy reached up for the light, using the opportunity she was facing away from Ms. De'Call to drop her smile and make a face to relieve her frustration.

Susan clopped her high heels all the way up the stairs just to see what would happen, returning to a ladylike walk at the top. "My, but this is drab," she commented. "Do the portraits come with the mansion?"

"Yes. Every last one of them." Betsy said cheerfully, catching up with her investigator at the top of the stairs. "They just don't seem to...agree with other places. Any furnishing you see in this house stays, a little bonus you might say." she winked at De'Call and had to hold back a shiver. Discreetly she glanced back at the stairs, hoping no holes had been left from De'Call's stomping.

"Mhmh." De'Call glanced around the room, noting that most of the walls were covered with pictures. "And if I don't want paintings of gaudy men and women hanging about my place?" Let's not make this too easy.

"Well then. I would suggest you hire someone to take them down, or sell them, or perhaps you could give them away to friends." Betsy smiled sweetly and hoped that the sarcasm she felt hadn't crept into her voice. She couldn't scare away a customer. How many times did she have to remind herself that? "Personally, I think that the pictures add a nice feel to this home. Many seem to capture the feel of the house when this house was actually built."

De'Call treated Betsy to a "when customers aren't happy" look. "Did I ask how you personally felt about these....loose leafs? No, Ms. Deadheader, I did not. And as for hiring someone to remove them, shouldn't that be the company's job, not mine? After all, I would be paying a large sum already. Surely that would account for any small inconvenience on your part." Susan let a dramatic sniff come into play here, for effect. "I am afraid, Ms. Betterleed, that if you can offer no finer service than this, I must bid you adieu." She reached into her oversized red handbag and pulled out her pager. Clipping it onto her ear, she allowed her hand to hover over the on switch. "One call, that's all. You have thirty seconds to convince me that I ought to stay. Now twenty, Now ten..."

"You haven't even seen the rest of the house yet Ms. De'Call!" Betsy blurted, "Perhaps you would like everything better after a full tour. And as for getting rid of the paintings...I may be able to talk to the company about arranging something." Adrenaline pumped through her veins and she had to resist the urge to grab the pager and toss it to the ground.

"I think I've seen enough for my taste," declared Ms. De'Call, and indeed she had.

"Why don't we go into the parlor and discuss prices, mmmhm?" Her finger tapped her pager impatiently.

"That sounds like a very good idea." Betsy said, trying to smile again and letting out a small sigh of tense relief. "That is-If you're sure you don't want to see the upstairs. It really is quite beautiful!"

"I said, I've seen enough," Susan said slowly and politely. "The parlor, Messy?"

"Betsy." she said shortly, before she could stop herself. "Right this way please Ms. De'Call." She led the way through the main entry to the large parlor doors. Though old, they were a beautiful dark wood with leaf and flower patterns carved around the sides. On the main part of the door, six boxes were carved into the wood, showing wooden people going about various chores, talking with one another, and other such activities.

The room was mostly unfurnished. Only a few velvet chairs and a small coffee table sat in one corner by a window looking out onto the back lawn.

De'Call glanced at the room under her pretended air of disdain, though in all reality, her mind reeled with thoughts of renovation. "Are those chairs...acceptable to sit in for negotiation, Ms. Letterbeater?"

"They should be just right." Betsy said, envisioning the chairs actually being covered with dust and other not so pleasant filth that dusted Ms. De'Call. "If you prefer, we could stand around the table." She grabbed the sheet covers from the first chair and carefully pulled it off as to not dump dust all over.

"I seem to recall a certain blond girl who had a fascination with just right that put her in mortal danger, Ms. Letterbearer," De'Call said, perhaps a bit more crisply than necessary, eying the chairs. Her future chairs. She didn't want some stranger's DNA all over them. "We shall stand."

Betsy ground her teeth, an automatic habit that she used whenever nervous or angry. Now she was both, and her teeth would hurt for hours afterward from the pressure she now put on them. "Alright then." she said, moving around the table and pulling off the sheet covering it. "If you look at the packet we sent you, you'll find our price underneath all the information about the house."

Ms. De'Call scrambled mentally for any recollection of a packet and recalled the large, unopened package sitting at home on the kitchen counter. She probably should have looked at that. De'Call pursed her lips and tapped her foot in what she hoped looked an impatient motion and not a nervous twitch. "Ms. Lardbearer, I don't seem to recall receiving any such packet. As this was clearly a mistake on your company's part, I assume you have a policy to deal with such incidents. As I never saw this packet, and therefore, cannot see the price, would you be so kind as to name a price? Keep in mind, Betsy, I am an experienced mansion collector, and am willing to pay generously, however, I do have other...ehm....options should this one....displease me.." She patted her large, overstuffed pocketbook.

