

The Rogue's Revenge

A Regency Romance

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Chapter 1:

In Which a French Monseigneur is an English Milord
Paris, 1735

Clutching a crumpled paper with an address on it, London solicitor Cornelius Gleason straightened his coat and knocked at the elegant door of a fine mansion in the Rue de le Roi, Paris. When a butler opened it, the solicitor handed him a calling card, saying, "Good morning! Cornelius Gleason to see -- " He paused, uncertain. His law firm had discovered Robert Amberley's current address, but knew nothing of his social status, economic situation, or present identity. Perhaps Amberley was not the master of the house. What if he were a servant? A footman or a groom? His fortunes could have gone in any direction in the ten years since he had disappeared.

Chattering impatient French, the butler tried to close the door. Unable to speak his language, Gleason planted a firm foot in the entryway and spoke English all the louder. "Robert Amberley! I must speak to Robert Amberley! I have come all the way from London to..."

"Robert Amberley?" The butler raised an eyebrow.

"Yes! Oui! Robert Amberley!" Mr. Gleason's voice grew more frantic. "He is also known as Robin Amberley!"

The Frenchman shook his head. "Il n'est pas ici. C'est l'hôtel de Châteaugris."

Gleason pushed against the door. "Now look here! I know that Robert Amberley lives here!"

Disturbed by the noise, a gentleman emerged from the depths of the house, his full-skirted, blue velvet coat gleaming as a diamond nestling in his lacy cravat winked in the sudden sunlight. Lace fell over his slim, white hands and a black velvet riband secured his unpowdered auburn locks. Glancing at Gleason, he addressed a curt French query to the butler.

The butler's answer ended with 'Robert Amberley' and the gentleman's eyes locked with Gleason's for a long, tense moment. He gave a sudden command to the butler and disappeared through a pair of carved oaken doors. The butler bowed Gleason into the house, collecting his hat and gloves.

He was ushered into a library. Books covered most of three walls, but the fourth was comprised of tall windows that looked out onto a garden. At the far end of the room, overstuffed leather armchairs

clustered before an empty fireplace.

Bowing, Gleason introduced himself. Standing by a desk at the near end of the room, his host answered him in perfect English. "Please be seated, Mr. Gleason. I would know what business you have with Robert Amberley."

Gleason sank into a chair by the desk. "Is he in your employ, Monsieur?"

"Etiénne de Châteaugris," the gentleman supplied, seating himself. "If you tell me your purpose, I will tell you if Monsieur Amberley can see you." He waited, studying the solicitor.

"Well, milord, well," Gleason licked his lips. "The fact of the matter is Lord Amberley's... the Marquis of Norelton's grandfather is -- dead."

The gentleman stilled, his granite grey eyes boring into the solicitor's soul. Then he leaned forward abruptly. "I am Robert Amberley, Mr. Gleason. Do you come all the way from England merely to tell me that my brother, Clayton, has succeeded to the title?"

Gleason's eyes widened as he glanced at his fine surroundings.

"No, Mr. Gleason, I've not done badly for a penniless, cast-off younger son," Amberley said. "When did my grandfather die?"

"Almost a year ago, Your Grace," Amberley's eyes grew wide at the news that he was now a duke, "but your brother died two years before him, leaving you the heir. My firm has been looking for you since the marquis's death."

"Clay too!" Amberley's voice softened. "What happened?"

"A carriage accident, Your Grace."

"And the duke?"

Gleason shook his head. "The marquis's death devastated His Grace. When you could not be found, his grief turned to madness. Often, when he was alone in a room, he would rail at you as if you were with him. He said that you -- " The solicitor halted, flushing.

"I can easily imagine what His Grace had to say about me!" Amberley said.

"Then, suddenly, His Grace stopped talking altogether," Gleason said. "He just sat for hours, staring at nothing. Finally, he summoned me to Lynkellyn Castle to make out a new will. He died three days later."

"So I am now the Duke of Lynkellyn!" The new peer laughed. "I'll wager that didn't set well with Grandpapa. I don't suppose he settled any of the estate debt after I left?"

"No, Your Grace," Gleason said.

"No, of course, he didn't!" Amberley shook his head. "The Lynkellyn holdings have been mortgaged to the hilt for three generations, but even though his fortune was vast, my grandfather couldn't see past his own tight-fistedness to remove that embarrassment."

Gleason flushed. "His Grace felt that since the ducal lands were entailed, the mortgages need not be discharged in haste. He also believed the debts should be paid with the ducal rents rather than his personal fortune."

"Ah, yes! His personal fortune! The whip that drove us all!" Amberley's eyes glittered with contempt. "I suppose my cousin Giles inherited that money? The old duke would have left him the title and estates, too, if it had been possible."

"No."

"No?" Amberley's brows rose.

"No, Your Grace. Along with all the titles, honors, and estates you naturally inherit, the late duke also left you his personal fortune, provided you meet the terms of his will."

"Which are?"

"That you be married to a lady of good family within one year of His Grace's death; said year to end at midnight on March 28, 1735, the anniversary date of the late duke's demise. Also, that you produce a child from this union within two years of His Grace's death."

The ticking of the mantle clock filled the room for some time. "And if I don't meet these stipulations?" Amberley finally asked.

"Ah! Then the deceased's entire personal fortune goes to your cousin, Lord Mountheathe."

Amberley stared out the window, silent for a full minute. "How much money is involved?"

"An income of one hundred thousand pounds per annum, stocks, bonds, a large amount of real estate, a shipping firm... I would venture to suggest, Your Grace, that if you are not already married..."

"I am not."

"Then you had better wed quickly. It only lacks a fortnight until the anniversary of His Grace's death. If you do not hurry, everything will go to Lord Mountheathe."

Resting his elbows on his desk, the duke pressed his fingertips together. "Lady Luck has been exceedingly kind to me in the last few years, Mr. Gleason, and I have sufficient funds for my needs. I doubt that, considering my grandfather's stipulations and the time constraint, I shall be claiming my legacy. Giles shall have it! And why not, pray? He's taken all else from me!" Bitterness tinged Lynkellyn's voice.

Gleason rose and reached into his pocket. "Here is my card," he said, bowing. "If Your Grace should change your mind, send word to my firm. I must witness your wedding."

"très bien. Won't you stay for luncheon, Mr. Gleason? 'Tis good to hear an English voice again."

"No, Your Grace, I'm sorry, but I cannot. I sail for home tonight and I've still got some personal commissions to which I must attend."

The solicitor had almost reached the door when Amberley halted him. "One more question, s'il vous plaît, Mr. Gleason. How did your firm find me?"

"The merest chance, Your Grace. A month ago, the Earl of Malkent saw you riding in the Bois de Boulogne. His companion did not know you or your direction, but recognized your horse as one his neighbor had sold the day before. We received your direction from the Comte de Montville who sold you the horse. Good day, Your Grace." Mr. Gleason bowed and was gone.

For a long time after Gleason left, Amberley sat in his sunny library, black and bitter regrets crawling through his mind. Visions of Mountheathe's smirking features taunted him and he leaped up to pace, all the frustration and resentment he thought he had banished after ten years consuming him again as if he had left England only yesterday.

Giles had stolen or ruined every good thing in his life. His name was irreparably blackened; his youth wasted wandering the sewers and stews of the world; the love and respect of his family lost forever. After all he had suffered at Mountheathe's hands, he would be damned if he let that lying cur have the Amberley fortune as well!

The butler entered. "The Marquis de Valière requests an audience, Monseigneur."

"You may admit the marquis," Amberley said. "He'll be staying for luncheon."

A few minutes later de Valière entered the library, grinning as he held out his hand. "Etiénne! It has been an age."

"Georges!" Amberley clasped his hand, smiling. "Pray be seated. Will you have a brandy?" Without waiting for an answer, the duke filled two glasses and handed one to de Valière. "You'll stay for luncheon, of course."

"I never pass up a free meal, Étienne. You know that!" Still smiling, the marquis took a seat. "So, mon ami, what new scandal has tantalized Paris while I have been buried in the country?"

The butler announced luncheon soon after and the gentlemen sauntered into the dining room without a lull in their conversation. Over the soup, however, Robin began to brood once more upon Gleason's visit and his features hardened.

"Is anything amiss, Étienne?" Georges asked, lowering his spoon. "You seem -- distracted."

"I've had a most unpleasant morning," Lynkellyn said, shoving his soup away.

"I apologize if I intrude, mon ami. You have only to say 'Georges, be gone!' and I will vanish!"

"I welcome your company, Georges," Robin said, signaling the butler to clear the table and serve the second course. "'Tis just that, well, I have had disturbing news from home."

"Oui?" Georges raised a brow. His friend had always been curiously reticent about his background and family.

Amberley served himself from a platter of chicken. "Georges, do you consider me a close friend?"

"One of my closest." Georges said as he accepted the platter.

"Would you go with me to England?"

Piling chicken onto his plate, De Valière looked up in surprise. "England? Pourquoi?"

"I shall explain in the library after luncheon. We have too many ears here," Amberley said, glancing at the servants. "If, after you have heard me out, you still count yourself my friend, we will talk more of England."

Later, in the library, the gentlemen settled into comfortable chairs, port in hand. The room was silent for several minutes as Amberley decided how to begin. He swirled the last of the wine in his glass, then tossed it down and sprang from his chair to pace across the patches of sunlight that dappled the parquet floor. "First of all, Georges, I'm an Englishman, not a Frenchman..."

"How can that be, Étienne? What about your houses, your lands, your title, and, most of all, mon ami, your manner!"

Amberley searched Georges's face. "My title I made up out of whole cloth. I acquired my wealth through gambling and deceit. As to my manner, I have a gift. I can assume any nationality, any social class I wish. I've been Italian, Spanish, Austrian, Hanoverian even a gypsy! I know a dozen languages and cultures, for I've been part of all of them at one time or another."

"Then -- then you are an adventurer! A charlatan!" Georges could hardly credit his own conclusions.

"Oui, mon ami. That is exactly what I am." Amberley gazed out at the garden, frowning. "I've engaged in countless unsavory occupations -- actor, gambler, highwayman, pirate, mercenary, pick-pocket, also a whoremaster." He was silent for a moment, his eyes bleak. With a flutter of his hand, he swept his memories away. "Naturellement, I prefer to live like a gentleman when I can and my luck has been extraordinary these last few years. I've accumulated a respectable fortune and, until this morning, I had thought to settle here in France."

"I cannot believe what I am hearing! You are, perhaps, amusing yourself at my expense, Étienne?"

"I only wish I were," Robin said, pouring more wine, "and the name is Robert Amberley. I had a visit from an English solicitor this morning. He told me that my brother and grandfather are dead and that I am now the Duke of Lynkellyn."

