

LADY AUGUST by Becky Michaels

EXCERPT

Chapter Two

London, England

April 1816

Samuel Brooks stood outside St. George's, holding an umbrella over himself and his mother. He shifted impatiently from foot to foot as his mother spoke to Mrs. Jennings and her daughter, afraid they all might catch a chill if Mrs. Brooks didn't let the poor women go soon. That or Miss Jennings might get the wrong idea about him, which he was sure was his mother's real intention behind making them stand out in the rain after church that morning.

Miss Jennings was a pretty girl—if one liked brown-haired, brown-eyed, slight things. But looks alone could not tempt Brooks into marriage, even as his mother's harassment over his perpetual bachelorhood became more severe with each passing year. He discreetly consulted his pocket watch for the time.

"Mother," Brooks said, interrupting something Mrs. Brooks was saying about the weather, "perhaps we ought to let Mrs. and Miss Jennings be on their way. As you have pointed out, the rain has not been conducive for outdoor activities as of late. I believe that includes conversations on church steps."

His mother turned and smiled at him. If he were still a boy, perhaps he would have faltered at the forced expression, but his gaze remained stern. *I will not have you arranging a match between Miss Jennings and me*, he said with narrowed eyes.

Must you be as cold as the weather? His mother asked with a tilt of her head. When it became apparent that the answer was yes, Mrs. Brooks turned back to the other two women.

"I apologize, Mrs. Jennings," she said with a slight bow of the head. "I have kept you and your daughter in the rain for too long. Perhaps my son and I can call on you at Stratton Street sometime this week?"

Brooks stifled a groan.

“That would be wonderful!” Mrs. Jennings said with a smile, her eyes flitting from mother to son. Brooks didn’t dare look at Miss Jennings, who was probably regarding him with one of those demure looks that a stupid man might find innocent. Fortunately for Brooks, he knew better.

After they went their separate ways and it was safe to speak freely, Brooks turned his head sharply toward his mother. “I hope you know I won’t be joining you on that call. Unlike that girl’s other suitors, I have actual work to do. Not to mention I’m not interested in Miss Jennings.”

His mother’s nostrils flared. They often did when she was displeased. She turned and glared at her son, her wrinkles in her forehead becoming more prominent. “Miss Jennings is a lovely girl,” she said before turning away again and lifting her chin. “Perhaps you ought to give her a chance. She looks at you as if she adores you.”

Brooks groaned. He loved his mother, but she had the terrible habit of seeing the best in everyone—even those who didn’t deserve it, like his late father. “Miss Jennings looks at any man who comes in her direct vicinity with adoration,” Brooks said. “How can she not? She is on the wrong side of five-and-twenty, and her father was a rascal who did nothing to protect her and her poor mother in the event of his death.”

His mother turned to him, her eyes widening and mouth falling open. “My!” she exclaimed. “I had no idea I raised you to be so arrogant! Mrs. Jennings and her daughter have certainly fallen on hard times, but that’s no reason for us to turn up our noses at them.”

Brooks huffed, shaking his head. “I am not *arrogant*. I am only pointing out that Miss Jennings wouldn’t have looked at me twice last year when there was still the promise of a dowry in exchange for marrying her, and I was nothing but a mere solicitor working for her father.”

“You do not give yourself enough credit,” his mother murmured with a frown. “You may not be a gentleman by birth, but you are by nature, and your business is more successful than some of these estates belonging to aristocrats. You could be quite the eligible bachelor if you only went out and socialized more like your father did.”

“Are you asking me to be more like my father?” Brooks asked, shooting a pointed look at his mother.

Mrs. Brooks offered a sheepish look in response. “No, but—”

“I apologize, Mother, but I have no desire to marry. And I think you and I would both agree that it’s for the best that I have a demeanor opposite of my father.”