Although Ms. De'Call's impatient attitude made Betsy inwardly swirm even more, she tried to retain her composed, cool and friendly attitude. "Not a problem Ms. De'Call. We have had trouble with the mailing system before and so I came prepared." She reached into her bag and brought out a manilla envelope. She opened it and rummaged inside for a

moment until she found the contract page she was looking for. She placed this page on top of the envelope and handed the entire packet over to the potential buyer. "As you can see, the purchase of the mansion includes any furnishings inside the house, the large grounds stretching into the surrounding trees, and even a free month of work from the current grounds keeper." "Who was SUPPOSED to make sure EVERYTHING was ready." she added to herself. "Our price is really quite reasonable-cheap even." she continued aloud.

De'Call took the packet from the saleswoman. She glanced at the price, barely taking it in. Somewhere in the millions, a reasonable price for a mansion, and with all of the perks, she really was paying practically nothing for the mansion, but Susan De'Call was not the queen of mansion shopping for nothing. She NEVER paid full price, even if full price was practically free to begin with. "Hmph." She thrust the papers back at the saleswoman with a dissatisfied glare. "You call this, bargain shopping? Ms. Lardbratter, may I inform you, there are certain...other clients who are more hospitable and prepared who are asking half that amount as a high price." She tisked and flicked her hair with blood-red nailed hands. "It seems to me, Bessity, that you are not serious about my offer, therefore, unless you can find me a much better offer, and quickly, I will be forced to take my business," she patted her pocketbook for emphasis, "elsewhere. If you get my drift." She raised her thinly plucked, penciled in eyebrows in an implying gesture and tapped her pocketbook once, twice, three times for emphasis.

As Betsy stared at the pocketbook in almost meltdown panic mode something strange happened. Ironically, the more sour that Ms. De'Call turned in her rant, the better Betsy started feeling. That isn't to say that she wasn't still nervous beyond any sort of nervousness she'd ever felt. Her heart still beat quickly and she thought she might be sick, but her brain was finally clearing so she could make rational decisions, not just fly off in a panic. It was one of the points she prided herself on, being able to get used to a person's attitude quickly and readjust the situation. She finally realized why she had been given this assignment. Everyone else at the office must have know how tight of a client Ms. De'Call could be. But Betsy Ledbetter hadn't gotten where she was by being a pushover!

"Ms. De'Call," she began, mostly calm, "Your business is very important to us which is why we arranged this tour so short notice and have tried to get you all of the information possible. I have heard about the amazing renovation work that you do with older homes and think that this mansion is another great opportunity for you. However, I don't think you can't be as experienced as they say if you do not see the great discount you are receiving. Had you received our packet or if you would care to take a closer look at that one in your hand, you would find four home evaluations from separate contractors who evaluate the worth of this lot and mansion much higher than what we are asking. If I may, I would say that there is probably a reason you are being offered other houses at half of this price: that's all they're worth. Unless you have already gone and inspected them yourself I would almost guarantee that the sellers of those homes are desperately trying to get rid of the house because of some large problem that they will fail to mention to you. Here, we have provided you with all of the information on the house, given references to inspectors who have come as well as the evaluators. Every dripping faucet or creaking floorboard is recorded and reported in that packet in your hand. We've done our job Ms.

De'Call, have tried to be as hospitable as possible while still being honest, and we hope that our clients would try to do the same."

Ms. De'Call tapped her pocketbook a fourth, quick tap. She hadn't come all this way to pay FULL price for a mansion for the first time in her life because a frivolous saleswoman suddenly grew a backbone. Oh no. She would just have to turn her game. "Ms. Ledbetter, do you take me for a fool? Of course I checked the mansions. That is why my request to see this," she motioned around the room, pulling the guise of slight disgust while stalling for time, "this *beauty* of a peace. To be quite frank with you, Betsy, this mansion is of a better quality than the others I have seen in some time. I would love to pay more, but you see," she paused for a moment, pretending to regain her composure and pulled out a laced handkerchief, "my late husband, he and I were never really on the best of terms. Thought I was all for money, which he had much of, but that's a long story. My late husband died recently. Oh, he left a will, but I was not in it. I only have limited funds. I am not the waterfall of money I once was, due to his departure." She dabbed slightly at her eyes with the kerchief and sighed. "I had dearly hoped it would not come to this, but it seems one last dream mansion for compensation purposes is not to be. Alas. As you and your fine company have offered a splendid deal, I cannot push any further. Well, thank you Ms. Betsy Ledbetter. I'm afraid this mansion is just not in my budget. You will, no doubt, find a more wealthy owner who will treat you with more respect and sell to them. No loss on your part, but oh how I wished for one last renovation fling." She turned away from the saleswoman and hid a smile behind her kerchief.

