

Here is a sample of a Full Evaluation for \$699. There are two parts. Part 1 is the letter and synopsis of the Evaluation below and following are actual markups made on the first 2-3 chapters

Full Evaluation of “Absalom’s Beauty” by Sally Sample

Dear Sally:

Thank you for allowing me to read “Absalom’s Beauty” and offer suggestions for how to make it stronger and more marketable. As with all critiques, opinions are subjective, so implement what works for you and your story, and set the rest aside. The most important thing is that it always remains your story.

I’ve made numerous comments in the margins of the manuscript while reading through it, and you’ll see the ideas for structural solutions evolving along the way. You’ll want to read all of the comments before making any revisions so that you can see the big picture of the structural changes may choose to make.

Humor and character motivation are among your strengths (for Charlotte), and character motivation is also one of your weaknesses as a writer (for the hero and heroine). Charlotte’s character is particularly well drawn and funny, in that she thinks and says things most people wouldn’t dare to think or say. If you can put that same kind of single-minded purpose into the hero and heroine, they’ll be just as appealing as Charlotte is. Even though Charlotte is what’s known as an unsympathetic character (basically, a mean person we wouldn’t really want for a friend), we want her to succeed because she has a goal and she goes after it with all her heart. Mary does have a strong, admirable motivation, but what’s missing is that her motivation (her need to find her father’s killer and the horse) doesn’t propel her to actually search for the killer and the horse. James seems to drift along, trying to avoid the women in his life until the debacle with Stewart and Absalom. Try giving James a noble purpose and having him actively pursue a goal, and he’ll pull up his hero socks faster than you can blink.

Susan (Editor)

Author

- Sally Sample

Title

- There are layers of meaning in this title. As well, it sounds like the name of a pedigreed horse, which fits perfectly with the story.

Voice

- You’ve captured the historical feeling beautifully.

Conflict

- This is an area you can work on. For a novel to keep the reader's interest, the characters must come up against some kind of conflict. In the first part of the story, where Mary is working for the baron, she wants to keep her job but he won't keep her in his employ unless she becomes his mistress. That's strong conflict. But once she meets James, things start going rather well for her, other than his occasional thought that she might be trying to seduce him. Conflict can be subtle, but it needs to be present and it needs to be relevant to the plot. I've given specific examples of relevant conflict in the manuscript.
- A novel is built of conflict between the characters, and conflict creates dramatic tension. Without that tension, a story can't engage the reader emotionally. Even in a romance novel, the romance is not the plot—an engaging plot springs from clashes between characters who have opposing goals. After Stewart comes back into the picture, you have a tremendous amount of conflict. Try to get some of that intensity into the earlier chapters as well.
- Mary has an initial goal of finding her father's murderer and finding his horse, but she doesn't seem to do anything to move toward achieving that goal until she accidentally finds the horse. While I've made suggestions for getting the murder/horse into the middle of the story, a simpler solution might be to eliminate the vow to find the murderer/horse, and give Mary a story goal of earning her own keep, since most of her scenes seem to revolve around her troubles with money and finding a home (the horse would still play into the plot, it just wouldn't be the main goal). I don't detect a goal for the hero at all, and that's a major structural issue.

Plot and Scene Structure

- Most of your scenes end on an interesting note, but many of them contain little or no conflict between the characters and don't seem to relate to the heroine's goal of finding Absalom the horse and her father's murderer.
- There are many good books on plot and conflict available, but one of my favorite resources for learning how to create effective scenes is an online article called "Writing the Perfect Scene" by Randy Ingermanson. You can find it at <http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/art/scene.php>. This article will also help you address your tendency to rush through the scenes without taking time to fully develop the characters' small-scale motivations and reactions.
- The scene where the baron propositions Mary initially feels like it's full of conflict, but if you look at it closely you'll see no connection between Mary's stated story goal and the baron's proposition. What might tie it all together is Mary's asking him for information about her father's murder, and his countering with an offer of information in exchange for her becoming his mistress. This kind of plot issue is present in most of the scenes that make up the middle of the story. In every scene, Mary should actively pursue the truth about her father; it should motivate everything she does. Maybe the baron even told her he'd look into her father's murder if she became Samantha's governess. Those are just some suggestions to help you find a way to tie all your scenes to the plot so they form a cohesive story (if you keep the murder/horse goal as the main story goal).
- I've made copious comments regarding goals and conflict throughout the MS. I

realize you'll find them repetitive, but it's important to see places and ways to keep the story cohesive. Right now you have what's called an "episodic plot," which is a collection of scenes that are for the most part unrelated to the story's main purpose. All the scenes need to be tied together with an overall story goal and a common theme.

Characterization

- The characters are well rounded, except perhaps the baron and Stewart, who seem to be purely villainous.

Character Arc

- Mary shows courage even in the beginning of the book, but she does have a nice bit of character growth when she stands up for her right to sell the horse to whomever she chooses. Her faith grows over the course of the MS too, which is important in an inspirational story.
- James grows to learn, in a subtle way, that his feelings for Mary aren't unholy, and that changes his outlook on life.
- Charlotte undergoes the most change by far, even though she backslides a little. Her character shows that you do know how to create vivid, complex characters.

Point of View

- This is a strong point. You stick to one POV per scene, and it helps the reader bond with the character for the duration of the scene.
- I'm concerned about the amount of the MS devoted to Charlotte. She completely takes over the story in a lot of places, which is a hazard with strong secondary characters. You need to make sure Mary remains the star of her own story.

Setting

- Try to weave in more description of the setting to paint an image for the reader. Not in big chunks, but in subtle strokes.
- Remember to use all five senses to draw your reader fully into the scene.
- If you have Donald Maass's *The Fire in Fiction*, do the exercises in chapter 4 to use setting as a way to convey emotion. I can't recommend this book highly enough.

Backstory

- You've layered in the backstory subtly. It works well.

