



## Chapter 1

I know I have seen this young woman naked, Michael Winslow, Viscount Althorpe thought. He was just seated at a table at Gunther's with his niece. He studied the red haired young woman in the brown bombazine gown intently. He had vague memories of unbound titian hair cascading over creamy skin. He watched as she pointed out to the shop attendant the cakes and pies she wished to purchase. He remembered full, rose-tipped breasts--

"Uncle Michael, I don't think you heard a word I said," Maggie said plaintively interrupting his thoughts.

He looked at niece Maggie distractedly and quickly said, "I was just wondering if you were going to have just an ice or some cake as well." This seemed to mollify Maggie somewhat. One did not expose one's female relatives to the members of the demimondaine. He continued to study the young woman as she made her purchases with one part of his brain focusing on his niece's chatter.

The young woman must have felt his regard; she looked over to him enquiringly, then with smiling recognition. Michael somewhere in the back of his mind remembered her smile, but for the life of him he could not place the acquaintance. He had vague memories of the warmth of summer and the crisp fragrance of cool clean country air. These transient memories momentarily displaced the fragrance of fresh baked pastries and the oppressive humidity of the sweet shop. For him to have such intimate knowledge of her nude form, he must have known her well indeed. He surreptitiously sent a wink in her direction. The young woman waggled her fingers discreetly at him and hurried out of the shop. He noticed a young man in rough clothing trailing after her holding some of the packages.

"...and then the pink bunny told me that rainbows had jewelry in them--"

Michael refocused his attention to his niece with a start. "What talking pink bunny?"

“I wanted to see if you were paying attention,” his niece looked at him a long suffering expression on her face. “What was I talking about?”

“You were talking about your new saddle and bridle that you received for your birthday.”

“You may have heard me but that young woman had most of your attention,” the little girl said.

“I was just thinking that your new boots should be exactly the brown of that woman’s dress.”

Maggie looked at him knowingly, not taken in by this obvious ploy by her uncle Michael, “My new habit is blue, I think black would be better, as you should know.”

Michael took one last glance at the door through which the young woman disappeared and then refocused all of his attention to his niece.

He remembers me, Emily Blakely thought, as she quickly walked towards her aunt and uncle’s townhouse. There was a new lightness in her step, as she was dodging puddles left by a brief summer shower. She forgot about her tiredness from the two day trip from Bath and riding in closed coach in the sweltering heat. She was transported in her mind to the time that Michael Winslow and his father visited her family when she was but fourteen. As he was an older young man of eighteen, she was pleased and delighted when he played games with her. He treated her as a friend and she had fallen headlong into calf love with the tall, dark haired young man. About mid week she must have worn out his good will though, because he had started avoiding her company and sought more mature entertainments at the local tavern. She was heart-broken at the time. Looking back from the maturity of her years, she realized that the exclusive company of a fourteen year old girl must have palled after a few days.

She walked up the front steps and stopped to inhale the wonderful fragrance of fresh baked goods. She wished to dispel the memories of that long ago summer and focus on the here and now. She needed to fix her thoughts on possibly contracting an alliance. The one thing she had not had since her father died was her

own family. Her relatives treated her well, but she never seemed to stay anywhere long enough to develop emotional attachments. And no one kept her long enough to become attached to her.

Emily finished setting out all of the cakes and tea things with the help of Billy the pot boy. Emily's aunt, Lady Minerva Warrick, sailed into the room, a plump frigate with her beribboned lace cap streaming ribbons like pennants on the mast of a ship. Her daughter Beatrice was a trim packet ship in comparison with blond ringlets and blue eyes. "Mama, I had heard that Madame Violet's establishment was the most fashionable place to obtain gowns," Beatrice said excitedly.

"Oh my yes," her mother replied. "We must also go to Hoby for some new riding boots."

"I cannot wait to go on our first shopping trip."

"My friend Lady Sarah, Viscountess of Anders is having us to tea later this week. We will leave our cards at the two patronesses of Almack's with whom I am well acquainted," Lady Minerva said with almost as much glee as her daughter.

"Aunt Minerva, do you think I could quickly change my gown?" Emily queried. "I have not really had a chance since leaving Bath two days ago."

"Oh of course dear," her aunt said. "Oh good! I'm glad you were able to find some biscuits and cakes for tea. Emily dear, could you please dig your uncle out of the study? After you change would be soon enough. Heavens, when there is settling to be done men go out of their way to avoid the unpleasantness of the disruption. While Horace was holed up in the study, your cousin Matthew abandoned us altogether. He left to go to see which of his friends are in town."

Emily smiled and hurried out of the room. After a quick wash and a fresh dress she sought her uncle in his study. Sir Horace Warrick was scholarly and could be a bit absent minded, except about his studies. He would quite possibly forget to come out for meals at all, if not reminded.

As she knocked and walked into the study, Uncle Horace looked up from the letter he was reading. He appeared somewhat distracted, but he smiled warmly at Emily.

“Uncle Horace, its tea time.”

“Thank you, Emily,” he gave one last concerned glance towards his correspondence before he rose and followed her into the parlor.

Sir Horace greeted his wife with a kiss on the cheek asked jovially, “I say, is it safe to come out now?”

Lady Minerva replied while pouring his tea “Yes dear, but you might not think so--we are planning our campaign strategy to bring your daughter out since we are starting late this year. With Napoleon escaping Elba, it just did not seem right to give our daughter her first season. Especially with the worry of Marcus being over there. Now that Napoleon is contained and everybody who is anybody will be in town this summer. We definitely mean to make a bit of a splash on the social scene.”

He smiled and said, “How much of my blunt are we projecting on spending?”

Aunt Minerva evasively replied, “More than a little, but not too much. We need to set a good impression; Emily needs a couple new gowns as well.”

Emily's head turned in surprise, “Me!”

“Yes dear, you! My sisters and I want you to have a chance this season to have some fun and to contract an eligible alliance. Dorothea was aghast when she realized that you were already four and twenty. She wrote me immediately and arranged for your Uncle Horace and me to sponsor you as well as Beatrice. She could have done a little something there in Bath but all of her acquaintance was of our generation or worse! The only time anyone was in the vicinity who was even remotely suitable was when her friends’ sons visited. Of course, I know you can make some of your own gowns for day and afternoon, but there is nothing like a gown of the first stare for evening attire.”

Emily was overwhelmed with her aunt's generosity. She did not think anybody truly saw her as anything but an extra pair of hands. She said, “Thank you so much! I had never expected that you and Uncle Horace would want

to gown me as well. I had planned on going to the Pantheon Bazaar to get some dress lengths. Now I can spend a little more on my hobbies.”

As well as reading the Minerva press gothic romances, and making her own clothes, she did delicate marquetry on jewel boxes, chests and other things. It takes a long time to complete a work for a present. Even though it was June, she was anxious to start on an embroidery box to hold her aunt's silks for a Christmas present. Her father had loved to work with his hands and he had passed that love and skill, along with his tools, to Emily.

“Emily has been reading guide books Mama,” Beatrice said. “She wants to go to Astleys, the Tower and Parliament.”

Aunt Minerva replied, “I don't know if we will have time for all of those places in this short season but the twins may wish to see those as well.” She rang for the butler.

“Bingham, can we spare a footman to go get dinner from Pulteney's dining room? A nice, cold collation, I should think, with just beef, cheese and fruit. Horace, you so love a nice piece of Stilton. Make sure we don't get anything inferior, Bingham. Remember, Sir Horace was knighted by the Regent just a few years ago for services to the war office. The story behind such services we have yet to hear about.” Lady Minerva hinted archly.

Sir Horace smiled benignly at his wife, ignoring her statement cleared his throat, “Ahem, pass me one of those Salmon puffs, dear. Ah Matthew, my boy, back in time for tea are we.” Sir Horace turned to his oldest son who had just entered the room, the subject of his secretive war exploits clearly closed.

Emily saw her aunt frown, but true to her mercurial nature she immediately forgot her consternation. Her aunt instead focused on winking as much of the ready as she could out of her husband for frills and furbelows.

Emily went up to her room and saw that the servants had already unpacked her things and set out her brushes and miniatures. The only things she was able to take with her from her father's, now her Cousin Nigel's, estate were these miniatures of her parents and her wood working tools. She looked at her

mother's image and thought that Mama would have been happy that she was finally going to be able to meet gentlemen. She crossed to the wardrobe and took out her evening gown that she had just completed. The fashion was for light muslin gowns but she found this beautiful blue and silver material dagger cheap in Bath two years ago. As the material was somewhat heavier than the current fashion, she had only added a few simple ribbons to adorn the bodice and hem. She held the gown up to herself in the cheval mirror and imagined herself dancing with Michael Winslow.

Beatrice said from the doorway, "That's very pretty but not in the current mode. It would be best to put that away and get something fashionable, in pink maybe."

Emily frowned. She looked terrible in pink—it made her skin look mottled and her hair garish. Beatrice went on, "With your bright coloring I will stand out in contrast. Don't worry; I'll make sure that some of my beaux also dance with you."

Her cousin Matthew strolled into the room and shook his dark blond head and rolled his blue eyes. "Beatrice, you are such a twittering nit. Pay no attention to her Em, I told some of my friends what a great gun you are and they are anxious to make your acquaintance. Besides, I ran into Patrick and Simon in the park today and they said that all of the cousins will be here in London. Even Marcus is home from the war."

Matthew must have seen her look of consternation for he laughed and said, "Don't look like that Em! It IS the beginning of the quarter so all of the gents are flush with their allowances. I reminded Patrick and Simon of every time they were light in the pocket and you helped them out. They suddenly remembered what a delightful dancing partner you were for young men learning how to dance. They look forward to partnering you at Lady Filbert's Ball on Friday. Tomorrow, we are invited to go riding in the park in the early morning."

Emily said smoothly, "I am sorry but I have no riding habit and cannot go." She just could not believe her cousin! He seemed to be on a mission to get her out and established. He also apparently wanted to make up for all that she

had missed since her parents had died, real and imagined. Did he get knocked in the head while out walking?

“Emily, do you remember that time when I forgot Mama's birthday and you gave me that box to give her with all that different colored wood?” he queried.

“Yes,” she said, “but you paid for all of the wood later and that truly made the present from the both of us.”

“Well, to pay you back I had Dora, Beatrice's maid, get your measure and had a habit made by Mrs. Donau, the village dressmaker. It should be in your wardrobe.”

Beatrice opened up the other door of the wardrobe and pulled out the new black habit and shako hat. She said, “This will do. And I can give you my old pair of boots. I am not using them tomorrow and I never get up early. Besides, I am going to be getting a new pair measured for me tomorrow; while we are shopping.”

Emily sighed, “I guess I need to know what time to be ready tomorrow morning.”

“6 o'clock.” Matthew beamed.

Michael escorted his niece home and sought out his brother-in-law for some congenial male company and perhaps a brandy. He found James Pierce, Earl of Ballard, in the study. Michael looked around the study at the masculine décor: older leather chairs, dark wood paneling, books. His sister had not been allowed to change anything in here when she redecorated the house.

“James,” he began, “you and my sister seem to rub along rather well.”

“I should hope so,” he laughed. “Your sister and I have been married some twelve years.”

Michael cleared his throat and continued, “How did you come to choose her out of all of the chits trotted out for your inspection that season?”

“My first view of Lynette was that I saw her being whisked out to a moonlit garden by another man.”

“You must have been mistaken,” Michael said aghast.

“Well, she did not seem to be too willing and I knew the chap in question to be a bounder and a fortune hunter. So I felt I should come to Lynnette's rescue. I found the gentleman in question holding a kerchief to his nose. Your sister was tapping her foot, arms crossed, glaring at him. She'd planted him a facer and drew his cork for him,” he smiled with a far off look in his eye. “I knew right then and there that she was the one woman I wanted to rule my household and my heart.”

Michael chuckled. “Now that sounds like her.”

“Well,” James said, “if we don't join the rest of the family soon, the children will have eaten all of the cakes.” The men took their brandies and joined everyone at tea. The rest of the house was decorated with sturdy but fashionable furnishings, colorful cushions and children's toys. Michael thought that this was the sort of home he wanted some day. The home was warm and inviting. His sister Lynnette had done well for herself as had his brother-in-law. His sister had not been the most popular debutante of her year; not even in the top ten. His brother-in-law obviously had not been looking for a spoiled society beauty to grace his home. He had wanted a wife, helpmate and mother. The one time Michael thought he was in love, he had been a young man just up from Oxford. The young lady had given him to believe that she returned his affections but spurned him for a gentleman with a title and fortune. He had had no great expectations at that time; not knowing that in a few short months an influenza epidemic would wipe out a distant branch of his father's family leaving Michael's father the Earldom and all of the entailed riches and estates.

He had also seen examples of typical spoiled society beauties making life difficult for the people they deigned to honor with their hand in matrimony. He knew he had to marry some time, Michael thought. He would do well to emulate James and avoid some of the strategic plotting of the determined mamas of the ton. He would find a nice young lady maybe not of her first season, to be his wife. But until such time as I find this lady, he thought with a wicked grin, I will have no problem with renewing my acquaintance with a certain red haired nymph.

## Chapter 2

Emily woke to the early morning calls of the vendors selling fresh fruits and vegetables. Her room was in the back of the house with her window looking out at the herb garden. She took a deep breath; the scent of lavender was very strong but not unpleasant. She could hear Mrs. Henning, the housekeeper, haggling with the vegetable man over some brussel sprouts for dinner.

Emily freshened her face with the water left next to her dressing table basin. She then brushed, braided and pinned her hair. She rang the bell for a maid to help her into her habit as it fastened up the back. She admired herself in the mirror when she was done and thought how the habit became her. Dora had given her actual measurements to the seamstress; so she was able to go without strapping herself. The bold black was well fitting and it seemed to de-emphasize her figure.

She went downstairs to where Matthew was waiting for her. He looked at her in her new habit, his face filled with self congratulations. "Emily," he said, "When was the last time you went riding? I don't believe I ever saw you ride when you visited us..." a look of consternation crossed his face.

He cleared his throat, clearly uncomfortable. "You haven't had much chance have you? I will wager you have not been on a horse since your father died."

Emily met his eyes, her gaze steady, "No matter Matthew, I am going riding now, am I not?" To prevent further uncomfortable talk, Emily said, "Come now Matthew, we must not leave the horses waiting."

She took his arm and he escorted her out to the mews where their horses were waiting. He had rented her a hack from the local stables. She felt the poor thing would have been more suited to haul a milk cart as to carry a rider, so fat and placid was the horse. It was gray and white and when Emily patted the mare's behind there was a cloud of dust. Obviously the beast either had not been groomed or she liked to roll in the hay.

Matthew and Emily rode into Regents Park, he on his prancing gelding and she on her plodding mare. They were met at the south gate by Simon and Patrick Randolph, her Aunt Millicent's boys, and some of their friends.

"Matthew," called Patrick jovially, "I see you are still riding that slug."

She saw Matthew straighten himself, "I see you and Simon are on matching ponies--your mother still picking your horseflesh?"

Emily hid a smile; their chestnut mares did look remarkably alike.

Patrick bristled at this comment, "I will have you know these fillies were sired by Destroyer. He won the Dublin Derby quite handily."

One of the other gentlemen said, "Warrick has a point. Did you have to get twin horses as well? Seems, that you two are quite dandified."

Even Simon, the calmer twin, was affected by that sally. "Only one way to show off our horses' paces, eh Patrick?"

Matthew caught the excitement, "A race," he exclaimed.

Patrick rubbed his hands together with glee, "I propose a race to the east gate. Losers buy a round at White's this afternoon."

The gentlemen all agreed. They lined up and took off galloping to the other end of the park. Emily was left seated on her fat, plodding and dusty mare.

Oh well, she thought, I might have known. She guided her horse over to where some workmen were erecting a large fireworks display off to the side of a riding path. It would be magnificent when it was lit that evening.

"My," she said aloud, "That's some project."

A voice behind her said, "Yes, Prinny has many such things being planned and erected to celebrate the end of Napoleon."

It was to her surprise Michael Winslow, Viscount Althorpe appeared by her side on a roan stallion. The early morning sun shone on his dark brown hair his blue eyes unnerved her with the intensity of his gaze. His fine muscular physique was displayed to advantage on his horse. Emily sighed; even his large gloved hands holding the stallion in place were impressive.

Emily remembered seeing him in his niece's company the previous day at Gunther's. She had seen in his eyes that he had recognized her; which had surprised her. The summer he and his father had paid a short visit to her family's estate, he had made an indelible impression on her adolescent heart she had doubted that she had made such an impression on him. She said hesitantly, "Are they all such marvelously splendid erections?"

He smiled knowingly, "There are erections and then there are erections."

His comment was innocent in and of itself but his tone seemed very suggestive. Emily felt her face flush slightly but felt he could not be talking to her like that. It was just her imagination or wishful thinking. She then remembered the house of cards they had built one rainy day. She smiled at the memory.

She innocently replied, "Why yes I do." Three decks of cards, she thought as she wrinkled her nose at him.

He looked at her quizzically as though he isn't quite sure that she is speaking the same language as he. He shook his head as if to clear it and said huskily, "I have a large one I would like to show you."

She wondered of what he could possibly be speaking. Then she remembered her one visit to his father, the Earl of Conley's estate when she was eight and ten and the pink marble folly. It was a magnificent decorative ruin in the extensive gardens of Conley. She replied knowingly, "I have already seen it, large smooth and pink with gold veins. It feels wonderful inside when it is warm. What a wonderful folly it is."

Emily noted that he seemed to be looking at her the way her young cousin Phoebe looked at a new doll she coveted.

He said, "You should be out with people who have more of a care for you. I would like to offer my escort back to wherever you are staying."

She laughed, "Matthew will be back shortly, he just forgot about me briefly. He insisted that I had to come out with him and his friends this morning. I

think he is so proud of himself for getting me this new habit and he wanted to show me off in it.”

Michael looked at her in an assessing way and she immediately became aware of the woeful inadequacies of her provincially made gown that had so pleased her when she had dressed in it this morning.

Emily met Michael’s eyes and he seemed to be about to continue this interesting conversation when Matthew road up. He glared at Michael and said, “Em, what are you doing with Althorpe here?”

Emily replied, “Oh Matthew, do you know Lord Althorpe? He was just keeping me company until you were done with your race. Who won?”

“I don't know. I dropped out as soon as I recalled that we left you here all by yourself.”

“Matthew, what has come over you? You were never this careful with me before?” Emily said wonderingly. The changes that age and maturity had wrought in Matthew were astounding.

“Emily this is London and you just can't talk to every rake that scrapes up an acquaintance,” he sighed, pointedly glaring at Michael.

“Matthew, I was introduced to Lord Althorpe years ago and he is just renewing our acquaintance,” she said exasperated.

“Ah Emily, I did not know you were acquainted with Lord Althorpe. I am sorry I left you alone and I will be a more attentive escort in the future,” he said, “Althorpe, thanks for staying with Miss Blakely for me.”

Michael spoke to Emily as if Matthew was not present, “Miss Blakely will you be attending Vauxhall tomorrow? If so, I will be looking for you there. There is to be a fireworks display larger than this one commemorating Wellington’s victory at Waterloo” Matthew said, “We'll see, we may have other plans that evening.”

Later that morning, Michael thought about the warm conversation he had had with little Miss Blakely. Young Warrick had better mind his flirts a little better or someone will steal them away, he thought. But something in the young man’s

manner suggested protectiveness rather than proprietary, prurient interest. Warrick's sister is blond, not titian, and the young woman seemed a little older than Warrick as well. Michael had made it a point in seasons past to know which gentlemen might have an ulterior reason to invite him for shooting or a house party in the country. A perfectly capital fellow might betray his own acquaintance by an ulterior motive such as a scheming mama and unwed sisters. Such is petticoat tyranny. He knew quite well that the Warrick family had one marriageable daughter at present and Emily Blakely was not that young lady. He definitely had heard her name before; he just wished he'd remember the whole affair.

Maybe the boy had brought his little "light of love" up from the country, but his ardor had cooled when confronted with the many lascivious entertainments to be found in town. As a jaded man about town, the practiced charms of the many women of the muslin company had begun to pall. With a little town bronze, he mused, the little light skirt from the country would make a splendid mistress.

Michael rationalized that taking over the protection of the young woman would be beneficial to all concerned and leave young Warrick free to pursue new entertainments in town. Maybe, he mused, he might be able to arrange for Emily to renew her acquaintance with a certain pink marble erection. She certainly waxed poetical about it. Gold veins indeed! Then another thought struck him and he grimaced. He needed to give the conge to his current mistress.

When he arrived at his residence, he ran upstairs bathed, changed and proceeded to the breakfast room.

He was stopped in the hall by Pimms, his butler. "My lord, your friend Captain Darning came to call. I took the liberty of putting him in the sitting room. If you would like, I will have him join you in the breakfast room."

"Excellent," Michael stated.

Captain Marcus Darning, late of the Seventy-third Foot, since he had recently sold his commission was not cutting his usual dashing figure. As one of the heroes of Waterloo, he would have been entitled to wear his regimentals at the

many Balls and Fetes. He was wearing typical morning clothes as any gentleman of fashion would. The expression on his face was very serious.

“Michael,” he said, “the given reason I am in town is to help to launch my two cousins into the marriage mart, but that is only part of it. I need to talk to you on private matters and need your help.”

Michael turned to the footman and butler waiting to serve them breakfast and coffee and dismissed them, indicating that they would serve themselves. After filling their plates with eggs and kippers and checking that no one was lurking within earshot of the door, Michael turned to Marcus raised an eyebrow and stated, “Okay, I'm intrigued. What is happening?”

Marcus sighed “Well, you know that with the war finally over and an influx of discharged soldiers, the situation is rife for action by dissident leaders.”

“Yes, that would seem to follow. So many of our soldiers who fought bravely are coming home with no conventional marketable skills,” Michael agreed.

“Well the home office had heard some whispers that the underground leaders of the dissident factions are on a major recruitment drive and are plotting some destructive mischief. The nature of that mischief has yet to be determined. Lord Liverpool is taking a hard line with all dissonant factions. I am going to be investigating these factions by trying to infiltrate the organizations.”

“What you need of me? I will be happy to help wherever I can,” Michael replied. “I've always felt guilty that I was warm and safe while you and others sacrificed and risked your lives for the security of England.”

“Michael, someone besides the ne'er do well dilettantes of society needed to be back home to guide the country. You did what you could and sat in your seat in Parliament and voted funds our way,” Marcus stated evenly. “All I need from you is a base of operations. I was wondering if I may prevail upon you to have me as a house guest.”

“You are perfectly welcome to rack up here,” Michael agreed. “But could you not stay in your family's residence or get a set of rooms?”

“Same reason for both,” Marcus replied, “Too many people would have knowledge of my comings and goings. My mother's entire family is in town for the celebrations and they would query my every move. Rooms would be too public. Every common person in the area would be aware of my comings and goings, as well. Michael, every one of your servants has been with your family for generations. I know you to be as thoroughly ramshackle in your dealings as Chudleigh but it never makes the scandal boards. I can count on you and your staff for discretion.”

“I am not sure whether to be complimented on your trust,” Michael laughed. “Or if I should be insulted on your opinion of my behavior. You compare me to Chudleigh; who is considered a cad of the first water.”

“Actually,” Marcus argued, “all he did was refused to marry a chit who trapped him into a compromise. I know because my cousins Simon and Patrick were at the house party when it happened. The scheming chit and her mama tried it on them. It didn't work, not that they are all that canny, but they hardly ever go anywhere with out each other.”

“Well, welcome to Althorpe House. By the by, isn't Matthew Warrick one of your cousins,” he queried, “I saw him in the park with his current flirt and a few of your other cousins.”

“Yes, he is in town. Aunt Minerva is going to fire off two of my cousins,” Marcus grimaced, wondering how his cousin Matthew could have picked up a flirt so soon. “I don't have but two female cousins of an age to be introduced and it was decided that it would be convenient to get them presented together. My older cousin is a bit long in the tooth to be a debutante but none could make a push to see her established before this time. She was orphaned some years ago when first her mother then her father passed away. She could not put off her blacks until a few years ago. Quite frankly she is cooperative, quiet and they kind of forgot about her until lately. She's a great gun; I'll introduce you to both of them if there is an opportunity.”

Michael finished breakfast and walked over to the bellpull to inform Pimms that they had a house guest. “Please, have Mrs. Pimms to make ready a

guest chamber. Oh, and Marcus,” he turned to his friend. “I have some personal business to attend. I don't know how long it will take to get the deed done so I may not be here when you get back with your traps. Do you still have Justice, that big black stallion?”

“I have had him since he was foaled. Why, do you have likely mares you wish to cover?” Marcus stated with a spark of interest. “I had sold out and I am currently looking for another means of acquiring the ready.”

Michael laughed, “No, my Armageddon is here in town and he is very territorial. Tell Channing, the head groom, what Justice's care and rations are and to put him on the other side of the stable from my horse.”

After finishing breakfast, Michael ordered up his town carriage and made his way to Rundell and Bridges. He would normally walk to the jewelers but he had noted the overcast clouds when he came in from his ride and the air was fragrant with the scent of oncoming rain. London, never a dry place to begin with, was plagued by more showers than usual this year. Some might say the Almighty was displaying his grief at the loss of so many men, both French and English, on the altar of Napoleon's overweening ambition.

Michael shook his head to clear it of his morose thoughts and focused instead on the delightfully intriguing young woman he planned to set up as his latest flirt. He was plagued by his vague visions of the nubile Miss Blakely but she seemed a delightful contradiction. Her innocent expression as she spoke of their past sensual association was extremely titillating. He imagined that she would keep him entertained, until such time as he met a lady who would do as his betrothed.

He arrived at Rundell and Bridges and told his coachman to walk the horses around the streets and be back for him in a quarter hour. He looked into the display window as he mounted the steps and did not see anything as flamboyant as Clarisse's tastes in jewelry went. He thought briefly of picking out a small token for Miss Blakely but decided that he was not cognizant enough of her tastes to be able to choose something at the present time. He, after examining all of the wares, selected a sapphire and diamond bracelet for presentation to his soon to be former light of love.

The jeweler said, "Will you be taking this with you now, sir? We are closing early today, family reasons. We'll be closing at noon."

"Oh did someone die?" Michael queried.

"Lord no! It's my wife's birthday and she wants to go on a picnic in the country. Lord knows, a nice bracelet would be cheaper than closing, especially since my partner has left on an extended buying tour now that the war is over," he laughed.

Michael had the bracelet wrapped and went to Miss Dubonnet's residence. He had had the passionate Miss Dubonnet in keeping for several months. She, typical of the many women Michael had had in keeping since he came to town at the age of two and twenty, was slightly older than he was. He usually chose women who were well experienced without any hint of dewy innocence. His horror of possibly feeling an attraction to a young girl stemmed from an incident that had happened to him at age eighteen.

The maid greeted him at the door looking surprised. "The mistress is in the morning room I will see if she is taking callers yet."

He heard mumbled voices and then a loud exclamation and the maid hurried back out to the hall. She said in a flustered manner, "I am sorry to keep you waiting. Madame is always at home to you, my lord."

She took his hat and cane and escorted him back to the well appointed morning room where Clarisse Dubonnet hugged him and exclaimed, "Michael, mon cher, what brings you over so early! Shall I call for a tray?" She was an exotic beauty with her dark hair and slightly slanted green eyes which were a perfect foil for her pale skin. She was dressed in a green striped morning gown with matching slippers. She peeped under her lashes at him giving him a coy look.