Betsy had to restrain a huff of frustrated unbelief. The adrenaline from her speech still pumped heavily through her veins, leaving very little room for sympathy. She didn't trust someone who was so easy to flip flop emotions either. Either Ms. De'Call was going through a tremendous amount of strain, or she was an incredibly good actress. Betsy's brain began to spin, trying to come up with the solution to this problem. She had been trying to sell this house for months now with no luck. Ms. De'Call could be her only chance. On the other hand, the price was already much lower than she felt the house deserved, and she didn't like selling anything below what she thought it was worth, it was almost unfair to the mansion. On the other hand, selling this house could be a great weight lifted off her shoulders. On the other hand, would her company see a compromise on a lower price as a failure? If Ms. De'Call had looked back and seen Betsy's furrowed brow and worried face, she may have believed that her story was pulling at this saleswoman's heartstrings. But the heart wrenching story of a widow forgotten was far back in Ms. Ledbetter's thought process. "Ms. De'Call..." she began slowly. "I understand your desire to renovate. However, I have a duty to my company as well as this house." The words were coming easier now as she continued, "I've always thought that it wasn't fair to those who took the time to build a house to sell it for much less than it was worth, and I'm pushing the limits on this one already. If you spent years renovating this house you wouldn't want someone coming in and...and *demanding* it wasn't worth it. It's an insult Ms. De'Call, and one I won't tolerate, even if it was all a cover up for your....recent misfortune. If you had explained matters to me beforehand we perhaps could have worked on a better compromise. But now...now..." Betsy looked at the woman across from her as the adrenaline

wore thin and felt a tinge of compassion. She sighed, "Perhaps I can work a little something out...Nothing big mind you, maybe a couple hundred at most..."

Ms. De'Call hid behind her kerchief for a moment more to be sure she could control her elation. A few hundred dollars was all she was hoping for. At least she would not break her perfect record. De'Call felt a twinge of guilt for compromising the saleswoman, but quickly pushed it aside. The past was the past and she had finally gained some footing with this challenging woman. She turned back to the other woman and dabbed her eyes. "I understand that you must keep up the credibility of your company. I am sorry for the false face I put on earlier. It's just that I too have a reputation to uphold. Since my husband's passing, I have been an emotional wreck, you see. I had to find something to hide under. Somewhere to go," She sniffed slightly for emphasis and continued, "I suppose I jumped into a safety mask before considering your feelings and your company and for that I apologize, Ms. Letterbearer, that is your name, is it not? A few hundred dollars may just put this mansion in my budget. Perhaps a new renovation project will help me to be in better spirits. Or at least take my mind off of things for a while. Thank you."

"Think nothing of it." Betsy said, smiling slightly at the woman and ignoring the mispronunciation of her name. "Well then." she clapped her hands together and turned to end the sentimental or awkward moment. "Shall we sit down and discuss terms then?" she sat down in the chair, assuming that the show about 'we shall stand' earlier had been part of the facade and not really caring since her feet were killing her. She couldn't wait to get this whole crazy business behind her.

Ms. De'Call took a small, almost unnoticeable step forward, her way of stepping into a new character and smiled what she hoped was a grateful, somewhat shaky smile. "After you, Ms. Letterbarter."

* * * *

Adeline peeked out of her frame from the corner of her eye. She hadn't really had to worry about moving from her place at the window for quite some time, but she was sure she had heard voices, doors, and footsteps in the past hour. A door had shut not long ago and things seemed quietly muffled now, but she didn't want to take any chances. There was no sign of activity from her vantage point. At last she carefully snuck to the corner of her frame to get a better look.

Young Edward had heard everything discussed from his vantage point around the corner from the saleswoman and her newest client. He raced to Adeline to tell her the news. He rapped on the back of her picture frame and straightened his suit coat and tie, nervously and excitedly awaiting her.

The knocking made Adeline jump slightly. She turned and saw a young man through her back doors leading to the garden. She smiled and daintily hurried across the room to let him in.

"Good afternoon Edward! Have you heard all of the noises today? What's going on?"

"Heard? Adeline, I've seen it! There's this mean, but not mean pathetic mansion collector. And I think she's going to buy the world!" He threw up his hat in despair and excitement. "Let me in and I'll tell you it all!"

Quickly, Adeline opened the door. "Do come in, please, and start over. What do you

mean 'Buy the world'? 'mean but not mean'? I don't understand." She twisted her two flowered chairs toward each other and gestured for him to take one seat while she sat in the other.