"I am more confused than ever, mon ami! How -- why has all this come about?"

"How?" Amberley laughed. "Through my kinsman's scheming lies and my grandfather's doting blindness." He tossed off his port, grabbed the decanter, and refilled both their glasses. "My cousin Giles, my older brother Clayton and I, orphans all, grew up in Grandpapa's household at Lynkellyn Castle. Grandfather absolutely adored Giles, his favorite for reasons I have never fathomed and he showed great affection to Clay who always said 'yes, sir' and 'no, sir' and kept his own counsel in a way I never could, but the old duke and I argued constantly."

"At nineteen, Giles and I went to London for a little Town bronze. The reigning beauty among that Season's debutantes was Valeria Ashwell. We both courted her, but she accepted an offer of marriage from the Earl of Malkent. When their betrothal was announced, I declared my heart shattered and foreswore women forever! Forever lasted about a day and a half.

"But Giles left my pitiful theatricals in the dust. One night, well into his second bottle, he ranted that Miss Ashwell was his and she would never wed anyone else. He swore he would kill any man who took her from him. Alas, I dismissed his ravings as mere drunken boasts. No one was ever so wrong!

"The next day, when I went around to Giles's lodgings, he was out. Standing in the street, I read the note

he had left me and my blood chilled. He intended to force Miss Ashwell to Gretna Green. I rushed to the lady's house, but a footman told me the family was out.

"Determined to catch Giles, I raced to my lodgings for traveling money, then guided my mount north out of London, knowing that since Gretna Green and Lynkellyn Castle lay along the same route, I would have no trouble using my grandfather's name to procure fresh horses. Worried, I rode through the night and all the next day, inquiring after the fleeing pair at every inn along the way. At dusk, I finally had news of Giles at a small inn not generally frequented by gentlemen. I was mere hours behind him and the landlord said his companion was ill. Ignoring hunger and fatigue, I gulped down a quick tankard of ale while changing mounts and pressed on into the second night.

"At dawn, I arrived at the Crown and Thistle, an inn some ten miles from Lynkellyn Castle. While I was questioning Tulley, the landlord, I glimpsed Giles crossing the taproom and rushed after him into a private parlor, demanding to see Miss Ashwell.

"Furious, Giles cursed me for interfering, then drew his sword and lunged at me. I barely unsheathed in time to parry. My blade rasped against his as I blocked his attack and we began to duel in earnest.

"My mind and body sluggish from lack of food and sleep, I hadn't a chance of victory. My weapon grew heavier, my responses slower with every move. Above our ringing swords, we heard noise of new arrivals in the taproom. My grandfather's voice drifted back to us and then Lord Malkent's. Giles's blade whipped in and out, testing my defenses. Clay's voice sounded nearby and the door opened just as Mountheathe's blade pierced my shoulder. Starving, exhausted, and in agony, I collapsed."

Amberley swallowed half a glass of wine, then gulped down the other half. He fell into a chair, closing his eyes against the pained memory. "Eager to preserve his worthless skin, Giles told our grandfather the greatest tangle of lies ever uttered! While I lay unconscious, he accused me before my family and Lord Malkent of drugging Miss Ashwell and spiriting her away to a forced wedding in Gretna Green. Giles had kept Miss Ashwell sedated during the journey and when she finally revived, she could remember nothing except that, on leaving Lady Ford's house with Giles, she had become ill and fainted. Giles claimed that I took her from him at gunpoint and that it was he who had chased me across England night and day."

"To avoid a scandal, Grandpapa arranged to have Tracy and Valeria married quietly at Lynkellyn Castle the next morning. Nevertheless, the tale leaked out with a little help, sans doute, from Giles. Consequently, I was not received anywhere."

"And did you not tell your grandfather the truth?" Georges asked.

"I tried, but he didn't believe me. No one did. You see, I was a wild, rakehelly young buck while Giles was, to all outward appearance, a sober, worthy gentleman. Grandpapa would hear nothing against him. My protestations of innocence only incensed the old duke. Furious that I would not confess my 'crime',

he disowned me! Gave me an hour to pack my belongings and be gone. Mon Dieu! That awful day!" His hands shaking, Amberley poured more wine.

Georges sipped his port. "And Lord Mountheathe's letter?"

Amberley gave a bitter laugh. "Lost! Somewhere on the road between London and Carlisle. So much for proving my innocence!" Sighing, he slumped in his chair. "I've told you more than I've ever told anyone else, Georges. Do you still consider yourself my friend?"

"More than ever."

Brown eyes met grey. Amberley saw neither pity nor contempt in Georges's gaze and was satisfied. "In my youth, my friends called me 'Rogue Robin' because of my wild escapades," he said after a long silence. "I've not heard myself styled thus since." His jaw clenched. Calming his temper with a deep breath, he smiled. "What say you to England, then?"

"I still don't understand why you must go. I should think it would be a distressing experience, considering..."

"It will be! But along with the ducal lands that are my legal inheritance, my grandfather, enigmatic to the end, left me his personal fortune, which I shall have if I meet certain stipulations. I must be married to a lady of good family, to Grandpapa that meant aristocratic family, naturellement, within one year of his death and produce a child from that union within two years."

Georges gave a low whistle. "And if the conditions are not met?"

Lynkellyn's laughter cracked like breaking glass. "That's the cream of the jest, mon ami! The anniversary of Grandpapa's death is only a fortnight away. If I do not have a properly blue-blooded bride within that time, the entire fortune, a hundred thousand pounds a year, goes to that blackguard, Mountheathe. I don't need the money. I can live comfortably on my winnings for the rest of my life, but I'll be damned if I let Giles Bridland profit from his treachery again." All the anger, pain, and resentment that Robin had masked for so many years was suddenly naked in his smoldering eyes. "Will you come to England and help me find a wife, Georges? I must be a married man by the twenty-eighth of March."

"But already it is March thirteenth. Even if you leave tomorrow, the journey will take at least a sennight, Étienne -- Robin, I mean. You'll only have seven days in which to find a lady, woo her, and wed her. Why do you not court a Parisienne?"

"If I fail in this venture, I want to be able to return to Paris as the Chevalier de Châteaugris. If I marry a French lady, all of Paris Society will know of my new title and my previous deception. Living here would become unbearable."

"But you've only a fortnight, Robin! C'est impossible!"

"Nothing is impossible, mon ami. I'm sure there must be one gentlewoman in England who would not object to marrying a hundred thousand pounds a year and a ducal coronet, slightly tarnished."

"très bien," Georges sighed. "When do we go?"

Robin sat down at his desk to write. "We'll travel to Calais in the morning. I'll have a packet waiting for us there."

"Then I'll take my leave to prepare for the journey. Will I see you at the Comtesse de la Tournaise's ball tonight?"

"Most assuredly." Lynkellyn's eyes fell to his letter. "And Georges...to Paris I'm still the Chevalier de Châteaugris, n'est-ce pas?"

"Certainement. I will find my own way out. Until this evening, mon ami."

"Until this evening." Amberley's mind was already on travel details, but he raised his head with a slight smile. "And I thank you, mon vieux, for standing with me rather than against me."

"Any time." Georges bowed and was gone.

"Mr. Gleason! You are returned from Paris at last. I vow I had almost given you up!" Lady Amaryllis Blayne said as the solicitor bowed to her on the threshold of her salon.

"Rough weather delayed my journey, my lady. I must confess I did not care for the Channel crossing either way."

Amaryllis ushered him to a seat and settled on a divan across from him. She leaned forward, twisting a pale gold ringlet. "How was my cousin?"

"In excellent health, Your Ladyship."

"He -- he has enough to eat, then, and a place to live?"

"He has amassed a comfortable fortune, my lady, and lives in a manner befitting a man of his station."

Relief flickered in her eyes. "'Tis only that I worried lest he should have sunk." She drew herself up

sharply. "When is His Grace coming home?"

"I don't know, my lady. I assumed that, when I found him, I would be throwing a rope to a drowning man, but His Grace expressed very little interest in his legacy."

"Is he willing to let Giles have it, then, without a fight? I cannot credit it! The moment that creature gets his hands on Grandpapa's money, he'll usurp Lynkellyn Castle and all the other ducal estates. He'll run them into the ground just as he has his own lands."

"The Lynkellyn holdings are already heavily mortgaged, my lady."

"Well, Giles will find some way to make the situation worse! The man is a bounder!"

"My lady!" said the shocked solicitor. "Lord Mountheathe is highly esteemed and respected! His philanthropy is legendary!"

Amaryllis grimaced. "I've known Giles since he was in short coats. He excels at hiding the most reprehensible deeds behind that angelic facade he's created. I have seen things, heard things, but I am a lady, sir. Suffice it to say that I would prefer to see Robert Amberley take his rightful place in Society."

"But, my lady, during our search for His Grace, we discovered that he may have been involved in some extremely questionable activities."

"Robin was always a hero to me, my good man! Even when we were children, he protected me. Why, one spring when my cousins were visiting Manleigh Hall, he -- " Amaryllis blushed.

It had happened at her fourteenth birthday party. All the guests were playing hide-and-seek in the woods and she was hiding behind a large tree when Giles found her. She tried to run away, but he grabbed her, pressing her against the tree with his body. The rough bark scraped and bruised her skin as he tore at her dress and slobbered kisses all over her face. She screamed, fighting and begging to be released.

Suddenly Robin rushed into the clearing, demanding that Giles free her. Giles glared at his cousin with undisguised venom as Robin took a menacing step toward him, fists clenched. With a grimace of disgust, Giles shoved Amaryllis to the ground and strode away, leaving Robin to escort her back to the Hall.

She thrust the memory away, her voice shaking a little as she addressed Gleason. "Robin was always there when I needed him right up until that dreadful day. I cannot believe it of him! I simply cannot! I never have and I never will!"

"But, my lady, the facts, the circumstances in the case prove his guilt!"

"Facts may be twisted and circumstances misinterpreted, Mr. Gleason. Robin never betrayed my trust and I shall befriend him, no matter what the cost. You may tell him that if you see him again!"

"Your ladyship must realize that, having found your cousin and apprised him of the current situation, my firm can do nothing more," Gleason said. "His Grace must decide whether he will claim his inheritance or not."

Amaryllis twisted one yellow curl in vexation. "Oh, I wish I'd been there when you talked to him. I'd have dragged that wretched boy home by his ear!"

Lynkellyn and de Valière spent four harrowing days on the road, halting briefly for meals and sleep. With the coachman springing the horses at every opportunity, they arrived in Calais on the seventeenth of March, one day ahead of schedule.