Dialogue

- There's an occasional line that feels like chitchat, but most of your dialogue adds tension and moves the story along.
- Do watch out for dialogue that develops the faith thread. You have a slight tendency to imbue the dialogue with a preachy feel in these areas.
- Try to flesh out long sections of dialogue so you don't have "talking heads" that create confusion about who's speaking.

Pacing

- I think that once you make sure each scene furthers the story goal the pacing will pick up nicely.

Theme

- It feels like the theme is one of trusting in God to provide for us. This will appeal to many readers, especially when many Americans are reeling under difficult financial burdens.

Showing vs. Telling

- You have a nice balance of this. When you flesh out the emotions more with internal monologue, body language, and physiological reaction, you'll find your scenes have an even bigger emotional impact (which is what showing is all about).

Formatting

- This is quite professional.
- Normally the title of the story belongs in the header, not the footer (but always tailor your submission to the individual agent/publisher's guidelines).
- Make sure your dashes are dashes (—) and not hyphens (--).
- Ellipses are formed with three periods separated by spaces . . . like this.

Mechanics

- For titles like viscount or baron, you need to capitalize only when the title is used as a name or as part of the name. Ex: *They say Baron Oakbridge is a real villain* or *I'd be delighted to marry your cousin, Baron*. But if the term is used generically (usually it'll have *a* or *the* in front of it), then lowercase it. Ex: *Let's invite the viscount to tea*.

Recommendation

- Decide on definitive goals for your hero and heroine. Because this is a romance, their goals should be in opposition to each other. Extreme example: She wants to find her father's murderer and he's the murderer's attorney. The opposition doesn't need to be that direct, but it should be present, and it should be strong enough to create conflict that will carry the entire story.
- Make sure the characters' overall story goals motivate them to take action in each scene toward achieving their goals so you'll have a cohesive plot.
- Reduce the amount of pages devoted to Charlotte, so that Mary can take her true place as heroine of the story.
- Use more detail and all five senses to convey the setting.
- Use more body language, internal monologue, and physiological response to create stronger emotions, especially in scenes with a lot of dialogue.

Thank you again for sharing your manuscript with me. Despite the structural issues, you have a strong start to an engaging book.

SAMPLE OF SPECIFIC CHAPTER EDITS FOR THE FIRST FEW CHAPTERS

Absalom's Beauty

A 72,000 word

Regency Romance

Prologue

1802, Surrey County, England

Arthur Spencer pressed on Absalom's reins, urging him to the right side of the road, allowing the galloping horse behind him to pass. Instead of passing, the rider slowed his horse to walk in step with Absalom.

Arthur eyed the rider. "Where are you going with such haste?"

"I needed to speak with you about a matter of some import."

"You could not tell me before I left your home?"

"I did not want to concern my father with these matters."

"What matters, son?" Arthur asked.

"Should you not call me Your Grace?"

Arthur studied the boy who thought he was a man and had no right to that title, at least not yet. "Tell me."

"I want my horse."

"Your horse?" Arthur laughed and then reached into the satchel strapped across

Comment [SL1]: I've gone through this first short scene in depth so you can see the sort of techniques that will help you make the entire manuscript stronger. For the rest of the scenes I'll make more general comments.

Comment [SL2]: Word choice?

Comment [SL3]: Consider a different term like *overtaking him* so you don't have a repetition of *pass/passing*. It's a nitpicky thing, but repetition, especially of nouns and verbs, can really stick out on the page.

Comment [SL4]: Identify this character. Ex: Arthur eyed his cousin, Henry (or whoever it is).

Comment [SL5]: I inserted a space.

Comment [SL6]: Intriguing. You've built what Donald Maass calls "bridging tension." Good job. Also see how I moved *my father* into the boy's statement about "these matters" to tighten things up a little.

his shoulder. He felt inside it for his Bible.

"Stop." the young man lunged at him.

Arthur raised his arms in defense as Henry's greater weight struck him. Together they toppled to the dusty road with his cousin's arms around his waist like steel cables.

He bucked in the boy's grip.

The boy punched him.

Pain exploded in his face. Blood trickled down Arthur's nose. He wiped it off, gaping up at Henry, who stood sneering at him, and then at his bloodstained hand. "What have you done?"

The boy laughed and reached down to scoop up a large stone that lay by the side of the road. He raised it over his head.

Mary attempted to match the delicate stitches found on the handkerchief that belonged to her mother, but no matter how hard she tried, she could never master the intricate pattern. She pricked her finger and stuck it in her mouth, glad her father was not around to witness this act of childishness. She put down the fabric she used for practice and rose to get a cloth to wrap her wound before it could bleed onto her needlework.

The clock on the mantle said it was nearing eight o'clock. Her father had never been this late before. His tutoring sessions with Stuart usually ended by early afternoon. And this afternoon, Mary eagerly awaited instruction in the sciences. She had completed her morning reading and felt she grasped the content well enough to answer any question her father could ask. She counted herself blessed to be taught by one of the most sought

Comment [SL7]: There's no motivation (an action or event that causes him to react by pulling out the Bible) for this, so it feels jarring and maybe even like it's a way to tell the reader Arthur is a Christian. To write effective scenes, it helps a lot to think in terms of "motivation-reaction units," which are explained in detail in the online article, "Writing the Perfect Scene." <http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/art/scene.php>

Comment [SL8]: Again, there's no obvious motivation for this action. Also note that I did a little tightening here. Because you're in Arthur's point of view, you don't need to explain to the reader that he sees something—it's enough to put that something on the page. ...

Comment [SL9]: This "shows" that he's stunned. Body language, and often physiological response, creates an emotional response in the reader more effectively than using an emotion word (*stunned*, *angry*, *happy*, etc.) does.

Comment [SL10]: This is a good hook. I took it a little further. Never hold back when you have a chance to be mean to your characters.