"Clarisse, my dear," he began, "I think you know that my visits to you have been getting further apart." He took note that the lovely slanted eyes that used to attract him so much were narrowing into suspicion. He continued, "I think it is time for us to go our separate ways."

The narrowed eyes were mere slits. She looked like an angry spitting cat. "What means this," she spat. "Go our separate ways!"

“It means I will no longer visit you as a protector or a lover,” he answered carefully, “but I hope we would remain friends.”

“Moi, the conge,” she said, her voice a high pitch as she swiftly arose from the divan and seized a Dresden shepherdess statuette off of a table.

“No one gives moi the conge,” she shrieked, hurling the porcelain statuette at him. Michael ducked as it just missed him. Then all manner of brick-a-brack started flying in his direction. He carefully backed towards the door ducking and dodging poorly aimed missiles.

“Oo the bloody ‘ell do you think you are,” she screamed like a Billingsgate fishwife. The more she yelled, Michael noticed she seemed to be losing her French accent. As he carefully, yet swiftly exited the room, he decided not to give her the bauble he had picked up at the jewelers just now. He left the house precipitously and was glad his carriage was waiting at the curb. Right after the coachman closed the door, the threatened rain started. The release of the rain was akin to the feeling of relief that washed over him. Not only had he ended the relationship with Clarisse, but he had gotten away inexpensively.

He decided to go to his club and maybe relax in the study with a nice glass of brandy away from any shrill female voices. He could enjoy the warmth of the fire and the newspaper while he listened to the storm rage outside.

A short moment later saw him seated in the male sanctuary of Whites. The décor of White’s was all dark wood and deep leather chairs—not a flower in sight. It was a place where a man could relax and blow a cloud if he wanted and no one would think anything of it.

It was early yet, just after noon, and very few other patrons graced the hallowed rooms as yet. As he settled in his chair he was joined by another gentleman looking particularly harried and somewhat damp. The gentleman was the relatively newlywed Marquis of Townley. Townley married the toast of the season a couple of years ago and as far as Michael knew the union was as yet childless. He sank down in the chair opposite Michael, so lost in thought that Michael did not think that the man even noticed him sitting there. Michael cleared his throat to get his attention.

He exclaimed, "Oh Althorpe! I did not see you there, do you mind if I join you?" He pulled a dry kerchief from an inside pocket and wiped his face of the excess moisture wrought by the downpour outside.

Michael assented and soon he and Townley were given snifters of some newly legal French Brandy with the tax stamp displayed prominently for all to see on the flask. Townley tossed his back as if it was so much water and held his glass out to the footman for another dose. His agitated manner was in no way mollified by the swilling of powerful spirits.

After next glass of brandy was treated the same way as the first, Townley exclaimed, "I say, Althorpe, do you by any chance know of any other jewelers who might have roughly the same quality as Rundells? I happened by the place just moments ago to get the wife a bauble for her birthday today the place was closed!"

Michael replied, "Yeah it's his wife's birthday too. I was there earlier myself."

"Celeste is going to ring a peal over my head if there isn't a nice gift for her birthday awaiting her when she comes downstairs. I left it to the last minute," Townley said glumly.

Michael looked at him with pity he remembered him as a great man about town. He seemed to be under the cat's paw these days with that woman he married. Never going to happen to me, he thought smugly.

"Townley, would her ladyship like a nice diamond and sapphire bracelet?" Michael casually queried.

"She would love it above all things," he said, looking up at Michael with a glimmer of hope brightening his forlorn expression.

Michael pulled out the daintily wrapped package from his coat pocket and said, "I bought this little trinket this morning for someone and find I no longer need it."

"I'll send a draft immediately to your man of business, how much do I owe you?" asked Townley, who now looked like a man who had just received a stay of execution.

A price was agreed upon and Townley went on his merry way with a spring in his step. Michael saw him stop at a flower cart and give the girl a whole guinea for a small nosegay. My how the mighty have fallen, Michael thought ironically as he vowed yet again to never give in to petticoat tyranny himself.

### Chapter 3

“Matthew, would you take me to see the fireworks display at Vauxhall tonight?” Emily queried, deciding to test her cousin’s goodwill.

Matthew looking a little askance at her replied, “Em, I really don’t think it would be quite the thing. The crowd there is going to be awfully rough.” He looked at her cunningly, “That Althorpe chap would think you came to see him.”

Emily looked in askance, but plodded on determinedly, “With the most exciting fireworks display to be seen anywhere celebrating Wellington’s victory at Waterloo, I rather doubt it.”

“Just the point Em, anyone with the price of a ticket will be there tonight—the crowds will be enormous.”

Please, Matthew,” she wheedled. “How could I get into trouble with a sophisticated and knowledgeable man about town such as you as my escort?”

“Doing it a bit too brown, Em,” he laughed as he preened a little. “But I guess I could keep you out of trouble.” He hedged a bit, “Mama said that the first evening dress would not be ready until tomorrow at the earliest.”

Emily beamed at him, “I have just the thing to wear—what time should I be ready?”

“Nine o’clock,” he sighed. “We’ll take the boat to Vauxhall. I’ll send a message to Simon and Patrick that you will be coming with us.”

Emily went down the stairs and headed for the front parlor to help with Tea. One of the footman said, “Miss, I was just coming to get you, Sir Horace wishes to see you in his study.”

She followed the footman the short distance to the door he knocked softly on the door and at Sir Horace’s bidding she entered the room. The footman softly closed the door as Emily took a chair Sir Horace indicated near the desk. She felt on edge, the last time she sat in her uncle’s study she had been scolded for some childish mischief.

“Ah Emily, I wanted to speak with you regarding some correspondence I have received in regards to your holdings,” her uncle said affably. “I have been managing your property and funds since your father’s death and while it is not a large sum, it should provide you with an adequate portion on your marriage. I have here a letter from your cousin stating that as your father’s nearest relative he feels he should be your trustee. If you would prefer him to manage your funds instead, I would be happy to relinquish the position to him).”

“Cousin Nigel,” she stated appalled. “Do you not remember how his representative sent me off in a farm cart to the local Inn? I had no money or means to care for myself...”

Sir Horace leaned back in his chair looking over his steeped fingers, his face inscrutable. “I seem to recall the incident.” he said. “Truthfully, Minerva and I should have taken you with us, we assumed that he and his stepsister would have let you stay with them.”

“If it were not for the Innkeeper and his wife, if they hadn’t sent their boy after you—I don’t know what I would have done. If they hadn’t helped me or if you weren’t able to come back for me...”

“I take it that you would be adverse to him managing your funds.”

“Absolutely,” she said. “I don’t know why he is interested in the little that I inherited from my father. Maybe he is trying to curry favor with the local gentry by pretending his abandonment of me was a misunderstanding. His solicitor told me to gather my clothing and leave by noon the morning after my father’s burial.”

Sir Horace sat up in his chair and taking quill in hand, dipped it in ink and started writing. “I’m going to send a man to investigate the matter further. There is something I don’t like about this sudden concern for your assets. Emily, would you tell your Aunt Minerva that I will be just a few moments more and to save me one of those nutty buns?” Sir Horace smiled at her look, “Yes, I know dear, hardly mature of me, but those nutty buns are prodigiously fine.”

A short time after nine found the five cousins approaching Vauxhall by the boat access. From the water, Emily could see the shimmering lights grow larger as they drew closer.

Beatrice exclaimed, "I'll wager that the fireworks display will be bigger than any other seen in London ever."

The male cousins all agreed with her as they assisted the ladies to alight on the dock. At first, the gentlemen were very attentive escorts guiding the ladies around the pleasure gardens and procuring them lemonade. Little by little they became more distracted by the scantily clad fashionable impures abounding that night. Patrick said, "Simon, I believe I see Gorman over there." He gestured vaguely across the garden.

Simon smiled knowingly at his twin, "I haven't seen Gorman in an age so we must definitely renew our acquaintance with him." The Randolph men left before anyone could offer an objection. Emily traded exasperated looks with Beatrice; the twins were not fooling anyone.

As Matthew escorted Beatrice and Emily to the area where the main display of fireworks was scheduled to start at eleven, a woman passed by wearing a muslin dress so thin that she could have been completely naked! Matthew gawked at the site just as the crowd surged and Emily was separated from him and Beatrice.

Michael was walking along a path away from the crowds. He came to the pleasure gardens with his friend Marcus but demurred to stay with him as he was meeting with a party of his cousins. All around him he saw ladies of dubious morals meeting up with well heeled gentlemen for some risqué entertainment. The gardens at Vauxhall were well known for their beauty, but were even more renowned as a popular place to make and keep illicit assignations. He was just about decided to join Marcus when he saw his red haired nymph by the infamous Dark Walk.

Emily in her silver blue dress seemed to be a sensuous goddess glowing in the moonlight beckoning him to discover what pleasures might wait for

him. As he approached her he was touched by the slight look of panic in her eyes. "Are you lost?" he said gently.

She looked up into his eyes and relief was writ plainly on her face. She replied, "I was separated from my escort by a surge of the crowd. I have never seen such large numbers of people crammed into one place."

"Here," he said, "Let us get away from this crowd and stroll down this area of the gardens." He took her arm and led her down the dark pathway.

"This is very pleasant," she said after they had walked a short way, "but Matthew is going to be worried."

"Ah," said Michael his voice sounding strange and husky even to his ears. "If Matthew wanted to keep you, he should have taken better care..." he leaned down and wrapped his arms around her and drew her into a warm embrace. He teased at her lips with his own and her lips parted.

His hand slid up her back and undid the silver cord that had held her dress in place. The embroidered satin of her dress began losing the battle of gravity as it started to slowly slide off her shoulders. His lips and tongue were working their way down her neck while one hand lowered the cloth of her corset, bared her breast and caressed her nipple. He felt himself become uncomfortably aroused. From a distance he heard a chorus of male voices shout Emily's name. She broke away and caught her dress just as it was about to lose its final moorings. Both of them looked into the shocked faces of her three male cousins.

Matthew was the first to recover, "What are you doing with Emily?" he asked in a strangled voice.

Michael was confused, because Matthew did not seem like a man angry that someone had taken his fille de joie from him. This sounded more of an angry brother.

Simon and Patrick were next to recover and stalked up to Michael in unison. They looked at each other and Simon said quietly, "I am the oldest. You take Emily back to Marcus and Beatrice." Patrick reluctantly agreed and turned Emily smartly and refastened her dress hastily with competence born of vast experience with female attire. She was lead away with Matthew and Patrick

flanking her. She glanced back over her shoulder with a worried look at Simon and Michael. Michael did not look her way; he maintained steady eye contact with Simon.

“Well, what is it to be--swords, pistols? You can't go trifling with my cousin and think that no one will stand up for her,” he said in a voice laced with menace.

“Your cousin,” Michael said with surprise, “I saw her in the park with Warrick and a group of young men.”

“My cousin may ride in the park with my brother, Matthew and myself without any impropriety,” Simon said with a snap.

“I didn't know she was your cousin and I recognized her from somewhere. Furthermore, she recognized me.”

“My cousin, Miss Emily Blakely, has been living with our older relatives in Nottingham, Plymouth, and Bath since she was eight and ten when her father died. Try again.”

“Blakely,” he winced as the nebulous memories finally surfaced, “that wouldn't be Sir William Blakely would it?”

“The same,” Simon said tersely, “now what's it to be: swords, pistols or horsewhip?”

“None of the above,” Michael said resignedly, “I could not harm a member of my bride's family.”

## Chapter4

Emily recovered some of her composure during the walk away from Michael and Simon. "Patrick, Matthew," she said in a high, nervous voice, "What is happening? What is Simon going to do?" She tried to stop and turn back but the men had her arms linked with theirs as they compelled her towards the other family members.

"Where did you meet Marcus?" she said trying to get them to say something.

"Marcus showed up just when we noticed you were gone," Patrick said quietly. "Now be quiet and we will discuss this when we get home." He guided her over towards the fireworks display where Marcus and Beatrice were waiting.

Beatrice raises her brows enquiringly. Matthew gave her a shake of his head and looked pointedly at the elaborate show of pyrotechnics exploding in front of them. Simon rejoined their party a moment later and whispered to Matthew who flushed and then passed the message along to Patrick and finally Marcus. Simon had a look of grim satisfaction on his face, Matthew looked chagrined, and Patrick looked disappointed. Emily wasn't certain what Marcus was thinking and she was beset with curiosity and foreboding. The magic and anticipation she had felt drained away, leaving her tense. She watched the elaborate fireworks display dispassionately. She wanted to know what was going on with Michael and yet she knew she was up for a scolding at the very least.

The family arrived home thirty minutes after the fireworks display had come to its dramatic conclusion. Emily somehow felt that compared to the coming melodrama in Uncle Horace's study, the fireworks display was not quite as exciting. Emily tried to follow her cousins into the study and was firmly told to sit in the sitting room across from the study until called. Beatrice looked pityingly at her and scurried up the steps. Emily heard raised voices and what sounded like the pounding of a fist on wood. A servant passed the sitting room baring a tray with

brandy and three snifters and entered the room. Emily buried her face in her hands and thought: it is so terrible they needed an extra bottle of brandy!

After a time which seemed interminable to Emily, the door finally opened and Matthew motioned her to follow him. The men were all standing around the room except for Uncle Horace who was seated at his desk. His spectacles were pushed up on top of his balding head and he looked at Emily over the top of his steeped fingers. "Emily," he said gently, "Will you please tell us about your meetings with Lord Althorpe?"

"Well," she began, "how far back should I go?"

"Start at the first meeting and tell us everything, my dear," he replied.

Emily squirmed a bit and glanced around the room at all of her male cousins who were studiously avoiding looking at her. "Lord Althorpe and his papa came to visit my family when I was four and ten. He seemed very nice at the time; he even played backgammon with me. After about midweek, he sought more mature entertainments at the local tavern."

"When I saw him at the confectioners with his niece, he winked at me. I thought he remembered me," she added in a small voice.

Matthew jumped in, "What about the meeting in the park?"

"Uh," she began uncomfortably. "He saw me waiting for Matthew, Simon and Patrick by the gazebo that was being built there." It was the male cousins' turn to squirm as Uncle Horace gave them a censorious look. She continued, "His voice made me feel uncomfortable, but we were talking about all of the decorative buildings going up to commemorate the victory at Waterloo."

"What exactly, as near as you can remember it, was said," Uncle Horace coaxed.

"He spoke of all of the fine erections going up and if I liked those he could show me his erection." Simon, in the midst of taking a sip of brandy, started choking and coughing.

"I had visited Conley a couple of years earlier with Aunt Dorothea and had seen the pink marble folly," she resumed after Simon had gotten his coughing fit under control. "It was just completed--the Countess served tea out

there. It was our first outing after coming out of blacks for Papa and about a six months after Michael's father inherited the Earldom. It was a warm day in the autumn and the marble folly was comfortably cool inside."

"Where was Althorpe at this time?" Patrick spoke up.

Emily looked confused, "I think he was in town—it was opening session."

"Did you tell him about the Folly?" Uncle Horace probed delicately.

"Why yes," she said, "I told him that I had seen his pink marble folly and that it was wonderful inside there when it was warm." She heard the click of several glassed being set down at once and she looked around at her cousins who were giving significant glances at one another.

"Emily," he smiled, "I have delightful news. Lord Althorpe is coming to call on you in the morning. I think that you should go upstairs and retire so that you will look your prettiest."

"Uncle Horace, what is going on here?" she queried suspiciously. "I may not have town bronze, but I am four and twenty and I can tell when something smoky is happening."

"Emily my dear, I can see you are a bright young lady. Lord Althorpe had a misunderstanding of your station, acted beyond the pale with you and will make things right."

"Right?" she had a dazed look, "you mean..."

"Exactly my dear, so do run along, I need to talk to your cousins about a few things," he told her sending a steely glance at the sheepish looking cousins.

Emily walked out of the room with a sideways look at her cousins and quietly shut the door. Emily expelled a deep breath after she left the room. She wasn't so sure that a forced offer from a gentleman so much higher than she in station would lead to happiness she was hoping for.

"Now then gentlemen," Sir Horace angrily after Emily had quit the room. "Let us talk about the duties of escorting our young female relatives." The men gathered around his desk standing straight and tall like prisoners facing

execution. “We were very lucky that Althorpe is a decent fellow. What if it had been that dirty dish, Stanhope or even Beheimer, that loose screw! Our young ladies are sheltered and naïve. The crowds at open air events are teeming with unsavory characters and ballrooms are not much better. I have a few rules for us all. Number one: we will all pony up the necessary for a wardrobe that will leave no one in doubt that she is a young lady of good family. Number two: There will be no skirt chasing or horse racing while escorting our ladies at events or about town. Number three: all of you will donate a portion of your quarterly allowance to dower Emily. Finally, there will be no dueling or talk about any of this event to anyone. Hopefully we can rub along with minimal gossip. The suddenness of the attachment will cause comment but since Althorpe hasn’t deflowered Emily, we will have a well planned chapel wedding—nothing hasty.”

Patrick said his eyes narrowing with intensity, “But what if he won't follow through with marriage? I should think we should at least remind him in a discreet but painful manner that our cousin is to be well treated now and in the future.”

Marcus, who had been standing silent, spoke up, saying, “Enough people saw you three looking for Emily at Vauxhall. Some talk will be engendered by the pairing of Althorpe and Emily. If you try anything resembling a confrontation with him, you will validate that gossip. A large scandal will ensue for a young lady who has done nothing wrong but be related to a gaggle of care-for-nobodies. I include myself in your number.”

## Chapter 5

Marcus left his Uncle's house and went to the White Horse Tavern on Lombard Street. He made his way to an out of the way table with a view of the door and ordered up a tankard of ale and a steak and kidney pie. His contact came through the door, spotted him, then took a chair to his back. They carried on a quiet conversation with tankards raised so that no one would see them talking.

Lord Debenham, a gentleman with a minor position with the Home Office, "Were you successful in getting lodgings in Althorpe's home?"

"Yes," he replied, "but there are complications."

Silence reigned for a moment as the cheerful serving wench served Marcus his food. As Marcus dropped a couple of shillings into her loose fitting blouse, the smiling wench said, "Lor' love ya! I loves me a gennelm'n 'oos right gen'rous! If'n ya needs anythin' else just gives ol' Sal the eye."

"Just the food Sal and say hello to Big Harry for me." Sal smiled and left him ostensibly to his meal.

"Do you know her, is she discreet?" Lord Debenham demanded behind his tankard.

"Yes, I am a regular here when I am in town. I will draw no attention coming here for a pint upon occasion," Marcus replied. Marcus felt there was something not right here. He planned to play along with Debenham to find out.

"What then is the complication?" he said querulously.

"Althorpe, is about to become a relative through my cousin," Marcus answered carefully. Lord, he hated these noble bureaucrats from Whitehall.

"Does it impinge on your taking residence then?"

"No," Marcus said. "But it will mean a time limit to how long I can stay."

"What did he do—throw the blond chit's skirts up?" Debenham said crudely.

“Mind you, keep a civil tongue in your head while talking about my cousin! He knew my Blakely cousin when she was a young girl and they've recently become reacquainted. Tentative plans were made by their families when they were children and Althorpe has decided to follow through on the arrangement,” Marcus said cautiously.

“The red haired chit instead of the blond? I say, better him than me. I saw them out shopping this morning on Bond Street,” said Lord Debenham somewhat the worse for drink, as he belched loudly.

“Do you want my help or not?” Marcus said coolly, “you can find yourself another flunky to spy on Althorpe's household. Do you want to continue insulting my relations and risk 'pistols for two, breakfast for one' or do you want to give me any new information about who it is that could potentially be causing trouble at Athorpe's house.”

“Ooo, steady on man, no insult intended,” Lord Debenham said hastily, “I found out that Althorpe has been rather generous in giving employ to returning soldiers--several in the house and stables. Man of affairs is actually a distant cousin whose two older brothers are in line for the title. Rest of the staff, old retainers—been with the family for generations. Just keep a sharp look out for as long as you can.”

“Right, let me finish my dinner and I'll find a congenial card game in here,” Marcus said dismissively, “you can get another tankard or finish this one and then leave.”

“Tell me more of your cousin, where has she been all this time?” Lord Debenham said.

“Why do you need to know about my cousin,” Marcus growled into his ale tankard.

“It just seems strange that they waited all this time to become betrothed.”

“Not at all. It was a tentative arrangement between families made when Lord Conley was just a scholar and Althorpe was a school boy. The family never pushed the connection beyond a visit or two after Conley inherited. When

they met again, they decided that it would be a good match for them both as most of the families now throwing their daughters into Althorpe's path did not even acknowledge his existence before his father ascended to the Earldom."

"She must have something going for her since she has no dower to speak of..." Debenham said with a sidelong glance at Marcus.

"She has a little property up North and my uncle is brilliant at investments."

"Strange that a connection on her mother's side is handling her funds," Debenham mused.

"I have said all I will say of my cousin's affairs. I suggest you either join a card game or take your leave."

"Mayhap, I'll see what that wench has to offer a gentleman," Lord Debenham said with a leer, rubbing his hands together.

"I wouldn't if I were you," Marcus said.

"What, the barmaid a cousin too?" he laughed disparagingly.

"No, Big Harry that I referred to is the serving wench's husband and owner of the tavern," replied Marcus.

"So? He probably wouldn't mind a little more of the ready," Lord Debenham stated.

"He's very particular about his wife," Marcus warned.

"I can make it worth their while," he said.

"See the man who just entered: the big bruiser with the broken nose?" Marcus said.

"Ah, yes actually," Lord Debenham replied, "I believe he is the Kent Killer Harry Miller I lost a few quid betting against...I take your point. I'll just finish my drink and go now."

Marcus gave one last look at the arrogant Lord Debenham swaggering out of the Tavern. Something not quite right about this whole affair, he thought. Debenham's name seemed familiar, as if he had heard it in another context in the past. He mentally shrugged his shoulders, dismissing it from his mind, and joined a card game with a few soldiers.

## Chapter 6

The next morning, Marcus walked into the breakfast room and saw Michael reading the Times. He helped himself to some kippers, toast and eggs. After the footman served his coffee Michael told the footman to leave the pot they would serve themselves.

“Alright Marcus, let it out,” Michael said resignedly. “I’m sure I deserve whatever you are going to say.”

“Actually I think you and Emily would make a fine match,” smiled Marcus tucking into his food. “I heard the gist of your conversations with Emily; Simon nearly choked and we all had a hard time keeping a straight face when Em talked about taking tea in the pink marble folly with your mama...did you know that the folly is a wonderful place to take tea when it is warm outside?”

“Alright, alright! I was jolly well listening to her through a lustful haze. Everything she said, my brain gave a naughty spin and put the most salacious interpretation on...,” Michael replied. “Anyway, you know your cousin better than I, what kind of jewelry is her preference?”

“Haven’t the foggiest, old man. I’ve never seen her in any—don’t you have a betrothal ring or something?”

“Yes but my mother has it in the country. I really think that I need to get her something she can display to all of the other ladies,” Michael explained.

“Just so you know,” Marcus said seriously, “Emily, Beatrice and Phoebe, Beatrice’ six year old sister, are our only female cousins out of the twelve of us. We are a bit protective of them and would not take kindly to anyone mistreating our dear Emily.”

Emily passed a sleepless night knowing that Michael would be coming to offer for her hand in the morning. It did not seem fair that she if she accepted Michael she would be getting a husband who would come to resent her, if he didn’t already. All she had done was trust an acquaintance from her childhood

to take her back to Matthew. How was she to know that he would make decidedly improper advances!

It had been so thrilling, just like a kiss from a hero in a Minerva Press novel. Right up to the point that her dress became undone and her cousins caught them. Could she truly be happy now, married to a widower or a cleric? Emily heard a perfunctory knock and Aunt Minerva sailed into the room in her bedgown and wrapper.

“Oh Emily!” she cried. “I just heard the good news! Lord Althorpe is coming to offer for you this morning. You are very lucky—he seems to be a fine temperate man of steady ways and so handsome as well. I know that people might make a deal about the title—but one isn't looking across the breakfast table at the title.”

Emily just stared at her aunt with a tired and confused expression. “Emily dear,” Aunt Minerva said, “He is a man to whom many lures have been cast since he became of age. He is a man of some experience; he must be powerfully attracted to you to ignore the usual strictures of behavior.”

“Aunt Minerva,” Emily said with tears in her eyes, “I keep thinking that I must have behaved in an awfully familiar manner for him to act like that. I wonder if there is something wrong with me. I usually strap myself in to make myself look respectable. The squire's son near Blakely Grange said that ‘girls who had large bosoms like me are always strumpets’. I get my first kiss and the gentleman behaves with inappropriate familiarity.”

“He did rather cross the line didn't he?” Aunt Minerva smiled, “just like your Uncle Horace did.”

“Proper, scholarly, Uncle Horace?” Emily squeaked.

“You may not be able to visualize looking at me now, but I was quite pretty when I was younger,” Aunt Minerva smiled with a far off look in her eyes.

“I danced every dance, some of my beaux were very high in rank,” she continued, “Horace decided that I was the one he wanted, and so he set out to make a study of me. He learned all of my likes and dislikes and set himself up a campaign to win my affection.”

“He did?” Emily said with amazement.

“It didn't work however, since all of my other beaus were also vying for my favors,” sighed Aunt Minerva, “I would like to say that I was a young lady of sense and say that it did not, but my head was quite turned by the attention. One night, your uncle was so terribly frustrated by my lack of acknowledgement of his suit that he took me outside on a balcony when we were supposed to be dancing. He kissed the daylights out of me! He then proceeded to behave in a most forward fashion. That's when Dorothea came out and saw us.”

“You were compromised?” Emily asked shocked.

“Not quite, but none of my other beaus acted towards me like your uncle did,” she said. “He treated me as though I was a real person and not a prize to be won. All of my other beaus went on and married other ladies and had typical Ton marriages with mistresses and lovers. I could have never been happy like that and I don't think you would be either.”

“Aunt Minerva, I am not sure if this is the right thing to do.” Emily stood up from the bed and started pacing. “He doesn't know the real me. My cousins think I couldn't figure out from their reactions that there was a whole other connotation to the conversations with Lord Althorpe. One that was less than innocent.” She stopped and stared out the window. “I'm sure I don't know him now either. Aunt Minerva,” she turned back and looked her Aunt in the eye, “When he visited Blakely Grange with his father, he was great fun for a few days then about mid week he didn't have time for me—avoided my company and sought out a certain barmaid who was known to be free with her favors...well I was very hurt. If he should get bored with me quickly and leave me after I came to care for him...”

“My dear, nothing is settled yet.” Aunt Minerva crossed the room and placed her hands on Emily's shoulders, “When he comes today to ask for your hand, ask for time to get to know him better. As long as only your cousins saw you in the Dark Walk with Lord Althorpe, your reputation is safe.”

Emily, after washing and dressing in one of Beatrice' old gowns, went seeking the one person who could and would explain things to her. She ran her cousin Matthew to ground in the breakfast room. “Good Morning Matthew,” she

said pleasantly as she helped herself to eggs and ham she was too tense to eat. “I wanted to have a word with you.”

Matthew had a hunted expression on his face as he forked a large amount of fluffy scrambled eggs into his mouth. He swallowed hard after barely chewing and seized a glass of juice to wash the food down. “Ahem, Emily I really need to eat and get going. There’s plenty to do today—“

“Like what, for an example,” Emily glared at him suspiciously.

“Mama gave me a list of things to do and I am meeting Simon and Patrick later at the bank to get some funds.” He pushed back his chair and attempted to bolt for the door. Emily stood up and stepped in front of the exit and placed her hand on his chest. She pushed him back into his seat.