Over supper that night, Robin told Georges that once they arrived in England, they would dock at Harwich and travel by coach one more day to Brackenwell Hall, a small estate he owned in Essex.

"We're not going to London?" Georges tore at a bit of chicken with his fork.

"I'd have the devil's own luck finding a wife in London, mon ami. My name, face, and reputation are too well known. No! I shall search among the country misses and hope my title and fortune will impress while my blackened character languishes in anonymity. With any luck, a veritable horde of spinster gentlewomen will live in the vicinity of Brackenwell Hall in Essex."

"This Brackenwell Hall, what sort of place is it?"

"Je ne sais pas. I won the estate at cards in Vienna and I've never actually been there." Robin served himself from a dish of glazed carrots. "Since I've been administering the place by correspondence, I've brought the deed with me, lest my ownership comes into question."

"I see that you are prepared for everything."

Robin smiled. "Everything but marriage and fatherhood, Georges."

After an unusually calm Channel crossing the next day and a quiet night at the Pelican in Harwich, the gentlemen left for Brackenwell Hall in a hired coach just after dawn. The carriage stopped in Sudbury for a noon meal and turned into the tree-lined drive of Brackenwell Hall at sunset.

Facing north toward the Stour River, the red brick mansion nestled amidst a lush park like a ruby on

green velvet. The house boasted a white marble portico with a flat roof that sheltered stairs leading to a set of polished oak doors.

The coach pulled up to the entrance and the gentlemen alighted. An elderly butler waited to greet them and take their wraps. The servant, expecting a Frenchman with dark hair and eyes, bowed to the marquis, who more closely resembled that image, and said, "Your Grace!"

"Non! He is your master." De Valière indicated Amberley with a wave of his hand.

The butler turned toward Robin and bowed a second time. "Forgive me, Your Grace. My name is Carter. I head the staff here. Dinner may be served at Your Grace's pleasure."

"The Marquis de Valière and I would like to change our clothes and rid ourselves of our travel dirt. We will dine at half past six. Pray show us to our chambers. Have our valets arrived with our baggage yet?"

"They are already in your rooms, unpacking, Your Grace."

"Bon! After dinner, I would like to see both you and the steward with the household and estate accounts in the library. This place does have a library, does it not?"

"Yes, Your Grace. I shall be happy to show you the library at your pleasure," Carter said a little huffily. "If you will follow me to your chambers, Your Grace?"

As the gentlemen started up a long staircase behind Carter, Robin turned to Georges, speaking in his usual French. "I fear I must leave you to your own devices this evening, mon ami. Business calls and if I can get through it tonight, I shall have one less thing to occupy my mind while I muddle through this marriage affair. That shall require all my attention and I must needs go quickly. I only have nine days left."

Chapter 2:

In Which His Grace Courts a Bride and Steals a Kiss

"What next, Robin? How will you begin your quest for a bride?" George asked over luncheon the following day.

Robin smiled, sipping his wine. "This afternoon, mon ami, we shall call on the neighbors. Hunting, as it were." He took a paper from his coat pocket and looked at it. "Carter gave me a list of the better families in the neighborhood. Out of eleven families, six know or are connected with mine in some way, if memory serves. They may not receive me at all. The other five - Reverend Stanfield and his wife, Sir Archibald Forbin and his lady, Lord Arledale, Mr. and Mrs. Weymouth and Lord and Lady Saddewythe

-- are all unknown to me. Perhaps I am unknown to them. We shall see."

Robin decided to visit his former friends first, thus, he confessed to Georges, getting the worst over at the beginning. At each home, the Lynkellyn carriage waited while the gentlemen were announced. At two houses, they were politely requested to leave; at two others, the residents were not at home; and at two of them, Robin received threats of physical insult in response to his calling card.

Having rejected Lynkellyn's neighborly overtures, Viscount Wranham had sent word to all the gentry in the district, warning them against Rogue Robin and his sordid past. Consequently, amongst those families who did not know Amberley, the Forbins and the Weymouths were not at home and although a reserved Lord Arledale welcomed him, the man was a bachelor and of no use to the duke.

As the coach lurched away from Arledale House, Georges glanced anxiously at Robin who sprawled on the seat across from him. Amberley's jaw jutted forward, his lips compressed into a hard, angry line and his fists clenched in his pockets. Although his eyes were hooded, cold steel glinted from beneath those dark lashes.

"Don't worry," said the marquis, "We'll find someone, Robin."

Amberley swallowed an angry retort, saying only, "Who is next?"

Georges looked at the list. "Vicar and Mrs. Stanfield."

"At least, they should receive me," Robin said. "I am responsible for the vicar's living. It wouldn't do to offend me."

As expected, Vicar Stanfield and his lady received the gentlemen with every evidence of welcome, despite an alarming note from Wranham Chase only minutes before they arrived. When Robin discovered that the Stanfields were older and childless, he chafed at the bit, yearning to be gone, but good manners compelled him to stay the socially required twenty minutes.

Having also received Lord Wranham's message, Lord and Lady Saddewythe were in some disagreement over the prospect of a visit from Lynkellyn. Lord Saddewythe did not wish to receive him, but Lady Winifred nursed a secret desire that her dearest Pamela might be a duchess before her first Season had even begun. Insisting that a duke could not be anything but respectable, her ladyship carried the day.

As his carriage bowled up the drive to Saddewythe Manor, Robin wearily watched the landscaped park pass outside his window. "I will be very glad when all this is over, mon ami," he said. "Already it's a curst bothersome bore."

"Let us hope your new wife is not 'bothersome', Robin."

"It makes no difference if she is. I shall contrive, in that case, not to tarry overlong in her company." Suddenly all the duke's languor ebbed. He sat up abruptly, his eyes widening as he stared out the window. "Mon Dieu!"

A little girl skipped into the path of the speeding carriage as it rounded a curve in the drive. The coachman sawed at the reins, endeavoring to turn the horses. The vehicle shook and rattled as the confused, frightened team reared and plunged.

At the last possible minute, a blur of blue and black hurtled across the drive, pushing the child to the side of the road and scrambling madly after her.

The coachman got his team under control a little farther down the drive and stopped. The passengers alighted, rushing back to the child and her rescuer; a young woman clad in a patched and ill-fitting blue wool dress.

The woman's mobcap lay forgotten in the middle of the dusty drive. Having escaped both cap and pins, her long ebony hair tumbled about her shoulders in a maze of silken curls as she knelt beside the child. "Truly, Miss Honor!" she scolded, helping the girl to her feet and brushing off her clothes. "I begged you to stay with the rest of us. Your mother will not allow us another picnic if she hears about this, as I know she will, from the visitors in the coach. Really! It is too vexing!"

"I'm sorry, Cothy, but the flowers over here are ever so much prettier -- Oh!" Honor fell silent. She stared over Cothy's shoulder in awe, a finger stealing into her mouth.

The woman turned to find the gentlemen standing directly behind her. Her eyes widened and she paled.

Robin was looking at the child. "I trust the young lady has sustained no injury?"

"No, sir. Thank you for asking, sir." The woman curtsied, then returned her attention to the girl. "You may go to the garden and join the others, Honor, and do contrive to stay out of trouble."

Honor ran across the drive, disappearing through the trees. The woman watched her go, then, visibly steeling herself, turned back to the gentlemen. Curtsying again, she focused her eyes on the sapphire that nestled in the lace of his grace's cravat.

His gaze lingering upon her bowed head, Robin wondered if the midnight tresses dancing down her back were as soft as they appeared to be. Quelling the urge to fondle them, he said, "And you, Miss -- er -- may I be permitted to know your name?"

"Miss Lucia Cothcourt, sir. I am Miss Honor's governess. I pray you will pardon Miss Honor, sir. She is adventurous and will go wandering off if..."

"Have you taken any injury, Miss Cothcourt?" Robin interrupted, a faint caress in the deep timber of his voice.

Startled, she looked up at him and he glimpsed a pair of magnificent blue eyes before they were swiftly lowered again. "No, sir."

Lynkellyn's glance took in a torn skirt and ripped sleeves. He turned her hands palms up. Georges gasped when he saw the bloody gashes the sharp rocks had cut into them.

Blushing a deep red, Miss Cothcourt jerked her hands out of the duke's and shoved them behind her back. "Indeed, sir, I thank you for your concern, but I must return to the children." Curtsying, she scooped up her cap and ran across the drive, following Honor's path into the woods.

Robin stared after her, certain that face, those eyes, were familiar. Unable to summon any clear memories of such features from his past, he shrugged and walked back to the coach with Georges.

When the gentlemen reached Saddewythe Manor, Lady Saddewythe received them with apparent good will, eagerly introducing them to her daughter, Pamela. Robin bowed over her hand and accepted an invitation to tea.

As he balanced his cup and discussed Pamela's upcoming London Season, Robin studied the young lady. Pamela was a lovely blonde; about eighteen, Robin judged, and without education, save for drawing-room accomplishments. Life with her would be absolute boredom, but then he thought of Giles and his mouth hardened.

"Don't you think so, Your Grace?" Lady Saddewythe inquired.

"Pardon, my lady?"

"I was saying that Pamela will be unrivaled among the London belles, as pretty as she is. It will be a lucky man who weds her!"

"I'm certain she will take the *ton* by storm!" Robin smiled.

"Oh, do you think so, Your Grace?" Pamela leaned forward, her eyes shining. "I can hardly wait! Beautiful dresses and parties and riding in Hyde Park! It will be ever so grand!"

"When shall you be going to Town, Miss Saddewythe?" Lynkellyn asked.

Lady Saddewythe interrupted. "We leave on Saturday, March twenty-eighth, if all goes well, Your Grace; that is, of course, assuming Pamela has not already accepted an offer." As she gave Robin an

arch smile, a sudden movement captured his attention. Lord Saddewythe, who had, until that moment, sat silently in a corner chair, was glaring at his wife.

Amberley rose. "I'm certain Miss Saddewythe will have a fine Season. Perhaps I shall see all of you there, my lady, my lord?" His gaze shifted to his glowering host.

"I'm sure you will, Your Grace!" Lady Winifred simpered as the others followed Robin's lead and stood. The gentlemen were saying their farewells when she blurted out, "Your Grace! My Lord! We would be honored if you would dine with us tomorrow night. We keep country hours, I fear. Six o'clock?"

Robin's eyes flickered toward Pamela as he bowed. "I shall be delighted, my lady. Georges?"

The marquis dutifully accepted.

As the gentlemen settled into the coach for the journey back to Brackenwell Hall, Georges grinned. "Well, mon ami, what was the point of that little comedy? 'Twas all I could do to keep from laughing."

"I must act the beau if I am to please my future in-laws, héin?"