Comment [SL11]: For example. In a fight scene, or any high-action scene, slow it down like slow-motion sports footage. It may seem counterintuitive, but you'll actually increase the dramatic tension wh...

Comment [SL12]: Good job of showing the heroine as not quite perfect. Readers love to bond with someone who's a little flawed.

after tutors in this part of the country.

From outside she heard a commotion and went to the window. Men she did not recognize carried what looked like a body. Was the man drunk? Why were they bringing him to her door? She looked around the small room for something to use for protection. A fire poker leaned against the rock fireplace. She grabbed it and hid behind the armoire by the door, her body trembling in fear.

The men rushed in leaving the door standing open.

Mary pressed against the wall, studying the open door, determining if she could escape without them seeing her.

"Put him on the bed." She heard one man say. Two other men carried the limp body into her father's bed chamber.

"Where is his daughter?"

Father? Mary put a quivering hand to her lips to stifle a gasp. Her heart pounded in her chest. What had they done to her father?

A man came from the bedchamber.

Another spoke. "Will he live?"

Live. He must live. He must. What would she do without him?

"Paul, you stay here with Mr. Spencer. I'll find his daughter after I get the doctor."

The other men followed him out the door.

Paul. Was that the boy down the road? **The one she could outrun?** When the men left, Mary peeked around the corner. Paul stood by her father's door.

If they were going for the doctor, certainly they meant her father no harm. Did

Comment [SL13]: This decreases the dramatic tension by making the reader start thinking about things outside the scene. Do you need it?

they? She peeked around again and jumped when Paul looked her way.

"Miss Spencer?"

Mary came from her hiding place with the poker in the air.

Paul lifted his hands, his palms turned toward her. "I mean you no harm. We found your father injured on the road."

Comment [SL14]: Repetition.

Mary dropped the poker, pushed past Paul and ran to her father's side. His face was pale except where it was streaked with blood. He labored at breathing. She reached for his hand.

His eyes flickered open. "Mary." He spoke her name softly and with love.

Comment [SL15]: Powerful allusion.

"Father, what happened?" She pulled up the end of her shawl and wiped the blood from his face.

He didn't respond but looked at her with a tender gaze.

A knot had formed on his head.

"Father, who did this?" She ran a trembling finger over the lump.

"Tis in the Bible."

"What is in the Bible?"

Her father lifted his head and reached for her hand. "Find it in the Bible."

Had the injury caused this senseless babble?

"I know, Father. It is in the Bible." She spoke, hoping to calm him so he could rest.

He shook his head and seemed to get more agitated. "No. The doc..." His strength faded and he fell back on the pillow.

Why had they not come back with the doctor?

"You must..."

"No, Father, do not try to talk. Save your strength."

"Absalom."

"Do you need me to get Absalom?"

Her father moved his head side to side on the blood-soaked pillow and spoke between labored breaths. "Stolen."

"Stolen? Absalom was stolen?"

"St..." The words he attempted stopped abruptly as did his breathing.

"Father." Mary clutched his shirt in her fists. "No. You cannot die. I will find Absalom. I promise. Please, live." Mary sobbed into his chest.

Hands gripped her shoulders and pulled her up and away from the bed. "Come, sit." One of the men led her to a chair by the fire. "I'll fix you some tea."

"I do not need tea." She rose, pulling at the shawl stained with her father's blood. "I need to find Absalom. Please, my father said he was stolen. I promised him I would find him."

"His horse?"

Mary nodded and stood looking out the window. She would keep her vow. She would find Absalom.

Comment [SL16]: It looks like he's trying to tell her something and she's misinterpreting him. If so, great job of creating a sense of tension. I want to shake her and say, "Mary, open Father's Bible and you'll find the object he's trying to tell you about."

Comment [SL17]: I would add a sentence about this being the one thing she can do for her dear father, but other than that, you've done a wonderful job of giving your heroine a strong story goal with a motivation that will make readers root for her to succeed.

Chapter One

But in all Israel there was none to be so much praised as Absalom for his beauty: from the sole of his foot even to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him. 2

Samuel 14:25

1807

James Lewis, the Viscount Hawken, folded the letter delivered to him earlier in the day and sighed. Not again.

While the note did not proclaim the purpose of their gathering, there could be only one reason—matchmaking. This wasn't the first such event, neither would it be the last because that would mean either one of two things—he was snagged up in marriage or he was dead. Both options he'd like to avoid.

"Hastings." He called out for his valet.

The man appeared immediately. "Yes, m'lord?" Hastings bowed his lanky body.

"Send for William and then return to help us dress."

Hastings bowed again and left the room.

Everything in life should be as dependable as Hastings.

Comment [SL18]: If this is the hero of the story, you've shown an intriguing slice of his life, but neglected to identify his story goal. Ideally, his goal will be in direct to the heroine's. For example: she intends to find Absalom, so, assuming his son is the one who killed her father, he might intend to set the boy up in business—her search for the horse would expose his son, while his son's success would be the success of her father's murderer.

Comment [SL19]: Clarify what's going on at the opening of each scene. For example, if you used *invitation* rather than *letter*.

William walked in moments later with Hastings close behind. William had surpassed James in height. He now stood equal with Hastings, but the similarities in the two men ended there. His son's features still held its youth. William favored his mother, though there were days James couldn't bring her image to mind. Like the fading of vibrant fabric left in sunshine, so had the memory of her face begun to fade. He studied William's face hoping to remember—her smile, her laughing eyes. But his son's male features always made the image incomplete.

James stood from his writing desk. "We have been invited to Oakbridge for tea."

"Tea? I planned to ride again."

"We can ride to Oakbridge."

"I am sure that it is not necessary for me to attend." William strode toward his father.

"It seems you have been specifically invited by the Baron."

"Father, I do not want to go." At that moment William sounded more like his ten-year-old brother, George, than a man of twenty-one. "Why must we go?"

Should James reveal the true nature of their meeting? No. He should not. William would be in better spirits if he did not know.

