

The Valet's Secret

Josi S. Kilpack

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In Josi S. Kilpack's ebullient Regency romance *The Valet's Secret*, a classic case of mistaken identity inspires love between the heir to an earldom and a widow.

Kenneth, disguised as his valet, runs into Rebecca, who dodges his wayward horse just in time. It's a fleeting opening featuring chivalry and an impulsive kiss. Rebecca relishes thinking of the encounter, as does Kenneth, who was struck by Rebecca's responsiveness.

Rebecca's funny, chaste fantasies and worries about her humble stature mix with Kenneth's discomfort about his subterfuge. Meanwhile, their backgrounds add pressure to their clandestine meetings: she longs to escape the home of her bellicose father, and he's unconvinced that it's a good idea to choose a match among the gentry. Introspective passages reveal what each of them makes of the other. The novel is moved along by their fascinating hidden desires and aches, all of which are magnified by unspoken moments and meaningful gestures.

There are nice period embellishments, including the craft involved in silhouette art. The book is lighthearted about reimagining Cinderella's tale, too: there's a godmotherly intervention; in one scene, Rebecca is left coated in ashes; there's a midnight ball, but its telling includes fresh twists. Uplifting themes about second chances in middle age come in as well.

Reticence and propriety dictate Kenneth and Rebecca's interactions; both are sensitive about social classes. Still, their deepest conversations happen off-page, and sometimes their growing closeness is left to inference. Nonetheless, the conclusion is joyous.

Sweet and intense, *The Valet's Secret* is an enchanting romance in which a like-minded couple faces odds that seem insurmountable, but remains passionate.

KAREN RIGBY (January / February 2022)

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