"Mon Dieu! You are not going to marry that girl? That Pamela Saddewythe? She would bore you to death in a day and in one of your tempers, you would devour her!"

"It may have escaped your notice, Georges, but I must marry within nine days and there is but one eligible girl of good family available to me within a twenty mile radius of Brackenwell Hall. Therefore, I must wed that girl."

"Nonsense, Robin! There are two."

"Two?"

"The governess. Mademoiselle -- er -- comment s'appelle la femme -- Cothcourt! Oui!"

"Oui!" Lynkellyn nodded. "Papa Saddewythe does not appreciate me as he should and will doubtless cause me a deal of trouble. If Miss Saddewythe proves too difficult a prize, I shall offer for Miss Cothcourt. A spinster governess would welcome any husband. A ducal coronet should totally overwhelm her."

"The woman has courage," Georges said. "That's more than we know of Miss Saddewythe."

The next morning, Robin sent a letter to Gleason in London, announcing his arrival in England. He asked the solicitor to travel to Brackenwell Hall at his earliest convenience with a special license and

family histories of the Saddewythes and Lucia Cothcourt.

That evening, Robin found himself sitting beside Miss Pamela at the Saddewythe's dinner table. She smiled at him over her soup. "I trust your drive over here was uneventful, Your Grace?"

"I only pray that your journey to London passes as serenely, Miss Saddewythe." Robin dropped a pinch of salt into his soup and smiled.

"I don't understand," she said.

"Your road cuts through Epping Forest, does it not? I've heard tales of highwaymen along that route, but I daresay you will be safe enough in the daylight."

"Did you ever meet a highwayman?" Her eyes widened as she spooned soup into her mouth.

"Once, outside Vienna. I shot him."

The unfortunate highwayman was forgotten as Pamela sighed dreamily, "Vienna! It must have been wonderful!"

"Do you like to travel, Miss Saddewythe?"

"I don't know. I've never been anywhere, but I daresay I wouldn't want to leave England for very long. All those foreigners!" she said with a moue of distaste and a fine disregard for the marquis's feelings. "Still, a few weeks on the Continent would be delightful!"

"Paris is beautiful at this time of year," Robin said, his eyes holding hers. "Indeed, I was rather sorry to leave it...until now." Pamela blushed with pleasure.

"You were in Paris, Your Grace! Tell us about it!" Lady Saddewythe cried from across the table, forgoing formal manners in such a small group.

Lynkellyn smiled. "Perhaps Monsieur le Marquis should tell you about Paris. He knows the city far better than I do. I'm certain the ladies would like to hear about the king's new palace at Versailles, Georges."

All eyes turned to de Valière. "Oh, yes! Do tell us about the gowns the French ladies wear at court, my lord!" Pamela said.

Georges endeavored to give his listeners a sense of the beauty and history of his beloved Paris, only to be drawn again and again into a discourse on parties, balls, and gowns. De Valière's attempts to speak of

anything else were met with blank stares and barely concealed boredom.

"Fashion is all very well," he said, exasperated, "but what about art, music, and literature?"

"Oh, I am not at all bookish, my lord!" Pamela said. "Mama says too much learning is not becoming in a young lady."

Shaking his head, Georges glanced at Robin and muttered, "Mon Dieu!"

Lady Saddewythe signaled Pamela to rise. "Well, gentlemen, enjoy your port, but don't linger overlong. Pamela and I are very dull without company." Curtsying, the women strolled from the room.

The gentlemen needed little encouragement to rejoin the ladies. Having presided over dinner in stony silence, Lord Saddewythe had as little to say over the port. The younger men found his surly glower disconcerting and were relieved when he rose almost immediately to follow his wife.

A few minutes after the gentlemen entered the drawing room, Miss Cothcourt led the Saddewythe nursery party through the door. "I hope you and the marquis will not mind a visit from the children, Your Grace. They always come down after dinner," Lady Saddewythe said, "and since we consider you practically a member of the family," Lord Saddewythe bristled visibly at this "I thought you would like to meet everyone. This is Arabella and Derrick; Philip and Terrence; and this is little Honor." Each child nodded. "And, of course, Miss Cothcourt, their governess." Eyes on the floor, Lucia sketched a small curtsy.

"I am pleased to meet you." Robin gave them a solemn bow.

"Children, be seated," their mother commanded. "Pamela is going to play for us."

Quite grown up at sixteen, Arabella found a chair quietly. Her three younger brothers made faces at each other and fought over the seats until Miss Cothcourt called them to order with a gentle reproof. The governess sat in the back of the room near the door and a sleepy Honor climbed onto her lap.

Lord Saddewythe retreated to the far side of the room, fixing a dour eye on the assembly while his lady, ignoring him, settled beside de Valière.

As Pamela took her place at the harpsichord, Lynkellyn stood beside her, turning her pages of music. After playing two pieces, she rose with a little smile and curtsied to the applauding audience.

"Well," Lady Saddewythe beamed as Robin and Pamela sat down, "that was lovely, dear. Now, Your Grace, if you should not dislike it, Arabella shall recite for you." Arabella stood and faced the group. Focusing her eyes on a spot above everyone's head, she launched into an epic.

His attention wandering, Robin's bored gaze soon found the governess, cradling a sleeping Honor on her lap. She wore an outmoded grey satin evening gown, her hair hidden primly beneath a white linen cap. Envisioning those luxuriant ebony curls rioting about her shoulders as they had yesterday, he knew a sudden desire to tear off that lacy prison, freeing her cascading tresses to his caress.

When she became aware of his scrutiny, he smiled at her. Fixing him with an icy stare, she nodded distantly. His smile broadened, his bold gaze lingering on the swell of her breasts above her stomacher before traveling lazily over the rest of her. She blushed and turned away to scold Derrick for talking.

Robin studied her face, admiring the amethyst eyes shielded by sweeping dark lashes, the long, straight nose, and the chin lifted in unconscious pride. But it was her mouth set him afire.

When she called Derrick's name, her quivering lips, moist and ripe and rosy as a sweet red wine, stirred him with sudden swelling lust. Her lips puckered against her long white finger in a plea for silence and, hot and hungry, he dug his nails into his chair's velvet arms. When she mouthed 'Hush!', her tongue danced between her ivory teeth and he wanted that sweet tongue to dance with his, to waltz across every inch of his body until he went mad with pleasure.

The drawing room audience was clapping as Arabella curtsied, her recitation apparently over. Robin reluctantly tore his eyes from the governess to join the applause. Then Lady Saddewythe insisted that Pamela and Arabella sing a duet. As the girls began their performance, Robin risked another glance at Lucia.

The governess had quietly risen and was carrying Honor toward the door. Thrilled at his unexpected luck, Robin waited a few minutes, then followed her. Georges glanced up, but no one else noticed his exit.

Robin was standing alone in the entry hall when Lucia, having put Honor to bed, reached the head of the stairs. She saw him as she began her descent and her eyes widened in wary surprise. When she reached the floor, she curtsied, murmuring, "Your Grace!" before hurrying past him.

"Miss Cothcourt!" Robin followed her into the corridor that led to the drawing room. "Miss Cothcourt!" He caught her wrist and pulled her back to him so that she was imprisoned between him and the wall. His voice was honeyed as he turned her palm upward. "Why in such haste, Miss Cothcourt? I merely wish to inquire whether your hands are healing properly. It would be a pity for an inflammation to set in."

"My hands do very well; thank you," she said, eyes downcast. "Lady Saddewythe will be wondering where I am, Your Grace. Allow me to pass, if you please."

"Ah, but I do not please." Robin's eyes gleamed with a predator's triumph. "I've a fancy for your company yet awhile."

He leaned his body into hers, his chin grazing the lace of her cap. He frowned, whipping the cap off her head. "Why the devil do you wear this monstrosity? It does not become you."

A few wisps of hair escaped from a thick coil of ebony braids as she grabbed for the cap with her free hand. "Please do not do this, Your Grace! I shall lose my position!"

"I could offer you a better one," he whispered, his lips nuzzling her ear. She stiffened and tried to leave, but he held her fast. "Why fade away in a dreary old schoolroom when you could be a grand lady dressed in satins and brocades, commanding your own servants? All you have to do is accept my protection. All you have to do is please me!" His breath, hot and ragged, caressed her ear. His tapered fingers stroked the smooth white column of her throat.

Anger danced in her eyes. "Let me go, Your Grace!" She tried to yank her wrist out of his hand, but he only tightened his grip.

"Well, well! An ember does burn beneath all that ice." His voice was deep and unsettlingly intimate as he captured her other hand. "Shall I fan it into a flame, ma chérie?"

"Your Grace, please -- " She endeavored to twist away from him as he pressed closer against her. With one large hand holding both her wrists like a vise, he dropped the offending cap and embedded the fingers of his other hand in the thick black mass of her hair, jerking her head back.

Her struggles grew fiercer. He pushed his body harder against hers and pinned her to the wall, relishing the feel of her breasts crushed against his chest. His mouth swooped down on hers and he forced his tongue between her protesting lips to explore the sweet warm velvet inside.

Her resistance slowly subsided as he deepened his kiss and she moaned softly, trembling in his arms. His pulse pounding and his manhood painfully swollen, his body screamed to possess her. He slid his hand out of her hair to stroke the mounds of silken flesh that quivered above her stomacher. His shaking fingers brushed the neckerchief she wore for modesty and yanked it away to tug futilely at her lacings.

Desperate to have her, he reached into his coat pocket for his dagger, intending to sever the cords. As his hand curled around the cold, hard hilt, an icy blast of reason cleared his lust-fogged brain.

What the devil was he doing? If any of the Saddewythes found them together, there'd be no marriage to Pamela, no legacy, and, above all, no revenge upon Mountheathe.

He drew his hand out of his pocket and cupped Miss Cothcourt's breast outside her gown. His kiss gentled, gliding like sun-drenched silk over her lips. Bon dieu, but she was sweet!

Sensing that his hold upon her had eased, she began to struggle again and he reluctantly let her go.

Stunned that a simple kiss could so completely steal away his reason, he searched her face for some explanation as he endeavored to calm his drumming heart and banish his throbbing desire.

She glared at him, her eyes flashing like lightning over the Caribbean. "You, sir, are the most shameless blackguard I have ever encountered! In other circumstances, I would -- " She stopped as if suddenly recollecting herself.

"You would what, Miss Cothcourt?" Amberley's wanton gaze roamed over her, lingering on the bounding swell of her breasts above her décolletage, then swinging up to challenge the fire in her eyes.

All at once that fire died. Curtsying meekly, she retrieved her belongings and arranged the neckerchief properly about her shoulders. Stuffing her ravaged tresses under the cap, she fled toward the drawing room while Robin stared after her, totally bewildered.