At Oakbridge, the country estate of his deceased friend, Hartman, James half-listened as the new Lord Oakbridge droned on about his good fortune.

Good fortune? Someone had to die for him to receive such wealth. Had he no shame? No care or thought for the three girls who lost their father?

After claiming his inheritance, the new Baron now sought to rid himself of his unmarried cousins. The youngest was only five--not yet ready for marriage, but Lord

Oakbridge would even marry *her* off if he could shed himself of the responsibility.

While James had no inclination toward another marriage, neither did he have one against it. Marriage was inevitable for someone of his social standing, and after all, it was ordained for a remedy against sin as the clergyman had read during his marriage vows more than twenty-two years ago. He intended to delay this remedy for sin for as many years as possible, because no one could match his dear Catherine, the mother of his two sons.

He didn't think of marriage as a prison sentence as some men claimed. He just wasn't convinced that he could find another mate as agreeable as the one he'd had.

Mary Spencer finished the lesson sooner than she expected and sighed. She treasured the additional time she would have to herself as a result.

Samantha sat beside Mary at the large wooden table. The room that had been designated for Samantha's studies was much too large for the two females. Mary preferred a small room with a table half the size as this.

"Samantha, since we have completed your studies for the day, you may go play with your doll if you wish." Mary ran her palm over the girl's silken curls. "But do not leave this room."

"Come play with me, Miss Mary." Samantha grabbed Mary's hand and pulled.

"No, you play. I need to prepare tomorrow's lessons."

"But, Miss Mary..." The girl slanted her blue eyes toward her governess and poked out her lower lip.

Mary shook her head.

The girl hung her head at the rejection, picked up her doll and trudged to the far corner of the room, her footfalls echoing through the large chamber until they were muffled by the rug near the fireplace. Samantha dropped to the rug, placed her doll in the cradle and not so gently rocked it.

Mary looked down at the books in front of her. Studies were the last thing on her mind at the moment. Instead she picked up a sketch pad and drew a picture of Absalom, her father's horse. Absalom, like his Biblical namesake, was the most beautiful creature she had ever seen. At one time, she had believed Absalom would make her father a handsome living once Arthur Spencer no longer tutored the future heirs of **Dukes and Viscounts**. She remembered Absalom so well, as if he stood before her today. His coat was a reddish-brown and shone like burnished copper in the sun; a bay, his mane, tail and lower legs were black as coal. Mary pictured herself burying her head in the Arabian stallion's unruly mane before she carefully braided it to reveal the most unusual birthmark in the shape of cupid's heart.

The years had passed and she still had not found him as she had promised her father that night so long ago. Taking a position as governess kept her from her true purpose in life—finding Absalom. But what else could she do for food and a warm place to sleep?

"That is a good drawing, Miss Mary. Could you draw me a dog?"

She hadn't heard the five-year-old come up behind her. "You are supposed to be playing."

The girl returned to her corner to play. For such a loud child, she had an uncanny

Comment [SL20]: When used generically, lowercase titles of nobility.

ability to appear and disappear in complete silence.

Mary continued her sketching and escaped back in time to when she had a home and a father.

Bang!

Mary jumped. The door to the classroom had slammed shut. She looked to where Samantha had been playing. The corner was empty. Mary's heart pounded in her chest.

How had the child gotten past her?

James's son, William, shifted in his seat and pulled at the collar underneath his cravat, as though he stood on the gallows and not sitting on a parlor sofa on the Oakbridge estate. One look at his son's face told James that William understood the reason of their invitation and wanted no part of it. William had no interest whatsoever in Charlotte, the eighteen-year-old middle sister, or so he told James every time they visited Oakbridge. James caught his eye and gave him an encouraging nod. William might be uncomfortable, but he was scheduled to return to Oxford the following week where he pursued studies in law. No matter what Lord Oakbridge had designed, William had no room in his plans for a wife at this time and would soon be away from his lordship's plotting.

James had positively no interest in the older sister, Jane--a mere child at age twenty-one, but her cousin had no qualms about matching her with an old man of forty-two.

He supposed he was like any man, preferring a young face over a wrinkled one.

Comment [SL21]: This looks like it's probably a decent end-of-scene hook, as long as the missing child is an important part of the overall plot.

But beyond the looks, would he have anything in common with someone that age? One time he did. His own sweet Catherine had been a tender twenty when he married her. But he was only twenty-one at that time. They could talk to one another for hours. Now he was so far removed from the youth of the day--his own son included. It was a rare moment when the two of them could agree on anything. And the two of them were men. How much harder would it be engaging the opposite sex?

From the corner of his eye, just over the shoulder of his host, James caught a glimpse of a fast moving object in the corridor. It moved with such speed he was uncertain he saw anything. An apparition, perhaps?

Just as he turned his head back to his host there was another quick rustling. He could make out the color yellow. Intrigued by the commotion outside this room of conversational torture, his imagination turned to thoughts of what could be the cause of such goings on. He was fortunate that even in the dullest of company, he could entertain himself.

Unwilling to shift his attention from the entrance of the room for fear of missing whatever action was occurring in the hallway, James focused on the door, aware he wasn't being an attentive guest. His host rambled on about the changes he was making on the estate since he had inherited it.

James caught another quick flash of movement from the corner of his eye. But this time the motion came from outside the window. Once again the yellow flash followed just behind it, this time descending down the long slope of the lawn to the garden.

"What do you think, Lord Hawken?"

James's face colored. He should have paid attention. His host waited for a response and he had not a clue how to answer, settling for, "I believe so," and hoping it would be neutral enough to answer whatever his host had asked.

"I believe so? What kind of response is that to my question?"

"Well, ah..."

"I asked which country estate will be the best for hunting this year."

"Oh, yes, I thought you were asking if I would be hunting this year." James hedged.

His son stared at him in bewilderment as if his father had gone mad.