She looked at him sternly, “Do not think that you will get away all that easily. I have some questions for you.”

Matthew looked like he would rather be hanged for a highwayman than talk to his cousin. “Alright then, what do you wish to know,” he said with resignation.

## Chapter 7

Ten o'clock saw Michael being ushered into Horace Warrick study. Michael wanted to do the thing up right and ask for Emily's hand from her current mature male relative. As the butler announced him into the study, Sir Horace gestured for him to take a seat opposite him across the desk. Michael cleared his throat, "I'd like to talk to you about your niece, Miss Blakely, sir."

Uncle Horace leaned back in his chair and absently removed his spectacles and wiped them with a white cloth. "Yes, I have been expecting your visit; the young men told me about what happened last night. Emily also related some of the topics about which you two talked. I have to ask you one thing—was your mind so disengaged from your libido that you could not tell that Emily was a well brought up young lady?"

Michael adjusted his position in his chair, "Well Sir Horace, I think you have the right of it—my mind and my libido were not in direct communication. I found Miss Blakely to be an attractive woman with a charming freshness about her." Looking Sir Horace in the eye, he continued. "I found her on three separate occasions to be without proper escort. I suppose my natural inclination towards cynicism assumed the worst possible interpretation on her situation and acted in my own perceived best interests. However, how I came to be sitting here this morning is neither here nor there. The fact is I have come to ask permission to pay my addresses to Miss Blakely. Do I have it?"

Sir Horace leaned back in his chair, touched his lips with steepled fingers and looked at Michael, considering the situation in silence. Sir Horace was the type of man who wanted as much information as possible before making a decision. The silence was unnerving to Michael; he could hear the tick of the clock on the mantel.

Michael fought to contain his impatience; he had requested an audience with Emily's Uncle Horace as a matter of form. He wished to do at least one thing properly in this fiasco of a courtship, even though Emily was quite old enough to marry without consent. "Sir, I have come to present an offer of

marriage for your niece. In the short space of time that I have become reacquainted with Miss Blakely, I have come to appreciate her many fine qualities.”

Uncle Horace looked up over his spectacles at Michael searchingly, “I heard how much you were appreciating those 'fine' qualities last night.”

Michael felt his face warm but he did not drop his eyes, “Miss Blakely is a young lady whose family is known to mine and she has met my parents. I have not told them of my plans as yet, but I am sure they would approve.”

“Tell me of your ambitions for your future,” Sir Horace.

“I have plans to manage my estates and eventually the estates of the Earldom, though hopefully not any time soon.” Michael looked over his host's shoulder to the portrait of the Warrick family. This was not a formal family portrait. He saw a fond mother and father gazing at their four children; he saw Matthew and Beatrice casually seated at the feet of their parents and each parent held an infant. “Of course I want a family—,” Michael continued. “I have an estate left to me by my maternal grandparents so we would not be staying with my parents, except for holidays and the like. I have income enough to support a wife in style.”

Uncle Horace turned and glanced at the family portrait and said casually, “Family, yes. Do you like children?”

Michael was nonplused at the turn the conversation was taking, “Uhh yes. My sister, Lynette, has three promising children and I am a fond Uncle. She and her husband have the children eat with the family except for formal dinners. I would like to emulate that example when my wife and I set up our nursery.”

“Wonderful!” exclaimed Sir Horace, rubbing his hands together. “I’ll let you speak with my niece privately.”

He stood and escorted Michael to the sitting room, where Aunt Minerva and Beatrice were keeping Emily company. AS they walked into the room, Sir Horace said, “Well my dears, why don't we leave Lord Althorpe and Emily alone to have a private discussion. Beatrice, I believe I owe you a rematch at chess. Minerva, no interference from you this time, if you please. I would like to try and win all by myself. Althorpe, England lost two fine military minds when these two were born female.” With that, the family left the room and an awkward silence fell.

Michael crossed the room to where Emily was seated in a pale pink ruffled dress. The color washed out her already pale complexion. The dress was very tight across her bosom and the ruffles overwhelmed her. The expression of apprehension in her eyes was almost his undoing. He sat down next to her on the settee and took her cold hand in his, "Miss Blakely, by now you know of my admiration of your many charms. Indeed, my admiration has caused me to cross the bounds of propriety and treat you in a manner not in keeping with your maidenly demeanor. I wish to apologize for any of my actions which may have offended you."

Emily flushed a deep pink and looked down at their joined hands, "I have been informed by my cousin what you meant during our brief conversations. I was not offended, but I was shocked by how thrilling it was. I did not think that anything would be as exciting as the novels say. I hope I haven't given you a disgust of me."

Michael was surprised and smiled; he took her chin into his hand and pressed his lips to hers. At first she was unresponsive, and then she placed her hands on his shoulders, pulled him forward slightly. With that encouragement, he put his arms around her and slid his tongue into her mouth. As he was kissing her, his hand accidentally brushed the tape that was keeping her dress fastened. The stress of the tight dress plus the friction of his hand caused the tape to tear. Her ruffled neckline became an enchanting frame for her lace trimmed breasts. Thanking provenance and weak materials, he trailed kisses down her neck and touched his tongue to lace over her hardening nipples. Completely forgetting that they were in a family parlor and not a boudoir, he slid his hand up her skirt, stroking her thighs.

There was a knock on the door, "Emily dear," said Aunt Minerva, "has everything been settled?"

Michael and Emily broke apart in a hurried fashion. Michael regained his composure first and said, "No, not yet. I am still explaining the advantages of our match to Miss Blakely." Emily flushed deeper and touched her hand to her swollen mouth and hurriedly pulled her damaged dress up. Michael

grinned unabashedly and said, “Miss Blakely it would do me a great honor if you would become my wife.”

“I-I am not sure,” she stammered bemused. “I can't think rationally when you do those things. We hardly know one another—and what you thought you knew you mistook for a ... a country courtesan. Matthew explained all of it to me this morning after breakfast.”

Damn Warrick, he thought. Aloud, Michael asked, “Did he also explain that you attracted me so strongly that I could not think rationally? That the beauty I see shining out of your eyes affected me so strongly that it compelled me to try and secure you for my own?” She looked at him with a wary look in her eyes. As he brought out a box from his pocket, he remembered her as a child of fourteen, climbing out of the small pond on her father's estate; a beautiful, nude nymph with moisture droplets clinging like diamonds to her shapely form. He looked into her eyes and slipped the large ruby ring onto her finger. She was startled to see a beautiful ring that was much more elaborate and expensive than anything that her aunts owned. She tried to remove the ring to hand it back to him, but it was stuck firmly. “I don't think I should accept this right now. This is beyond the pale for a courtship gift.”

“That is because it is a betrothal ring. Obviously, the ring was made for you, a sign that you are to keep it and all that it means. I want the ceremony as quickly as possible.”

Lady Minerva burst into the room at that point, “Is it all settled?”

At the same time, he said, “Yes” and she said, “No.” They looked at each other with consternation.

“My dear Emily, what happened to your dress?” asked Lady Minerva. Then with a sudden dawning of comprehension, “Lord Althorpe! Shame on you young man! Emily, I know he is dashing enough to turn a young lady's head, but you simply must keep him at arms length if you want a courtship.”

Michael protested, “I was thinking of acquiring a special license and waiting just long enough for my parents to arrive in town.”

“Lord Althorpe, I cannot decide if you are impatient or impetuous—maybe a little of both,” Lady Minerva exclaimed with an amused laugh. She continued more seriously, “You must realize that any scandal derived from an unseemly haste would have the effect of damaging not only Emily's reputation, but your credibility in the House of Lords. Any bill brought forward or vigorously supported by you would not be given as serious a consideration if you were known to not have control over certain aspects of your personal life.”

“Aunt Minerva, I would be agreeable to an understanding. I don't want to cause a problem,” said Emily quietly.

“Nonsense girl, we are going to do the thing up right! We will announce your betrothal at your come out ball.”

## Chapter8

Emily had plenty of time to think prior to luncheon. She wondered if she would, after so many years, finally have a place she belonged. Could a marriage have a great chance of success from such shabby beginnings? For her, it would be a brilliant match; for him, a probable misalliance. He possibly thought that she was not discriminating in company. If only he had remembered who she was and decided that he wanted her for herself and not because of some sort of misunderstanding. In truth, she was still hurt inside that a momentous time in her girlhood was such a totally forgettable occurrence in his life. He likely had had so many varied life experiences that she had been lost among the crowd of female acquaintances of his. She walked over to the window and ignored the summons of the bell for luncheon. She wished her mother were still alive. Her mother's sisters tried to be good mentors to her but they had their own families and concerns. The one aunt with whom she had the most attachment was her Aunt Dorothea, whose sore joints kept her in Bath. But, even she had no compunction sending her off to other family members if someone was needed elsewhere.

After luncheon, the ladies of the household went to pay calls. Though she rarely came to town, Lady Minerva Warrick had a large number acquaintance, some of whom were well connected ladies. Some of these ladies were friends she had made when she was at the Bath School for Young Ladies, the others she had made when she was a debutante. The ladies were from some of the best families in the ton and most had made socially acceptable, if not brilliant, matches. Minerva herself had not made a brilliant match socially, but the scholar her father had frowned upon as being far beneath their family socially had made excellent husband material, Minerva thought in her opinion. Lady Minerva and her young companions were waiting in the well appointed hall while their cards were taken in to her old friend, Lady Sarah Bennington, the Viscountess Anders. Lady Sarah had made a brilliant match but she and her noble husband lived separate lives. He had his Parliamentary seat in the House of Lords and his cronies, while she substituted

being a premier society hostess in place of a meaningful relationship with her husband. Lady Minerva felt she had the better marriage but she knew that Lady Sarah would have been aghast if she knew that she was pitied.

Looks like Sarah has been redecorating again, Lady Minerva thought as she examined the detailing of a crocodile table in the hall. Sir Horace forbade changes in the house décor just for fashion. Luckily she had children who could be depended upon to cause a calamity just when she was getting bored with the current furnishings. As the sitting room in their London residence was looking a little dated, she decided it was time to either accidentally let one of the coach dogs into the house or give Peter a new ball.

The butler came back and; returned to show the three ladies into the room where Lady Sarah and another lady awaited. Lady Sarah crossed the room to give Lady Minerva a light hug and an air kiss by her cheek. “Oh, I am so glad to see you Minerva! However did you manage to break away from that appalling bucolic domesticity you love so much to come to town?”

“It was very hard to do, Sarah,” Lady Minerva said dryly. “But I wanted to do the right thing by my daughter and my niece. May I present to both of you, my niece Emily Blakely and my daughter Beatrice.”

The other lady in the room nodded her head in acknowledgement of the introduction as the girls curtsied. While she looked closely at Emily, Emily felt a vague stirring of recognition and a dawning certainty that she knew this lady. The lady smiled and said, “Emily dear, it has been a long time. You may not remember me, but I was a close friend of your mama, you used to call me Aunt Louisa.”

Lady Minerva said with happiness, “Emily, Lady Louisa was your mother's first choice for your godmother but at the time of your Christening, Lord Liverpool and she were newlyweds and she could not leave town at that time. Lord Liverpool was just starting out on his brilliant political career.”

“Dear Emily, please say that you remember me a little--I have fond memories of what a sweet, well mannered child you were,” Lady Louisa said beseechingly. Emily crossed over to her mother's old friend and said, “I remember

you well Lady Louisa. Mama loved your visits and I loved the sweetmeats you used to slip me when she wasn't looking.”

“Ahem,” Lady Sarah cleared her throat, “Minerva, Louisa and I were discussing the young ladies come out Ball and Louisa had an interesting suggestion...”

“I was wondering if you would let Liverpool and I to volunteer our ballroom. We were not blessed with children and I would love to play some small part in helping with the social launch of two such lovely young ladies.”

“Why, that would be delightful,” Emily's Aunt Minerva said. “We needed a room larger than our ballroom. Emily and Lord Althorpe have come to an understanding...Emily dear, show the ladies your betrothal ring.

Emily removed her glove and displayed the ring. The rare sunlight chose that moment to shine through the window and the dark red of the ruby gleamed mysteriously while the diamonds cast a beautiful rainbow onto the wall.

“My dear, what a beautiful ring!” exclaimed Lady Sarah. “How long has Lord Althorpe been courting you?”

Minerva replied for Emily, “Their families have been acquainted since they were children and in fact a tentative understanding was reached when they were children. It was to be encouraged when Emily was of age for them to make a match.”

“Whatever could have been the incentive?” asked Lady Sarah. “Emily is an attractive young lady, but, pardon me my dear, not a diamond of the first water like my dear Ermintrude. I have never heard that the Blakelys left any fortune to their daughter. In fact, I heard all of the property was entailed on a cousin.”

Lady Louisa said knowingly, “To a gentleman of property and fortune who has political ambitions, Miss Blakely has something extremely valuable; she has prominent social connections. Her father was a crony of poor Lord Spencer, the previous Prime Minister who was assassinated. And in addition to me, her mother was also a close friend of Lady Maria Castlereah.”

Lady Minerva was astonished at the amount of support from Lady Louisa. While she was friends with her, she was under no illusions that Lady Sarah was anything but a gossip. Making the Anders household their first stop had been a tactical ploy to garner support from the lady. In addition to being a tough critic, any holes to be found in their fabrication would have been ferreted out by Lady Sarah. With her daughter married to a noble diplomat heading for Vienna, her son away at school, and a husband involved in his own pleasures, Lady Sarah was left with too much time alone to think. Minerva felt sorry for her friend but not enough to not utilize her penchant for rumor and innuendo. "Emily also has some small property left to her in Northumberland on the Tyne River near one of the estates in the Conley holdings. We do not wish this to get out, and I am trusting you ladies with this confidence, my sisters and their families all love Emily, so a substantial dower has been amassed to establish her credibly." Minerva knew that by mentioning and embroidering on her husband's plans for Emily and swearing them to secrecy, soon the word would be out all over town. But Lady Sarah was not going to let the subject go quite yet, "...and yet Emily is all of four and twenty... well past the age of the usual bride..."

"Althorpe is only four years older than Emily. He needed to establish himself in town and mature first. While young ladies are settled at an early age, most young men, with a few notable exceptions," said Lady Minerva, nodding to Lady Louisa whose husband had been elected to the House of Commons at the tender age of twenty, "are like fine wine...they need to mature before decanting."

Lady Sarah frowned glancing at her husband portrait over the mantle, looked away and said under her breath, "Some never do."

The ladies made a few more calls after their visit to the Viscountess Anders. The final call was to the residence of Mrs. Drummond-Burrell. It was the common consensus during the calls that both young ladies had charming manners and would do well this small season. The honorable Mrs. Drummond-Burrell, however, was reputedly harder to impress than any other patroness on the board at Almacks.

"My dear, Miss Blakely, you do have the look of your late mother," she said after looking at Emily for a long moment.

“Did you know her well ma’am?” Emily queried politely.

“As well as anyone knows the other debutantes the year we make our bows,” she answered. “We were presented at court the same day. I owe her a debt of kindness.”

Emily looked quizzically at the lady, but did not question her. One did not interrogate anyone as high in the instep as Mrs. Drummond-Burrell. Emily glanced at her aunt who imperceptibly shook her head, indicating that now was not the time.

“Be that as it may, I could not have issued vouchers if your behavior was not up to snuff,” Mrs. Drummond-Burrell said with a sniff. “Please, do be on time. We would deny Wellington himself entry if he came one second after eleven.”

On the carriage ride home Emily said, “So many people that I only knew from the society pages knew my mother even though she was married to a minor nobleman. I know she and Papa were quite fond of one another, but didn't Grandmother encourage her daughters to marry gentlemen of fortune and title?”

“Our father was the one encouraging us to try and make brilliant matches,” Aunt Minerva said. “Mama always said that one married a man not a title; if the man was not right, then the social success of being titled was not worth it. One spends approximately four months out of the year socializing during the season. That leaves eight months when one spends time with one's spouse. If a lady is married to a drunkard or a bore, life can be incredibly tedious. Unfortunately, my friend Lady Sarah's husband is both. She lives for the season and letters from friends. However, if you girls were to marry a worthy gentleman who also is socially prominent, why that would be the best of both worlds.”

Both Emily and Beatrice looked at one another and knew that they would attempt to discern a gentleman's true worth before taking the ultimate step. Emily felt that Michael was possibly the best of both worlds, but she would be happy to not rush into a marriage only to repent it at her leisure.

She wondered at her aunt's wondrous abilities at dissembling: a little contributed pocket money becomes a substantial dowry; a half forgotten childhood

meeting becomes a tentative betrothal agreement. Uncle Horace always said that England lost a master tactician when Aunt Minerva was born female.

## Chapter 9

“Oh look, my dears,” cried Aunt Minerva as she gestured to the silver salver in the hall. “We have had callers since we left this afternoon.”

She crossed over and picked up one of the cards and read, “Lynnette Pierce, Countess of Ballard.”

Bingham returned from the butler’s pantry with a package. “Your ladyship, this was left with the card for Miss Blakely.”

Emily brought the package into the butler’s pantry to open it. Inside, Emily found a beautiful dark green riding habit with matching hat, and gloves, along with a note. Michael had mentioned to her ladyship that Emily was having several outfits made up at Madame Montpelier’s dress shop. Lady Lynnette had had the woman quickly alter a ready made riding habit to Emily’s measurements. It seemed that Emily, Matthew and Beatrice were invited to go riding tomorrow morning. It also seemed that Michael was bringing a suitable mount for her to ride. Emily was glad that it wouldn’t be that dusty slug she had the last time.

As she moved through the house with her package, she saw Matthew slamming the front door with exuberance. He spied Emily and exclaimed, “Althorpe is a great gun!”

“Althorpe?” she enquired eyebrow raised.

“I got to know him today. We went to Tattersall’s and we were invited to join the ‘Bond Street Beaus’ in the window at White’s.” Matthew seemed to be in waxing enthusiastic about awe of Michael and how they spent the afternoon. “Em, he even asked my opinion about what kind of horse to purchase for you!”

“For me?” she queried surprised.

“Yeah, he said that as a soon-to-be member of his family he couldn’t have you seen on an obvious job horse. Besides, he said he needed another ladies’ mount for his stable anyway. By the way Em, I’m real sorry for that jobber I put you on the other day. It was the only thing available at the stable.”

“Matthew you have never been anything less than kind to me. I really appreciate all of your thoughtfulness,” Emily smiled.

Matthew turned red and kind of lowered his head into his prettily tied neckcloth. He mumbled, "Should've done better for you being my favorite female cousin and all."

"Matthew," she laughed, "I am your only female cousin."

Matthew looked up his eyes twinkling, smiling, "Yeah, that too. Papa told me to get a likely looking slug for Bea as well. She isn't the rider you are but "Papa said that, ahem, 'we do not let the ladies of our family out on inferior horseflesh.'"

"I can imagine tomorrow is going to be an interesting day," Emily concluded.

Later that day, Lord Debenham went to his club to have a brandy and to gather gossip. He gripped his snifter tighter upon hearing that Althorpe and his new fiancé would be feted at, of all things, the Prime Minister's residence. It was all he could do to not hurl his brandy into the fireplace. It seems that Miss Emily Blakely's darling common mother was a bosom bow to, of all people, Lady Louisa, the Prime Minister's wife. It took all his self control to smile and make noncommittal conversation. I wonder, he thought, what would happen if something should happen to spoil their perfect plans? Maybe someone should see to it.

The next day dawned slightly overcast with a faint mist swirling around the horses' hooves. Michael had arrived at the civilized hour of 9:30 after he had broken his fast at his sister's home. He and the Warrick contingent were going to meet with the Ballard party at the East gate of Regent's park. He brought a handsome roan mare for Emily to ride. It was beautifully bridled with shiny new black saddlery with brass accents. It was the most stunning thing Emily had ever seen.

When they arrived at the park his sister Lynnette and her husband James, the Earl of Ballard, were waiting. Michael made introductions and Lynnette immediately spoke to Emily admiringly of the striking picture she made on the

mare. Emily warmed to Lynnette right away--she seemed to genuinely wish to get to know Emily.

Emily glanced at Michael and saw that his attention was totally focused on her. It gave her a tingling sensation. He gazed into her eyes then let his eyes travel to her breasts. Emily's face pinkened as her nipples tightened, remembering how he had caressed them that night at Vauxhall and in her aunt's drawing room. She shifted in her side saddle as the sensation spread to the juncture of her legs in her most intimate place. Emily must have made some response to Lynnette because Lynnette turned and said something to Beatrice who smiled and told a funny story about the twins. Emily looked toward the fog enshrouded trees and thought that it might be easy to get lost or separated in the park this morning. The fog seemed to be thicker than it was a few moments ago.

Michael drew along side Emily and they walked their horses toward the trees. The rest of the party did not seem to notice them as they disappeared into the mist. Emily looked back and while she could hear the conversations of their family members, she could not see them.

"Blessed fog...couldn't have planned it better," Michael said with a naughty grin. "When I saw the fog this morning, I sent my man to a particular place in the park to set up a place to discuss our nuptials."

"What is there to say my lord?" Emily looked confused. "We will court and if we suit, we will announce our betrothal at the ball Lady Liverpool is planning for Beatrice and me."

He frowned, "Lady Liverpool?"

"A friend of my Mama's from her school days."

"We could be wed by special license and be back from our honeymoon in the Lake District in time to have them announce our marriage."

"B-but don't you want to be taken seriously as a Member of Parliament?" Emily stammered. "Aunt Minerva said that you did not wish to get a name for reacting impetuously."

"Doesn't matter to me, my brother-in-law and my father will always support anything I feel strongly enough to debate," he said nonchalantly.

"Lord Althorpe...," she began.

"Michael."

"LORD ALTHORPE," Emily scowled, "I do not wish to be hasty in marrying you."

"Ah, holding out for a royal duke, are we?" he teased.

"Be serious, I am just a poor relation in a well connected family--you would not be just a brilliant match for me but a stellar one. The match for you would not have any advantages..."

"Oh, I can think of one or two," he said as he stopped the horses and was met by a groom. He dismounted and walked over to Emily and lifted her protesting from her horse.

"But I actually wanted to go riding!"

"I wanted to talk to you and get to know you better," he said. "What better place than out here where no one can see us, but can find us easily."

Emily looked at him doubtfully. The thickness of the fog was getting worse and she could see moisture beading on his hat. He took her hand and led her over to where she could see a small brazier as his man lifted a tarp off of pillows and a blanket. She was given a steaming mug of cocoa poured from a carafe. Michael removed his hat and placed it on the blanket. He turned, smiled a boyish grin at her and she was suddenly fourteen again and he was the eighteen year old boy on break from Oxford. A tendril of his shining, dark brown hair curled charmingly over his forehead. She could not help herself she reached out and smoothed it back. He caught her hand and peeled the glove back from her wrist and placed a lingering kiss there. He gathered her in his arms and started to kiss her deeply when he yelped and jumped back. She had spilled hot chocolate down his back. Emily tried not to smile but soon Michael's eyes were twinkling with merriment. They both burst out laughing.

Suddenly, Michael was bashed over the head by a stranger coming out of the fog. Then he spoke in a mocking, cockney voice saying, "I loves it when the quality makes it easy to do me job. Come now girly, I be paid roight 'andsome I

'as to take you off for a bit 'o sport. Stop struggling or I'll give ya wot I gave yer gent. Oi 'ave been paid to cause 'is nibs 'ere a bit of embarrassment. Com' on then. 'Tis nofin' ya haven't done 'afore."

Emily stopped struggling and said in a fair imitation of what she thought a fashionable impure might say, "I have never had a strong exciting man of the streets."

"'ats the ticket!" he loosened his grip on Emily and turned her in his arms. As he wasn't much taller than she was, Emily ducked her head, butted his chin and then nailed him in the groin with her knee. As he held himself, the groom who hadn't been visible in the swirling fog walked up behind the cursing villain with the brazier in his hands and brought it down on the villain's head. Emily hurried over to where Michael was trying to stand. "Did you come in a carriage when you set up this area?" Emily said to the groom.

"Yes, Miss. The carriage is just the other side of these trees."

"Help me get his lordship into the carriage." She stopped and stared at the unconscious footpad. "We'll just hope that he stays unconscious until we get Michael into the carriage."

Michael was unable to contribute much to transporting himself to the carriage. After much pushing and pulling, he was ensconced in the small town carriage. Luckily, the coachman saw them and pushed him up the step.

"Your name, sir?" Emily asked the groom.

"Hastings Miss," he replied distractedly looking off towards where the footpad lay out of sight in the fog.

"Hastings, you go and secure that man. I am certain that the gentlemen of the family would like to question him."

The groom went back to see if he could secure the man with the ties he had used to bundle the blankets and pillows. The ruffian had escaped but the groom noticed that the bushes and grass nearby indicated that his gait was far from steady.

"Here," Emily said to Hastings when he returned. "Take Lord Althorpe's horse and notify Lord and Lady Ballard what has happened and I will take him back to his house."

Michael was hurting, even the movement of the extremely well sprung carriage made his head pound and his stomach churn. “What hit me?” he groaned.

Hastings said he found a heavy cudgel where we left the footpad. Do you remember what happened?” Emily asked.

“Only too well,” he grimaced looking up at her from his reclining position in the carriage. “Foolishly, I had arranged a special tryst in the park, not taking into account that foggy, out of the way areas are where footpads like to hang out.”

“Then you didn’t hear what the man said,” Emily replied. “He said he was paid to dishonor me and to humiliate you. He thought that I was a member of the fashionable impure.”

“No, I didn’t hear that,” wrinkling his forehead and trying to recall what he saw and heard in his semiconscious state. “Are you sure?” he asked,

She frowned at him, “I know what he said and I know what he was trying to do, when I head butted him and disabled his manhood.”

“Wha--,” he turned his head quickly and winced. “How did you know to do that?”

“Let us just say that none of my male cousins ever wanted to play dolls with me when I visited.”

## Chapter 10

Emily had instructed the coachman to take Michael to Althorpe house very slowly. By the time they arrived, the riding party was there waiting for them. The carriage was driven to the back so as to minimize viewing by the vulgarly curious. Several burly footmen had been summoned from both the Warrick and the Ballard residences to assist in transporting Michael into the house. This was not easily achieved and not without Michael casting up his accounts in the news behind the residence. Thomas Winslow, Michael's secretary and distant cousin, saw to it that he was carefully carried up to his bedchamber

“Hmm,” he said frowning, “nasty bit of work this, and I’ll have to call in Bow Street to investigate.”

Emily sought out Lord Ballard and her cousin Marcus who had hurried home from his club as soon as he had heard of the attack. She told them the particulars of the attack. At the end of her tale, she asked, “Why would someone wish to harm Michael in such a way?”

“I don't know,” Lord Ballard sighed. “Michael's heir to his title is a distant cousin who lives in seclusion on a distant estate with his immediate family. He's a scholarly sort of fellow--not ambitious in a worldly sort of way.”

Marcus thought for a moment then said, “Isn't Michael cosponsoring a bill with you to bring financial relief to all of our soldiers and sailors? A personal attack like this would be considered a good stratagem for discrediting Michael in the House of Lords.”

Lord Ballard speculated, “Michael did just give his mistress the conge...”

Marcus glaring daggers at Lord Ballard for speculating on something like that in front of his cousin. “Emily, I am anxious to hear what the sawbones has to say about Michael. As his intended, he might be more forthcoming to you than anyone else.”

Emily recognized a red herring when she heard it. She was tempted to stay and learn more of Michael's affairs, but her concern for Michael overwhelmed her curiosity.