A few minutes later, he followed her into the room. Her eyes met his and slid past him, calmly, coldly indifferent. Such nonchalance in the face of their recent encounter provoked him, but, finding a seat, he hid his anger, pretending intense interest in the Misses Saddewythes' duet.

After the schoolroom party retired and Lucia saw the children to their beds, she went thankfully to her own little sanctuary. She locked her chamber door and lit a candle on her dressing table from the one she held in her hand. Struggling out of her gown, stays, and hoops, she donned a once exquisite silk dressing robe, now frayed and threadbare. Sitting at her dressing table, she hardly noticed her reflection in the cracked mirror as she removed the cap that had so offended the duke. Loosening what little hair remained braided after his grace's assault, she brushed it until the long ebony curls gleamed in the candlelight. When she heard a coach pass on the road outside her window, a tide of relief flooded her. The Duke of Lynkellyn was gone.

Braiding her hair with trembling fingers, she examined her encounter with the duke. With a single kiss, he had ripped away the mask of demure docility she had so carefully cultivated, banishing all thoughts of restraint or discretion from her brain. His kiss had been brazenly carnal without a hint of tenderness or affection in it, yet her lonely, love-starved heart had responded to him as if he were offering her eternal devotion. For a few breathless moments, she had yielded to him like the cheapest harlot, moaning her pleasure against his lips. As furious at her reaction to his advances as she was at him for kissing her, she had lashed out at him without consideration of the possible consequences. She had taken stupid reckless chances with her livelihood and security and she could not afford to let it happen again.

She stared critically at the mirror, wondering if she had invited Lynkellyn's attack. Her ebony hair, always tightly braided and hidden beneath a cap, was never allowed the immodesty of freedom. Her blue eyes, fringed with long, dark lashes and topped with delicate, arching brows, always stared demurely at the ground. She had draped a far too pleasing shape in loose, limp, faded old gowns and wound strips of cloth around her body to flatten her regrettably bountiful bosom. Thus, she had managed to avoid unwanted advances in the Saddewythe household, until now.

She decided, at last, that the fault for this evening's incident lay not with her, but with the duke. He was one of her own kind -- another unwanted, unloved soul without friends or family. When she had heard the gossip about him, his situation had touched her heart.

Perhaps, at the time of the abduction, he had truly loved the lady in question. But it no longer mattered. His eyes were hard and jaded, always wary, always suspicious, always searching for an edge. It was a look she had seen often enough in others of his ilk; even in her father's eyes. Such men took what they wanted with ruthless disdain, whether it be power or wealth or, Lucia blushed.

Yesterday, when she saw his grace in the drive, she was certain she had met him somewhere before. This evening she had finally remembered. It had been five years ago in Vienna. She was posing as a young Italian nobleman, the duke as an Austrian army officer. His hair was black, then, and he wore a less than flattering moustache, but those silver-grey eyes were unmistakable.

They played at piquet in a sordid little gaming hell and he won; not an astounding fortune, but enough to send her to the High Toby to recoup her losses so that she might have a decent dinner and sleep indoors that night.

She had the misfortune, however, to waylay her erstwhile opponent's coach just outside the city. The whole affair went terribly wrong and he shot her, leaving her sprawled, unconscious, in the road. She awoke sometime later, alone and in agony, and staggered away, half-dead, to find help. Infection set in and for weeks she writhed in fevered torment, battling for life.

Shuddering, she forced the past out of her mind and rose to shed her dressing gown. Dwelling upon the present, however, was no pleasanter. When she thought of the damage the duke could do to her fragile security should he recognize her, her blood chilled. Her aunt, Lady Laddon, had stressed that finding her this employment was an isolated act of kindness. No more aid would be forthcoming. If His Grace told Lady Saddewythe her inglorious history, she would be sacked without a reference and forced to return to her old life. An unbearable prospect!

Thankfully, he did not seem to know her and she hoped he would never see the flamboyant Italian of five years ago in the meek governess of the present. Nevertheless, she resolved to avoid him in future, lest his memory be stirred.

She prayed fervently that his interest in her was only a momentary fancy. Lady Saddewythe had already hinted at her aspirations regarding Pamela and the duke to Lucia and it would be disastrous if he should seek her out instead.

With a sigh, Lucia snuffed the candles and crawled into bed, falling into a fitful sleep full of nightmares, half dream, half memory, of exploding pistols and maddening kisses; of pain and passion and piercing silver eyes.

As Lynkellyn's coach left Saddewythe Manor, Georges stared into the darkness in his direction. "Well?"

"Mon ami?" Amberley lifted a brow.

"How did you find the governess?"

"Delightful, Georges! She struggles like a tigress!"

The carriage turned onto the main road and moonlight spilled into its interior, bathing the gentlemen's faces in soft, white light. Georges's eyes widened. "I don't take your meaning."

"I -- stole a kiss." Robin smiled. "A sweet, enticing confection that only left me hungry for more!"

"Mon Dieu, Robin! You didn't..."

"No, Georges. I took it no farther than a kiss. I'm not such a great monster as that! But I did want her, mon ami! I can't ever recall wanting a woman quite so badly."

"And the lady rejected you."

"When I offered her carte blanche, she was insulted," Amberley drawled.

"Imagine that!" Georges shook his head in mock bewilderment.

After a short silence, Robin said, "The devil of it all, mon ami, is that I'm still wanting her. My heart is racing; my blood is hot -- nom de nom! If I could have found some way, some place, I think -- I very much fear -- damn! I wanted to bed her then and there, with or without her consent, regardless of the consequences. A single kiss and I almost lost my wits with that slip of a girl in my arms. Such carelessness can lead to a disastrous, even fatal, error."

"But, Robin, your adventuring days are over. You need no longer fear an unguarded moment."

Lynkellyn shook his head. "She intoxicates me! She endangers my logic, my vigilance, and my reason. I must avoid her until after my wedding to Miss Saddewythe and leave her far behind when we go to London to confront Giles."

""Tis still to be Miss Saddewythe, then, mon ami?"

"Naturellement! Giles would laugh me out of England if I presented a governess to him as my duchess!"

"Naturellement!" De Valière threw up his hands. "You are mad to have la petite governess but, fearing the strength of your own desire and your worst enemy's opinion, you will marry this other girl that you hold in utter contempt, instead. I ask myself who gives a damn what Monseigneur Mountheathe thinks? If you want the governess so very badly, mon vieux, consign your cousin to the devil and marry her! You will still have your fortune and, even if you lose interest after you've bedded her, you will have sated your appetites and had some genuine pleasure as well! Mon Dieu! How can you prefer respectable boredom with Mademoiselle Saddewythe to wild intoxication with la petite governess?"

Robin shrugged. "Mountheathe's opinion means nothing to me, but I need respectability, Georges, and I cannot allow unreasoning lust to interfere with my thinking. Miss Saddewythe is clearly the proper choice for a dishonored man trying to regain his respectability."

Amberley settled in his corner of the coach to nap for the rest of the drive home. Gazing at his friend in the silver moonlight, the marquis shook his head in disbelief, muttering, "Mon Dieu! I shall never understand the English!"

Chapter 3:

In Which His Grace Receives Enlightenment and Proposes Marriage

When Mr. Gleason arrived at Brackenwell Hall on March twenty-first, Lynkellyn introduced the marquis and the gentlemen swiftly turned to business. "Well, Gleason," Robin said, lounging in an overstuffed chair, "have you brought the special license?"

"Yes, Your Grace. I have it here." Gleason sifted through a sheaf of papers in his satchel and handed the document to the duke. "May I say, Your Grace, that both Lady Blayne and I are pleased that you have decided to fulfill the stipulations in your grandfather's will and claim your inheritance."

"I am always happy to oblige you, naturellement," Robin drawled, "but I fear you mystify me. Who is Lady Blayne?"

"Lady Amaryllis, your cousin! 'Twas she who hired my firm to find you and inform you of your legacy."

Robin smiled. "Faith, I've not seen Ryl since she went off to some dismal school in Bath when she was sixteen. She didn't like the idea above half. Threw the devil of a tantrum! And now she is married!"

"For seven years, Your Grace, to Sir William Blayne."

"Sir William Blayne! I remember him! Good man! Dependable! Just the sort of husband Ryl needs. She's done well for herself." Amberley's eyes darkened. "She is happy?" he said after a few brooding

moments.

"As nearly as a man in my impersonal position can tell, Your Grace, yes."

"Good! Good!" Leaning back in his chair, Robin closed his eyes. It was exhilarating and excruciating to speak of the people he loved. He had too long denied himself thoughts of them. The hardest part of this venture was knowing he would meet only contempt and condemnation when he took his bride to London to satisfy Giles. Bitterness twisted his heart. "And have you brought information on Saddewythe's women?" he said.

"Yes, Your Grace! I have everything here." Gleason pulled a few more pages from his satchel and started to hand them to Lynkellyn.

"Just tell me, Gleason. Your fine prose doesn't tempt me this afternoon."

"Very well, Your Grace." The solicitor cleared his throat. "Er -- which young lady interests you most?"

"Miss Saddewythe. She is the one I intend to marry."

"A very wise choice, Your Grace." Relief colored Gleason's voice.

"I always strive for your approval, Gleason. Pray proceed."

The solicitor cleared his throat a second time. "Miss Pamela Saddewythe and her family fulfill your grandfather's stipulations admirably. Lord Saddewythe's Saxon lineage can be traced some three hundred years before William the Conqueror. His lady is one of Sir Carwell Halverton's daughters and her ancestry can be documented for five hundred years. In short, there has not been a scandal or blemish in either family within living memory, Your Grace."

"They sound much too dull, mon ami," Georges frowned. "That much respectability would put one to sleep!"

"Pamela Saddewythe is perfectly suited to shore up my own lack of respectability, Georges."

"Well, what of the other one? The governess?" de Valière asked.

Gleason shuffled his papers. "Quite a different story!"

Lynkellyn straightened. "Do you mean that she is not of good family?"

"Oh, no! Her heritage is impeccable. If Your Grace married her, however, you would be fulfilling the

letter, but not the spirit, of the will."

"You speak in riddles, Gleason. We merely asked the lady's background."

"As you wish, Your Grace. The Cothcourt family traces its ancestry back to the Conqueror. Lucia Cothcourt's father was Albert Cothcourt, brother of the present earl. Family connections include the dowager Countess of Easterbury and the Earl of Malkent." Amberley's brows rose as Gleason continued. "Miss Cothcourt's mother was Elise de Couvrelle, daughter of the present Duc de Mondecharles. Coming to prominence in the court of Charlemagne, the family can trace an impressive lineage to the present day."