James rose from the sofa where he had spent most of the visit and crossed over to the window that almost touched the floor. In the distance he saw a child being chased by a woman dressed in yellow. They ran across a large expanse of lawn and to a maze with walls as tall as the woman. She stopped short of following the child into the shrubbery. Her fists were balled and he could tell by the fluttering of her gown that she stomped her feet as she shouted into the labyrinth. The woman turned toward the window. He quickly slipped to the side, but a moment too late. He was certain she had seen him because as soon as he stepped away, she ran into the maze.

"Lord Oakbridge, I admire your maze. Do you have the solution memorized?" he asked.

"I never go into the blasted thing. I think it may have been put in as some sort of torture device."

Nothing could be as tortuous as listening to the Baron.

The Baron rose from the sofa. "I tried to find my way in it once and had to have

my man come with the ladder to help me out."

"Well, Oakbridge, I suggest you get a ladder," James said as he turned toward his host.

"Whatever so? Are you telling me you wish to give it a turn, old man?"

"It seems someone else already has and may be lost in it."

"What do you mean somebody? Who?"

"I saw a woman and a child go into the maze."

"Not again." Oakbridge rose from his seat and summoned the butler, who in turn summoned the housekeeper. They both sighed heavily before heading to the garden.

The Baron came to stand beside James at the window. Had the Baron's face not shown some considerable pain, or possibly annoyance, James would think the whole occurrence comical. Down on the lawn below both the butler and the housekeeper ran into each other time after time and always missed the turn that would take them right by the little girl and in another turn would take them by the young woman in yellow.

The woman in yellow cupped her hands against her face. James assumed she yelled the child's name. The butler and the housekeeper did the same. But the child apparently was enjoying their confusion immensely.

James turned from the window and followed his host. This tea might yet turn out to be quite entertaining despite its unfortunate purpose.

Comment [SL22]: LOL!

Comment [SL23]: It looks like this scene furthers the romance thread but not an overarching plot. Each scene should move the story's plot forward. It can also further the romance, add humor, develop character arcs, etc., but it *must* advance the plot.

You have a cute end-of-scene hook, though. That's one of your strengths.

Chapter Two

From the window William watched the two people scurry about the maze. Why was his father so fascinated with the happenings down below in the garden? Was one of those people Charlotte, the middle daughter, the one William tried with his whole heart to avoid? As a child she bossed him around incessantly and as a woman she openly declared her desire to marry him.

He hoped she would stay lost in the thing until they could leave for home. Unfortunately, any hope of that was shattered when his father followed the Baron to the garden. He could understand his father wanting to help the youngest daughter, but not Charlotte, not that, that... there were no words in William's vocabulary to describe her, for he didn't use those sorts of words. But that woman could come close to making him.

Seeing as he was alone in the large estate, he made his way to the library. His thoughts had been on that room throughout the afternoon's conversation. The library was one of the largest rooms in Oakbridge and that is the way it should be. Hawkefield's library was sufficient he supposed, but nothing like Oakbridge.

William breathed in the smell of leather and old paper. He walked to the world

Comment [SL24]: This characterizes him as a man who covets wealth and power. A good job, if that's how you intended to portray him.

globe nestled in its black walnut Chippendale stand and spun it like he used to do when he was younger. Back then he would stop the spinning with his finger and then dream of traveling to that destination. He had gained his love of reading from that game, for when he did not know the country, he would search the library for a book on that land. He studied many exotic locales. When he finished his studies at the University, he wanted to travel.

He spun the globe again, this time stopping it on India. Would he travel to India?

He spun it again, this time landing in the ocean.

He heard footsteps coming down the grand staircase in the foyer and then voices.

"Come quickly, Jane." It was Charlotte's voice.

Oh, no. He must hide. He tucked himself behind the open door to the parlor. From the small crack he saw Charlotte run to the window.

"I do not see William in the garden." Charlotte turned from the window as Jane walked in the room. "Where could he be?"

"Cousin was entertaining the guests in this room, was he not?" Jane asked.

"Oh, I know, William always goes to the library." Charlotte grabbed her sister's sleeve and tugged her toward the library.

William's heart thudded in his chest. He closed his eyes tight and prayed. *Please do not let them find me. Please do not let them find me.* He pressed his back against the wall and waited.

Moments passed before he heard her voice again. "He is not here, Jane. You can go back to your bedchamber. I shall keep looking."

William heard steps leave the room and let out a breath, happy to be spared. He

Comment [SL25]: Foreshadowing that all will not turn out as he hopes?

Comment [SL26]: He's coming across as almost childish and cowardly. You may want to layer in some slight noble aspect of his character so he doesn't start to come across as a caricature, even if he's the bad guy.

stepped from behind the door to come face to face with Charlotte.

"Did you lose something back there, Mr. Lewis?"

Mary heard her little charge giggle behind her. Samantha was just on the other side of the hedge. Could she possibly crawl through the greenery? She looked at the delicate fabric of the new gown the Baron had given her that morning and insisted she wear it. She had never owned anything so fine. Nothing would cause her to risk ripping it to shreds in the dense shrubs separating her from Samantha.

Then she heard gurgling and a commotion most unlike what she would expect from a sprightly little girl. It sounded as if she scraped at the ground.

An epileptic fit.

She had to get to Samantha.

Mary tried opening the shrubs but saw the futility as the branches grew too close together. Her only choice was to go over, and she wasn't certain the shrub would hold her. She clawed at the branches, and stuck her slippered foot into a v-shaped branch.

"I'm coming, Sammie. Hold on darling. Hold on."

Her footing slipped and she heard the inevitable rip of fabric. If only she could have kept the child indoors where the only place she could run was down the long corridors. She had been given a list of what the child was forbidden to do— no running, no horseback riding, no hard candy.

In the beginning, she believed the master of the house overly strict. Now Mary understood the purpose of the rules, but a child of five with an adventurous streak could not comprehend why she couldn't get out and play like the others.