The doctor had just left Michael's room and Emily stopped to hear the instructions that he was giving the valet. "Young lady, it would be a good thing to keep him awake to make sure his brain does not become addled," the doctor said.

She went directly to Michael's room where he was lying in bed with the shades drawn and said "I don't wish to tax you any more, my lord, but I need to keep you talking. A doctor once told me that with head injuries you can't give laudanum or allow the patient to sleep for at least eight hours. Have you read Guy Mannering yet?"

"No, but I am sure I have a copy in the library. I have enjoyed all of Scott's Waverly novels."

"Why don't I send the footman to the library for it and I will read it to you?"

Michael assented and soon her soothing voice had him enthralled in the story of Guy Mannering. The door to the room stood open and a maid was in attendance for propriety's sake. Michael's sister Lynnette stopped by occasionally to check on the patient. Emily stopped reading upon the arrival of another maid baring Michael's midday meal, consisting of fresh beef broth and weak tea. Emily left the room to get her own luncheon and found their whole extended family waiting for her in the dining room.

"Our parents will be here in the morning," Lady Lynette said. "It would be unseemly for you to stay the night—even if your betrothal had been announced. I would stay with him tonight, but Ballard says I have had enough excitement for today." her cheeks pinkened, "we are breeding again."

It was after seven when Emily returned home to find her aunt and her aunt's dresser were awaiting her. "Come along now dear," her Aunt Minerva admonished. "We do not wish to be late!"

"It was such an eventful day, why are we going Out?"

“Althorpe is doing well isn't he?” Aunt Minerva queried. “This is about scotching any tittle tattle about his accident. You must appear to not have a care in the world. The ton is all about appearances. If you don't appear, whoever attacked Althorpe today will think he was at least partially successful. Now we have two hours to get you presentable.”

Emily was dressed in her newly arrived ballgown: a green sarcenet with gold trim, matching gloves and slippers. She was tired and did not wish to go out and talk inanities with fashionable fribbles. She has only been in town three days and she had already spent a fortune on clothing, gotten lost at Vauxhall, become nearly betrothed, and been attacked by a footpad. All of this before she had even gone to her first ball! No wonder Aunt Minerva says the regular season is exhausting—this was only a portion!

The family arrived at the Filbert Ball with the usual waiting in a crush of carriages. Lord and Lady Filbert, their son Dominic, just graduated from Oxford, and daughter Cassandra, a young seventeen year old who had made her debut this past spring, were in the hall receiving their guests. Lady Filbert exclaimed, “Oh Minerva I could have picked these two as being from your family even without seeing you together! Beatrice, you are the image of your mother! And Emily is it? You look just like your mother, God rest her soul.”

Beatrice and Emily murmured their thanks to their hostess.

Lady Filbert said with a pointed look at her son, “I'm sure these prettily behaved young ladies are going to be much in demand for dances. An intelligent gentleman would do well to secure his dances early. Minerva, after all these tiresome hostess duties are completed, we will have a comfortable coze. I am sorry I was not at home to you when you called yesterday—I was just swamped with last minute details!”

“Think nothing of it Honoria. I did not expect to do more than leave our calling cards. I knew you would be overseeing last minute details yourself, the fine hostess that you are! I simply did not wish to appear to slight one of my

dearest friends by not leaving a card.” With that Lady Minerva and family moved on to the ballroom where she spied several more acquaintances she with whom she needed to speak with. Uncle Horace made a beeline for the card room.

Lady Filbert was soon finished with the receiving line and she signaled the musicians to begin with a country dance. Young Lord Dominic led out Beatrice while Matthew led out Emily. The young ladies were not without partners all evening and did not stop dancing until the musicians took a break. Emily’s current escort went in search of a cool glass of punch for the ladies. While Emily was waving her fan talking quietly with Cassandra she noticed a beautiful, dainty blond with a cupid’s bow mouth dressed in half mourning.

Beatrice saw where Emily was gazing, “Oh look out! Here comes the wispy little queen of drama who is about as helpless as a wolf.”

“She bats her eyes and gazes soulfully at the gentlemen and they all act like fools,” Cassandra muttered grimly. “Lord Chudleigh was getting to the sticking point when she started in on him all helpless and fluttery hands.”

“I’ve seen gentlemen go along with that sort of thing rather than seem churlish,” Emily said frowning. “Didn’t I hear some tittle tattle about Lord Chudleigh and some chit trying to compromise herself with him?”

“Yes, that’s him,” replied Cassandra. “Most of the time he is a gentleman, but even he would not honor an obvious trap. He is only a little foolish for the helpless female routine...”

Beatrice spoke up, “Don’t look now but Leonora, the ‘weeping willow widow’, is coming this way.”

Emily noted that the lady in question did sort of look all weedy and wispy with trailing lacy bits of gown in lavender with black trim.

“Oh my dears!” she trilled. “I had heard that you were with Michael when he was so cruelly struck down by that footpad! However did you manage to tear yourself away from his side?”

“We managed,” Emily said, a trifle taken aback as she had not been introduced to this woman. “Michael is fine, he is just staying home tonight and

playing a few hands of Piquet with Marcus. He should be managing his usual activities soon.”

Lady Lenora raised her eyebrows enquiringly at Emily and looked at Cassandra. Cassandra obliged, “May I present Miss Emily Blakely and Miss Beatrice Warrick to your ladyship. Emily, Beatrice this is the Dowager Countess of Bentley.” Cassandra had an evil gleam in her eye as she emphasized the current status of Lady Leonora.

“Miss Warrick and I are well known to one another as one of Bentley's estates is near her parents' home. How are dear Lady Minerva and Sir Horace? And is this your chaperone for this small season?”

“Mama and Papa are here tonight and in fine fettle as you will see for yourself,” replied Beatrice. Then she added gleefully, “This is my cousin Emily. Mama is chaperoning us since we could not find anyone of sufficient maturity, such as yourself, to help out.”

Other than a stiffening of her posture and a steely glint in her eyes, Lady Leonora ignored that last sally, “I imagine you will try to manage to see some of the sites, while you are here Miss Blakely. It will make for good conversation when you go home to where ever it is you live.”

Beatrice spoke again, “As a matter of fact, when Emily quits the season it will be as Lady Althorpe as she and Lord Althorpe are betrothed.”

“My dear, you must be mistaken. Michael must not have known that I was free again,” Lady Leonora said as she brought a wisp of a kerchief to her eye to dab at an imaginary teardrop.

“Emily, show Lady Leonora your betrothal ring,” Beatrice said gleefully.

Emily fidgeted, clearly uncomfortable. “Beatrice, we were not going to announce anything until the Liverpool Ball,” she hissed as she reluctantly unbuttoned her glove and drew it off, displaying the ruby and diamond ring.”

“My dears do not try and cozen me with some Banbury tale—that is not the Conley betrothal ring.”

“You’re right,” Beatrice replied. “Lord Althorpe was in such a hurry to claim Emily that he did not wish to wait for the family betrothal ring. He also wanted Emily to have something she could keep and not give to the wife of the next heir.”

Emily noticed that Beatrice had an unholy glint in her eye while Lady Lenora was frowning. Obviously, this must be something of a sore point for Lady Leonora. She must have had to give up all of the family pieces to her stepson. She said through clenched teeth, “That was very thoughtful of Michael.”

“Oh look! Isn’t that Bentley escorting Miss Hamilton-Smith out to the garden? My, she does look pretty tonight,” Cassandra said with a knowing look at the others.

Lady Leonora hurriedly excused herself and tried not to look panicked as she went to break up any tête-à-tête between her stepson and an eligible miss. As soon as Lady Leonora left earshot, the young ladies looked at one another and started giggling. “The family went to dear departed Lord Bentley’s lay out at Bentley Court,” Beatrice said. “It was said in the neighborhood that she was constantly haranguing Bentley for carriages and baubles. He seemed to wear a hunted expression all the time. I must say though, when I saw his corpse in the parlor, the expression on his face was beatific—he was the happiest dead nobleman I ever saw.”

Emily wondered how Michael was doing and if Marcus was doing a good job keeping him entertained. She hoped he wouldn’t be upset by Beatrice’s precipitous announcement of their betrothal.

Meanwhile, Michael had persuaded his staff to help him into a comfortable chair at a small table in his room. Sometimes his housekeeper, Mrs. Pimms, would set up a small repast in his room if he had come home late and cupshot from too much brandy. He also had them send up a tray of cold meat, cheeses and bread. Marcus brought the cards into the room as Michael made a sandwich for himself.

As Marcus made himself a sandwich, “One cannot say that the old Earl of Sandwich was all bad. I mean, even though he nearly single handedly brought the British Naval superiority down through his corrupt administration, at least he invented the sandwich.”

Michael set his plate to the side as he shuffled the cards. “It’s not like other administrations didn’t have their share of corruption—just look at the scandalous waste of supplies and materials by corrupt army quartermasters during the late war with France.”

Marcus said with a faraway look in his eyes, “Some quartermasters did their best to acquire and distribute supplies.”

Michael was abruptly reminded that his friend owed his life to a quartermaster who had defended him from looters at the cost of his own life.

Marcus, as he picked up his cards, thought of his contact with the home office, Lord Debenham. Sometimes they are not just corrupt but are fools as well. He had not decided how much to tell Michael.

“By the by, where is my charming, soon-to-be betrothed tonight?”

“Aunt Minerva and the cousins prevailed upon her to hold to the schedule of entertainments and go to the Filbert’s Ball,” Marcus replied.

“Aunt Minerva, I think every loose screw and cad has tried to scrape an acquaintance with us tonight,” Emily complained. “All of them claimed close friendship to Simon and Patrick and prevailed upon Matthew to introduce them.”

“I know what you mean! If even a third of those rake shames are truly friends of those two, I will have to talk to your Uncle Cecil about them,” Aunt Minerva agreed exasperated. “I am going to have to warn Matthew about introducing anyone who claims acquaintance with the twins.”

Emily glanced toward the door and saw a couple enter the room. The gentleman had raven hair touched at the temples with gray and, even from a distance, the hard expression and lines of overindulgence were clearly evident. The lady was a dark haired beauty who dressed in a thin red muslin gown. Her chemise,

if she even had one on, was so gossamer thin that one could make out the glitter of her bejeweled garters. Aunt Minerva saw her gaze and stated in a sotto voice, “Avert your eyes girl! Do not be caught looking at that man as he is just a nobleman not a gentleman! Your Uncle Horace refers to him as a dirty dish.”

Emily pulled her eyes from the couple and focused them determinedly on her aunt, “Who is he and who is the lady?”

Aunt Minerva took another quick glance at the couple, “Oh dear Lord, this is beyond the pale even for him,” she muttered distracted.

“Aunt Minerva?” Emily prodded.

“Oh dear,” Aunt Minerva sighed, “I had better tell you, someone else will soon I assure you...” Emily raised her eyebrows enquiringly. “That woman is Miss Dubonnet, reportedly Lord Althorpe’s mistress.”

His mistress! Emily thought. How am I to compete with a beautiful, worldly woman like that? Emily had no confidence in her abilities to keep a jaded gentleman of the ton focused on her charms. Emily’s thoughts were interrupted when, to her aunt’s consternation, the couple in question walked straight up to them.

The gentleman spoke, “Well Minerva, it has been a long time! Is this another one of your lovely and amazingly fecund sisters? Won’t you introduce me?”

“Lord Stanhope,” Aunt Minerva said with a roll of her eyes, flattered in spite of herself. “You know very well that this is my niece and I will not introduce you to her. You, sir, are not a proper sort of gentleman for her to know, as you are well aware!”

“Allow me to introduce my companion, Miss Dubonnet, to Miss Blakely” he interjected smoothly as if Lady Minerva had not spoken.

“Ah Miss Blakely, I ‘ave ‘eard so much about you,” Miss Dubonnet intoned in her overdone French accent. “Michael said...” she paused, eyelids fluttering down like she made an unintentional faux pas, “I meant to say someone said to me that you were a charming young lady.”

The whole ballroom seemed to be trying to discreetly watch this titillating scene. Emily did not bandy words with the older woman. She glanced at

her, letting her eyes trail from her head to her toes and back again, then turned towards her aunt and said, “Aunt Minerva, I see Beatrice over there in the corner with Matthew. Shall I send him to the card room for Uncle Horace? I imagine he would like to talk to your delightful acquaintance Lord Stanhope.” She picked up her skirts and suited her actions to her words. The trio she left behind all wore stunned expressions: Aunt Minerva with bemused pride, Stanhope with grudging admiration, Miss Dubonnet with dawning rage at just being given the cut direct by someone she considered much less attractive than herself.

Michael, with Marcus trailing behind, carefully stepped into the ballroom just in time to see his intended snub his former light o’ love. The bad headache, which had been exacerbated by the protests of Marcus, his valet and even his coachman about him leaving his sick bed, momentarily abated as he beheld the vision of Emily in her new ballgown. He then refocused his attention on Clarisse Dubonnet.

What the devil is she doing here, he wondered. And who thought it was a splendid idea to introduce his fiancé to his former mistress? He recognized the gentleman with her, Stanhope that old court card! His head began to throb again. He watched Stanhope lean down and whispered something to Clarisse as she looked like she wanted to follow Emily and throttle her. He started making his way to Beatrice, as Emily seemed to be heading in that direction, but before he could meet up with Emily, he was waylaid by Lady Leonora.

“Michael, you came after all!” she exclaimed seizing his arm. As he glared at her and glanced pointedly down at his arm, she reluctantly released it. “I have heard the most dreadful story please tell me it isn’t so...”

“What story would that be,” he said absently as he watched Emily meeting with Beatrice.

“Why the one that you are betrothed to that insipid spinster, Emily Blakely,” she exclaimed.

“It’s not been announced yet but it is true enough,” he replied.

She brought her wisp of a kerchief up to her eye and dabbed, “How could you do this to us?”

Oh lord, she is going to make a scene. “Compose yourself,” he said coldly, “there is no us—you married Bentley. Now that I am in line for an Earldom, I seem a more attractive proposition for you than when I was untitled.”

“... but I am free now...” she started to weep.

He grabbed her arm and forced her out onto the balcony to get her out of the ballroom.

Emily saw the last actions and saw red. She saw Lord Dominic, their hostess’ son, walking to them with some punch. She walked over to him and said with a smile, “I am feeling a little overheated. Could you please escort me to the balcony?”

Lord Dominic, who had also seen the pair head to the balcony, assented reluctantly and escorted Emily outside. There, they were surprised to see Michael pushing Lady Leonora away and stepping back just as she would try to seize his arm. “Oh Michael, how could you be so beastly... I told you my parents made me marry him,” she babbled tearfully.

Emily left Lord Dominic standing with the punch glasses, an unwilling audience to the scene. She walked up to Lady Leonora, and said very quietly, “You will stay away from my betrothed.”

“Michael!” she protested. “She is threatening me!”

Michael just looked at her with an impassive expression on his face. Emily said, “Michael asked to marry him and I am not so foolish as to turn him down. If you dare to come near him or any of my cousins again, I will draw your cork for you.”

“Oh Michael,” she said grabbing Michael’s arm again, “She is the veriest hoyden!”

Emily sighed, made a fist and hit Lady Leonora in the nose. “Don’t try that again or I will push you into the fountain.”

“She hit me,” Lady Leonora mumbled into her wispy kerchief, which was great for show but terrible at staunching a bloody nose.

Emily turned to the amazed Lord Dominic, “Lord Dominic, I think Lady Leonora needs the punch more than I do right now. Then, would you please escort her to her carriage?”

“But of course,” Lord Dominic strode up and took a subdued Lady Leonora in hand and escorted her to the front of the house where the carriages were lined up but not before looking back at Emily with a look of amused admiration.

Emily watched them walk away, then glanced up at Michael face, worried about what he would think of her actions, and was relieved to discover he had a wicked glint in his eye. “My lady!” he teased. “You have saved me from the evil intentions of that dastardly damsel! Now I suppose you are going to carry me off into yon gazebo and have your wicked way with me,” he sighed as he rolled his eyes.

“Don’t be silly,” Emily said, exasperated. “I have been fending off cads and rakehells all night long, not to mention your former friends. Beatrice told Lady Leonora about our betrothal, by now it is all over the ballroom.”

“...ah so I need get a betrothal kiss from you,” he backed her up against the wall of the balcony and took her into his arms. He brought his lips close to hers and Emily stared up at him mesmerized. She licked her lips and looked at his mouth. He gently touched his lips to hers and inhaled her gasping breath. She felt the tingle of her nipples as his hand dipped inside her low bodice. She felt warm dampness at the juncture of her legs as he pressed his erect cock into her belly.

As he licked and nipped her shoulder, Emily, striving to regain control of her reeling senses, said breathlessly, “I thought the Doctor said you were to stay in your bedchamber tonight.”

“Ah yes, I am an injured man and you need to be very careful with me,” he replied smoothly. “It is so hot in the ballroom and there isn’t a place to sit down. I really need to find a place to sit—I am feeling a little unsteady on my feet.”

“Michael you look quite fit to me,” Emily looked at him suspiciously as she moved out of his embrace.

“Trust me,” he said with exasperation. “As soon as I heard that you were coming to the Filbert’s ball tonight, I had to come. I knew that it would be common gossip that I had offered for you and every scoundrel in London would be trying to scrape an acquaintance. I had to argue every step of the way and now I really need to have a seat.”

Emily was flattered, but she could not tell if he was pale, as the moon was obscured by clouds. The only place available nearby to sit was the gazebo. So she solicitously assisted Michael to the bench there.

The subtle aroma of the Old Blush pink roses climbing the gazebo walls the faint mist of fog gathering around the area seemed to grant a further element of intimacy and the illusion of privacy. “Now,” he said, “where were we?”

Emily felt her face pinken as she mentally berated herself for falling for his blandishments. “Michael, the whole ballroom saw you and Lady Leonora come out here and then Lord Dominic and I followed. I think we have had had better...” Michael suddenly swept her up in his arms and laid her down on the cushions with himself on top.

Emily could not help herself. She quite forgot about her aunt and all of the people in the ballroom. This man was Michael, the star of all of her childish fantasies—the man she always pictured in her head when she read a Minerva Press novel. Her hero was kissing her thoroughly and raising the hem of her skirts. His hands were stroking the silky skin of her thighs, spreading her legs apart, touching her in an intimate caress on her mons. Emily felt bereft as he lifted himself off of her and made a protest. “Shh, I am not stopping, just changing where I am kissing you,” he whispered. He started to kiss and lick the inside of her thighs, moving up to the triangle of hair covering her secrets. He parted the lips of her labia with his dew slick fingers and blew on the engorged pink flesh he saw.

“My dear, you are in need, aren’t you?” he asked huskily.

Emily gasped in response as he kissed and suckled her there. She felt something just out of reach, something building inside her.

Suddenly, she heard Beatrice say, “I know I saw her go that way. We need to find her before Simon and Patrick.”

Emily scooted away from his teasing tongue abruptly and hastily rearranged her skirts; Michael gave her a slow intimate smile and straightened his cravat.

“Over here,” he said.

When Beatrice and Cassandra came into sight, he said, “Emily was still feeling a little excited after drawing Leonora’s cork for her...”

“Did you really?” Beatrice questioned excitedly. “I have wanted to do that this age...”

“We decided to sit out here for a while,” Michael continued and kissed Emily’s wrist, giving the young ladies a hint as to what else they had been doing.

Cassandra said conversationally, “Why the gazebo, Lord Althorpe? Didn’t you know that there is a bench near the balcony?”

“Oh really,” he said with a knowing look at Emily, “With the knock on the head that I received today, I must have forgotten.”

Beatrice smirked, “I’m sure you did. Mama is looking for you Emily. It is almost time for the supper dance.”

“I’m sure whoever signed your card for the supper dance will grant me his dance, newly betrothed as we are...”

The small group made their way back to the ballroom as the sets were being formed for the supper dance. Lord Dominic conceded his dance to Michael.

The movements of the dance left little time for intimate conversation. Michael thought, much as he enjoyed her reading, he preferred dancing with Emily. He hadn’t felt this good all day. He smiled at Emily he should have tried this sooner.

## Chapter 11

After Marcus had delivered Michael home to his scolding valet, Marcus slipped out the door to take himself off to a gaming hell. He would not darken the door of a gaming hell if it were not for the fact that he had to seek out his contact, Lord Debenham.

Marcus peered around the smoke filled room, and saw Lord Debenham, cravat slightly askew, about to roll the dice. He appeared to have had some luck tonight, judging from the rouleaux of coins which were in front of his position. The dice rolled and the croupier called out crab. Marcus watched as much of the coin in front of Debenham was raked forward to the house.

“Blast and damn,” he said. “Someone switched the dice...”

“Debenham,” Marcus interrupted, “Why don’t you take a break from the bones and partake of the buffet. Gads man, surely you’ve dropped enough blunt to pay for it.”

Marcus took him by the elbow and guided him over to the buffet. “S-sorry old chap,” he slurred. “Oh Darning, did we have a meet on for tonight? I plain forgot if we did...” Marcus unobtrusively waved his hand in front of his face; the man’s breath was toxic with cheap brandy.

Oh well, in vino veritas, Marcus thought. “I need to talk to you, Debenham. My friend, whom you had me watching, was attacked today. Do you have any further information?”

“As a matter of fact, the home office fellows said that this is getting too complicated and that since an attack had been perpetrated on a peer, a Runner will be hired to investigate further,” he said glumly.

“We are to hand over investigating to Bow Street?”

“Yes. I am not to further involve myself in this matter,” he said as he belched.

“Why don’t I escort you home?” Marcus asked in such a way that brooked no disagreement. “You are a bit cup shot to be playing with much sense.”

“You know what?” Debenham replied. “I think you’re right. By the way, that cousin of yours is devilishly attractive.”

“Who, Bea?”

“Nah, though she’s pretty, too. The one with the copper color hair and big...” Marcus gave him a warning look “...eyes. If Althorpe doesn’t pan out I might try for her hand myself.”

“Why the sudden interest?”

“Quite frankly, I could have use of a wife connected to the Prime Minister and whose family is well thought of in the home office.”

Michael woke the next morning, his mother, Lady Margaret Winslow, Countess of Conley, came bursting into the room. “Michael Anthony Horatio Winslow! You were supposed to remain in bed and stay quiet for a couple of days!”

“Mama?!”

“Don’t you Mama me,” she continued. “And what’s this do I hear about some trollop trapping you into marrying her?”

“Where on earth did you hear that?” Michael sat up in bed, clutching his sheets.

“One of my friends sent me an express note.”

“Who exactly?” Michael groaned.

“Amanda Fitzwilliam,” said his mother.

“You mean the one who has a daughter coming out soon? I thought you would be pleased since you are well acquainted with the family...” he trailed off.

“Who the devil is she?”

“Mother! Watch your language, please! She is Emily Blakely, daughter of Sir William and Lady Helen Blakely. As I heard it she and her Aunt Dorothea visited Conley at least once...”

“Oh, little Emily? Well that is a different story!” Lady Margaret exclaimed. “I heard that it was some young hoyden lurking by the Dark Walk at Covent Garden with a band of ruffians!”

“Mother, she was separated from her male cousins at the fireworks display. I saw her over by the dark walk with the moonlight shining down on her... I quite forgot myself entirely and behaved very cavalierly towards her.” Michael said carefully, his face taking on a ruddy hue.

Michael continued with his story. “Her male cousins came along, the Randolph twins and Matthew Warrick—they were very upset and I made an offer for her right away rather than waiting until later in the season.”

“Oh, I am so pleased, Michael!” she beamed at him. “You are so like your father; I’ll just wager that you want to marry right away, just like we did. Why, I remember the first time I met dear Emily. We took tea in the pink marble folly. It was such a warm day and that folly with all that cool marble—it is wonderful inside there when it is warm.”

He winced, and said, “Yes, Emily mentioned to me that our folly was very nice that way.”

## Chapter 12

Emily woke up late the next morning and she rang for the maid. She quickly performed her morning ablutions and went downstairs to the breakfast room. The rest of the family was there before her.

“Good morning, my dear,” trilled Lady Minerva. “My, don’t we look pretty today!”

“Good morning everyone,” Emily replied.

Sir Horace put aside his copy of the Times to give her a greeting. “I hear you ladies have some special shopping to do today.”

“Yes, we need to go to the dressmakers and get Emily some bride clothes today,” Beatrice said excitedly. “Emily, Papa is meeting up with Lord Althorpe’s man of business to discuss the bridal settlements today.”

“What is going on here?” asked a confused Emily.

“Em, you just can’t go out into a dark garden with a fellow for thirty minutes and not expect people to notice,” Matthew said, clearly uncomfortable.

Oh well, she thought, it’s not as though I did not intend to accept his offer. “Aunt Minerva, what more should I need in the way of clothing?” she asked.

“Well dear,” Aunt Minerva said with a pointed look at Matthew and the twins, “I thought we would discuss it along the way. Now we all have our assignments; Matthew you are to help the governess take Peter and Phoebe to the Menagerie at the Towers today. Horace you are...”

“I know dear. I am to go by the Times and insert the betrothal notice after I take Beatrice to Cassandra’s for a visit,” he smiled. “Honestly woman, Nelson didn’t plan this thoroughly prior to Trafalgar.”

“If he had, he would still be alive,” Aunt Minerva retorted. “Now finish up and attend to your appointed tasks.”

When Emily and her aunt were finally on their way in the carriage, Lady Minerva said, “Now then Emily, we are going to the dressmaker who services the fashionable impure.”

“What else could I possibly need?”

“Sleeping attire for a married women or women who should be,” she replied.

At the shop, the patroness was gratified to see her best married customer again. “If more ladies of the ton were to shop in special establishments like mine I think that more gentlemen would seek entertainment at home,” she said knowingly.

After spending a delightful late morning choosing sleep gowns that made Emily blush to consider. Lady Minerva and Emily went for a planning luncheon at the Liverpool residence. Lady Louisa greeted them as they entered the drawing room. “Minerva, Emily you both look wonderful! This little victory season seems to be agreeing with you both. This is my social secretary, George McMillan...” gesturing toward an earnest looking young man in spectacles. “Mr. McMillan will be making notes for the wedding breakfast which we will hold here.”

Lady Minerva said, “Your home is lovely. You have made a great many changes since I was here last.”

“Yes, after poor Lord Spencer, the previous Prime Minister, was assassinated over at Downing Street, we decided to stay in our own residence. With Liverpool being the new Prime Minister, we felt that our residence would best serve our needs. You would be surprised at the number of working breakfasts and luncheons we hold here. The Prince Regent has been here many times; he adores our chef.”

Lady Louisa showed them the large formal drawing room which was large enough to hold all of the relatives for the ceremony. “Even though Althorpe is nominally aligned with the Whig party, he has on occasion voted with the Tories on matters of national security. Liverpool feels that to hold the Althorpe wedding here would be a good conciliatory gesture on his part. My dear husband positively toils so hard to get everyone to work together.”

Lady Minerva replied, “It was so nice of you to be able to throw yourself into the fray, as it were. Young people are so impetuous nowadays,” she said with an affectionate glance at Emily. Emily turned her head as tears started in her eyes; her aunt and Lady Louisa were being so wonderful. She had felt hunted last night with every rake and rogue last evening leering at her. However, if one asked these same gentlemen to describe anything but her bosom they would be hard pressed.

And Michael, oh lord, what he must be thinking. Maybe her character was lacking. As the thoughts chased themselves around her head, she tried to pay attention to the plans for the small wedding ceremony. The wonderful luncheon prepared to perfection tasted like sawdust in her mouth. What if she did something wrong and embarrassed everyone at the ceremony?