"Mon Dieu!" Georges muttered, growing pale. "Elle est ma cousine!"

"Je ne comprends." Robin frowned. "With so much money and such high-born kinsmen at her disposal, why is this woman a governess?"

"Because they are not at her disposal, Your Grace. Neither family will acknowledge her existence."

"Riddles again, Gleason!" Robin said. "Pourquoi?"

"Miss Cothcourt's parents were cast off when they married against their families' wishes," Gleason said. "Her English grandfather detested the French and her French grandfather abhorred the English. They both pronounced the marriage a *mésalliance* and cut the newlyweds adrift."

Georges nodded. "That sounds like grand-père!"

"When Miss Cothcourt was born, both families were informed of her birth, but neither was willing to recognize her. Here is a letter from Madrid dated February 14th, 1711, announcing the babe's arrival." Gleason handed the letter to Robin. "No one heard anything from the Cothcourts for sixteen years. Then, in 1727, the Earl of Cothcourt received a letter from Miss Cothcourt in Copenhagen informing him of Albert's and Elise's deaths in a fire." Gleason also passed that document to Lynkellyn. "Four more years passed in silence and then, from Paris, Miss Cothcourt sent a letter to the earl, asking that she be taken in as a poor relation or given assistance in finding a respectable situation. Here is the letter, Your Grace."

"Obviously, she got some response. Who was it took pity on our hapless heroine?"

"Her aunt, Lady Lavinia Laddon, offered her a home if she would be governess-companion to her daughters, Your Grace, but within six months, Miss Cothcourt was with the Saddewythes. One can only suppose that she did not prove satisfactory in Lady Laddon's household."

"She probably caught Laddon's eye. The man always was a thorough-going rakehell!" Robin muttered. "How do you come to have all these letters, Mr. Gleason?"

"Discreet inquiries yielded little about the governess, Your Grace, but Lord Cothcourt employs our firm to handle his family's legal affairs. Viewing Miss Cothcourt and her parents' mésalliance as such, he filed all documents pertaining to the matter with the firm. I merely borrowed the file for Your Grace's confidential inspection. I shall, of course, have to have the letters back, but not immediately, if Your Grace would care to look them over."

"Yes, I would."

"And now, Your Grace, if I might retire? The journey from London was rather wearing."

"Certainement," Lynkellyn nodded, rising. He rang for Carter to show Gleason to a bedchamber. "But I will require your presence at Brackenwell Hall until I am married, Gleason."

"Yes. I certainly must be here to serve as legal witness."

After the solicitor left, Robin and Georges sat for some time in tense silence. Finally, Amberley rose to pace the room, halting to stare at the faded letters on the table. "Damnation! I cannot credit it!"

"Mon ami?" Georges looked up.

"How could anyone turn an infant, his own granddaughter, out into the streets? Mon Dieu! All she did to merit four-and-twenty years, a lifetime in hell, was to be born!" Robin's eyes smoldered.

"Surely it's not as bad as that, Robin?"

Amberley flung himself back into his chair. "Yes, it is, Georges! No home; no name; just cold and hunger and endless wandering. The loneliness corrodes you and your soul is ripped apart again and again until you draw away from humanity, lest it savage you. And if, a Dieu ne plaise, someone touches your heart, you had best flee before you are discovered, denounced, derided and cast out." He leaned back and closed his eyes. "You say Miss Cothcourt is your cousin. Why the devil haven't you tried to help her?"

"I was four years old when my Tante Elise eloped, Robin. My family never spoke of her and I had forgotten her very existence until I heard Gleason's report. I knew nothing about a child or, believe me, I would have sought her out and offered her a home."

"Forgive me!" Robin sat up to look at Georges, his eyes dark. "'Tis just that I shudder to think of la petite governess forced to live by her wits. An adventurer's life is not a fate I would wish on anyone."

"C'est rien." Georges smiled. "Have your intentions changed in the light of this new information, Robin?"

"Of course not. I shall still woo and win Miss Saddewythe for my bride. Miss Cothcourt would be a liability. Giles would be only too delighted if my wife's own family refused to receive her."

"Giles! 'Tis always Giles with you, Robin! What about your own pleasures? What about your bride's happiness?"

"I don't take your meaning, mon ami."

Georges shook his head in defeat. "No," he said, "I don't suppose you do!"

Lynkellyn haunted Saddewythe Manor for five days, endeavoring to fix his interest with Pamela. He took her for rides and drives, strolled with her in the manor gardens, and attended her at the harpsichord when she practiced in the afternoon.

As each day passed, however, she irritated him more and more with her helplessness and inanity. He longed for the day when they married so he could pursue his own interests and leave her, for the most part, to pursue hers.

Of Miss Cothcourt, Robin saw nothing. He was relieved, yet disappointed. In quiet moments alone, he dwelled upon the kiss he had stolen and his soul yearned for more. Ruthlessly quelling such importunities, he forced his mind to focus, instead, upon Pamela's spun-gold tresses and soft brown eyes.

Lady Saddewythe, always present as chaperone, smiled on Amberley's courtship, resolutely ignoring the wagging, warning tongues of friends. Her lord, however, was not so sanguine and when, on the twenty-fifth of March, Lynkellyn asked for a private audience, Saddewythe agreed, resolved to be rid of him.

In Saddewythe's study, Robin formally requested Pamela's hand in marriage. Saddewythe eyed him as if he were a dead worm. "And what makes you believe that I would have you in my family when your own grandfather was ashamed to have you in his?"

Robin's cheeks reddened. "I will not pretend that I don't take your meaning. I know my name is scandal-ridden and therefore I do not require a dowry. I am extremely wealthy and if your daughter becomes my duchess, she shall want for nothing. I am also prepared to bestow a generous marriage settlement upon your family. I must, however, request that Miss Saddewythe and I be married within three days. I have a special license in my pocket and I will make arrangements with Vicar Stanfield for the wedding ceremony immediately."

"Rushing your fences a bit, aren't you?" Saddewythe flushed angrily. "You are a scoundrel and a reprobate, sirrah, and no fit husband for any daughter of mine! You entered my house at my lady wife's

insistence, but I'll be damned -- damned -- if I let such a beast into my family, sir!"

Robin stood frozen, consciously crushing his fury. "Good day to you, then, my lord," he said through gritted teeth. Bowing stiffly, he turned to leave.

"One thing more!" Saddewythe said. "You will grant me the favor of not calling on my family again."

Robin bowed a second time and stalked out of the room, his eyes mutinous and his lips compressed into a thin, hard line. He had just entered the foyer when Lady Saddewythe hailed him. "Oh, Your Grace! You are not leaving already? Did you have your mysterious conference with Nigel?" She threw him an arch look.

Robin schooled himself to smile. "Lord Saddewythe and I had a most enlightening conversation, my lady. I trust you will pardon my haste, but I have pressing business at the Hall."

"You'll call on us tomorrow, though!" Lady Saddewythe was instinctively aware that something had gone wrong regarding Amberley's proposal. "Pamela will be completely cast down if you do not."

"I am desolated to disappoint Miss Saddewythe, but my estates will require my attention for the next few days."

In a vexed voice Lady Saddewythe said, "Very well, Your Grace. Perhaps we shall see you in London. We leave bright and early Saturday morning, the twenty-eighth. If you want to visit Pamela before she is surrounded by suitors, you had better call on us within the next three days."

Aware that he had given her every reason to presume, Robin nevertheless found Lady Saddewythe's audacity infuriating. "I shall bear it in mind, my lady," he said through gritted teeth in a forced smile. "Good day!" His fists clenched, he bowed his farewell.

He stepped out onto the porch and descended the steps, shouting for his carriage. Fuming, he jerked his gloves onto his hands as a servant headed for the stables.

Miss Cothcourt came around a corner of the house, her boisterous flock in tow. While she scolded Philip for punching Terrence and bent to wipe a smudge from Honor's face, Amberley stared pensively at the scene. Making a sudden decision, he strode toward her.

Seeing his approach and disliking the fire in his eyes, Lucia hastily told Arabella to escort her younger siblings back to the schoolroom for tea. As the children disappeared into the house, he reached her side and nodded. "Miss Cothcourt."

"Your Grace." She curtsied stiffly, her eyes lowered.

Robin did not bandy words. "Miss Cothcourt, I want you to marry me."

The governess frowned, tucking an errant lock of hair under her cap. "Why must you amuse yourself at my expense, Your Grace?" she accused, her gaze flying up to meet his. She tried to push past him, but he grabbed her arm, halting her.

"'Tis no jest. I must marry by Saturday midnight or lose my grandfather's legacy. Saddewythe has not only denied me his daughter, but his house as well. You are my last hope."

"And what of the other young ladies in the area?"

"I'm not deemed worthy of them." Bitterness tinged his words.

"Ah, but as a lowly governess with no future, I should swoon with joy when you deign to offer me marriage. Very flattering, considering I rejected your last proposal."

Amberley grinned. "Still smarting from that, are you?"

"I have never accepted carte blanche, Your Grace, and never will. One needs at least a scrap of honor to salve one's soul when all else has been sacrificed to survival."

"A touching philosophy." Robin sneered. "But I've no time for such abstractions just now. Give your notice to the Saddewythes. We shall wed this evening."

"No, Your Grace. I cannot marry you. My past is questionable. A union with me would bring you no honor. Besides, I do not love you."

Robin grabbed her shoulders, spinning her to face him.

"One hundred thousand pounds a year is at stake here, ma douce. I know all about your past and love has absolutely nothing to do with this. You will be amply rewarded. A title, money, jewels, fine clothes, great estates, servants..."

"You know all about my past! But how?" Lucia paled.

"I had my solicitor look into your background to be sure you were suitable. My bride must come from aristocratic stock."

Cold, incredulous anger stole over her. "And is my blood properly blue? Am I noble enough for you?"

"I'd not be here, else. I've no time to waste on someone who is unsuitable. Wed me and you shall have

all I've promised you, but we must produce a child from our union within a year. On our first anniversary, I will give you a separate maintenance and clear title to a fine country estate; Brackenwell Hall, if you like; but you must leave the child in my care. I will provide you a very generous lifetime annuity in return. What say you to my offer?"

Miss Cothcourt blushed. "I say you have run quite mad, Your Grace. I have made a home here and if you 'know all about my past', then you must know that I have forsaken it. I have no desire to sell myself back into plots and deception. Furthermore, if I should ever be blessed with a child, I certainly would not abandon my babe for money, as you are suggesting! The answer is 'no', Your Grace."