Comment [SL27]: Here you have a scene that develops William's character but doesn't seem to advance the plot. What is William's goal in life (his story goal)? You need to get that on the page and make sure it works against the other main characters' goals.

In an unsupervised instant, the child had once again gotten lost in the maze. This one lapse could cost Mary her job which made her try even harder to get over the hedge.

The limbs gave way as she crawled over the top of the perfectly level shrubbery. Her body sank in. The branches scratched at her body and face, but she couldn't stop. Samantha needed her. She threw her legs over, grabbing branches to keep her from landing on the child. She eyed a small clearing and dropped to the ground.

The girl struggled in the throes of a fit. Samantha attempted to pull the jerking head into her lap and off the graveled path. The shaking stiff body relaxed. Mary pulled the child into her arms, brushed pebbles and twigs out of the golden strands of hair and searched for any signs of bumps or bruises.

The voices of the search party called their names.

"We're here." Mary feared to face her employer, but she had no choice. Samantha needed to be carried to her bed.

A wooden ladder was lowered down on their side of the hedge.

"This is the way out," the butler's concerned voice beckoned to them.

"Samantha, can you climb up the ladder to Sims?"

The girl nodded and Mary supported the child until the butler could reach her, lift her out of the maze and carry her to the manse.

Mary slumped to the ground and breathed deeply. She fingered the torn fabric of the gown. There were too many rips for a simple mending. The gown was a total loss. A tear moistened her cheek, and she quickly wiped it away with one of the shredded pieces of fabric. Mary leaned her back against the prickly hedge, relieved the others had forgotten about her.

Comment [SL28]: To portray Mary as a sympathetic heroine (in other words, a heroine readers will love and will root for), tweak her worry so that it's for Samantha's well-being instead of her job.

Comment [SL29]: See how here, her only thought is for Samantha. It will endear her to the reader.

Comment [SL30]: This seems like a pretty quick seizure, especially if it's grand mal. It's OK if they can be that quick. I mention it because the seizures I've seen usually last quite a few minutes.

Comment [SL31]: Her fear is all right, but she's coming across as not quite selfless enough to be a hero. While we don't want her to be inhumanly perfect, we need her to be a little bit more perfect than we are so that we can admire her, or be honored to have her as our friend. Does that make sense?

Comment [SL32]: Again, this seems too quick. Often a seizure patient will be pretty woozy or even unresponsive immediately following a grand mal seizure. You might consider going back and making it a much more subtle seizure, which would eliminate any problems with the swiftness of Samantha's recovery.

"Are you coming?"

The sound of a man's voice coming from above startled her. She looked up to see a most agreeable man with dark hair stretching out his arm to help her up the ladder. His eyes pleaded for her to take his hand. She reached for it. The smoothness spoke of nobility. Nevertheless, he effortlessly pulled her up and over the hedge before helping her down the ladder on the other side.

She patted down the torn pieces of her dress. "Thank you for your assistance. I must attend to Samantha."

She kept her shoulders straight, aware that the man quietly walked behind her, across the expansive lawn and back to the house.

The woman's hand had been shaking as James helped her across the hedge. Why had the butler rushed the young girl to the house? One look at the woman in front of him convinced him that the child didn't need the attention, the woman did. Her clothes had been shredded to pieces and spots of blood showed on her arms and on the material around her legs. She even had a cut across her cheek--the only imperfection on a porcelain face. Twigs clung to the tendrils escaping the pins that held her upswept hair.

Why didn't she wait for the butler? Why had she frantically scaled the top of the maze? Had she seen a snake? Not many women would ruin a gown like the one she wore. While he couldn't claim familiarity with women's fashion, he did know the woman wore the latest design. He admired the yellow color on her shapely figure. But the dress did not fit with her station within the household. Although he had never seen her before this day,

Comment [SL33]: Samantha is the device you're using to get the hero and heroine together, but does any of this pertain to the search for the horse, or the murder of Mary's father? If not, you'll need to rethink the scenes that revolve around Samantha.

he knew she wasn't part of the family. He assumed she was employed by the household, most probably as the governess for the youngest sister, Samantha.

"Let's put something on those cuts." James said as they reached the veranda.

The woman looked down at them as if she saw them for the first time. "I will be fine. I'll wash them in my room." The woman picked up her skirts and fled into the servant's entrance of the manor, confirming his earlier thoughts.

The drawing room was empty, so James went in search of his son and his host.

William averted his eyes away from Charlotte. "I was looking for a book."

She smiled. "I can assure you, we do not use books as door stops. What book did you want?"

He looked toward the globe in the corner of the library. "A travel book on India."

"On India. I wouldn't know if we had one, but Jane would. But we can talk about that later. I would like for us to talk privately." She linked her arm in his and pulled him toward the parlor.

"Would you like more tea?" she said, after she had seated him on the sofa.

"No."

Charlotte sat beside him, moving closer to him each time he tried to slide away from her.

"Sims!" Lord Oakbridge yelled from the foyer.

Charlotte rose at her cousin's voice and hurried to the door to close it before he caught her alone with William. But then again, he probably did not care. He was walking toward the parlor but was stopped by William's father. Charlotte lingered at the door to

Comment [SL34]: You've done a wonderful job of characterizing Mary through James's observations of her. I'm still left wondering how the scene pertains to the plot, though.

Comment [SL35]: Tweak this opening line so that it's clearer that the scene is in Charlotte's point of view.

hear what they had to say.

"Lord Oakbridge, thank you for inviting us, but now we must go."

"Why must you? You have not talked with Jane. I so hoped to have her play the piano forte for you."

"I told young George we would not be gone for too long. He wants to play me in a game of chess."

"Of course. I shall invite you back soon."

Charlotte turned to discover her prey had escaped from his place on the sofa while her back was turned. He had returned to the adjoining library and stood with his hands behind his back as he perused the shelves.