“Emily dear, whatever is the matter? You have hardly touched your food and you look as though you are about to bolt.” her aunt said, looking concerned.

“I-I’m not used to so much fuss over me,” Emily said tearfully. “Last week I was a companion and general dogsbody for Aunt Dorothea and this week I am a betrothed woman to a titled gentleman! Everyone is going to so much trouble for me. What if I trip on my train, forget someone’s name, not curtsy low enough to a more socially prominent individual....”

“Emily, we are planning things so that all you must do is show up and say what the Bishop...” began Lady Louisa.

“A Bishop!” Emily exclaimed.

“Heavens, I knew I should have had you up here in London with me when you came out of mourning,” sighed Lady Louisa. “But poor Lord Spencer had just been assassinated and Liverpool was trying to put together a solid government—still, I should have done something.”

“Louisa, I remember you wrote me at that time and everything was at sixes and sevens,” Aunt Minerva said gently. “Emily was staying with us at the time. We should have introduced her then, but I could not because Beatrice was too young, Matthew was still at Oxford and the twins were just four years old. Her help was invaluable to me in keeping my household together and then Benjamin Dering died. Emily was needed to go to my sister since Marcus could not get home from the 73rd Foot to handle all of the details of the funeral. We have taken sorry advantage of her over the years.”

“Aunt Minerva, I felt useful and needed, and none of the gentlemen to whom I had been introduced were sufficiently enamored of my charms to even begin a courtship,” Emily said finally, “If it were not for a silly misunderstanding, Michael would not have even noticed me.”

“Be that as it may, Lord Althorpe is seriously courting you now, in a less than subtle manner,” Aunt Minerva with a smile. “Or else we would not be meeting here today to discuss your immediate wedding. Emily dear, please bear in mind for the future that silk taffeta wrinkles so easily. And ladies who discreetly tryst always go back through to the withdrawing room and have their coiffures freshened. You are such an innocent, dear, and Lord Althorpe seems to be a right rogue.”

Emily’s face pinkened in embarrassment. “I’m sorry aunt. He said he was feeling dizzy and needed to sit down in the gazebo.”

“I’m sure he did,” Lady Louisa said archly. “However did you manage to get flecks of blood on the front of your gown? At least, you must have boxed his ears for his cheek.”

“No, Lady Bentley was making a cake of herself hanging all over Michael, I told her I would draw her cork if she came near him again—she didn’t listen,” Emily replied her face pinkening further.

“You didn’t,” Lady Louisa said excitedly. “George, ring for Richardson and have him bring up the ’85 champagne. We must toast to this occasion! I have wanted to do that for ages...”

The rest of the arrangements were completed swiftly and the ladies were found later by Lord Liverpool, when he came home early from his office, to be slightly ‘well to live’.

“Liverpool, what are you doing home so early? George, do we have anything besides the Devonshire Rout tonight? I hope I did not make mice feet of your schedule darling,” Lady Liverpool said turning to her husband.

“Got into the ’85 did you?” he said Lord Liverpool asked as he picked up the bottle.

“We were just sampling it to see if the quality was there, my lord,” Lady Louisa said smoothly. “You know you want to make a good impression with the Whig coalition at the wedding breakfast.”

“I definitely need someone’s good will,” he said with a grimace. “The broadsheets are showing me shoving raggedy soldiers and their families out into the snow, and someone threw a rotten tomato at the Chancellor of the Exchequer

thinking it was me. Mr. Bailey, of the Lake District, has been working behind the scenes to pull some of my support in the House of Commons.”

“Nobody appreciates all of your noble efforts at trying to keep a stable government in place more than Horace and I,” Lady Minerva said firmly. “With all of the soldiers coming home and the upcoming meetings with the Russian delegation, we do not need to be dealing with upheavals in leadership.”

“Just so, Lady Minerva. This little wedding will help to demonstrate the spirit of cooperation in the differing factions of government and subtly present a united front,” Lord Liverpool concluded.

As Lady Minerva and Emily were climbing into their town carriage, a young street urchin ran up to Emily and shoved a note in her hand. Lady Minerva was being helped into the carriage by the footman so she did not see the event. Emily discreetly opened the note and read it:

If you want to find out more  
Information about the attack  
Come to the Chalk Farm at  
Dawn tomorrow alone

Emily called after the urchin, “Young man, you forgot to wait for your penny.” The young urchin halted in mid flight turned and looked back at Emily suspiciously.

“Wot cher talking ‘bout? Nuffin’ was said ‘bout a penny.”

“Emily what are you doing?” Emily surreptitiously slipped Lady Minerva the note.

“Oh my, yes you had better get him over here for a tip,” Aunt Minerva said in a whisper.

“Come along then boy.”

The boy crept closer. “Oh dear me,” Emily said, “I have nothing less than half a crown in my reticule.” Emily held the coin out to the boy while giving a significant look to the footman and gesturing with her eyes. The scrawny urchin was mesmerized by the coin.

"I'll wager that your family will be very pleased with you for this days work if you bring back half a crown," coaxed Emily.

The urchin was snapped out of his dreams of what he could purchase with the coin, "Don' 'ave no fambly," he said as he scrubbed at his nose with his shabby sleeve and looked at Emily cautiously. Emily held out the coin to the boy.

He quickly snatched it out of her hand and backed away. "I have another half a crown if you tell me who gave you the note," Emily said withdrawing another coin out of her reticule.

"'e some toft," he replied.

"Describe him."

"'e was an older chap wot 'ad some white at the sides of 'is 'air," the boy reached for the other coin.

Emily pulled the other coin back just out of reach, "Old like my aunt or old like the Queen?"

"Older than you, not as old as the pretty lady here" he replied holding out his hand for the coin. Emily raised her eyebrows at that but gave him the coin.

Lady Minerva said, "You look like you could use a good meal boy. Would you like to come home with us?"

The boy backed away like he had been like he had been stung, "Wha' cher tike me fer I lives at ta mission. I don' wanna end up in no 'ouse."

Lady Minerva frowned in consternation from her place in the coach. "We aren't in the business young man! We just came from Lord Liverpool's residence—he wouldn't entertain persons of that ilk here!" Her expression softened, "You have seen too many things a child should not even know." She pulled a calling card out of her case and handed it to Emily, "Please, if you ever want to come to my house and have a hot meal, or start out in service like James here..." indicating the footman, "...just come around to the mews at 121 Curzon Street in Mayfair."

The boy accepted the little card with more reverence than he had the coin and slipped it carefully into his trousers. He looked up at the pretty lady in the carriage and pulled his cap and sketched a fair approximation of a bow, he said, "Thank ye, milady," and started to run off.

Emily called after him, “What is your name?”

“Ida No,” he said.

She wrinkled her brow, “You don’t know?”

“No, it’s me name... Ida—No,” he said as he disappeared out of site.

Emily said as she was assisted into the carriage, “I hope he comes by for the meal or the job—he seems so alone.”

“He will, if he wants you can’t save everyone, just those who wish to be saved and he does say he lives at a mission.”

Emily took one last look at the corner where the boy disappeared and turned back to Lady Minerva. “What do you think about the note?”

“Well the gentleman described could be any of a number, but I do have my suspicions: Stanhope.”

“Why Stanhope?” questioned a perplexed Emily. “What did Michael or I ever do to him?”

“I blush to tell you, but he was an ardent suitor of mine who felt humiliated when I chose your Uncle Horace over him. Horace was an untitled young man of comfortable means with steady ways. Stanhope’s father had not gambled away his fortune at the time, and he had a fine old title.”

“I heard rumors about thirteen years ago that he was ‘pressing his suit’ as it were, with Lynnette Winslow and was turned down in no uncertain terms.”

“Michael’s sister?” she asked. “He is unmarried still? I would think that he would have offered for more than just two young ladies?”

“He’s a widower. His first born died as a toddler and his wife died in child bed after giving birth to a still born son soon after,” Aunt Minerva replied. “I’ll give him this; he danced attendance on his wife, a cit’s daughter who brought a fortune to the marriage. He even wounded a man in a duel who had made some disparaging remarks about his wife.

“He doesn’t seem all that bad then,” said Emily, “but why me?”

“Emily, gentlemen say they can not figure out the female of the species,” Aunt Minerva sighed. “Sometimes, I can not figure out what motivates men.”

## Chapter 13

Emily and her aunt went to call on the Althorpe family and were surprised to find a large group already there. In addition to Michael, they found Marcus, Sir Horace, Lord Ballard, Lord and Lady Conley, and a beefy looking individual Emily had never seen. They were meeting in the front parlor because the small gentlemen's study was too small to hold such a group. Lady Conley was almost hidden in the corner behind a tea service. She was pouring cups of tea for anyone who wished while the butler was dispensing brandy. Lady Conley looked up and smiled, looking relieved to see some other female faces. "Emily dear, I was ever so pleased that Michael had the good sense to honor the betrothal contract between our two families." She had apparently been informed of the entire situation and the story that they were using. "Minerva... I haven't seen you since Lynnette's wedding. Do forgive me, ladies, if I don't come over and greet you properly. I am hemmed in by all these males and the tea service."

Sir Horace walked over and escorted his wife and Emily to a sofa and gestured to the unknown gentleman in a red waist coat. "My dears, this is Mr. Josiah Wolcott of Bow Street. Mr. Wolcott, this is my wife, Lady Minerva Warrick, and my niece, Miss Emily Blakely.

"My dear, we were just giving Mr. Wolcott information about the attack on Lord Althorpe," Sir Horace said. After he went over the statements of Michael and the groom he said, "Emily, do you have anything you wish to add?"

"Only this," she said, holding out the piece of paper and, with an apologetic look at her aunt, she continued. "Apparently, they think I am as bacon-brained as a heroine in a Minerva Press novel and will go meet a stranger in a deserted area without proper escort or leaving word."

Sir Horace read the note aloud to the company. Michael frowned in consternation. Emily said, "The urchin who delivered it said a gentleman with dark hair graying at the temples gave him the note to deliver it."

"Do ye think that the boy was tellin' the truth?" Mr. Wolcott queried. "About everything but his name—he said his name was Ida No."

The Runner smiled in recognition. "As it 'appens, I know the lad. He was found on the steps of a workhouse when he was but a babe, with no note and they called him the only thing 'e could say ... Ida No." Mr Wolcott continued, "E's a lad what 'olds 'orses for a penny or delivers notes. If that was 'im it's he told the truth."

Emily asked, "What should we do about the meeting? While I don't think I would receive any information, I would like to see who is trying to lure me out."

"Emily, you can not go. It is too dangerous," Michael said. Emily rolled her eyes at her aunt as if to say 'did I not just indicate that I have too much sense for that action?'

"Your lordship, if I may?" Michael nodded his head. "One of the other runners Darby Jenks, is between assignments right now."

"Who is Darby Jenks?" asked Sir Horace. "John Stafford, the head clerk at Bow Street, said you were the best man for the job."

"For this little part of the job, ye needs not a man but a woman..." Mr. Wolcott trailed off, "...or a man wha' could pass 'as a woman."

Lord Conley spoke up, "This sounds like an interesting plan, pray continue. Who is Darby Jenks?"

"Jenks is a smallish sort of fellow. We usually uses him over at Newmarket to gather information...he looks like a jockey," Mr. Wolcott stated. "Anyway, 'e is about the size of Miss Blakely, give or take, and with a large cloak and a veiled hat..."

Lady Minerva interjected, "Oh I see! He will resemble Emily. If any woman were to do such a crack brained thing, she definitely would cloak and veil herself to disguise her appearance. This is a wonderful plan!"

Sir Horace looked approvingly at the man awkwardly balancing a fragile cup of tea in his large hand. "No wonder you come so highly recommended by Stafford. Will there be any problems with getting Mr. Jenks to dress as a woman?"

"'Spect not sir, Darby is lookin' to broaden his area of h'information gatherin'—'e really 'ates 'orses despises the bloody beasts." He looked sheepishly at the ladies in the room, "Beg pardon, my ladies."

When the family arrived home, Emily felt drained, but she wanted to do some woodworking. She always felt closest to her father when she was working wood the way he taught her all those years ago. Emily went to the small tack room attached to the stables behind the residence where her small chest of tools were stored. Along with her marquetry tools, Emily also inherited some chisels that she rarely used. Upon opening the chest she noticed that her things appeared somewhat disarranged and the set of chisels were on top instead of the bottom of the chest. Emily looked closely at the set; one appeared to be missing!

She called out to the head groom, "Loxley, has anyone been in here lately? One of my chisels seems to have been misplaced.

"Well Miss Emily no one has disturbed yer tool chest," he said. "All of us here knows that those tools was the only thing that that skinflint relative of yourn let ya take from your home. It's the only thing ya have of yer da', Sir William. Could it have been jumbled about from moving?"

"No, not this much and like you said, these tools have great sentimental value to me," Emily said. "I supervised the loading and unloading personally. Do you recall seeing anyone out here?"

"No Miss," Loxley said. "Last night, on my evening off, I did notice that the tack room door was open when I came back from having a pint."

"Are you sure it was closed when you left?" Emily asked.

"I always checks the doors 'afore I leaves on my evening off, even at the Little Tipping property," which was the name of the village where the Warrick family resides. "I'm in my position since I was a lad because I am responsible." He cast a worried look at Emily.

Emily smiled at him reassuringly, "Of course you are Loxley... never doubted you for a minute, just making sure."

He looked relieved, and continued, "I did see one fella, claimed he was a new footman. I caught him hangin' about the stables a couple o' days ago when the family first came in the residence. I sent him right about his business—I don' trust any of these Londoners the family took on."

Emily frowned perplexed, “Which new footman? The only new servants we have are the cousins of the cook who reside in London.”

“Don’ know Miss, I hadn’t seen ‘im since then--figured ‘e was jist keeping out o’ me way, as I spoke rather sharpish to ‘im.” He pulled his cap to Emily and glanced over to the horses. “Anything else Miss? No disrespect intended, but the horses need groomin’ somethin’ fierce as the family is going out later. I needs to get these horses cleaned up ag’in.” He looked questioningly at Emily. Emily nodded her dismissal, all thoughts of working on one of her projects gone from her mind.

Emily thought, the chisels were way down in the base of the tool chest and I haven’t touched them in months. Could I have misplaced one of the chisels myself?

All of this was forgotten as Beatrice greeted her in the hall near the drawing room. “Emily, there is a package for you from Lord Althorpe from a ladies shop!” she exclaimed. “Please open it now I am dying to see what he has sent you!”

“Beatrice, dear will you please exhibit at least a little decorum, and lower your voice to ladylike levels,” Aunt Minerva said covering her ears. “I’m sure our neighbors next door are well aware that you are the veriest hoyden, but I would like the people across the square to have at least a little doubt.” Lady Minerva may have been scolding Beatrice, but from the curiosity which lit her expression, only age and maturity which had restrained her own behavior.

Emily took the package in her hand, wondering what it could be as she went into the drawing room to open it. She turned the box—more jewelry, perhaps? No, it came from a ladies store. Emily was startled from her study of the package.

“Devil take it! Emily, open it!”

“Mama!” Beatrice exclaimed.

“Beatrice, you don’t think you take after your father do you?” Lady Minerva laughed as Emily opened the package.

Inside the box was a pair of jeweled garters with tiny little rubies, the same stone as in her betrothal ring.

“Emily how exquisite,” Beatrice breathed.

Lady Minerva said, “How wonderfully personal, but private! It is somewhat risqué but only we and perhaps our lady’s maid will know.

“I will have to wear them tonight. Where are we going?” asked Emily dazedly.

Matthew walked in just in time to hear her question and answered it for her. “We are attending the theater tonight in the Conley box with Althorpe and his whole family. Kean is playing Sir Giles Overreach in *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*. What has you ladies all a-twitter?”

“We are just excited to be seeing Kean tonight,” his mother prevaricated. “I read the review of this play in the times and it says that Kean sends a chill through to one’s soul.”

“Oh good, something worth watching—no romantic drivel like that *Romeo and Juliet*,” Matthew stated matter of factly, accepting the explanation.

“Matthew, how can you say that—it was so romantic dying together at the end,” Beatrice said rolling her eyes.

“Papa took me to the theater when I was on holiday from school and we saw Kean playing *Romeo*,” Michael stated, rolling his eyes, clearly bored with the whole thing. “He was ridiculous playing a tragic youngster at forty years of age—hey Em, what’s in the package?” he asked as he caught sight of the package still in Emily’s hands.

“Michael sent some flowers to me for tonight,” Emily said, waiting to see his response.

Matthew surprised them, “Those are the garters I saw Althorpe purchasing at Madame Viola’s.

“We saw him in there. Papa told me that a gentleman should give his lady small personal things to show his favor; a book or flowers before engagement, and after the formal engagement a busk for her corset or maybe garters.”

Emily and Beatrice turned to look at Lady Minerva, who pinkened and looked everywhere but their enquiring eyes. “Ahem. Ladies, I think we should start our preparations for our trip to Drury Lane.”

Emily, for the second time in two days, dressed up in a glamorous gown and had her hair styled by a maid. She, who usually wore stays that she could fasten herself, was being dressed in a beautiful green watered silk with creamy gold

lace trimming the front and a piping around the hem. Beatrice and her mother raided their stock of accessories for items to compliment the gown. Beatrice found some ivory hair combs and a fan which, because of a patina, seemed to match the dress. Emily felt overwhelmed with the thoughtfulness of Beatrice. Emily had never been a close intimate of Beatrice's, as Emily was approximately six years older. And during the times that she had spent with her, Emily tended to be more of a chaperone than a friend or a confidant.

"Beatrice, why are you being so nice to me?" Emily asked. "You hardly ever spoke to me before this visit."

"You were always so quiet and I so noisy," Beatrice replied. "Everyone remarked how composed you were all the time--you didn't seem to need me or anyone."

"I had just lost my parents," Emily said. "I had seen how other families related to the spare female relation. I did not want to cause a problem. Since no one had to care for me, my father's nearest relative would have consigned me to the nearest work house or charity school with out a qualm if it hadn't been for your mother and father."

"You didn't think we were like that did you?" Beatrice asked, clearly aghast.

"I did not know and I felt that I needed to make myself as agreeable and useful as possible so that your parents would not mind the expense of keeping me," Emily stated looking out the windows at the dusk sky.

Emily what trouble and expense?" Beatrice asked. "Your papa left you a little property which gives you some income...I overheard my papa say that," Beatrice said. "Mama also said that as her dear, older sister's child, you would always be welcome."

"No one ever told me anything about my finances," she said. "And I know little of the property papa left me."

"I happened to be by the servant's hallway," Beatrice said, carefully not meeting Emily's gaze as she turned to look at her, "when my papa told Mama that you had a nice little property in between two rivers south of Newcastle. Papa said Uncle William bought it to rent out occasionally as a hunting lodge. That with the

woods and the nearness of the rivers, it would be ideal for a gentleman to go there to hunt and fish."

"Really?" Emily asked. "So, Aunt Beatrice wasn't exaggerating much when she told Lady Sarah of my portion."

"Papa has been managing the income from your property so that you have a tidy sum in bonds. Maybe even £500."

Emily gasped at such an enormous sum. Maybe she could afford to get a couple of novels to keep on a shelf in her room instead of waiting her turn to borrow them from the lending library.

"I know what you are thinking," Beatrice smiled, "you can afford to purchase your own clothes..."

Emily quickly schooled her face to keep from betraying the fact that purchasing clothes hadn't crossed her mind just then.

"...but Mama really wants to buy your trousseau." Beatrice continued, her expression thoughtful, "Maybe you should purchase a new novel? I know how you just devour them whenever you can acquire them."

Emily agreed very quickly, "It would be a shame to spoil Aunt Minerva's fun."

Beatrice looked around and said in a sotto voice, "Emily, are you not the least bit curious about the person that sent you the note—at least enough to insist upon meeting this person yourself?"

"Of course, I'm curious," Emily responded rolling her eyes. "You think I don't want information about Michael's past as it were? And why Michael was attacked."

"I would," Beatrice nodding her head in agreement vigorously enough to make her blond ringlets bounce.

"Anyone could easily speak to me at any party," Emily stated.

"But what if that person were not of the Ton?" Beatrice questioned curiously.

“Then they must have other motives in imparting this information to me,” Emily replied, staunchly forcing away her own curiosity and misgivings. “I do not feel that they have my best interests in mind. Such a lonely area!

“What if I went with you?”

“Then there would be two of us in harm’s way,” Emily stated firmly.

“What if we rented a hackney and watched the runner make contact?”

Beatrice beseeched Emily.

“No, no and no,” Emily said exasperated, “I think you are more curious than I am.”

“I must say—you seem the veriest prig,” Beatrice cried stomping her foot, folding her arms and turning her back on Emily.

Emily sighed, she hated when her ebullient cousin took a pet, “Beatrice dear, if you frown like that you will get lines in your face and you will start to look as old and used as Lady Leonora.”

Beatrice started and turned and looked anxiously into the mirror. “Emily, don’t even hint that I could be anything like that old harridan.

Emily winced, she felt that Lady Leonora was only a few years older than she was, but she continued on, “All those lines of discontent on her face...”

Beatrice hurriedly smoothed out her expression, taking Emily very seriously and said, “I think I will go to "Mama and see if she will let me borrow some of her wrinkle cream.” Then, carefully controlling her expression, “I still think you are a poor sort of cousin. Are you sure we are related?”

## Chapter 14

Emily, dressed in another beautiful new gown, soon was headed downstairs to await her relatives. Her aunt felt that Emily would be the center of all eyes at the theater, being newly betrothed, that she should have first call on the dresser. Matthew and Sir Horace were already in the front parlor enjoying snifters of newly legal French cognac.

“Matthew, my son, it is wonderful to be able to imbibe of this wonderful elixir and not have to worry if I am impeding the war effort,” he looked up as Emily entered the room. “Emily this is a surprise,” he looked at the mantel clock. “Your aunt is never ready this early before an event and I must say you do that gown justice.”

“Thank you, Aunt Minerva did let her maid turn me out first,” Emily said deprecatingly. “She and Beatrice were trying out different accessories with their gowns,” she lied. Emily felt a little guilty that her aunt and Beatrice were late getting ready because Beatrice had insisted on her Mama getting out the new wrinkle cream she had recently acquired. She had only thought to tease Beatrice out of a sulk and now she is looking at her youthful complexion worriedly for lines and wrinkles. Emily looked pensively into the glass of sherry she had accepted from Uncle Horace. Was she ever that young and carefree at that age? The answer was no, she hadn’t felt that carefree since her mother had passed away. Her reverie was interrupted by the entrance of the ladies in question.

“Ah here they are,” said Sir Horace he walked forward and planted a kiss on his wife’s cheek. “It was well worth the wait, my dear. You and Beatrice look radiant.”

Mother and daughter exchanged a knowing glance, thinking that the cream had worked wonders for them. Emily thought they looked resplendent in their gowns but the beauty she saw in their faces owed more to good temper and generosity of spirit than any cream. Emily envied her cousin Beatrice; she would give anything to be going to a party with her own mother. With all of the hustle and bustle of trying to be everything to everyone since her father passed away, she

seemed to have spent little time reflecting on what her life would have been like if her mother had lived. The pain and envy flashed hot for a moment then with an effort Emily pushed it away. Accept things which cannot be changed and make the best of them, she thought.

“Oh Em,” Matthew said, “Althorpe, is picking you up in his town carriage with his parents.”

Just then, the butler walked in and announced, “The Earl and Countess of Conley and Viscount Althorpe.”

A tiny whirlwind of a lady crossed over to Emily after acknowledging her host and hostess. “My dear, it is so lovely to see you again and under such wonderful circumstance!” she said, seizing Emily’s hands. “Let me look at you. How wonderful you look! When your Aunt Dorothea and I were girls, we always dreamed of our children getting together but with her having Marcus a few years after I had Lynette, we figured it would never be. Dorothea has said many times to me that you are the daughter she never had—so it is almost the same thing. Michael is a dutiful son, but I never dreamed that circumstances would bring about fulfillment of our childish daydreams.”

Emily, while gratified at her approval and acceptance felt slightly overwhelmed by this elfin ball of energy. She remembered the visit to Conley Grange with her aunt and the tiny, effervescent Countess.

Lady Conley had made a great deal of fuss over the orphaned young girl she was then as well. She often wondered how this sparkling chatterbox of a lady ever made friends with her dour Aunt Dorothea.

They arrived at the theater with just enough time to settle in the Conley box. Matthew, after helping to escort his sister in, excused himself to meet with Simon and Patrick in the pit. Emily and Beatrice, since it was their first time at the theater were placed in the front of the box so they would not miss any of the performance. Emily took a casual look around the theater at the boxes she could see. Princess Caroline, the prince regent’s estranged wife, was seated in a prominent box directly opposite from, of course, the annoyed prince regent. She

seemed to have a number of male acquaintances. Emily looked down into the pit and saw Matthew with a few gentlemen of similar age, all wearing very colorful waistcoats. It was all so wonderful and new to her. The velvet curtains draping the stage and the frescoes on the ceiling—the theater in Bath was never this grand! How does one focus on the play with so many things to see and hear? She turned to her side and saw Michael watching her.

“I’m sorry it is all so new to me,” Emily said embarrassed. “All the decorations on stage and the boxes all seem to me small individual theaters in themselves.”

Michael smiled, “How so?”

“Just look at the Princess. She is over in her box working to annoy the Prince and he, though not as successful, is trying to ignore her.”

Beatrice exclaimed, “Oh look! There is Cassandra with her family. Can we visit her box during the interval Mama?”

“We will see dear,” Lady Minerva replied. “They may decide to come over here.”

Emily looked around and saw that many of the occupants of the other boxes were staring at her box with as much interest as they were at Princess Caroline’s. She looked over at one of the interested parties and saw Lady Leonora in a box with her stepson and, of all people, Lord Stanhope.

Michael, after looking around the room, replied to her earlier statement, “I see your point, and we must do our part to provide entertainment...” He took Emily’s gloved hand unbuttoned the wrist and kissed it.

He felt and heard the light thwack of a fan coming down on his shoulder. “Michael behave yourself, we are in public,” Lady Conley said. “Emily’s reputation is practically in shreds from your behavior. Her disappearance with you at the ball last night and coming back to the room with a decidedly wrinkled dress and her hair mussed...”

She was cut off in mid statement by Lord Conley clearing his throat and gesturing to the stage as the curtains were rising. Emily’s face had pinkened with

embarrassment while Michael looked amused. "I seem to recall hearing that you and Papa were not very circumspect in your courtship," Michael said in reply.

"Lady Conley looked flustered and said, "Shhhh! Watch the play."

Michael kept hold of Emily's hand as the play started, but not in full view of the crowd. After all, he thought, Mama does have a point and I have made mine. All of those gentlemen who thought that I did not have a care for Emily now know differently.

Emily was enjoying the play thoroughly, and was sorry when the magic of the theater was interrupted by the interval. Matthew came back from the pit with a few of his new friends who wished an introduction to the 'fair charmer' in the box. Matthew soon agreed to take Beatrice with his friends to her friend Cassandra. Lynette, being in the early stages of breeding was escorted rather hurriedly to the ladies withdrawing room by her husband. The Lady Conley and Lady Minerva settled in the back of the box while their husbands went off to procure some refreshments. The two matrons were almost invisible in their corner of the box; Michael and Emily were far enough away for private conversation.

"You look fully recovered Lord Althorpe," Emily said shyly.

"Just the occasional twinge in my neck," Michael said. "The announcement should be coming out in tomorrow's Times and with all that has passed between us, we should be able to speak our given names."