Edward quickly entered the portrait of Adeline and stood, almost shaking with excitement and anticipation next to a chair. He was too energetic to sit, but would manage if it seemed impolite to stand. His family had raised him properly after all. Remembering his manners, he removed his hat, setting it on the wooden table, and pulled out the second chair for Adeline. "Oh Adeline, I heard it all from my portrait. And saw much while visiting Eliza in the parlor. Where do I start? I want to tell you everything!"

"Well....I would assume one should start from the beginning! When did you first hear, or see, the newcomers. Was this the mean but not mean mansion collector?" Seeing Edward's excitement made it hard for her to sit still. She followed her friend with her eyes and sat on the edge of her seat, waiting to hear his story. "First though, how is Eliza? I haven't been able to make it down to see her in quite some time." Adeline's proper bringing up wouldn't allow her to ignore Eliza completely.

Edward slid Adeline gently to the table, as a gentleman should. "Eliza? Oh she's all right. Pretty as porcelain, as always." Edward smiled, distracted momentarily by the girl he would proudly call the finest beauty in the entire world, but would not allow himself to be distracted quite yet. "Her uncle's a stickler as ever, but what can a man do but dream, eh? Oh well." He shrugged. "Life is. And the portrait manor lady, I think she's going to buy the entire world! I mean all of it. She came clomping in with her high heeled kickboxers on and her skirt clear up to here!" He motioned slightly above his knees and made a scandalized face. "And her nails were like blood. I think she's a monster! A monster with a large pocketbook. I tell you, she's going to buy the entire world! And she's got a man...well, she had a man," Edward lowered his voice slightly at the end of his sentence. "Apparently his portrait faded or was burned or destroyed or something. What a horrid way to die." He shuddered at the thought. "But she's still the strangest thing," he went on, only slightly deterred from his course. "And she's going to buy the world! The WORLD, Adaline! Can you imagine?" He bounced on the balls of his feet, too excited to sit.

No, she couldn't imagine. In fact, Adaline found it very hard to keep up with what Edward was saying. In her mind she was getting a jumbled image of this woman. Scandalously high skirt, long, red fingernails that left marks in an overly large pocketbook, sharp teeth in a long face cowering over her, ready to strike. "This woman sounds absolutely horrible! But...buy the *entire* world? Is that even possible?"

Edward bounced excitedly on the balls of his feet, scarcely able to sit still for excitement and anticipation. He wasn't much for fear, believing that fear took the fun out of the world. "I don't know, Adaline. But if it is, this lady'd be the lass to do it, you mark my words!" He straightened his overcoat and stroked his clean shaven chin. "If I grew out my beard, do you suppose she'd up and leave? Adaline, suppose this monster lady does buy the world? Well, us gentlemen would have to protect it from her wicked wiles. You ladies would be welcome to help, of course. Everyone knows a man's better for a woman's sense. We tend to jump to conclusions about things and lose our tempers at the slightest thing. But it is our sworn duty," He placed a hand over his heart and bowed slightly, reaching for

Adaline's white, proper woman's hand. "You'd allow us to protect you, wouldn't you? And Eliza too. I have to protect her from that woman!"

Adaline had to smile when Edward mentioned growing out his beard. The image of the frightening woman was gone for a moment, replaced with a picture of her friend with a big, bushy, dark and curly beard like some men in a portrait upstairs she had visited before. A small shiver ran up her spine when he touched her hand and spoke of defending themselves. "Perhaps she isn't as horrible as she seems," she said, searching for something that lurked at the edge of her memory. "Didn't....Didn't someone own the world before?" The memory was faint, so much that it could have been nothing more than a dream. "I can't really remember, it seems very far off. But didn't they for a short time? The world wasn't destroyed then. Maybe we'd be alright."

Edward squeezed Adaline's soft hand gently in a thoughtful manner. "I believe, once, a very long time ago. Perhaps I do recall someone owning the world, but that was before the world was made. Then they just vanished one day. No more tea parties on the table. No more laughing and music. No more...." He looked earnestly at Adaline. "We were left, Adaline. Deserted to fend for ourselves. I remember that someone would come and dust my frame every day. I would stop whatever I was doing and wait because that dreadful duster tickled my nose and made me sneeze. But then, one day the duster didn't come. Forever I looked for the duster, but they never came back. That's when it all stopped. I don't really remember anything else....Adaline, what if this new lady is nice like you say? What if she's a perfect dear and I must act proper to her and tip my hat? Oh won't my hands get tired? What if she wishes to gaze at me all day long so that I am stiff all over? Or worse, what if she stares at Eliza, as she is much prettier than I? Not that I care that Eliza is prettier, mind you. But what if Eliza becomes so sore that she is frozen in her frame forever? What if the lady likes her so much that I cannot sneak into her picture for fear of being spotted by an outsider? And worse, what if she does buy the whole world and then leaves it to her firstborn and he is a monster and rips portraits, killing everyone? What if he replaces us with those fancy pants....What are they called?" Edward scratched his head in wonder. "The new portraits? Oh...Oh! Photographs!" He leaned close to Adaline. "I hear that photographs are worse than the European Aristocracy! What if he *IS* European aristocracy?"