In moments his father would come for him. She would have no time to make her wooing attempt. Later. She would pursue this the next time. And she would make sure there was a next time. Even if it meant she had to coerce her cousin. She was sure she could do it.

Comment [SL36]: This is intriguing. I'm not sure who her cousin is—William or someone else.

Comment [SL37]: Again, a scene that advances a romance thread, but not a plot thread.

James found his son searching the bookshelves in the library.

"You always find the books, don't you, William?"

"Father, it's a curse. I can't stop myself. What was going on down there?"

"Hartman's youngest daughter got lost in the maze and the servants helped her out."

"The baby? She's a darling. Last time we were here, she told me she would marry me someday."

Comment [SL38]: This makes him sound feminine.

"Fanciful notion. Whatever would a female see in you?" James enjoyed teasing his son.

"Humorous, Father. But apparently, her sister sees much in me."

"Apparently? What happened while I rescued a damsel in distress?"

"Damsel in distress?" William's right eyebrow moved up.

"Long story. You're evading my question."

"What question?"

"You know very well what question. What went on in here while I was out there?" James pointed to the window.

"Charlotte."

"Oh. Say no more."

A long silence ensued as William looked over the books.

James thoughts were not on the books, but on the woman in yellow.

William turned to his father. "Much has changed since that time young Samantha told me she would marry me some day."

James remembered the day the news had been delivered that his closest friend, Hartman, had passed away leaving three young daughters behind with no suitable relative other than the bachelor nephew to care for them. James considered taking them in himself, but when he heard the nephew would allow them to remain under his roof, he was slightly relieved. After all, he had boys. He knew nothing of raising daughters and without the benefit of a wife, he didn't think it would work. And it was assumed the new Baron would marry Jane, the eldest. Many wondered why that had not happened. And James wondered why he had been singled out to be a match for her. If only Lord

Oakbridge would follow through with his duty.

"I was twenty then, she was only four. She played with George like they were meant for one another, don't you think? Maybe you should draw up the marriage contract with Lord Oakbridge for those two."

"Lord Oakbridge would schedule the marriage ceremony for tomorrow if I did that. And, you know your brother, he would think it disgusting to kiss a girl."

William laughed. "Yes, kissing a girl would be like kissing a chamber pot I recall him saying."

"He'll grow out of that in short time. You felt that way when you were ten, William. I hope that is no longer the case. You are prime material for the marriage mart."

"No, girls aren't disagreeable anymore. In fact, they're mostly agreeable, but I don't have time for all that blathering idiot love nonsense right now." William looked around to see if anyone else listened and then whispered, "And certainly not with Charlotte."

"That's right, wait until you're my age for that blathering idiot love nonsense."

James saw William glance his way as if he would never even consider his father as a candidate for blathering idiot love. And he wasn't. Not anymore, anyway. He had that sort of love once. There could be no one who could bring out those feelings again.

No one.

Comment [SL39]: This was cute the first couple of times, but it's starting to feel repetitive.

Comment [SL40]: Again, good development of the romance thread, but no external plot.

Chapter Three

Mary cowered back into her chair as her employer blasted her with insults. He didn't say anything to her that she had not thought herself. How could she have let her guard down and let Samantha escape? And to destroy the fine dress he had bought her. It was inexcusable.

Lord Oakbridge paused from his insults and turned to the window that overlooked the maze. He stared at his own reflection in the night-darkened window, straightened his cravat and smoothed down his hair. And to think she once thought that square jaw and full smile attractive. His looks, handsome though they be, now repulsed her.

"So, you see, that is why..." He slowly turned toward her with dramatic effect.

Released. She was being released from his employment. Under normal circumstances it would have been a relief. Mary could not tolerate the man, but she loved the little girl. How could she leave Samantha? The child said and did the most adorable things, making Mary want to wrap her arms around the little one and squeeze.

"...I'm giving you another chance." Lord Oakbridge said with a smug smile on his face.

"You're letting me stay?" Mary relaxed her tense body.

"But there will be some changes."

"Of course. I'll never let her out of my sight again."

The man waved his hand. "I am not as concerned about Samantha's health as I am worried that if word gets out she has this problem, the other two will never get married. And you see, that is one of my greatest desires." He looked at her as if he was waiting for something. "Aren't you going to ask me what my other desires are?"

She did not care what his other desires were. Her only concern was for the little girl resting upstairs. "What are your other desires?"

The man paced in front of the window. "I want a wife. A suitable wife."

Mary's hand gripped the chair. Surely, he did not mean to marry her? Bile rose to her throat. She would marry the ugliest man alive before she would marry this man. His behavior was a far cry from his handsome exterior.

"I will not be able to find a wife with these three under my roof." He shrugged. "And I do not want to be burdened with their care anyway. So, you must keep Samantha out of sight at all times. Do you understand? I must get the other two married. Unfortunately, James and William did not have an opportunity to speak with Jane and Charlotte today because of that little escapade."

Mary hid her relief. Keeping Samantha away from prying eyes would be a pleasure, not a burden, difficult though it sometimes was. "Yes, my Lord, I will keep her out of sight."

"But that is not your only duty now."

"I know, I must teach her."

"No, that isn't what I mean." A long moment passed. "You see I am a man. And a man has needs. Needs that a wife fulfills, but I don't have a wife. I have you."

What was he suggesting? Appalled, Mary held her breath.

He stepped behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders and squeezed. "You can give me what I will not have until I find a suitable mate."

Mary put her hand to her mouth to hold back the contents of her stomach that seemed to be making its way up. She wanted to flee. Pack her trunk and run for the nearest coach, back to the cottage where she grew up with a father who spoke kind words and read from the Bible and gently explained what it meant to become one flesh and to remain pure until the wedding day. She had promised him she would.

This man wanted her to break one of the promises she had made to her father—to remain pure until marriage.