"I am sorry to have put you in this position L-Michael," she said.

"I put myself in this position; I should have remembered the little girl who wasn't such a little girl when seen so charmingly undressed for a swim."

Emily felt as if her whole body was aflame with embarrassment. "You saw me bathing at the pond on my father's estate," she said in a shocked whisper.

"A charming sight it was too," he smiled wickedly, waggling his eyebrows. "Before I realized that the lovely nymph cavorting in the water was the child I had played cribbage with the night before, I thought to join you."

Emily felt her face flush even pinker, "I was just a child then."

"Yes, and when I realized that it was you, I was overcome with guilt and disgust."

“Disgust,” she breathed with dawning horror, withdrawing her hand from his and shrinking into her chair.

Michael was alarmed by her reaction realizing too late the impression he gave her. He hurriedly added, “...at myself for finding a child so alluring.” Emily appeared so mortified that she did not hear him.

Michael was mentally berating himself for his poor choice of words as he and Emily both stood—she looking like she would take flight and he looking to block her. The two older gentlemen returned to the box with a servant baring a tray of punch. Michael said, “I am going to escort Emily to the withdrawing room and see what is taking my sister so long.” He handed Emily a glass of punch and took one for himself and escorted Emily out of the box.

He asked the porter who had carried the refreshments into the box where he could find a small alcove where he could continue his conversation in private with his fiancé. After being slipped a generous tip, the porter pointed them to a small cleaning area. Before they attained the privacy of the storage closet, they were confronted by the woman who attempted an introduction to Emily at the ball the night before—Clarisse Dubonnet, Michael’s former Mistress.

“So this cow is why you gave moi zee conge?” she hissed.

Michael stepped in between the two women with his back to his former mistress. She was enraged, “After all we were together you will settle for this brood mare.”

Emily was jarred out of her contemplative state by the appearance of the thin small breasted older woman whose bodice was so brief that even the woman’s tiny breasts were in danger of exposure. The woman reached around Michael and grabbed Emily’s arm, “Once you are breeding ‘e will be back to moi.”

Emily’s eyes sparked with rage. She stepped around Michael fully and threw her punch into the woman’s face. She did not hesitate as she stepped up to the woman’s dripping, furious face and said, “What Michael had with you was commerce.” Emily looked around the hallway at all of the pruriently curious people, “Do you have an escort tonight or are you perhaps trolling for business?”

Clarisse Dubonnet's mouth worked with outrage, she was beside herself. The woman swung her hand at Emily intending to strike her. Michael quickly reached over and blocked the blow. Unfortunately, that was the hand in which his punch resided and, for the second time that evening, Clarice Dubonnet was dowsed with sticky sweet punch. The porters having heard the commotion finally arrived and took charge of sputtering woman. "Look at me," she shrieked as she was escorted back to her box. "You will pay for this!"

Michael, taking his cue from Emily, said coolly, "I believe I already have."

Emily was still seething when she went back to the box, "If you so much as go near that woman again, I will rip out every strand of hair on her head and then I will go out and spend a large amount of your blunt." she said with a final glare at Michael as she focused her attention on the stage. Then the bell sounding the interval rang and the actor resumed the stage.

In another box in the theater another low voiced argument was taking place. "You little fool," a shadowy figure in the box said as Clarisse Dubonnet came back to gather her things. "We have not worked so hard for so long to let my plans go up in smoke, just for you to indulge in a bit of drama."

"Why, I do not know what you mean," she said, attempting a nonchalant tone, difficult to pull off when one is sticky with punch.

"Stow the phony French accent, I know you are really Clara Dunbar from Billingsgate," the figure said. "You were to make her jealous not cause a scene!"

"I will cast doubt in her mind when we meet at zee Chalk Farm tomorrow," she said, continuing in the same accent.

"Are you sure she will be there?" the person in the shadow questioned. "You should have had a reply sent to you."

"Bah! This chienne sans doute reads novels all of the time and lives with her head in the clouds, they all do," she said contemptuously. "I must leave now; mon ensemble is ruined."

"My servant will see you to your carriage, I must hurry back to the box or I will be missed."

Emily remained in stony silence throughout the rest of the performance. Michael did not quite blame her—what woman would wish to be confronted with a gentleman’s former lover at any time, much less in a public place. He could not let her continue in this mood. He wondered what he could do to get her alone to talk to her. Wolcott and Jenks were trailing them everywhere so he supposed it could be safe enough to go on a moonlight carriage ride. His sister and brother in law could come along to chaperone but he could drop them off at their residence instead. He remembered all of the times when he was a young lad when James would call on Lynette when they were betrothed and James would give him a coin or allow him to ride his horse when he was supposed to be keeping them company.

“Sir Horace, Lady Minerva,” he said hesitantly, “I wonder if you would allow me, with my sister’s chaperonage that is, to take Emily on a moonlight carriage ride?”

Lady Minerva looked suspiciously at him, “What about all of the strange happenings?”

“I would take Wolcott and Jenks with us, of course.”

Lady Minerva looked searchingly at Lynette and James, “Are you sure you would not mind chaperoning these two?”

Michael sent his sister a look that promised pay back at a later date if she didn’t acquiesce to his plan. His sister returned the look and said “I was just thinking that this would be a lovely evening for a carriage ride—don’t you think so, James?” and poked her husband.

“Oh yes, I remember the rides we would take when we were courting,” James said hurriedly.

Lady Conley looked at him pointedly, and he added quickly, “When we would take Michael along as a chaperone.”

Lady Conley gave Lynette a sharp look and Lynette smiled back benignly.

Emily, who had been silent during this whole exchange, said, “Where shall we go?”

Michael, thinking quickly, said, “I was thinking we would take a ride over to the Chalk Farm, it is less than a mile to Camden from here and we could see where Emily is supposed to be meeting this mysterious note writer. I’m sure Wolcott and Jenks would appreciate being able to scout out the area in advance to the meeting tomorrow.”

Sir Horace looked thoughtful, “That sounds like a marvelous plan... if I were a few years younger, Minerva and I would join you.”

It was Michael’s turn to look suspiciously at someone, but Sir Horace just smiled back at him benignly. Sir Horace, he thought, knows exactly what I am about. “Then it’s a go—I will go and wait for our carriage.”

While he was waiting in line for the carriage, Michael saw that a flower girl only had a few posies left. As he purchased two pretty bouquets for his sister and Emily, he was joined by Simon and Patrick. “I didn’t see you in the theater gentlemen, where were you seated?” Michael asked.

“We were over in Harriette Wilson’s box. She and her sisters had generous libations and a cold collation,” Simon said. “I heard your former friend confronted you in the hallway.”

“That traveled fast. Emily was already upset over something I said and that didn’t help” Michael replied glumly.

“Cheer up Althorpe,” Patrick said. “A posy is a step in the right direction.”

“Since we are so close to Camden, where Emily is supposed to be meeting the author of that mysterious note, I suggested we take a moonlight carriage ride there with my sister and her husband.”

“What note?” the twins asked together.

Oh lord, huge mistake, he thought with an inward sigh. He told them about the note and outlined the plan to Simon and Patrick.

Patrick exchanged looks with Simon and said excitedly, “That sounds like a capital idea--we’ll take a hack and go on ahead.”

Simon and Patrick hailed a hackney and left in a flurry of excitement.

Michael decided, as he assisted his fiancé and sister into the carriage, that it could be worse... Matthew and Beatrice could have invited themselves along, too.

They drove the half mile to the Chalk Farm with Lynnette making a determined chatter about weddings and her nursery full of young hopefuls.

Gradually, Emily was drawn out of the sulks, as she was not normally a temperamental person. Michael was being very attentive to the ladies, wrapping a robe over their laps and presenting them with flowers. When Michael reached across the carriage and caught Emily's hand, she squeezed his hand back and smiled.

In a very short time they met up with Simon and Patrick whose expressions were deadly serious. Patrick raised his hand to stop the carriage and Simon went around to the side. "My lords, we need you and the runners immediately. We need you to come and see something." Lynnette and Emily exchanged glances and made to get out of the carriage.

Simon said, "Lady Ballard, Emily... I think you two should stay here with the coachman. I will stay here as well."

"Simon," Emily said plaintively, "what on earth is going on?"

"Ladies," Simon began hesitantly, trying to find the words to indicate what happened and not shock their delicate sensibilities, but failed. "There is a dead body up ahead and I don't think you should see it."

Lynnette, mother of three children, two of them boys, was made of sterner stuff asked, "Why, is it anyone we know?"

"I think it is Clarisse Dubonnet," Simon said.

"But we just saw her..." Emily trailed off.

Michael stood along with James and jumped from the coach. "Simon, are you armed? George, my sister's coachman always carries a blunderbuss.

"Just my swordstick."

"No matter," Lynnette said. "We always keep a brace of pistols in the coach since Lord Spencer was assassinated." Simon looked impressed.

"Simon, I want you to escort the ladies to Ballard house. Send a footman to Curzon Street to inform Emily's aunt and uncle of her spending the night at my sisters and to give a note to Sir Horace about the dead body. Patrick, you and Mr.

Jenks go and fetch the constable, give him my card,” Michael said passing an elegantly inscribed calling card to Patrick.

“Which one?” Patrick queried glancing at the card.

Mr. Jenks spoke up in the high voice so common to men of small stature, “Your Lordship, iffen’ I could makes a suggestion, Sir John always prefers to use Constable Edwards as he’s tight as a clam with a body’s information when needs be.”

“Right, is he very far from here?” Patrick asked.

“Happens the Constable has rooms not far from here, sir,” Jenks replied as he pulled out and checked his pistol.

“Good you are armed. The murderer can’t have been gone long,” Michael said.

While the area that the body was found was being secured, an onlooker watched with consternation from some distant bushes. Damn, he thought, something always happens to save her from misfortune. Slowly he slipped away from the busy area. I’ll have to find another way to prevent the wedding.

## Chapter 15

Emily spent a restless night being chased in her dreams by apparitions resembling Michael's paramours. After one particularly memorable nightmare, she woke up shuddering. She mused on the fact that she did not resemble by any means the types he seems to prefer—experienced older women who were tall with slim figures. On the few times she met alone with Michael she was swept away in a sea of sensation where rational thought had no place.

Emily greeted the next day as it dawned with a faint misty haze. She could see the front of her aunt and uncle's residence from the well appointed bedchamber she had been shown to by the Ballard's housekeeper, Mrs. Norris. There seemed to be quite a bit of activity for so early in the morning. No doubt because of the murder at the Chalk Farm, she thought. She turned away from the window and pulled the bell to summon a maid to help her wash and dress. Unfortunately, it had to be in the dress she wore the previous evening to go to the theater.

Beatrice was upset; all the exciting things always seemed to happen to Emily. It was to be her season, not that she minded sharing with Emily though. Could not one exciting thing ever happen to her? Emily got swept away by a crowd at Vauxhall and rescued from danger by a dashing nobleman and discovered in romantically scandalous circumstances by our cousins leading to a precipitous engagement. Beatrice sighed dramatically with envy and glossed over in her mind the fact that Michael was attacked in the park and Emily almost dishonored by a footpad. Now, she thought, Emily goes on a moonlight carriage ride with her betrothed and his family and they discover the body of Michael's former paramour. She, at least should be able to see the body, but no... she had to stay home today and all of her engagements for the day were cancelled.

She sat up quickly in bed, enough to make the bed curtains rattle. She knew what she could do, she could dress in a heavy veil and take a hackney to the area and see what was happening. She would peek at what was happening and be back in a trice with none the wiser.

Beatrice did not notice the young gentleman who was strolling along fall in step just behind her and grab a hack just after she did.

Beatrice payed off the hack just by a group of bushes and carefully peeked through at a group of men gathered around a town carriage. She recognized two of the men immediately as the Bow Street Runners hired by her father. Soon the coroner's wagon arrived and the men conferred. The gentleman hung back in his own hackney watching her.

Beatrice, not knowing she was being observed, was thrilled at finally being involved in the excitement. She could see directly into the carriage from her vantage point. Just wait until she told Cassandra what she had seen.

The woman known in life as Clarice Dubonnet aka Clara Dunbar had the handle of a knife protruding from her chest, just below her heart. Blood had gently oozed around the blade leaving a stain on the woman's fashionable pelisse. The two runners had stood guard all night to make sure that no one could disturb the position that the body was found. When the constable had arrived after midnight, it was decided to not to disturb the scene until daybreak when the whole area could be searched for clues and evidence.

"Either the murderer got lucky or the bloke knew what he was doin'," said Mr. Wolcott. "Stabbed 'er right in her air bag, 'e did. She couldn't call out. That knife 'andle looks somewhat strange though."

"You're right, don' look like any knife I ever seen," Mr. Jenks replied staring dazedly at the body.

Beatrice saw Michael standing to the side of the carriage, flexing his fingers with rage. Beatrice, with new insight, thought about what could have happened if Emily had gone out as Beatrice had urged her. Suddenly her lark was not so much fun anymore, and she looked to abandon her hiding place and scurry home. What had Michael's paramour been involved in to cause her death? What was Emily's place in all of this drama?

Beatrice saw Michael leave in his carriage and she stood quickly in the bushes and ran for the back of the carriage. The man who had been following her moved quickly to intercept her flight and caught her arm.

“L-let me go,” Beatrice cried, desperate fear making her stutter. “I-I need to go home.”

Beatrice felt her arms pinned with one well muscled arm and felt her veil torn off. She gasped; she knew she had to scream. She opened her mouth and attempted to scream for all she was worth, but he covered her mouth with his hand. Beatrice bit him through his glove.

He was stunned into inaction and she tried to take advantage of his surprise by trying to kick his shin with her kid walking boots. He was a large man who was also wearing Hessians, so all her assault did was damage the shine on his boots. Beatrice was not sure if she was more amazed or terrified. She felt herself slung over his shoulder and the air wooshed out of her lungs, cutting her off mid shriek. He then strode over to the two men with Beatrice struggling wildly to get free.

Beatrice started beating the back of her captor, shouting, “Let me go you lout...oof,.” He smacked her wriggling derriere with his free hand.

“Behave,” he said.

“‘ere now wot’s this?” Mr Wolcott asked. “Pardon, but we b’ain’t no time for the antics of the quality right now.”

The man turned so that Beatrice head could be seen by the runners. “Do you know this young woman?”

“Miss Warrick! What are you doing here?”

“Can one of you men escort Miss Warrick home? My reputation is such...”

“Ordinarily, I would but we ‘aves to investigate the circumstances of a deceased female wot did not die in ‘er sleep,” the beefy looking Runner explained.

The man rubbed his forehead with his free hand obviously resigned to the inevitable.

“Might I ask, your lordship, what your doin’ out here so early this morning,” the diminutive Runner asked.

“Not at all,” he said with a smile, gesturing with his free hand to his evening clothes. “I was coming home from my club after playing picquet all night, to find a mysterious female leaving a respectable residence in a secretive manner.”

“Oho and you being the good neighbor that you are...”

“Rather, I was being more curious than neighborly,” he said nonchalantly. “I usually avoid respectable households when I am aware there are marriageable females about. Avoid the chits like the plague.”

Beatrice snorted disparagingly. It did not come off very well as part of the sound was muffled by her position over his shoulder.

“Reason enough, I s’pose,” the Jenks said, ponderously rocking back on his heels. “Might I have your name, sir?”

“Here is my card. I am Jonathan Hamblin, Earl of Chudleigh.”

“Chudleigh,” said Beatrice her voice muffled by his back. “You can’t leave me with him he is a gazetted cad.”

“Well now Missy, t’ain’t enough o’ a cad to let you run around into trouble,” he said then ignored her and acted as if they were introducing themselves on the street. “I be Josiah Wolcott an’ the other gennelman is Darby Jenks. We work for Bow Street.”

“I rather gathered that,” he replied glancing significantly at their red vests.

“My lord, I believe the young miss there has had enough excitement for today,” Mr. Wolcott said, frowning at Beatrice who snorted in disgust.

Chudleigh hoisted Beatrice a little higher on his shoulder and pulled his glove off with his teeth. He walked to the road and placed two fingers to his mouth and gave a shrill whistle.

“That is so common, where did you learn to do that?” Beatrice gasped.

“Same place you learned your manners... Billingsgate,” Lord Chudleigh replied as he opened the door of the hack and shoved her onto the seat. Beatrice spluttered with indignation.

As they drove off in the hackney, Lord Chudleigh asked Beatrice if there was a way into the mews behind the residence so that no one would see them together.

Beatrice sat fuming with her arms crossed in the carriage until finally she said, “This is all Emily’s fault.”

“You mean she made you go unescorted to the scene of a murder and then didn’t come herself?” Lord Chudleigh asked, astonished.

“No, not exactly,” Beatrice said mutinously looking away and refusing to meet his eyes.

“Then what exactly,” asked Lord Chudleigh, quietly taking a finger and tilting her head to look him in the eye.

“Emily has had more than her fair share of excitement,” Beatrice said knocking his hand aside and looked out the window. “My cousins, Simon and Patrick, discovered the murder last evening when they went to the Chalk Farm on a lark. Emily, Lord Althorpe and the Earl and Countess of Ballard were going there on a moonlight carriage ride. She and Lady Ballard did not even leave the carriage to see the body. I think it was ever so poor spirited of them.”

“Your cousin and her friend sound like women of rare good sense,” Lord Chudleigh said sagely. “If Lord Althorpe had not already spoken for her I would consider her an excellent party myself.”

“How did such a sanctimonious stick like you ever get labeled as a dirty dish?” Beatrice exclaimed, exasperated.

“Maybe there is more to me than what you see right now,” he smiled and waggled his eyebrows at her. “If I hadn’t been out all night playing cards, I might be inclined to demonstrate to a foolish, unescorted chit just how wicked I can be.”

Beatrice looked at his handsome countenance with interest. Maybe he isn’t such a stick after all, she thought as they arrived at the mews behind her residence.

A short time later, Sir John Stafford, the administrator of Bow Street himself, came with the constable to the crime scene to oversee the situation. As a personal friend of Sir Horace, he felt he should oversee the murder investigation. The constable, one Hamish Edwards, was a fellow Sir John knew could be relied upon for discretion.

With Sir John looking on the area around the carriage was thoroughly searched for any anomaly which would shed light on the murder. “From the facts at hand, it would seem that it was arranged to discredit Miss Blakely,” he said sagely.

Mr. Wolcott asked, “Why would anybody wish to harm a nice young lady like her?”

The constable replied, "That's what we need to find out."

"The coroner indicated to me that the knife was not a knife it was wood carving chisel," Sir John said.

"Sir, the Warrick family's 'ead groom approached me 'e did and tol' and told me that Miss Blakely's woodworkin' tools were disturbed an' that a chisel were was missin' yesterday when Miss Blakely went to look at 'er things," Mr. Wolcott said.

"Really?" Sir John lifted a brow questioningly. "Did he think he would be blamed?"

"No sir," Mr. Wolcott replied. "'e jist thought there be a lot of 'avey cavey goin's on around lately, with with 'is Lordship gettin' attacked and all."

"Sir John, sir," Mr. Jenks began, "Miss Blakely had a bit of a brangle at the theater wi' the deceased female."

"Did she or any of her party have a chance to leave the theater and perchance kill Miss Dubonnet?" the constable asked.

"No sir," said Mr. Wolcott, "We was wi' them the entire time."

"How about the cousins, any chance they would have killed the victim to get her out of Miss Blakely's way?" the constable continued.

"While they might 'ave 'ad the opportunity," Mr. Wolcott said, "stabbin' is a right messy business an' neither one o' those men was mused."

"Constable Edwards, go the woman's residence and interview her servants and find out if there are any next of kin. Wolcott, Jenks you start looking for any witnesses to the coach arriving here late last evening," Sir John directed. "I'm going to the Warrick residence to start with interviewing the servants and family."

"Jenks—on second thought, go with the mortician and see if there is any further evidence on the body. Maybe she managed to clutch a piece of cloth or button from her killer."

## Chapter 16

Later that morning at the Warrick residence, Sir John conducted interviews of all the household staff and family members.

The interview with the servants was not fruitful—all he could find out was that “Miss Emily was a nice young lady and always polite, never a sharp word for anyone.” He received that statement verbatim from every servant in the household from the tweeny to the butler.

The family members were to be next after luncheon. Lady Minerva had invited him to break bread with them for the midday meal and he accepted, hoping to observe the family’s interaction and see if anything untoward could be discerned.

During the interviews of the servants, Beatrice was in the study with her father, the subject of a ringing scold.

Sir Horace said sternly, “If it were not for Lord Chudleigh’s good sense in following you, you might have been found, attacked and killed yourself.

“I was safe Papa, and would have made it home in a hackney by myself if Lord Chudleigh had not stopped me.”

“Young lady, I do not feel that you perceive the gravity of your actions,” Sir Horace thundered. “If it were not for the ensuing scandal, you would be on your way home this instant. I wouldn’t want to be in your slippers when your mother comes down from the boughs enough to speak to you. As it is, a maid will attend you at all times.” Sir Horace pulled the bell pull. Beatrice, ashamed, hung her head.

The butler entered the room, “Sir?”

“The tweeny who lays the fires in the morning, what’s her name?” Sir Horace barked.

A flicker of expression crossed the Butler’s otherwise impassive face, “Alice, sir.”

“I have noticed that her diction and grammar have improved over time and she is a hard worker. I think it is time to promote her in the household.”

“Sir?” the butler was perplexed.

“I find that my eldest daughter is in need of a personal maid Alice is to sleep in a trundle in Miss Beatrice’s room and accompany her on any excursions out of the house when she is not accompanied by myself.”

“Do you wish to leave the replacement of Alice in her duties to Mrs. Grayson the housekeeper and myself?” Bingham asked, alarmed at the breach in household protocol.

Sir Horace looked back at the Butler somberly, “I think that the cook’s boy could start earning a few pence.”

“As you wish sir,” the butler intoned.

“He is to clean out the grates in the evening and lay the fire while the family is out, the maids will light them in the morning. He is to continue in his studies with Peter and Phoebe, as well as be their companion,” Sir Horace instructed.

“Alice can show the young man his duties and responsibilities, and then attend my daughter. She has come down with an attack of the ague and will be resting in her room for a few days.”

Sir Horace looked sharply at Beatrice who obligingly coughed a few times.

Bingham the butler, who was not born yesterday, said, “Sir Horace, I shall assist Miss Beatrice upstairs to her room.”

“That’s a fine idea, but first show Sir John in here, if he has finished interviewing the other servants.”

“I believe, sir, that he has just completed that task.”

“Good Miss Beatrice is tiring and needs to seek immediate rest.” He looked at Beatrice who obliged him with another coughing spasm. “We hope she is feeling well enough to attend her cousin’s wedding next Saturday.” Indicating she had better be properly chastened or she would only leave her room long enough to prove to gossips that she has not eloped or some such nonsense.

Emily was sitting alone in the morning room when Michael found her at his sister’s house. She was staring pensively into the fire. “I know it must be difficult for you” he said softly.

“I wished her to blaze, but not dead,” Emily said dropping her chin to her hand. “I’m sorry Michael, I’m sure you will miss her.”

“I am sorry that she is dead, but I had no further dealings with her from the moment I met you again,” Michael said quietly to her, drawing her back into his arms.

“She is-was so different than from me,” Emily said stiffening. “I must look like a cow compared to her.”

“You have a beautiful, womanly figure that I have wanted to get my hands on since you were a child of four and ten and I was a randy youngster on my way to Oxford.”

He attempted to take advantage and slide his hand into her low necked evening gown. The high neck of a morning gown usually made that impossible. She moved his hand away from her breast.

“Damn, why do you ladies wear so many clothes usually,” he muttered into her neck.

“Lord Althorpe,” Emily said scandalized.

He took in a deep breath, savoring the aroma of lavender and woman. “I do like your scent. Where do you buy it? I’ll purchase you buckets of it.”

Emily pushed his hands away flustered, scooted away from him as far as the settee would allow, and said, “It must be that my room is over a large patch of flowering lavender and I leave the window open. The fragrance is very strong and seems to permeate everything in my room, including me.”

She hurriedly stood up and shook out her skirts and said nervously, “I’m sure that Aunt Beatrice must have sent a maid with a fresh gown for me by now.”

“Oh I don’t know, I think you look perfectly charming in this confection.” He smiled and traced his finger over the low neckline of her evening gown. Emily felt heat sweep up to her face and she turned away.

“No you don’t Michael,” Lynette said as she entered the room. “You will not be seducing Emily here in my morning room. The poor girl must be in a state from last night. I know I am. You just go and talk with James in the study. Emily

dear your maid is here with a morning dress. You can change and get back to your family.”

Michael smiled at Emily as she hurried out of the room.

“Michael,” Lynette said sternly. “You will need to escort her to the Warrick’s. I will be sending the two large footmen to ensure her safety and yours.”

“While I believe he would not try to attack her in daylight on a busy residential street, I do agree with you on taking all necessary precautions,” Michael said grimly.

Just then the butler entered, asked if the family was ‘at home’ to Captain Marcus Darning.

“Oh yes, Bedford show him in,” Lynette said. She turned to greet Marcus as he entered the room. “I imagine you are here to help escort Emily home.” Marcus crossed the room and kissed her hand.

Just then an adolescent female shrieked, “You give that back—MaaaaMa!”

Lynette rolled her eyes and hurried out of the room, “Maggie darling, whatever is the matter...” a door was heard to shut, then silence.

Marcus said, “Heard all about the commotion last night. Thought that you would like a little more help escorting Emily home.”

Michael grimaced, “I can’t wait until after the ceremony and I can take Emily somewhere safe.”

“At first I thought it was you that was the focus of the attacks,” Marcus said thinking of that silly ass Debenham, with all his posturing and his airs. Now it seems very much like someone has a grudge against Emily.”

“Has anyone seemed more curious than seemly about Emily and her activities?” Michael queried.

“Only everyone in the ton. Your engagement and hasty wedding is the talk of the town.”

Just then, Emily entered, dressed in a yellow sprigged muslin gown carrying her pelisse and bonnet. “Oh Marcus, I have become popular all of a sudden,” she sighed. All she would need to make her day complete would be for the

rest of her male cousins to show up to escort her. Queen Charlotte doesn't get this much attention.

Just as if her thoughts had conjured them, Simon, Patrick and Matthew were ushered into the room. "All of you young men escorting me are going to make me look a perfect quiz?"

Lord Ballard entered the room saying, "She's absolutely correct, if all of you leave together you will look like you are going to a cock fight. "

He went back into the hall and said, "Maggie, tell Bedford to bring the brandy snifters into the morning room."

Lynette reentered the room followed by little Maggie. "Oh no you don't James. It is not even ten of the clock." She walked to the bell pull and gave it a vigorous tug.

Bedford, the butler entered the room, "My lady?"

"Please bring a tea tray and some biscuits. Maggie is going to practice pouring." Lynette cast a steely eye around the room, "Any objections?"

There were various helpless choruses of no and of course not to Maggie's expectant young face.

"Now then Emily, you and Michael take the town carriage with the two footman I mentioned and go to Bond Street for some shopping. Emily you can help Michael pick out my birthday gift...I always like jewelry, and then continue on to your aunt and uncle's house."

Matthew exclaimed, "What about escorting Emily!"

"Mr. Warrick, nothing will happen to Emily in broad daylight on Bond Street—too many people. There will be greater tittle tattle and scandal if you escort her around like a dangerous prisoner."

"Won't it look strange if we leave after visiting here?" Simon asked, accepting a cup of tea from the eager little girl.

"Nonsense, Mr. Randolph," Lynette stated. "You and your cousins came here to speak to Ballard."