Edward's rant first made Adaline's head spin, and then made her smile. As he went on she couldn't keep back a dainty laugh. "Perhaps after she-or he-or they have taken over the world you can stop worrying so much Edward!" she lay her free hand on top of her friend's. "I don't think things can become nearly as bad as you say. And if they do, all we can do is hold up our heads and make the most of it. Maybe we will get a little sore from being frozen so long, but I don't think that will stop you from visiting Eliza or stop your active tongue." Her tinkling laugh rang through the frame again.

Edward smiled a bit, inclining his head slightly in response to Adaline's words. His smile grew into a grin. "I suppose it would be great fun getting to know the lady who bought the entire world. She can buy all she wants, but can she tame it?" He raised an eyebrow at Adaline. "I suppose as long as Toby can't stop me from seeing Eliza, no one can!" He nodded sharply in determination.

Adaline smiled. "As long as you find time to still come visit me." she said, giving him a teasingly sharp look, "I feel like I haven't seen nearly enough of you lately."

Edward smiled. "Of course I will. I do apologize. I'll keep my priorities straighter in the future. I do wish my portrait hadn't been moved forever away." He shrugged, not allowing it to deter him much. "Regardless, I ought to make it up this direction far more than I do."

Remembering that Edward's frame was farther away from hers brought the previous subject back to Adaline's mind. "You said that your frame was very near the...woman...didn't you? I think I'd very much like to see her if she is still here." She couldn't be nearly as frightening as Adaline's imagined version of her.

Edward nodded. "Yes. It is. I'm sure the woman is still there. She seemed to be in for a long talking to from the...what was it? Sails-woman? I suppose she owns a ship or something grand like that. Anyway, let us go see, shall we?" He picked up his hat and held out his hand to Adaline.

Adaline accepted his hand and with her other held up her skirts so as not to step on them as she stood up. "Is there a ship portrait down by your new home? I don't think I've ever seen one there. And I don't think I've ever heard of a woman who owns her own boat. What a strange world this is becoming." She started with Edward to the back of her painting.

Edward shook his head. "No. No, Adaline. There is no ship portrait by me. A shipmaster wouldn't bring the ship into a house anyway. It wouldn't fit." He winked at the young woman playfully and grinned. "No. It is my theory that after the woman with red fingernails buys the world, she'll need a Navy to run it. Like King George had or better. Like the Spanish Armada. I reckon that sails-woman owns a whole fleet and that's why they must bargain." He stopped at the back of Adaline's portrait and held open the door with a small bow. "See? A woman who owns the entire world and has her very own Navy! Can you imagine?"

Adaline blushed. Of course a ship wouldn't fit into the house. She had completely misunderstood her companion. Times like this were why Gertrude from upstairs always said that a lady should keep her mouth shut. Her embarrassment soon turned away though as she remembered Edward's playfulness. She laughed again as he began another rant about the woman taking over with a navy. "I cannot imagine nearly as well as you can Edward." she said cheerily, walking out the door and through her back garden toward the carved, wooden circular staircase underneath a weeping willow. "But perhaps I will better understand you when I see both of these women for myself."

Edward chuckled. He never could understand why most girls he came in contact with downplayed themselves while he was present and had given up trying to years ago. "Oh Adaline, I'm sure you have a fine imagination. It just needs a little oil is all. Gertrude tells you not to think too much. I say, think away! It's the only way to survive in the world. Especially if women are going to be running things like the Navy." He grinned. "I've been saying that to Eliza for years. She just laughs at me. But she does know mathematics, and world history, and writing, and so many more things. You do to, Adaline, I'm sure. I do not surround myself with the ill-witted and dull of spirit!" He grinned. "Come, my intelligent,

well imagining friend. Let us go and see the queen of the world, shall we?"

Another blush stole onto Adaline's cheeks though she had to admit to herself that she was more pleased than embarrassed with Edward's praise. She smiled widely "Do you think we are dressed well enough to meet a queen?" she teasingly glanced at she and Edward's attire. "Perhaps she will take one look at us and decide this world isn't worth conquering with her navy after all." She lifted her skirts and began the descent down the wooden spiral staircase.