Mary shrugged her shoulders from his grip and stood, slowly turning to face the man. "You should have released me, because I will under no circumstance agree to such a reprehensible suggestion."

"You have no choice." He smiled a knowing smile. He knew she had nowhere to go. No family. No friends to take her in.

"Then, I shall leave."

"If you leave, take that little nuisance with you."

"Samantha?"

He nodded.

That evil uncaring man. "Of course. She will come with me. We will leave by morning."

Before she could leave the room, Lord Oakbridge grabbed her by the arms, pulled her to him and forced his lips onto hers.

Mary struggled to free herself from his grip and turned her face from his. His hand moved to under her chin and guided her lips back to his. She pushed him away, stumbled backward and wiped her mouth with the torn sleeve of her gown.

He laughed. "I just wanted you to see what you were giving up."

Mary fled to her room and locked the door behind her. The thought of that horrible kiss lingered. She took one of the torn pieces of fabric from her dress, doused it with water from her washbasin and scrubbed her lips hard until she felt she'd rubbed them raw. She threw the scrap of yellow onto the floor. She despised this dress now that she understood why she received it. She thought it had been a gift of gratitude for her work with Samantha like the gift of a horse to her father. But it wasn't so. It was a ploy to win her favors.

Mary lit the logs in the fireplace to take the chill from the room, and after ripping off the ruined gown, she threw it into the fireplace.

God forgive me because I want to see Lord Oakbridge in the fire more than this dress.

He would have an eternity of fire to punish him. That should satisfy her, but it didn't. She wanted him in pain now for his evil behavior.

Do not judge people, because only I know the heart.

Mary walked to the window, rested her forehead on the cold glass and stared to

Comment [SL41]: Possible logic issue: That she's had to take a position as a governess suggests she was left penniless after her father's death. So how can she possibly have the means to care for herself and a child if she leaves?

Comment [SL42]: Oops. She's still in her underwear.

the grounds below. *But Lord Oakbridge's heart was crystal clear.*

But God loves the sinner, Mary. He sent his Son because of that love.

She raised her head and looked to the ceiling as if to see the Father she prayed to.

How can you, God, love that man?

I loved King David.

She raised her hands in frustration. *But what does that have to do with this situation? He was the apple of your eye.*

Remember, David had lust in his heart and took another man's wife?

But that does not mean it is right.

It isn't right, Mary. But I am a God of grace and mercy.

Mary walked to the bed and picked up a pillow and then threw it with force back onto the bed. *Have mercy on me because I want to kill him.*

Mary, I want to redeem him.

I cannot be of service to you in this matter, God. I despise the man.

Christians in the early church hated Paul because he persecuted them. Look how he served me. I can take the vilest sinner and make him a new creation.

I'll pray a vicar comes to talk to the Baron, but I cannot talk to the man.

Are you running away from Me, or the man?

The man. I would never run away from You.

Jonah did. Look what happened to him.

Mary wiped a stray tear and laughed. Would God *really* send a fish to swallow her up? Would he really want her to stay here with a man who proposed such a thing?

Certainly not.

Comment [SL43]: This made me cry.

Mary tossed her few items of clothes into her worn portmanteau. If it weren't dark she would leave immediately.

With a candle in one hand, Mary walked to Samantha's room. The child looked like a cherub with her arms thrown over her head in a semi-circle. There was no way possible she'd leave her here with that man and her two sisters. Neither sister showed affection toward their younger sibling and certainly not to Mary. In fact, they acted as if they resented Mary for coming. She wouldn't feel sorrow for leaving the two of them. They were old enough to take care of themselves.

Quietly she set her candle on the dresser and began packing Samantha's clothes. In the morning, Mary would tell Samantha they were going on an adventure.

An adventure. She thought of all the books Samantha loved for Mary to read to her. How could she leave without the books?

Mary finished packing Samantha's clothes and knelt by the sleeping child. Would Samantha sleep as peacefully if she knew the upheaval her governess would soon cause her?

She had one more task before going to bed to attempt a good night's rest before she began her new journey. Mary picked up the candle from the dresser. Its small flame bounced flickers of light off the heavy wood-paneled walls of the long corridor in front of her.

Gently she pushed the library door and flinched when its creaking hinge echoed in the silence. The room with its floor-to-ceiling shelves looked menacing in the darkness. She brought the candle close to the spines of the books that Samantha's father had specially bound for his library.

With her one free hand, Mary placed book after book in a pile, choosing books that Samantha loved and some not yet read.

The stack grew higher and she wondered if she'd be able to take both the books and the candle back to the room without dropping something.

Thou shalt not steal.

This isn't stealing. These books belonged to Samantha's father. They belong to her. Wouldn't you rather her have them than that louse of a man?

No response. Was that good or bad? Was God giving her the choice? A decision over whether what she was doing was right? It didn't matter because her mind was made up. Samantha needed the books. The books brought excitement and taught the girl to love reading.

She placed the candle on one of the shelves and gathered the stack of books in her arms. She heard mumbling coming from the far corner of the room. Her heart stopped and then began to pound in her chest. Had someone been watching her? Would they tell the Baron?

Mary shuffled the books to her left arm and grabbed the candle, debating whether to blow it out or investigate.

She crept toward the location of the sound. The candle's light quivered in response to her nervous hand. The Baron sat slumped back in his chair with an empty bottle of something in front of him. He mumbled again, startling her. Asleep.

Leave before he wakes up she told herself. In her haste a book toppled from the top of the pile. Its noise echoed in the darkness. She didn't stop to pick it up.

When Mary returned to her room, she closed the door and leaned back on it in

relief.

Comment [SL44]: I really can't tell where the plot is going, or whether there is one. Is the main plot going to revolve around Mary's struggles to care for Samantha after they leave the baron's home? How does that form opposition to her finding the horse and her father's murderer? Wouldn't she be asking the servants if they'd heard anything, or approaching the baron's family members for the same reason (before the baron makes his icky proposition, of course)?