Amberley's hands tightened painfully on her shoulders and his stormy, steely grey eyes bored into hers. With a crack of laughter, he shoved her away. "You've made a home here? A home! That's rich! Slave quarters, belike!"

"I am content." Her chin lifted and her eyes challenged him.

"Oh, yes, I'm sure you are. A bird with clipped wings is always content in its cage, n'est-ce pas? Ah, here is my carriage."

The vehicle rounded the corner and stopped. Amberley entered the coach, then leaned out the window, grinning wolfishly. "I bid you adieu, Miss Cothcourt. If you are ever feeling 'lonely', my first offer still stands."

Chapter 4:

In Which His Grace Runs True to Form

"Brandy, Carter, and quickly!" Robin shouted, striding into Brackenwell Hall. "Bon Dieu, but this has been a hellish day! Is the marquis in the library?"

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Serve me there."

As Amberley entered the room and sank into a chair, de Valière looked up from his book. "Am I to wish you happy?"

"Non! I have been given to understand that I am not good enough for Miss Saddewythe and I am too good for Miss Cothcourt." He stretched his legs, shoved his hands into his coat pockets and glowered into the shadows of the fireplace.

"There is more to it than that, certainement!"

"Mais oui!" Robin conceded. "Saddewythe said he wouldn't have a beast like me in his family! Beast! His exact word!" Lynkellyn's eyes smoldered.

Carter entered with refreshments. Georges leveled his quizzing glass at the tray of liquors as the butler left. "Perhaps tea would be wiser this early in the day, mon vieux."

"To the devil with your tea, Georges!" Robin poured brandy into a glass, then looked inquiringly at his friend.

"The claret, s'il vous plaît." De Valière accepted a glass, saying, "And what of Miss Cothcourt?"

"She is the most vexing wench I've ever met! When I offered for her, she started babbling about honor and love, then she refused me!" He sipped his brandy and laughed. "imbécile! She is passing up the chance of a lifetime!"

"Being wedded to you?" Georges sounded incredulous.

"Non, mon ami! I explained the situation and offered her a host of riches and rewards! More wealth than she will ever dream of in her dingy little schoolroom!"

"Une mariage de convenance! That must have been très amoureux!" Georges sipped his claret, shaking his head in disbelief.

"I've no more time for courtship! She's a woman of the world or, at least, she should be if Gleason's report is true. I made her a business proposition, nothing more."

"So what is to be done?" Georges asked after a pause.

"Je ne sais pas, mon ami. Perhaps I shall go back to Paris. At least I have friends there."

"And Cousin Mountheathe shall win after all."

"Yes, damn his soul!" Fury danced in Robin's eyes. "And all because I must needs be Don Quixote, tilting at Giles's windmills. Chivalry is a fool's virtue, mon vieux. Avoid it at all costs."

Georges smiled and went back to his book. Amberley downed his brandy and refilled his glass, brooding into the glowing golden liquid for a long while. Suddenly his head snapped up, reckless danger glinting in his eyes. "I know how to keep Giles from my fortune, Georges! Look you! I've always stood accused of abduction. I'm called scoundrel! Reprobate! Beast! très bien! I shall to run true to form and take what

I want! Abduct myself a wife!"

Sipping his claret, the marquis choked. "If you are trying to be funny, mon vieux..."

"I'm serious, Georges. When Lady Saddewythe and her family leave for London on the twenty-eighth, they will have to travel through Epping Forest. I'll await them there, hold up the coach, and carry Pamela off to Brackenwell Hall. I'll have the vicar waiting here to marry us...et voilà! C'est finis! I have my fortune." He grinned at his friend. "I would welcome your help in this venture."

De Valière's face drained of all color. "I cannot believe -- surely you cannot be -- c'est diabolique!" he spluttered. "Are you mad?"

"I've just found my sanity, mon ami! I'm not like other men. A girl of good family is never going to wed me in the normal course of events. To win a bride, I shall have to drag her down to my level. Once I have ruined her, Pamela will have no choice but to marry me."

"I would never lend myself to such a stupid, barbarous, unfeeling scheme," Georges said through gritted teeth, his eyes meeting Amberley's with dark anger. "Have you thought of the risks? Highway robbery and abduction are dirty, dangerous crimes. You might be killed in the attempt! If you are caught, your execution will be swift. The English are especially adamant on that point. Even if you succeed, Vicar Stanfield and Monsieur Gleason may not agree to such an improper marriage arrangement. And finally, I do not think Miss Saddewythe is strong enough in mind or spirit to cope with the social nightmare into which wedding you will plunge here!"

"If I am killed, the world will not mourn my loss," Robin drawled. "And I hold Stanfield's living. He will perform my wedding ceremony, regardless of the circumstances, if he wants to continue to serve this parish. I shall, of course, pay generously for his services, but if bribery and intimidation do not persuade him, I shall appeal to his sympathy for Pamela's woeful plight. One way or another, he will do as he is told.

"Gleason is merely a legal witness to my marriage. His opinions are of no great import to me; and I don't give a tinker's damn about Pamela's mind as long as she can give birth to my child." Robin sipped his brandy. "I intend to go through with this, Georges. 'Tis my last chance to best Mountheathe. Whether you join me in Epping Forest will make no difference in the outcome of the venture. You must, of course, be guided by your own sense of honor."

Georges leaped to his feet. "Honor! Judging by what I've heard this afternoon, I am the only man in this room who knows what that is!"

"I've told you what I am, Georges!" Robin snarled. "My honor died in an inn on the Scottish border a decade ago. 'Tis greed and a sincere desire for revenge that spur me on."

"I do not like this side of you, monsieur. It disgusts me. You do not care whom you victimize! Perhaps your death in Epping Forest would be a blessing."

"You wish me dead, Georges? Over the insipid Pamela?" Robin's brows rose.

"You will destroy that girl's life! What about her family? They'll turn their backs on her!"

Robin shrugged.

"Non, mon ami, I don't desire your death," Georges said, "but I'll be damned if I can stand the sight of you a moment longer. Maybe, by tomorrow, you will have reconsidered. Mon Dieu! I hope so!" He stalked out of the library, shaking his head in disbelief.

Tossing off the last of his brandy, Robin watched De Valière go. "I fear you are in for disappointment, mon ami," he muttered as he emptied the decanter into his glass. "I will do what I must do."

He rang for a second bottle and watched the blue and orange blaze dance in the fireplace, sipping his brandy as he perfected his abduction plans and tried to imagine himself married to Pamela Saddewythe.

Unbidden, a vision of Lucia Cothcourt, her blue eyes sparkling with fury, her raven tresses tumbling around her shoulders, rose in his mind to blot out all thoughts of Miss Saddewythe. As vividly as if Lucia was in his embrace at that moment, he could feel the warmth of her, taste the sweetness of her lips. Tormenting desire throbbed through every physical and spiritual part of him, pleading pitifully, bitterly, insistently for her. His blood rushed hot and he ached to enfold her in his arms, to explore her, body and soul.

Robin drained his glass, suddenly in need of fortification. "Damn the wench!" he swore softly. "Damn her! Damn her! Damn her!"

Robin spent the next three days preparing for the capture and subsequent wedding of his bride. Informing Carter that he was to be married during a private ceremony in the Green Salon on Saturday, Amberley commanded that food be prepared in advance and stored in the kitchen, then announced that his wedding day would be a holiday for the entire staff, save his valet, Hercules.

Mr. Gleason was ready to witness the wedding ceremony at any moment on Saturday, and, after a great expenditure of charm and persistence on Amberley's part, Georges agreed to lend his cooperation to the scheme, hoping that one relatively cool head amidst all the lunacy might save a life, Robin's!

On Friday, Robin paid a purposeful call on Reverend Stanfield. Sitting in the vicar's small, sunny drawing room, sipping tea, he announced, "I have a special license and I want you to perform my

wedding ceremony on Saturday."

Stanfield nodded. "And who is the bride?"

"Miss Pamela Saddewythe."

"That is strange. I have heard nothing about a betrothal."

Robin smiled "There is no betrothal. I intend to abduct the lady and marry her out of hand."

Stanfield's brows snapped together. "This is, perhaps, a secret engagement? The lady wishes to fly with you in the face of her father?"

"No. I have to marry by Saturday or I stand to lose a great deal of money. Since I have been unsuccessful in securing a willing bride, I have resolved to wed an unwilling one."

Stanfield rose, outraged. "I will have no part in such a scheme!"

"Then I fear you will have to find a new living."

"A new living! But I have served this parish for forty years! This is my home and the people here are like family. I couldn't leave them!" Stanfield's eyes widened with incredulity.

"Since I hold this living, your services toward the community must prove satisfactory to me. If I should find your efforts on behalf of your flock to be wanting..."

"Are you suggesting, Your Grace, that if I do not take part in the monstrous crime you propose, you will turn me out of my home?"

"Without so much as a letter of recommendation," Robin said. "Not that a letter from me would add to your consequence."

Stanfield sank into his chair. "I cannot credit this. What everyone says of you must be true! You haven't a shred of decency or honor!"

"I do, however, have the right to demand that you perform my wedding ceremony on Saturday. I assure you the task will not go unrewarded. I shall raise the income you receive to, shall we say, seven hundred a year?"

Stanfield's eyes widened and his jaw dropped. "But that is twice my current stipend!" His mind raced, thinking how wonderful it would be to make his rounds in a bright, shiny new carriage or perhaps to

take a trip to Surrey to see his grandchildren, but then he gave himself a mental shake. His mouth snapped closed. "No!" he said. "No, Your Grace. I will not accept your blood money. I cannot perform a marriage ceremony under such circumstances."

Lynkellyn shook his head. "That is very sad, Reverend Stanfield. I intend, you see, to carry out my plan with or without you. I will send to London for a parson as soon as I leave here. It may take a few hours longer, but once I have the girl, that won't matter to me. For her, of course, those few hours alone with me may spell ruin. If I have not married her by Saturday midnight, I shall ravish her and turn her out of my house. Then I shall see to your expulsion from my vicarage."

"You will burn in hellfire for this!" Stanfield's eyes bulged. "How could you think of doing such a thing?"

Robin watched him from beneath hooded lids. "If Miss Saddewythe is ruined, it will be on your head, sir. Had you consented to marry us, the lady's honor would have remained unsullied, but since you have declined -- " He shrugged and rose to leave.

"No! Wait!" Stanfield cried. "If -- if I perform the ceremony, Miss Saddewythe will be safe from scandalous slurs? Dishonor would crush her."

"I promise you, she will be as protected from scandal as I can contrive." Lynkellyn studied his long, white hands.

"And that is not very much protection, is it?"