"All the better for the world." Edward grinned, shutting the door. "Besides, it's not like we have a choice what we wear. We come in what we come in. They can like it or not." He nodded, plopping his hat haphazardly onto his head. "Besides, she's only a future queen. So, more like an...enemy monarch. And we're spies." He grinned, catching up with Adaline at last. He grinned wider, offering his arm. "We don't want her getting the wrong impression of us and trying to...befriend us while we're still forming opinions, now do we? Maybe she'll mistake us for the sails-woman's sailors."

Adaline laughed again. She always seemed to spend half of her time with Edward laughing. "I can stand being mistaken for a spy. But if she thinks that I am a sailor working under some other sails woman or man, I think I shall have to shut myself up in my room and cry for at least a few hours. Gertrude would be absolutely horrified!" As they descended the staircase, the green grass and flowers of Adaline's garden merged into first rich, dark soil, and then into wooden planks as the picture changed. Now they were in a small, one room cabin in front of them and hallways leading both to the left and the right. Adaline had visited the picture a few times before. Inside was a cozy family who spent their days playing and talking in front of the cabin's fireplace. Gertrude would never have set foot inside of course, the family was much too poor and rustic for her civilized taste. But Adaline found them all to be quite charming and enjoyable company.

Edward smiled and tipped his hat to the family. "Have you heard? There's to be a new queen of the world, and she's hiring a Navy! We're going to go spy."

"Edward!" Adaline smiled, nudging him gently. "Don't pay him any mind. We're just going for a stroll. I look forward for dinner tomorrow!" she waved at the children, nodded her head to the parents, and began dragging Edward away down the hallway before the startled family could react or ask questions.

"I shall be back to tell the news!" Edward shouted, waving his hat. "And yes. I have sweets, but you must eat your supper first! I'll be back." He allowed himself to be dragged out of the picture frame. The wooden planks merged back into dark soil, quickly turning to green grass. Trees sprung up around them as they walked. The sounds of birds and a lively river came from nearby. "I think the scenic route is the way to go this time of year," Edward commented. A pack of hounds ran past, barking at a scent in the distance close enough for the breeze they created to ruffle Edward's collared shirt. Edward smiled. "Don't you think so, Adaline?"

"Oh definitely." Adaline said, taking a deep breath of the trees and stepping slightly to the side so she was not in the way of the hounds. "It's a perfectly lovely time of year." Out of all of the pictures, Adaline loved the outdoor ones the most. "What do you suppose the hounds are chasing today? Red fox?"

"My cuff button," Edward commented, glancing at the ground.

Adaline glanced at the ground with him and laughed. "Not much of a catch is it?"

Edward bent, picking up a small, golden object from the grass. "It is if you're my father. He was furious when I lost this here the night before the Duke's party." He smiled. "Now about the hounds....Likely they're chasing their own scent, but don't tell them that, hm?" He raised his eyebrow at Adaline as he secured his cuff button safely in his inner coat pocket.

"Oh I wouldn't disappoint them." Adaline said in mock seriousness. "Here. After we've seen this future queen, we'll go a few portraits over to the seamstresses and I'll fix that up so that it doesn't come loose again. We don't want to disappoint your father anymore than the hounds. Imagine, his own son not properly dressed to see the Duke! Shameful." she smiled teasingly at Edward as they neared the curving stream. It stretched before them, on and on into the next frame, twisting as the trees thinned until there were only a few surrounding the pool where the stream began. At the other end of the pool was a mighty waterfall near which sat a quaint little house with smoke rising from the chimney and cheery candle lights through the windows.

"Aw. He expects me to grow up proper like everyone else," Edward said, walking through the waterfall with a sigh. "I'm not exactly the prime example of the perfect son." He shook water from himself, emphasizing his point and smiled. "Oh he'll be thrilled, certainly. Honestly though, were it not for him and Mama, I couldn't care less if all of my cuff buttons magically disappeared. The shirt would look better that way. Watch your step." He held out a rather wet hand to Adaline.

Adaline reached for the parasol hanging from her arm and lifted it above her head and grabbing her skirts before reaching with her other hand to take Edward's. She may not entirely have minded getting wet, but the gown she was wearing tended to shrink slightly and itch horribly unless she kept it dry. "I think you're a perfect son. Or at least a perfect gentleman. And I think that shirt may look, or at least feel a lot nicer without the buttons." She knew that her wardrobe would be greatly improved with a few minor adjustments to the dress, shoes, and stockings. "Who knows. Perhaps your uncuffed shirt may even become the new style and one day, the new 'proper.' All young men who are raised correctly would be expected to wear their shirts unbuttoned at the cuffs."