Matthew asked, "What about?"

Maggie said excitedly, "You all saw me in the park the other day..."

The men all exchanged uncomfortable glances, none of them wished to hurt little Maggie's feelings.

"...and you all wished to find out where my Papa bought my new saddle and reins. Peter and Phoebe have a birthday coming next month," she turned to her Mama. "Phoebe did so like my new saddlery. When Lady Minerva came to call, I showed Phoebe and Peter my pony and saddle."

James walked into the room and looked approvingly at his eldest child, "What a splendid little dissembler you are pigeon." He turned to the men, "She takes after her mother."

Matthew looked into his tea cup, "Actually, I did wish to know about that saddle and reins—I won a fair sum the other night playing Piquet, enough for two saddles, I think. Fellows here in town just don't play cards as well as Emily or even Beatrice."

Simon and Patrick nodded, "S'truth. Fellows here drink, don't watch the play, mismanage their discards..." Patrick said.

"...and when a fellow wins repeatedly they think you fuzzed the cards," Simon concluded.

Simon smiled at Maggie, "I wonder how well Lady Margaret plays cards...I bet you could give lessons."

Maggie was flushing pink with pleasure as Emily and Michael left to explore the shops with the two burly footmen.

## Chapter 17

After getting a dainty diamond and emerald bracelet at Rundell and Bridges for Michael's sister they went to Hatchard's to peruse the new books, then to the Warrick residence on Curzon Street. To any casual observer, it appeared to be a normal outing for a betrothed couple. The two footmen in their livery were perched outside the town carriage and the two runners were unobtrusively following behind in a nondescript hackney which had been hired for the day.

Michael attempted to make conversation with Emily on a variety of subjects, but all of her responses were disturbing to him in their brevity. Finally he said, "Emily you must speak to me sometime—we are to be married in a few days. You will be my wife and I expect to have a normal relationship..."

His words pierced her apathy, "How normal MY LORD, you will attend me until I am breeding and then go back to the kind of women you prefer..." she looked back at the footmen aghast and clapped her hands over her mouth. She was shocked at her own temerity. She had tried to be so accommodating for so long and bottled up her feelings of loneliness and despair. Everywhere she went, she seemed to be accosted by examples of the type of woman that Michael was attracted to. Michael looked at her, his face unreadable.

After arriving at her family's residence, Michael helped Emily to alight from the carriage and escorted her into the house. In the hallway, Michael undid the wrist of Emily's glove and placed a lingering kiss to her bare skin. Emily felt the scorch of heat all the way up her arm. She flushed and snatched her hand away from him, turning her head away from him. She felt unsettled, unsure and confused of her feelings for Michael.

"Emily will you and your family be going to the Evanston Musicale this evening?" Michael asked her.

"I don't know my aunt's plans for the evening but I would just be glad to have a quiet evening at home," Emily said, not making eye contact.

Lady Minerva, entering the hallway, overheard her comments. "Dear girl, with all of the excitement you must be worn to a frazzle! A night at home will do us

all good, I expect. Winifred Evanston is not a particular friend and I don't know why she persists in showcasing her tone deaf daughters in such a manner."

Michael smiled, "Lynette agrees with you that they are truly dreadful."

"Well, be that as it may, we will have a family dinner tonight. Lord Althorpe, I imagine that your parents' residence is still at sixes and sevens, let me write your mother a note for them to come here for dinner. They can meet the rest of my crew. We might as well invite the rest of the family as well. Simon and Patrick are sure to show up for a free meal before they go on their evening revelries. Do bring Marcus along with you, please?" said the indefatigable Lady Minerva who, to Emily's amazement, went from family dinner to dinner party in one sentence.

"I do not know if you and my mother are going to be bosom bows or at each other's throats, as you both are so effervescent," Michael said, shaking his head, and with one last longing look at Emily, took his leave.

The dinner party was well attended; Lady Conley, who was seated near Emily, attempted to draw her into conversation. Lady Conley, Emily recalled, was very proud of her rose garden. "Lady Conley, I remember when Aunt Dorothea and I visited you several years ago, your roses were just out of bloom..."

With that Emily did not have to venture more than a smile or an occasional word as Lady Conley regaled her dinner partners of the wonders of her rose garden.

Michael was amused at how deftly Emily turned the conversational tables on his mother. While she attempted to appear interested in all of the dinner conversations, he could tell she was still brooding.

Emily felt that the dinner party lasted forever and by the time the gentlemen joined the ladies in the parlor Emily's head ached. She just wished to go to her room. Luckily the Conleys and the Ballards seemed to want to make an early evening of it and demurred at the mention of cards and soon took their leave. Michael drew her hand up to mouth and looked searchingly into her eyes. He turned, bade his host and hostess farewell and, with another glance at Emily, left the residence.

Lady Minerva saw how tired Emily looked and told her to get herself off to bed. Emily thanked her aunt, said good night and trudged up the stairs. One of the maids helped her into her linen nightgown and left the room.

Emily made her way to the bed which looked so inviting with the covers turned down. She heard a noise and turned and saw a Hessian boot attached to a muscular leg coming through her window. She was stunned into immobility briefly and the gentleman with a muffled curse pulled himself the rest of the way through the window. She was further surprised to see her betrothed with a few sprigs of lavender clinging to his clothing.

“Michael, what is it you are doing here!” she hissed. “How much brandy and port did you imbibe after dinner?”

“Already you sound like a wife—that is much better than the silence you have been affecting.” He stalked over to her, “I am going to tell you of the first time I was drunk.”

“Michael it is a little late for reminisces it is time for bed...” too late she realized what she just said as he smiled knowingly and undid his cravat.

“Why, so it is,” he smirked. “But first I wish to talk to you. You see, when I was a young man, I went to an estate with my father. I met this enchanting child there...” he made a significant look at Emily who looked suspicious.

“One day, on my rambles on her father's property, I chanced upon a beautiful site: a nude goddess arising from the waters of the pond. I had been studying Greek mythology, so my young and fevered imagination saw her as Artemis leaving the foam of the ocean.” Emily's eyes widened. Michael shrugged out of his coat and laid it across the settee and started on his vest and shirt. She was mesmerized by the sight of a man casually stripping off his clothing.

“I started toward the beautiful goddess with the bountiful breasts moist from her early morning swim, eager to join her when I realized to my shock and chagrin that the sensual goddess was none other than the enchanting child I had played cribbage with the previous evening.” He finished with his vest and shirt and sat down on the bed to remove his boots.

“I left the pond and walked to the village where I flirted madly with the buxom tavern wench and proceeded to get drunk enough to erase it from my mind. I was afraid I was a deviant individual who would prey on children.” Emily was like a statue, staring at his broad naked muscular chest. “At first, I made a point of pursuing women and ladies who were my senior and who bore no resemblance to the child-goddess, then it became habit. I forced the sight right out of my mind, until one day I saw a woman in Gunther’s in the company of a young boy. I had a sudden vision of having seen her naked and I wished to see her naked again...”

He stalked over to Emily who unfroze and started to back away blushing and stammering, “It’s only a few d-days Michael—I am sure we can w-wait...”

“I’ve waited ten years for my goddess of the pond to mature and I will make sure she is mine before she gets another maggot in her brain.” He swept her into his arms and deposited her on the bed. As he lifted her gown off of her and removed his final garments, Emily tried not to stare at him, but he was all muscle and sinew from his broad shoulders down to his muscled calves. She felt a frisson of sexual excitement shiver through her as he bent down and started stroking her legs.

He kissed her instep and licked her ankle and Emily felt her nipples harden and peak. Moisture seeped from her most private area. She felt overwhelmed with sensation, all of her senses a tingle. When he parted her legs and stroked the downy hair of her sex, she squirmed, “Michael it’s too much I am going to fly apart, if I scream my whole family will be in here.”

He whispered, “Then you had better learn self control for I am going to act on every wild fantasy I had when I first saw you naked at the pond.” He parted her labia and stroked her clit with his finger. He brought the moisture up to his mouth and tasted. He raised his eyebrows at her as she gasped. He spread her legs further and started caressing her clit with his lips and tongue. She felt the sensation build and climb. She almost cried out as her orgasm crashed over her. Michael looked at her, his eyes hooded as he continued up her body licking and kissing.

“Michael,” she said hesitantly and he looked her into her eyes. “I need to touch... you my palms are tingling, my--skin is so warm.”

He stopped kissing her long enough to smile in invitation and guided her hand to his throbbing cock. He resumed his sensual exploration of her body by licking her hardened nipple and then suckling it strongly. Emily felt the intense burning ache in her womb. If he didn't do something again soon, she was going to die, she just knew it. She felt the velvety length of his shaft. It seemed longer and harder now than when he had first removed his clothes. "Er, Michael is this going to fit..."

She felt the tickle of his breath as he silently laughed, and said through gasping breaths, "Oh yes, my dear. It will fit very well."

He drew her legs further apart and positioned his cock at her entrance. He took a little of her essence and lubricated the head of his shaft. "This might hurt a bit at first," he said as he pressed his cock into her tight channel.

Emily felt the uncommon fullness and then heavy pressure. This sensation was not pleasant; she thought and started to push back on Michael. He stopped, pulled back and used his cock to tease her clit. Emily squirmed and knew she wanted to feel all of Michael. She shifted and he felt the barrier of her maidenhead. Michael pushed through the barrier and Emily was shocked with the swift pinch of pain. Michael started slowly thrusting and Emily remembered the sensation she felt when Michael kissed her in the gazebo. The sensations magnified until all she could think or feel was the magnificent building heat inside her. Then she climaxed and felt her whole body convulse in orgasm.

After Michael achieved his own satisfaction, he rolled over and placed Emily's head on his shoulder. As she toyed with the whirls of hair on his chest, she thought back at some of their earlier conversations. "Michael," she said with a satisfied smile.

"Yes Emily?" he queried in a sleepy voice.

"It does feel wonderful inside when it is warm."

Michael had to bury his face in the bed pillow in order to muffle his laughter.

## Chapter 18

Emily woke after a very restless night, feeling happier than she had in a long time. Michael had made love to her once more before he had left the house via the window. Emily finally had a positive vision of the future and her heart was filled with hope. It was still early when she made her way down to the breakfast room.

Sir Horace was seated at the table reading his morning paper and Lady Minerva was looking at piles of invitations.

“Emily dear,” her aunt said, smiled knowingly at her, “I stopped by your room to wish you goodnight but it seemed that you had already went to bed.”

Emily’s face turned red and she looked down at her plate. She sighed; obviously she was in for an embarrassing lecture later.

“I was going to talk to you as you seemed so pensive at dinner,” she continued. “But looking at you now, it seems that an early night was just what you needed to get back in order.”

Emily looked up into her aunt’s eyes. She knew her aunt was nobody’s fool, “Yes, Aunt.”

“We have plans for every night up until the Wedding so there will be no more early nights until after then,” Aunt Minerva said firmly. “Do I make myself clear?”

Emily’s lips twitched trying not to smile at her aunt, “Yes Aunt Minerva.”

Sir Horace remarked absently from his paper, “Yes, a good night’s rest does the trick every time.”

Emily and Lady Minerva looked at each other and dissolved into giggles.

Emily went to the dressmakers for a fitting of several gowns. Her aunt and both of her female cousins went with her. Beatrice, who wasn’t getting a new dress today, came along to help choose a new dress for her six year old sister Phoebe. Though the wedding was to be a small parlor affair, the breakfast afterward would be well attended by the leading social and political leaders of the day. Due to the fact that Emily had no close female friends and few female relatives of a suitable

age, Phoebe and Beatrice, who was pronounced well and fit by her mother, would be attending her at the ceremony and breakfast. A new riding habit was also chosen, but ordered as it was to be held hostage to Phoebe's good behavior at the event.

Just as they were finishing their purchases, Lady Bentley, wearing her usual lavender with trailing wisps of lace, swept into the shop. She stopped the family party, "Oh, Miss Blandly..."

"Blakely," the four females said in unison.

"Such a poor memory, pardon me Miss Blakely," she corrected herself smoothly. "It seems that we have a mutual relative in common. Your cousin Nigel, Lord Debenham, is also my stepbrother. Of course, you would know that if you ever studied your Debretts."

Never having any interest in relatives who declined to acknowledge her existence beyond evicting her from her own home, Emily said, "Ah yes, I bow to your superior knowledge of who is connected to whom. I myself, never having any social aspirations, preferred reading the *Mysteries of Udolfo* and the like," Emily said with Lady Minerva's smiling approval at the oblique hint that Lady Leonora was a social climber.

"Sequestered as you were in Bath with your elderly aunt, I am sure that was extremely enlightening Miss Bailey..."

"Blakely," said the female chorus joined this time by the contralto of the shopkeeper who wished to curry favor with the soon to be Lady Althorpe.

"Mama," said 6 year old Phoebe pertly, "Did you not say, after we visited Lady Mattingly, that a poor memory is a sign of age?"

"Children should be seen and not heard..." interjected Lady Bentley. "Why, my little Marie Lynn ..."

"That's right Phoebe," said Beatrice. "Mama also said that another sign of aging is preoccupation with one's ancestors."

Lady Minerva smoothly cut in to the escalating war of words, "Lady Leonora, you perhaps wished to talk to Emily about a mutual acquaintance?"

"Why yes, Lady Minerva I did," Lady Bentley said, "I wished to invite Miss...Blakely to tea tomorrow—to discuss our mutual cousin."

Emily looked at her aunt and, at her imperceptible nod, turned and acquiesced to the plan. “Is Cousin Nigel going to be there?”

“Why no,” said Lady Bentley feigning surprise. “You know Cousin Nigel—no time for his female relatives.”

“Is he even in town?” Emily asked, “I have not seen him anywhere.”

“He is indeed in town but just going to the gentleman only entertainments.”

Emily read that to be going to hells and brothels every night. Lady Minerva smiled, “We will see you tomorrow for tea and Phoebe will bring along her new doll to show Marie Lynn.”

“Phoebe...” Lady Bentley said weakly. “Yes, I am sure Marie Lynn will love her visit.”

As they climbed into the carriage, assisted by the two beefy footmen, Lady Minerva instructed the coachman to drive to the doll shop. “After all Phoebe, you need a new doll to show Marie Lynn,” she said to Phoebe’s delight.

After the remainder of a blessedly uneventful day, Emily dressed to go to a subscription ball at Almacks. She and Beatrice had just received their vouchers that morning, another fruitful benefit of Lady Minerva’s active correspondence and judicious call paying. Lady Minerva also decided that Beatrice would not experience a relapse in health from the ‘small attack of the ague’ diagnosed by Sir Horace. She had prevailed upon Sir Horace’s good sense to keep Beatrice with them under close supervision rather than unattended at home and apt to get into mischief.

It was decided that Michael and all of the cousins in town would gather at Almacks tonight as well. Ostensibly, it was to support their female cousins and to ensure that they had dance partners but, in reality, it was to guard Emily from any noblemen of dubious character. Almacks tonight was to be worse than usual as Wellington himself was expected to put in an appearance.

Emily met her family in the study, prior to departure, where her uncle was taking some jewelry out of the safe. Her aunt and uncle had some really fabulous pieces she thought. Lady Minerva turned her back to her husband as he placed a beautiful sapphire necklace around her neck and fastened it. As she admired her

aunt in the necklace and matching earbobs, she noted that her aunt seemed a trifle pale this evening. She thought maybe her aunt should have a night at home or at least sleep late. At forty, she was not as young as she used to be. Maybe Uncle Horace should have the Doctor in for her.

Beatrice, in her debutante's white gown, was fastened into a pearl necklace by her brother. Sir Horace stated jocularly, "Some day all the practice Matthew received escorting his female family members and securing jewelry will come in handy when he has a home of his own."

Lady Minerva looked over at Emily, resplendent in a new green watered silk evening gown with touches of burgundy ribbon at the hem and sleeves and waistline. "Oh good Emily, just wait until you see what Lady Conley has sent over for you to wear." She gestured to the large velvet covered case on the desk. Emily approached the table with curiosity and opened the case to reveal a ruby and emerald set complete with tiara, necklace and bracelets.

"Here Emily, let me help you on with those," Matthew said as he took the case from her stunned hands. It was the most extravagant array of jewelry she had ever seen outside of the portraits of royalty.

"Lady Conley wished to signify her approval of her son's betrothal by sending over the Conley rubies. She indicated to me the other night that this was her intention and that was why I had the maid lay out this gown for you," indicating with an airy hand Emily's ensemble. She walked over to Emily and placed the tiara on her curls herself and stood back to admire her handiwork. "There, now you look absolutely stunning my dear."

Sir Horace and Matthew escorted the ladies out to the hall where the butler and the footman were waiting with capes and bouquets. Mistrs Wolcott and Jenks were waiting with the carriage out front. After the ladies were settled in the town carriage, Sir Horace turned to the runners and said, "Gentlemen, I wish for you to station yourselves outside on the balcony and at the tradesmen's entrance at Almack's tonight. For social reasons, we must put in an appearance and I have discerned that placing you at the portals not zealously guarded by the dragon-like patronesses would be the best use of your talents."

Sir Horace climbed up into the carriage and settled himself before turning to his wife and explaining, “With Wolcott and Jenks without and most of the male contingent of our family within, Emily should be well guarded.”

“I thought Simon and Patrick had said that they would never darken the door of Almacks,” Beatrice asked.

“Desperate times make for desperate measures. Not only is Simon and Patrick there, but your Aunt Winifred’s and Aunt Geneva’s boys will be there, having just arrived in advance of their mothers.”

Lady Minerva smiled knowingly, “The family is showing up rather quickly to be in attendance for the wedding. Is Nathaniel and James staying with Millicent or are they staying at the hotel?”

“Millicent, having Simon and Patrick, is well used to having noisy young men around and you know how Nathaniel hates town. He also hates traveling and hotels. He has family values though and would not shirk seeing Emily married to Althorpe.”

Lady Minerva, paler now with the movement of the carriage, seemed to be trying to keep a focus on conversing with Sir Horace. Emily thought she looked relieved when it was their turn to alight from the coach at the entrance to Almacks. Emily wondered whatever could be wrong as she walked into the famed ballroom.

The room itself seemed anticlimactic for all the anticipation the occasion had engendered. The meager decorations and refreshments had vastly paled to the adornments of the ladies and gentlemen inside. There were many gowns of white, worn by this year’s debutantes, such as the one worn by Beatrice. There were many more gowns of every color with every kind of trim imaginable. There were dowagers covered in valuable, old fashion jewelry and gentlemen from the dandy set to the Corinthian set. Emily was distracted from her concerns by the pageantry of the whole occasion. She turned back to catch Beatrice’s expression and caught sight of Lady Minerva’s face which was flushed now.

Emily went up to her aunt, “Aunt Minerva she whispered are you quite all right?”

Lady Minerva forced a smile as beads of perspiration broke out on her forehead, “I am just fine dear. It’s a normal function of womanhood; Millicent and Dorothea told me all about it—I hadn’t thought it would happen to me so soon though. Just realize that I will be fine as soon as we greet the patronesses and Horace finds me a chair and refreshment.”

As it was their turn to be greeted by several of the patronesses of Almacks Emily concentrated on trying to make as polite an impression as swiftly as possible. She did that by modestly hinting to the hostesses on how honored she was with being granted admission and that she was sure that there were more important persons than herself present. Which, of course had the opposite effect and made Lady Jersey spend five minutes enquiring into all of Emily’s aunts, uncles and cousins? Finally, when the friendly inquisition was over, Emily and her uncle guided Lady Minerva over to a set of chairs with Beatrice and Matthew trailing behind.

“Horace dear,” said Lady Minerva. “I am positively parched. Could you please secure me a bit of lemonade?”

Sir Horace was all that was solicitous, “Of course, dear. How about a little of that stale cake for which this place is so famous, you hardly touched your meal.”

“Oh no! If I even see any of that awful cake, I swear I may embarrass us all,” she said mournfully. Sir Horace looked at her suspiciously and vowed to himself to get Knighten, the family physician who attends them in town, in to see her first thing in the morning.

After a bit of refreshment, Lady Minerva seemed more like her effervescent self and she enjoyed some gossip with some of her friends. When the musicians took their places, Emily, who had been focused on her aunt’s mysterious illness, was surprised to find that almost every dance on her card was claimed except for the waltzes. Michael had fortuitously requested that she save the supper dance for him.

Her first partner was a young man who was introduced to her at the Filbert’s ball. She did not remember very much about him and was relieved that the figures of the country dance did not allow for conversation. After several dances, she saw

her cousin Nigel headed in her direction with Mrs. Drummond-Burrell. Emily sighed and thought she wished it were ANYBODY else but him, but if she declined him she could not dance anymore that night.

“Miss Blakely, I wish to present Lord Debenham as a suitable partner for a waltz. He assures me that he is well known to you, as he is your cousin,” Mrs. Drummond-Burrell said oppressively, as if wishing the relationship away.

“Yes ma’am, he is indeed my cousin,” Emily said reservedly. Then she added with a slight emphasis on distant, “He is a distant relative of my father’s.”

Mrs. Drummond-Burrell raised her eyebrows slightly in a questioning manner, when no more information was forthcoming she left them to join the dancers.

“Cousin, how noble of you to forsake your habitual town pleasures to come to the marriage mart tonight,” Emily said coldly.

He is choosing to ignore her cold tone, “Not at all. I could not let my dear cousin brave the doors of Almacks without lending my support now could I?”

Emily rather thought he could, but kept the thought to herself. “I have not heard from you since you sent me that delightful missive to quit Blakely Grange right after my father’s burial.”

“That was not from me,” he quickly denied. “Over enthusiastic solicitor, don’t you know?”

“I suppose the constable sent to make sure I did not take any of the family silver was his idea as well,” Emily said incredulously.

“Ah yes,” he agreed happy that she seemed to understand. “I have since switched solicitors to one who has a bit more decorum. Appearances you know.”

Emily did not believe that faradiddle any more than she did the first time she heard it. “I suppose you have a reason for seeking me out here in London...”

“Amazing you should mention that. I was wondering why Sir Horace is your trustee and managing your affairs...thing doesn’t look right.”

“I suppose that you think you should be the one who is in charge,” Emily said with an edge to her voice that was completely lost to her cousin.

“Yes exactly,” he smiled. “And as the head of the family, I must protest at your betrothal without consulting me.”

“Oh you do, do you,” Emily looked at him with exasperation. “Your lordship, I suggest you call upon my uncle in the morning and discuss these things with us both.”

The smile faded from his face, “Now see here young lady, I am a man of some importance in this town...” Which means he has a title, Emily mused. “...and you and your uncle should call upon my town residence tomorrow.”

He took her back to her aunt who seemed to be holding up rather well at this point. “Lord Debenham, I have no wish to promote the connection between us and any further communication on the subject can be conducted with my uncle and my solicitor. Good evening.” She turned her back to him and started to walk the last few steps to her aunt, Lord Debenham reached out to grab her arm. Immediately he was stopped by her cousin Marcus.

“Your lordship, I had not expected the pleasure of your presence this evening—insipid refreshments and simpering chits all that. As a matter of fact, I was just on the point of leaving...what’s say we go to a tavern and partake of some ale.” Marcus skillfully guided him out the door with an iron grip on his arm.

Michael came over to claim a country dance and they had no chance to talk during the figures. Afterwards, he remarked on how well the jewelry set became her.

“I was so happy that your mother saw fit to loan them to me for the evening,” Emily replied choosing to ignore the compliment.

He said, “My mother is such a small thing she always thought she looked like a child playing dress up in those things. Good thing she and my father were married when he ascended to the title. She would have had to wear them. You lend them a distinctly regal air.”

“You have been practicing your compliments, your lordship,” she smiled faintly.

“Wanted to have you prepared when my mother states how happy she is that she need never wear them again as they belong to the bride of the heir,” he laughed. “Normally she just ‘forgets’ and leaves them where she is not.”

“Goodness and I was thinking her sending them to me was her way of signifying her approval.”

“It was that as well. If she did not approve of you, she would just leave them in the safe like always and just forget about them,” he said with a shrug. They slowly made their way back to her aunt.

Lady Minerva smiled in approval of the lovely picture they made together. “Lord Althorpe,” she said, “Did you wear that green and burgundy waistcoat so that you and Emily would look so complete together?”

“Actually, I think it was a plot between my valet and the ladies of the family,” Michael laughed deprecatingly. “I am not a slave to fashion; my father isn’t either. Mama felt that if we were to take our places in the House of Lords we should have a proper valet. He is up to date on all the nuances of fashion that I do not care about.”

Lady Minerva looked approvingly at him. “Unfortunately Horace has no overt political aspirations—I don’t think even an up to the mark valet could improve his manner of dress.”

Michael, after escorting Emily and her family home, was invited carouse with his soon to be relatives. He joined Simon, Patrick, and Matthew in going to a few of the more respectable gaming establishments.

After all, he reasoned, he was going to be a respectable married man in a few days and considering his activities of the previous evening maybe a father in nine months. He should make merry while he could.

Emily saw how fatigued her aunt was when they got home and expressed her concern to her uncle when she caught him in the study. He was, as his habit,

carefully putting away the family jewelry in the safe and then, once the valuables were secure, he would enjoy a cognac prior to joining his wife upstairs.

“Uncle Horace, I am concerned about Aunt Minerva. She usually doesn’t tire so easily,” Emily stated pensively. She wondered if all of the extra work with her wedding might be too much for her aunt.

“Emily dear, I have an idea as to what the problem is with your aunt. It is nothing to be concerned about.”

“But the wedding and Beatrice’s come out and all of the responsibilities... I think it may be too much for her. I know it is overwhelming me...”

Sir Horace smiled. “Emily I have been married to your aunt for about four and twenty years and I think I know my wife,” he said admonishingly.

Emily felt her face heat. “I just felt that most of this is my fault...”

“Emily we are having the doctor in tomorrow morning. I feel he will have something specific to tell me. What is tiring Minerva is my fault or so your aunt will tell us all? Now that is all that I can say to you on the subject.” At Emily’s confused look he said, “Trust me, all will be more clear to everyone in the morning.”

Emily still looked troubled as she had her uncle assist her to remove the Conley jewels. As she made to leave the room her, uncle held up his hand to stop her. “Emily, please tell the housekeeper to have dry biscuits and weak tea sent up to your aunt first thing tomorrow morning.”

“I thought Aunt Minerva preferred her morning chocolate...”

“She’ll need the dry biscuits and weak tea tomorrow.”

Emily shrugged her shoulders and went to do her uncle’s bidding. She wondered if she and Michael would get to know each other as well as her aunt and uncle did. Her uncle seemed so confident that he knew what would help her aunt.

## Chapter 19

“If I were a younger woman Horace I would swear I might be breeding,” Lady Minerva said woefully.

“Now Minerva, we will have the physician in to see you and then maybe he can prescribe a tonic,” Sir Horace said cajolingly.

The family and Michael awaited the results of the examination in the morning room. All of a sudden they heard a loud shriek followed by a wail of “Horace!!!”

Sir Horace ran to the stairs and met the physician as he came down. Michael looked at Emily’s worried expression and touched her hand to reassure her. He had come over this morning to assist with some of the wedding preparation and had tumbled into a family crisis.

“Doctor?” Sir Horace said questioningly.

“Your wife will be just fine, Sir Horace,” he said bracingly. “Women her age have babies all the time.”

Michael and Emily looked at each other their faces mirroring the concern that they were intruding on a family moment. They retreated to the side of the room.

“Baby!” Matthew exclaimed following his father out to the hallway along with the rest of the family. “Are you sure?”