"And their hair all mussed. Oh! Wouldn't that just be grand?" Edward exclaimed, doing his best to help Adaline to stay dry while dripping himself. "I do try to be a gentleman. Though Papa seems to think a gentleman must dress like one. Adaline, what if we, you and I and all of the portraits found paint and made new clothing? Clothing that we liked to wear? Oh, then we could galavant in our own style of clothing and no one would be the wiser because it was on us, see? Can you imagine? I would wear a shirt like the medieval huntsman in the cellar hallway, you mark my words I would. And as for shoes? None at all!" He leaned close to Adaline and whispered, "No shoes. Can't you just see Mother's face now?" He smiled. "No shoes. No, sir! None. My feet would be as hard as leather from all of the walking. Then I could carry anyone anywhere. Over mud and rocks. Then you girls wouldn't have to get dirty. Unless you wanted to. Wouldn't you like that, Adaline? If I could carry you?" Without giving Adaline time to reply, he continued, "How

about you? What would you wear?"

As almost any woman, Adaline's initial thought after Edward asking if she would like him to carry her was, "I would hope that I wasn't too heavy for him to lift..." But that thought was soon gone after his final questions. "Me? Well...I, I don't know. I've never really thought of it before..." Edward's new fashion sounded strange, but exciting and fun at the same time. And it didn't matter what he wore, Adaline was sure he'd be as dashing as ever. But as for herself...

"I...I think I would wear a light, flowing dress, like the kind that the dancing nymphs wear in the attic. One that wouldn't drag me down or like to get tangled." Her own dress was lighter than most of the women she and Gertrude had tea with, but was still much too heavy to dance and frolic in nature as she often wished to do. A new image of her own fashion filled her imagination, and she smiled as she continued, "I think I would wear most of my hair down, and hold up the top with flower wreaths and barretts so it wouldn't fall into my eyes. And I wouldn't mind running barefooted either, so long as I could stay in the soft grasses and smooth rocks." The image of her freely dancing in the forests, clearings, and mountainsides made Adaline's smile widen and she rocked back and forth happily, swaying her skirts slightly. Suddenly an image of Gertrude's shocked face filled her imagination. She laughed, "Can you imagine what people would think of us? Running around in our strange fashions?"

"The people, Adaline?" Edward laughed, throwing his hat up in the air and catching it. "Oh, they'd think we were awful strange at first. Gertrude'd probably be furious, but then they'd see how much fun we were having and how well we liked our new clothes....and they'd see how pretty you were. And that I could still be a gentleman. Then they'd beg to know how we did it. And you know what I'd tell 'em?" He paused for a moment to take a breath. "I'd tell them they could do it too. Then you know what I'd do? I'd take dear ol' Gertrude's skirts and paint off a few layers if it were summer time. And she'd be awful mad at first. And Ma and Pa would beat me something sore, but then she'd find out she liked it and she'd keep it and it would become the fashion. Then no one would dare laugh, 'cause Gertrude was wearing the skirts." He half hop-skipped and grinned at Adaline. "That's what would happen, little lady." He nodded to her. "That's what'd happen."

The story played out in Adaline's imagination perfectly as Edward said it. And though part of her said that it was silly thinking and would never work, most of her believed it and almost wished it were so. So much in fact that she did something that she might never have even thought of doing before. "Why wait to start this new fashion?" she asked, "Let's try it a little. Right here. The ground seems comfortable enough here." And with that, Adaline began taking off her pinchy shoes, one after the other. The ground felt deliciously cool to her stockinged feet, and for once she didn't even care if they got dirty or ruined.

Edward grinned. "Yes. Why ever not? If it isn't comfortable for your feet, I can always carry you." He removed his overcoat and sighed with relief. He then kicked off his shoes one after the other and removed his socks. "Well, did I dress well in the new fashion or does it need more?" He stood for inspection, the cool grass feeling soft against the bottoms of his bare feet.

Adaline tapped her chin with one finger and squinted as though she were carefully inspecting the new fashion. "Well, it just won't do to only have one cuff unbuttoned." she said, reaching for his other sleeve, "We'll just have to unbutton the other side to make it even. It just wouldn't be fashionable to have it unbalanced. That collar looks a little tight as well. But, it is *your* fashion. Wear it as you like!" she smiled.

Edward surrendered his other cuff. "Of course you're right, Dear Adaline. I musn't go mussing up this fashion as well. And as for the collar, it is a bit tight. Perhaps if I loosened it..." He removed his necktie with his free hand. "Now what do you think?"

"One last touch..." she said mischievously, reaching up her hand to tousle up his hair a bit. "You did say that the men's hair must be a certain way. This fashion should be perfect."