The physician and Sir Horace gave the young man a look and Sir Horace said, “I had expected as much. We had roasted chicken for dinner last eve and your mother said that the aroma was not to her liking. The last time that happened, Phoebe and Peter were on the way.”

Beatrice rolled her eyes, “This is so embarrassing! My parents are going to have another baby.” Michael stole an unobtrusive look at Emily who discreetly shrugged and lifted an eyebrow in amusement. Beatrice caught the silent exchange and had the grace to blush. Their attention was drawn to the differing attitudes from the other members of the family.

Phoebe said in an aside to her twin, “Peter just think, we won’t be the babies anymore...”

Peter nodded his head excitedly.

Matthew said, “Is Mama going to be all right? Does she need to stay abed?”

“Just what I wanted to ask,” Sir Horace nodded approvingly to his son before turning his attention back to Dr. Knighten. Matthew was not much older than Beatrice but he had heard stories of women dying in childbed. Beatrice had doubtless heard some of the same but with the insouciance of youth, she dismissed the idea that anything would happen to her mother.

The good doctor looked at the family consideringly, put a hand up to stroke his chin, and then after a bit replied, “Lady Minerva should be just fine with a couple day’s bed rest and modification to her social schedule to include a nap every afternoon prior to tea.”

After having the butler see the doctor out, Sir Horace turned to his family and said “This makes Emily’s situation a trifle awkward. Your mother was beside herself with worry about the wedding plans. I left her making a list of things left to do. Luckily, since her friend Lady Liverpool is holding the wedding and breakfast at her home, all of the hubbub will be over there. Matthew, the one social engagement that is left today is the tea this afternoon with Lady Leonora. I feel that we could give that a miss.”

Emily said with a sidelong glance at her intended, “She was so toplofty in her belief that Michael should have had her first in mind for a bride—I should hate to have her think that she could frighten us away.”

Sir Horace, thought a moment and then stated, “It should be fine with the two footmen, the runners following close behind and the addition of Michael and Matthew to the party.”

Matthew said, “Michael, you said you had to meet with Townley this afternoon. I think I can escort the ladies today without you.”

“Oh Michael, I do not intend to live in your pocket after we are wed. I don’t see why you should not see your friend as you had planned.”

Michael hesitated; Townley was the only married man of his acquaintance. He was hoping for insight into the female psyche. He was thought to live under the cat’s paw and was extremely careful of his wife. He also was renowned for his

exquisite taste, an asset to be utilized when one is picking out the first gift for one's new bride.

At his hesitation, Emily reinforced her statement. "Michael I am sure we will be fine with Matthew's escort." Michael had a sudden memory of Emily sitting on a fat job horse unattended at the park one morning. With an effort, he pushed the thought away.

"Emily my dear," he began, "I suggest we compromise and I will meet you at Lady Bentley's house after your tea and we shall take in the air of Hyde Park." This plan met with everyone's approval.

"Papa what will you be doing this afternoon," Beatrice asked as an afterthought.

"I hear that a new tin soldier set has just arrived at the toy store. Is there anyone here who could possibly appreciate a new set of toy soldiers with me," Sir Horace said looking around the room as if Peter weren't jumping with excitement right in front of him.

"Oh Papa, me oh me!" Peter exclaimed excitedly with his twin sister and older family members hiding a smile.

"Well yes Peter, I do believe I recall you are something of a connoisseur of all things involving tin soldiers," Sir Horace said as though remembering this suddenly. "I also think we should reconnoiter at Gunther's afterwards and let the staff here indulge your Mama. Maybe Miss Grimsby can read to her while she enjoys her tea upstairs."

"Marcus mentioned to me last evening before he left with cousin Nigel that he had to consult a solicitor in regards to some recent developments in his father's family," Emily said. "Maybe he can tell us his news over dinner tonight and perhaps help set up a battle scene with the soldiers."

"Capitol idea my dear," Sir Horace said, rubbing his hands together. "I do not know about you children but I could stand a spot of luncheon about now, my breakfast was quite spoilt by worry for your Mama. Shall we adjourn to the dining room?"

Over luncheon, Sir Horace handed the list of tasks still to be done prior to the Wedding, in two days time, to Emily and Beatrice. Emily saw that their afternoon would be quite busy and decided they might enjoy a bit tea, even if it was as the guest of Lady Leonora Bentley. She looked at the faces of her aunt's family and knew that the new baby would be much cherished by all. Matthew and Beatrice, for all there sniping and bickering, would do anything for one another. She wondered if she and Michael would be as happy as her aunt and uncle. Only time would tell. The young man she idolized as a young girl was still present in the fashionable noble he had become. Hopefully he would appreciate the cautious woman into whom she had evolved.

Emily was the first one downstairs after luncheon and found Michael downstairs getting ready to take his leave. He looked at Emily and took her hand saying, "Emily let us take a stroll through your aunt's garden while the rest of your family assembles themselves."

As they strolled through the roses in the garden Michael stated, "Emily I have a great fondness for you. In time, I may even grow to love you. I know you feel that you are being rushed into a marriage with a stranger, but I don't think you are indifferent to me, are you?" Michael asked with a knowing smile.

Emily felt a faint hurt that Michael did not love. She looked up at him and lied, "I have fond memories of the boy who was so charming to a child. I had thought myself quite in love with you then, but I know very little of the man you have become. It is difficult to judge you, since some of the choices you have made in companions have not been impressive."

"Since one of those choices was you and another was your cousin Marcus, I think that I should be allowed for the occasional lapse in judgment," Michael defended himself.

"Marcus has never tried to push his way to my attention or to compete with me for yours," she retorted feeling somewhat snappish. "I think we should continue

this discussion at a later time when my family is not about to ascend upon us,” she said as she saw Matthew walk out to the garden to join them.

“Oh good Althorpe, you have not left yet,” Matthew said. “Papa wishes to see you and Emily in the study. Jenks and Wolcott are about to make a report.”

In the study, were the two runners who stood as Emily, Michael and Matthew came into the room.

“What news have you?” Emily said expectantly.

Wolcott seemed to be the spokesman for the pair. “It seems that your cousin Lord Debenham has got himself up the river tick”

Emily sighed, “Why I am not surprised?”

Jenks prompted Wolcott, “Tell her the other part we learned Josiah.”

Wolcott glanced with annoyance at his companion, “I was just getting’ there, Darby,” he looked back at Emily, Michael and Sir Horace. “It seems that Miss Blakely here has a property up in the Northumberland area what ‘as that has coal on it.”

“That would make it more valuable,” agreed Michael. “Is there anything else?”

Jenks spoke up, “There be jist a bit more, shall I tell ‘em?” Wolcott nodded his head. “It seems that some coal mining companies are lookin’ to use the two rivers on your land to transport the coal to market and are willin’ to pay handsomely for the right to build a canal between ‘em. They thought that Lord Debenham was the owner, or at least the agent of the owner, and have been in contact with him,” Jenks concluded with a pleased expression on his face.

“That would give him motivation for wishing to be Emily’s trustee now wouldn’t it,” Sir Horace said ponderously.

“That makes no sense. I am getting married the day after tomorrow,” Emily exclaimed perplexed.

“Maybe that is what all of the attacks and the murder is about,” Michael said. “I could not marry you if you were in Newgate under suspicion of

murder or if I was otherwise incapacitated. It escalated to murder after we announced our engagement. It seems odd though.”

“How so?” Sir Horace asked.

“I am well acquainted with Debenham’s work at the war office; he is only there because a relative of his had close ties with a previous government official. He has never shown any ability or talent with formulating and executing plans.”

“Yes I see,” said Sir Horace. “I also have heard stories of his incompetence at completing even the smallest task.”

Emily was shocked that she was the probable cause of Michael being hurt and the death of another person. Sir Horace, Matthew and the runners left the room, leaving Michael and Emily alone once more. Emily cleared her throat and without meeting his eyes, “Since I can afford to provide my own home we do not need to marry. Where there is not love and caring on both sides to begin with....”

“My dear, we are definitely getting married in two days.” Michael said firmly. “Besides, you could be breeding.

She flushed a bright red with embarrassment, but she felt justified and attempted to feign anger. “Didn’t you hear me? I was marrying you for your money and position. I knew what you were saying all the time in that garden at Vauxhall. I knew you were not talking about your mother’s pink marble folly that day in the park. I trapped you. I knew all along my cousins would find me with you.”

Michael grabbed her and gave her a shake, “Stop talking nonsense! Marcus told me over the years about his sweet cousin who helped everyone in the family, who went where she was needed. I would have gone to meet this paragon at some time and recognized the little girl from the pond.”

“His cousin who had nowhere to go, who had to be sweet and ingratiating to ensure that there would be a place at the table for her, who loaned her pin money to her cousins so that they would care for her. The girl who had to help her aunt with new babies at eight and ten instead of going to London and dancing the night away or making a scandal of herself by galloping in the park.” What had

started out as an exaggeration to save Michael from further harm had burst open a dam of frustrations that had been pushed down deep into her soul. Emily, trying not to cry, concluded softly, “The cousin who was replaced easily by a governess when Marcus’ father died and Marcus could not come home to help his mother two years ago and now I am replaced by Aunt Dorothea with a paid companion. So now I am to be married and become someone else’s problem.”

Michael looked shocked at the outpouring of hurt and anguish that came from Emily. She tried to pull away, but he pulled her to him and hugged her tightly to his chest. “Emily we will be married in two days,” he repeated calmly stroking her back as she fought tears. “You are not replaceable to me and my mother is overjoyed at having you for a daughter-in-law.”

She looked up at him with disbelief in her eyes, and sniffed while hunting for her handkerchief. Michael reached into his pocket and handed her a large linen square crookedly embroidered with his initials. Emily was momentarily distracted by the poorly executed work before blowing her nose. “I hear your cousins coming down the stairs. We will discuss your value you to me later after you do your shopping with your cousins. One thing you can save me from is having to receive another set of these linens from my sister.”

“Your sister? I had thought that this was the work of your niece,” Emily dabbing at her eyes and willing to change the subject. “I was impressed that you would carry a gift from your niece.”

“Let me tell you a secret,” Michael said conspiratorially. “I usually let people think it is a present from my niece rather than let anyone outside the family know that the women of my family are lacking in such a basic female accomplishment...my mother’s needlework is worse than my sister’s.”

Emily gave a little watery giggle as they walked out to the hallway to join her cousins, “How do you know my work would be any better...”

“I have seen Marcus’ beautifully embroidered linen handkerchiefs with his father’s family crest on them. He told me who did the exquisite needlework.”

Michael gathered his hat and cane and waited for his carriage to be brought around. He wondered about the affairs that had kept Marcus from supporting him on his last days as a bachelor. Marcus, who was to stand up with him, was unavailable as he had a long meeting with his solicitor. Michael was lucky to have a knowledgeable acquaintance in Townley. He could not bear thinking about what Simon or Patrick would tell him to purchase, judging from their terrible taste in waist coats. His father and Ballard were also otherwise occupied. He would rather be escorting Emily, especially now with her mention of her insecurities, but he supposed she could not tumble into a bumble broth taking tea at Leonora's residence with her escort of family, runners and servants.

## Chapter 20

Beatrice and Matthew were bickering enough to make her head ache. Beatrice had indulged in too many sweetmeats set out at the stationers, she complained that she was not feeling well and Matthew was scolding her about the candy. Phoebe sat in the seat opposite Emily and rolled her eyes. Emily had to hide a smile. At times Phoebe seemed much more mature than six years. As though reading Emily's mind, Phoebe exclaimed, "Will you two please stop? I am supposed to be the child here."

Beatrice and Matthew looked at one another chagrined at having their behavior checked by their much younger sister. The carriage came to a stop just before the entrance to the town house. Matthew looked at his sister, who had turned an unbecoming shade of green, assisted her out of the carriage and escorted her to the mews in the back of the Bentley residence where he was sure there was a convenience.

A footman assisted Emily and Phoebe to alight from the carriage. On Phoebe's descent, Emily had to smile as she caught a glimpse of Phoebe's new riding boots under her visiting gown. The one show of childish stubbornness Phoebe had demonstrated that afternoon was insisting on wearing her new boots out of the shop. Emily certainly missed her aunt's steadying influence with her children in the shops that day. She hoped she was going to be at least half as competent as her aunt in raising her own family some day. She pushed aside those thoughts and looked across the street to see if she could spot Jenks and Wolcott. She saw them standing next a street urchin who looked somewhat familiar. She smiled at him and discreetly waggled her fingers at the young boy she recognized as Ida No. The young lad had delivered her the note only days ago but it seemed like years.

One footman had knocked on the door while the other had assisted her and Phoebe. The door was opened by a tall distinguished gentleman of mature years with a little graying at his temples. Had Emily bothered to look back at Ida

No, she would have seen the alarm and recognition as he looked at the man answering the door.

Ida looked over at the two gentlemen who had been following his lady all day and could not decide if they were friend or foe. He decided to slip behind the row of houses and sneak back to the mews.

The butler showed Phoebe and Emily into a well appointed drawing room decorated in the Egyptian style where their hostess was already entertaining a guest.

Emily was surprised see her cousin Nigel seated on a crocodile sofa.

“Ah Miss Bamsy—“Lady Leonora began.

Phoebe, Emily and Debenham chorused, “Blakely”

“Blakely,” she repeated smoothly, “I see that your cousin Beatrice and her mother are not here...will they be joining us shortly?”

“Beatrice took ill in the carriage. My cousin Mr. Warrick is with her--”

“And your dear aunt?”

“She was fatigued and is at home resting and begs your indulgence.”

“Ah yes, Lady Minerva is not as young as she once was,” Lady Leonora smiled understandingly but

Emily could see an underlying expression of satisfaction on her face.

Phoebe covered her mouth and tried to stifle a giggle since she knew that age had not befallen her mother. Phoebe tugged on Emily’s sleeve and whispered, “Ask her where is Marie Lynn?”

Lady Leonora smiled coolly at Phoebe and replied, “Why, her brother Bentley had a previous engagement to take her to the park. She will be sorry she missed you at tea.”

Lady Leonora lightly tugged a bell pull and moments later the same man who had opened the door strode into the room with a tea service followed by a maid carrying a small tray of cakes. As the butler set the heavy tray down in front of her, Lady Leonora gestured to the two footmen hovering near Emily and Phoebe, “Langley, could you and Esme escort the Warrick servants to the kitchen and give

them some refreshment? I am certain the housekeeper could find them something fortifying.”

Phoebe and Emily glanced at one another, it seemed rather unusual for someone as self involved as Lady Leonora to be concerned with the servants comfort. They watched their footman be escorted to the back of the house. At least, Emily thought, they will be able to watch the rear entrance to the house. She reached into the slit in her skirt to the gun she had placed in the pocket of her petticoat to make sure that it was not tangled in the folds and she had easy access. She remembered her poorly concealed consternation when Simon and Patrick gave her this little steel pocket pistol from Belgium instead of ear bobs or a novel on her last birthday. All of her male cousins looked on in awe and her aunts with pity when she opened it. Emily smiled to herself, that every gift had its moments and hopefully this one never would but it was a comfort to have it with her.

“Just so you know, Lord Althorpe will be coming to escort Phoebe and I home after tea,” Emily said as she watched her hostess deftly pouring a cup of tea for Lord Debenham.

Lady Leonora looked up from her task and smiled calculatingly, “Why that is just marvelous—it will be so good to see Michael.”

Emily and Phoebe graciously accepted their cups of tea from their hostess and a small cake. Emily brought the cup up to her lips as her cousin Nigel started speaking to Phoebe in a manner that could only be described as pompous, “My, what a pretty little lady you are! You are going to instigate duels and break hearts when you are older.”

Emily noted that there was an unusual smell to the tea and decided to only pretend to sip it. Phoebe, she knew, hated tea so Emily knew that she would not drink it either, but would pretend as well. She watched her cousin drain his cup and Lady Leonora replenish it. After he took a sip of his second cup of tea, he took a deep breath as though he were going into battle and started to talk.

“Cousin Emily, I wanted to talk to you about me being the trustee of your property in Northumberland.”

“Sir Horace is my trustee and soon Lord Althorpe will be in charge of my property,” Emily said while thinking that this was not the time or the company to express any doubts about the future of her marriage.

“That’s another point I wanted to make. I am your closest relative on your father’s side of the...” Lord Debenham set his teacup aside and made to stand, he staggered a bit and put his hand to his temple, “Demme I feel dizzy, oh shorry ladiesh I thought tha’ port I broached at lunch wash a lil’...” He sat back down hard on the delicate Egyptian settee and then slumped over the side unconscious.

Michael enjoyed his shopping expedition with Lord Townley, whom did not seem quite so cowed when a person became more familiar with him. Townley had also taken him to his residence to meet his wife. Lady Celeste was exotically beautiful and as totally devoted to her husband’s happiness as he was to hers. Lady Celeste did not socialize as she was breeding and had already lost two babes early in pregnancy her husband had confided to Michael. Michael thought that made his willingness and anxiety to please her understandable. With his sister, Lady Minerva and Lady Townley all being enceinte, it seemed the whole world was breeding he thought as he left the Townley residence.

Beatrice looked pale with a sheen of perspiration on her face after casting up her accounts in the mews. Matthew himself was looking a little pale and queasy. “Bea, I will go to the rear entrance and beg a glass of water for you to cleanse your mouth.”

“Capitol idea Matthew,” Beatrice said wiping her forehead with her scented handkerchief and then gesturing vaguely to her right. “I will go and sit over there in the garden.”

Matthew went knocked on the kitchen door and pushed past the shocked mail. “My sister was just sick I need and glass of water for her...” too late the slumped over forms of their footmen came into view. The little maid hit him in the back of the head with a pan and he slumped to the floor unconscious.

Ida No jumped up and down and hissed to gain Beatrice’s attention

Maintaining a safe distance from him, Beatrice approached him carefully. “Miss,” he said earnestly, “That fancy cove what opened the door was the gennelman what give me the paper for that other lady... quick into the bushes they be comin’ out o’ the house now.”

Beatrice hurried over to the cover of the bushes and looked back. Emily was coming down the steps followed by a man holding Phoebe with a knife at her neck. Immediately after was a rough looking man with Lord Debenham slung over his shoulder. “Be careful with them I want them safely in the coach. Slit sweet little Phoebe’s throat if Miss Blakely offers any resistance,” said Lady Leonora coldly. “My dear step-brother has gone berserk and kidnapped them. He could very well kill the child, panicked as he is over his creditors. He’s going to force his cousin to be his bride.”

Emily stumbled as she looked behind her at the creature spewing vile these vile ideas. She saw the light of madness and fanaticism in the eyes of the woman. “What do you hope to gain by this treachery?” Emily said incredulously.

“Michael is being forced to wed you, I could tell at a glance,” Lady Leonora said coldly. “He was begging me with his eyes to help him escape from such a hoyden as you. I always knew we were meant to be together. He even sent Bentley a note declining an arrangement to go to a cock fight. I knew it was so that we would not be seen with any kind of association.”

Emily had never heard such convoluted reasoning in her life and she asked, “So Michael is approving of your plan to remove me from his life?”

“Oh yes, when you are as close as Michael and I were, mere words do not have to be exchanged.”

Phoebe standing there with a knife to her neck looked over at her cousin, “Emily she is nuttier than Aunt Geneva’s fruitcake.”

“Silence or I will have him kill you right here,” Lady Leonora raged.

Emily was afraid to reach for the pistol in her pocket, any movement might make the man holding Phoebe slash her throat. A large rough looking individual came up the path.

“Smithson, it seems that young Mr. Warrick is in the kitchen. He is obviously going to die trying to prevent his cousin being carried off by my stepbrother.”

In order to let him pass the butler had to shift his grip on the little girl, and move his knife away from her neck. Phoebe needed no prompting she quickly raised the heel of her riding boot and slammed it into her captors shin. At his wince of pain, she jerked away from him and Emily sprang forward to stop him from chasing her. The man grabbed Emily instead.

“What the deuce do you think you are doing?” Michael said striding into the mews with the two runners, and Ida No trailing close behind.

The butler had his knife now pointed at Emily’s throat.

“Michael,” Emily cried out in despair. She was going to be killed because of this madwoman’s obsession and she would never be able to tell him that she loved him.

“Who are all of these people Michael,” Lady Leonora said angrily gesturing at the group. “How am I to carry out our plan if you bring all of these people around?”

“What plan would that be Leonora?” Michael asked bitingly. “My plans for my immediate future are to get married to Emily.”

“Oh, do give over,” Lady Leonora said wildly. “I sent you a note that today was to be the chit’s comeuppance.”

“You sent a note that said today was to be a very special tea party because of our upcoming wedding,” Michael said his eyes narrowing. Emily saw that Michael was looking for a means to save her. She glanced back at her captor the man was starting to get a panicked look on his face. Emily wanted to help Michael but she did not know what to do. She saw Beatrice hiding in the bushes with a determined look on her face and a rock in her hand.

“Now see here your ladyship! This was to be a straight kidnap and ransom job,” the man lied.

Lady Leonora rounded on him, “You were to take Debenham, Emily and her family and make it look like a kidnapping gone wrong and have them die in a carriage accident.”

Gesturing towards Wolcott and Jenks, Michael said, “These two gentlemen here are from Bow Street and if you hurt her you will go to the worst hell hole Newgate has to offer.”

Michael slowly walked forward, Lady Leonora started shrieking, “Kill her, kill her at once!” She ran over to Michael to try and drag his attention to herself. “We could still be together, Michael! I remember your dreams of winning a seat in the House of Commons. You can be a hero who managed to save me from my step-brother’s madness. You had to have known what was going to happen—you sent notes to my house.”

Michael shrugged her off, as though she weren’t there. “My secretary penned a note sending regrets for some party or other you were holding. I had other plans.” He looked at Emily still in the hands of Leonora’s butler.

“Let her go,” Michael said quietly.

The man holding Emily was confused as to what to do; the puzzlement shown on his face. Just as Emily managed to surreptitiously place her hand into her pocket, Matthew appeared at the kitchen door rubbing the back of his head. “Who the bloody hell hit me!”

Beatrice, with her tongue stuck out the side of her mouth in concentration, suddenly threw the rock with deadly accuracy at Emily’s captor and hit him square on the head.

Michael sprang at the distracted butler and knocked him down, pushing Emily to the side. Lady Leonora ran at Emily her hands outstretched as if to claw her face. Emily pulled her pistol out of her pocket, but Lady Leonora continued running and then fell forward onto Emily when she stepped on one of her trailing bits of lavender lace.

There was a loud report as Emily’s gun went off and everyone stared in horror as both Emily and Lady Leonora were still with their eyes wide open.

Michael rushed to Emily and shoving his former flame roughly to the side, he picked Emily up in his arms. The front of her gown was covered in blood.

“Oh God Emily, don’t leave me!” he whispered into her hair. “I love you so...”

“I love you too but, not so tight Michael. She knocked the wind out of me,” Emily gasped.

“Emily you are alive,” Michael said wonderingly.

“Oh Lord help she shot me,” Lady Leonora moaned clutching her side.

The two Runner who had been frozen and helpless watching the tableau unfold ran forward to take the butler into custody. Everyone else started moving at once. Beatrice and Phoebe ran forward to examine Lady Leonora’s gunshot wound. Beatrice ripped open the woman’s tea gown to see how seriously Lady Leonora was wounded while Phoebe grabbed the woman’s petticoat and tore the ruffle away from the bottom and made a pad.

“It’s terrible Emily,” Beatrice said disgustedly. “The crazy woman is going to live. It is just a scratch.” Phoebe nodded just as disgusted as her sister.

Matthew still dazed from being hit was filled with puzzlement and frustration. “What the hell is happening here? Our two footmen are passed out in the kitchen; I just planted a facer on some bruiser who came in to grab me; Emily shoots Lady Leonora...WILL SOMEBODY PLEASE EXPLAIN?”

Ida No looked on, his face amazed, “I dunno ‘bout you people. I don’ think any of ya ‘as a lick o’ sense.”

## Chapter 21

The day of the wedding dawned with a slight drizzle. Lady Louisa and Lady Minerva were busy with helping Emily dress in her wedding finery.

Lady Louisa sniffed, "Oh my dear, your mother would have been so proud of you."

"Thank you very much, I do miss her and Papa, especially today of all days," Emily said her eyes suddenly filling with tears.

Lady Minerva took a lace handkerchief from her sleeve. "Oh Emily here let me wipe your eyes, it would not do for you to have red eyes for your wedding."

"In 'ere your lordship, I'm certain she'll be 'appy to see ya,"

Lord Debenham looked after the footman who just escorted him to see his cousin. It was a stroke of luck on his part overhearing the Randolph twins say that they were to escort Emily to her wedding, as the rest of the family was already over at the Liverpool residence. It was a simple matter to persuade them that he should be the one to escort her, being her father's closest male relative.

"Cousin Emily I am here to escort you to your wedding," he said. He wasn't lying, not really; he was just going to escort her to her wedding to him. The bride quietly took his arm and he escorted her out to the carriage. He laughed to himself thinking that this was much better than making a cake of himself by answering at the 'just cause for preventing this marriage' part of the ceremony.

Three sets of gleeful eyes watched as Lord Debenham tenderly lifted a lace swathed Darby Jenks into a traveling carriage. "You were right Matthew," Simon said, "Patrick and I did not think he would be that stupid."

Patrick said, "Speak for yourself Simon! I just thought he would at least tumble to it before getting in the carriage."

"With this bit of trouble managed, we need to be over at the Liverpool's rather smartly now or our female relations are going to make us wish that we were in the carriage with Debenham," Simon said with a sigh.

“By the by,” Matthew stated as he motioned for a hackney to pick them up, “have you two heard what happened with Lady Bentley?”

“No what?” asked Simon as he climbed into the carriage.

“She is staying at a very exclusive sanitarium in Yorkshire. Bentley is not fond of his stepmother, but he knows his duty. She will be kept under lock and key.” Matthew said grimly.

Patrick said as he took his seat and slammed the door, “Michael told me that he and Bentley personally escorted that evil butler, the maid and the hired thug down to the ship for transportation to Australia.”

“Why not Newgate or hanging?” Matthew said.

“Bentley prevailed upon Michael, to keep the scandal as quiet as possible for the sake of his little sister Marie Lynn,” Matthew said. “As far as the rest of the fashionable world is concerned, Lady Bentley is taking up residence in the country—for her health.”

“Loxley recognized the butler as the man who was hanging around the stable when the chisel was taken,” Patrick said. “No one is admitting to who killed Clarisse Dubonnet, but rest assured, one of that unholy quartet did the deed.”

“I am just happy everything is finally coming right for Emily,” Matthew said as the hack arrived at the Liverpool residence.

The Randolph brothers seconded that thought whole heartedly as they climbed down from the conveyance and went inside for the wedding ceremony.

### **Two weeks later**

It was a particularly hot afternoon and the newly married couple was enjoying an al fresco tea. Emily poured out and served her husband a cup tea with a cake as he looked in wonder at the pink marble folly, a light of mischief showing in his eyes. "Emily you were absolutely right. This folly is delightful for taking tea on a warm day."

Emily smiled an impish grin, "Michael, I do believe that I said that it was wonderful inside when it is warm, but now that I am a lady of some experience in such matters, I must say as an erection of note, it is less impressive than some I have seen of late."

"Why Emily Winslow!" Michael exclaimed with a mocking tone. "I do believe that you are speaking rather warmly for a young lady."

"I do believe you are quite right," Emily said as she stood took the tea cup from his hands and settled herself on his lap. "What do you intend to do about it?"

"Simply love you."

**THE END**

Naked Visions Silver Blue Dreams

Veronica Towers