Edward laughed, reaching behind Adaline with one hand to a tree full of pink blossoms. "Ah yes. This is a new fashion, so all must be precise. Allow me, if I may, inspect you now Adaline." He placed the hand with the flowers out of sight and circled the young woman. "Hm...It's almost perfect. Though you are right...." He stepped close to Adaline and whispered while reaching for her well done bun, "the hair," he pulled gently to be sure Adaline was not harmed. The bun began to unravel, her long hair falling gently down her shoulders. He reached up with both hands and used the clasp that held the bun to pull the sides back and stuck the handful of flowers through her hair on either side. Then he stepped back. "The hair is everything in fashion. Especially to a woman. And everything must be perfect." He nodded, grinning. "Everything."

Adaline felt a little self-conscious as Edward circled her and strangely vulnerable and almost somehow immodest as her hair fell from it's bun and slid gently down her back. He was so gentle with it that she barely felt his hands though his words sent a happy shiver down her spine. She reached up and felt the flowers holding back the hair that would have fallen in her face and smiled widely. She looked at her companion. "Why Mr. Baker, I do believe we've started our own fashion. And without the help of your paints and brushes either! Come on, let's have a look at ourselves." She grabbed Edward's hand and moved over to the other side of the pool where they would be able to see their reflections clearly.

Edward followed Adaline to the far side of the pool and looked at their reflections. "Adaline, you look amazing! Can you imagine what Eliza would look like dressed up like this?" He sighed. "You really are very pretty. And you look....comfortable."

Imagining what Eliza might look like with Adaline's fashion was far from her mind as she inspected herself and Edward in the clear pool. "You don't look too stuffy and improper yourself Edward." She said with a smile. "And the comfortable way you wear that fashion almost makes me wish I could try it for myself." "If only they could wear their fashion all the times, without all of the negativity Adaline knew they would receive if they ever showed up in front of Edward's parents, Gertrude, or many of the other inhabitants dressed as they were.

Edward chuckled. "One of these times I'll bring some extra clothing, perhaps on washing day, and you can try for yourself. I don't see why a new fashion can't be shared." He nodded to Adaline. "Between the two of us."

Adaline looked at Edward, smiled, then looked back at the pool. She looked absurd! Her dress (despite she and Edward's best efforts) was wrinkled and wet in some places, her hair looked scattered and strange not up on her head, and a glance at her stockings showed grass stains and dirt. She was sure that she should be horrified, Gertrude certainly would have been. But, she couldn't help but feel...better this way. Maybe not the picture of beauty, like Eliza, but beautiful in her own, natural way.

A sudden thought occurred to her and she laughed and turned to Edward. "Do you suppose that *now* we are in proper attire to meet the future queen?" ((Sorry that I kept you up so late last night. I get WAY hyperfocused when I'm knitting. :P Hope that you didn't totally konk out in class today, I'll try not to get obsessed so late in the night/early in the morning. haha. :P Haha. You didn't keep me up. I could have gone to bed whenever. I just didn't watch the time. Naw. I was alright. I didn't have class 'till 9. It's all good. :))

Edward gave Adaline a final looking over and scratched his non-existent beard. "Well, if she's going to buy the world, there's going to have to be some new fashions. Things are going to change, Eliza--I mean Adaline. Sorry." He nodded his head to emphasize his apology. "Dressed this way, we are at the height of the new style. We are most definitely dressed in the most proper attire the world has to offer." He flashed her an energetic grin. "And we're the only ones to boot."

"Don't worry about it." Adaline said referring to the name mistake. It was actually quite flattering, she always thought very highly of Eliza. She somehow couldn't see the whole world's style changing just because of a new "queen" who she still didn't really know would rule. "Well, we'll never get to meet her if we don't get going." she walked over a little ways, grabbed her skirts and leaned over to pick up her shoes.

"You are quite right, Adaline." Edward agreed, picking up his own pile of odds and ends. "My portrait is the next one over, I believe, if you'll allow me to lead the way." He offered his free arm to Adaline.

Adaline took it with a small nod and smile. They walked for a moment in silence, until the waterfall was a soft humming in the background. Adaline glanced at her shoeless feet. "Do you think your parents are at home?"

"They're probably out visiting," Edward replied with a shrug. "I was going to go to Eliza's place. It's a better view. Besides, I need to check in with Toby to be sure of my work for today anyhow." He smiled unconsciously at the thought of Eliza. It didn't matter if there was a mean new queen coming. Eliza would still be there, and that was all that mattered. The picture began to fade, melting into a scene Edward knew by heart. The grass underfoot melted into cool cement surrounded by a grove of coniferous trees. An angel stood to the right side of a long, wooden bench upon which lay a sleeping figure of the most stunning young woman Edward had ever set eyes on. He sighed and released Adaline's arm, walking around the back of the bench. He leaned over Eliza as if to bend and kiss her, paused, and jerked away. "I just can't do it." He smiled at the sleeping figure and whispered so softly that even he couldn't hear himself. "You're beautiful, you know. And I love you more than anything."