"No," Robin said after a slight pause, "but it is better than being abandoned in the streets with no virtue, no money, no home, and no family or friends. I fear I shall leave Miss Saddewythe in a sad case, indeed, if you do not help her."

Stanfield stared hard at his elegant visitor. Dressed impeccably in a russet coat of exquisite Parisian cut, tan smallclothes and an amber waistcoat embroidered with gold thread, the duke embodied the word, 'gentleman'. It was difficult to believe his soul was so black.

"You are quite serious?" the vicar pressed him.

"Quite! I shall not relent."

"Then I have no choice but to perform the service. At least it will save the lady from total disgrace, but I don't want your blood money!"

Lynkellyn sat down again. "You shall have it, nonetheless, vicar."

Stanfield sagged into his chair, defeated. "What must I do to aid your design?"

"Above all, tell no one of this business. You will ride over to the Hall immediately after breakfast on Saturday and wait all day, if need be, until I return with my bride. You shall then perform the wedding rites, et voilà! Your part is done. You may go home."

"But my wife will ask questions. I can't just -- "

Robin held up a calming hand. "Rest easy, Reverend. I shall send you a note early in the morning, summoning you to the Hall. You may send your lady a message at noon, postponing your return, and you will spend the night at Brackenwell, if necessary, until my business is done." He stood, towering over Stanfield, who shrank into his chair. "Don't let the fine clothes and the noble title fool you, Reverend," he said softly. "I am a brigand at heart and I know how to deal with those who cross me. Do not play me false. Good day to you, sir." He bowed and left.

Chapter 5:

In Which His Grace Steals Another Kiss

The simmering disagreement between Lord Saddewythe and his lady over the duke's suitability as a suitor for Pamela finally exploded the day before their London departure. When Nigel told Winifred he had rejected Lynkellyn's offer, she flung up her hands in disbelief. "How could you, Nigel? The man's a duke! He's worth a hundred thousand pounds a year! Pamela would have been the envy of the *ton*!"

"The man's an adventurer, Winifred. He has ruined himself and he only wants to drag our family into his shame! Well, I won't let it happen."

"My Pamela could have been a duchess if only you were not such a nodcock, my lord!" Winifred stamped her foot in frustration.

"Money and a title without social acceptance cannot be considered a good match for Pamela, Wini. She would be ostracized if she married Amberley! She's a dashed pretty girl! She'll get other offers that are much more suitable. A viscount! An earl! A marquis! Perhaps even another duke, a respectable one, I hope!"

"But Nigel! She's already got a duke!" Lady Saddewythe pleaded

"I have made my decision, Winifred!" Lord Saddewythe crossed his arms, his features set.

In her room, Pamela had her maids unpacking and repacking her baggage time and time again, fearing something indispensable had been forgotten or needed to be added, or to remove some garment suddenly

deemed not modish enough for fashionable London.

Since the younger children were to stay in the country, the schoolroom routine remained undisturbed until Friday morning when Honor awoke with a fever. Alarmed, Lucia, notified Lady Saddewythe, who rushed to her baby's bedside, sending immediately for Dr. Halcombe.

The physician diagnosed an inflammation of the ears and left some recommendations and medicines. Lucia and Lady Saddewythe set about making Honor comfortable, but after an hour or so, Winifred reluctantly left to deal with a packing crisis. Lucia found herself solely responsible for Honor as well as her healthier siblings. After a hectic day trying to teach lessons while catering to the needs of the invalid, she mounted a weary vigil by Honor's bed.

Early Saturday morning, Lady Saddewythe found Honor not much improved. She promised an exhausted Lucia some assistance and hurried away to oversee last minute details for the trip. The Saddewythes were supposed to leave at exactly eight o'clock, but due to dawdling and arguments, the carriage was not ready to depart until noon. Nigel climbed into it, begging his ladies to make haste in a voice ragged with anger and frustration. Winifred fled back into the house, insisting that she must look in on Honor one last time and Pamela followed, saying something about a forgotten shawl. Lord Saddewythe groaned.

A few minutes later, Pamela hurried to the coach, saying that she could not find her embroidered silk shawl anywhere and that the trunks would have to be unpacked again to satisfy her that it was, indeed, within one of them. Her father was about to remonstrate when Winifred rushed out of the house, announcing that they dare not depart.

"Why not?" Lord Saddewythe was thunderstruck. "The house is empty. We've nothing left to pack!"

"Oh, Nigel! Why will you be so difficult?" Winifred stamped her foot. "Honor is sick! I cannot leave her now! She needs her mother at a time like this!" Then Pamela's falling countenance caught her sympathetic eye. "But you need your Season, too, my love!"

"Take Honor with us!" Saddewythe said.

"Well, if I do, I'll need Miss Cothcourt to help me take care of her. Oh, but what will the other children do without a governess? Nigel, we shall just have to take them all to London!"

"But, Wini..."

"My mind is made up, Nigel! You might as well get out of the carriage until the children are ready to go. Order the other coach for them, please, my lord."

"But we've got two coaches going already!" Saddewythe said, aggrieved, as Winifred disappeared into

the house. With a resigned sigh, he sent for their last carriage. Meanwhile, Pamela instructed a footman to take all her trunks to her room so that they might be unpacked once more and the missing shawl found.

It was four o'clock before the entire Saddewythe family, their personal belongings, household goods, and servants were ready to depart. Saddewythe wanted to postpone the trip until the next day, but Winifred insisted upon leaving immediately saying that she and Pamela required a day to recover from the journey and they had an appointment with a very exclusive modiste on Monday. She added that it was most unseemly to travel on the Sabbath, in any case.

Nigel rolled his eyes and handed his ladies into the coach. After checking to see that everyone was settled, he climbed into his seat beside Winifred. He was about to give the order to depart when Pamela suddenly stiffened. "Oh, Papa! I have forgotten -- "

Freezing her with a glare, he thundered awfully, "No!" She cringed into the cushioned seat.

Saddewythe signaled to his coachman and his entourage lumbered down the drive. The well-sprung coach carrying Lord and Lady Saddewythe and Pamela led the way. The large, old family carriage followed, bearing the five younger children, Miss Cothcourt, and a small mountain of baggage. An ancient, dilapidated equipage brought up the rear with eight servants crammed inside and six more on top, besides the coachman and another, larger, mountain of baggage.

An hour into the journey, the servants' carriage suddenly lurched and crashed onto its side with a disheartening thud. The cavalcade halted and Saddewythe scrambled from his coach, muttering oaths beneath his breath.

He trudged past the second carriage, ignoring three little faces peering through the curtains, and stopped to survey the damage done to the third coach. Baggage sprawled amidst splintered wood all over the road but, by some stroke of fortune, every trunk remained intact.

The coachman trotted up to him as he watched the female servants being helped from the wreckage. "The front wheel buckled, my lord."

"Yes, I can see that, Hawkins! Was anybody hurt?"

"No, my lord, but, beggin' your lordship's pardon, what do we do now?"

"How the devil should I know? Any suggestions?"

"Well, it won't be fixed afore tomorrow, my lord, as late as it is now. We could mount a guard on the carriage tonight, take the horses and females into Saffron Walden and arrange to get the coach into town in the morning. It would be repaired in a day or two and then we'd follow you to London, if your lordship is agreeable."

"Very well," Saddewythe said. "Transfer as much baggage as possible to the other vehicles. Here is some money. See that everyone has a bed at the Green Horse in Saffron Walden. If you run out of money, have the creditors send their duns to Saddewythe House, London." He turned away, muttering to himself as Hawkins organized the servants. After another half an hour, the undamaged coaches, groaning with yet more Saddewythe baggage, lumbered uneasily down the road.

Stars were already shimmering in the dusky sky when the Saddewythe entourage entered Epping Forest.

"Perhaps they are not coming, mon ami," Georges said hopefully as he watched the sun sink. "Après tout, Lady Saddewythe said that they were leaving at eight o'clock this morning and it must be six in the evening already."

Amberley consulted his pocket watch. "Half past. We will give them another hour."

Both men wore heavy frieze coats and battered tricorner hats that Robin had acquired in his travels. Their eyes glittered through slits in black masks that covered the upper halves of their faces. Each carried a brace of loaded pistols.

The horses, dark and unremarkable, stamped their hooves and tossed their manes, snorting softly. Stroking his mount's neck, Robin said, "I trust you are not regretting your decision to come with me, Georges."

"I am regretting it -- have regretted it -- since the moment I made it! If you do not succeed, you will be dead and that will be a tragedy. If you do succeed, a young lady's life will be ruined and that, too, is a tragedy."

"You know, mon ami, you have turned damned moral on me. I was merely thinking of the cold, the discomforts of the saddle, and the long, tedious wait," Amberley said. Georges retreated into tight-lipped silence.

Time dragged. The moon rose and the forest was alive with rustling bushes and eerie cries.

A sudden discordant rumble drowned out nature's symphony and Robin drew his pistols. "Ils viennent, mon ami! Préparez!" He watched the moonlit road as a carriage edged slowly around a curve. "'Tis Saddewythe's coach! I recognize the crest!" he said. A second coach, piled dangerously high with baggage, lumbered after the first. He watched the carriages a little while longer, then glanced at Georges. "You hold the coachmen and staff at bay. I'll take care of the rest." His eyes returned to the road. "Now!" he commanded, spurring his horse forward.

Brandishing their pistols, the bandits thundered out of the forest onto the highway and the carriages lurched to a halt. Inside his coach, Saddewythe growled, "Devil take it! What is it this time?"

The highwaymen, meanwhile, had ordered the drivers from their perches and disarmed them, Menacing the coachmen with his guns, Robin suggested in thick Cockney heavily laced with thieves' cant that they mind the horses and their own business, lest their brains be splattered against a tree.

While Georges remained on his horse, his weapons trained on the coachmen, Amberley dismounted. In a harsh, almost unrecognizable voice, he called the passengers out of the carriages.

The Saddewythes alighted, Nigel seething with indignation and Winifred whimpering hysterically. At first sight of the robbers, Pamela fainted in her father's arms and he shook her gently to rouse her. She awoke, weeping and shivering.

Amberley walked over to her. "There now, me pretty. No need to cry. Only one thing I'll be wantin' from ye." He pulled Pamela into his arms and brought his mouth down on her trembling lips, kissing her thoroughly and waiting, hoping to feel the wild, sensual intoxication that had sent him reeling when he had held the governess. It did not come.

Lady Saddewythe's voice shrilled in his ear. "Oh, my God! Nigel! Do something!"

With a laugh almost of despair, Robin pushed Pamela into her father's arms. She fainted once again.

He glanced toward the other carriage and caught his breath in surprise. Bathed in moonlight, Lucia Cothcourt stood beside the coach, stalwart and serene in the midst of all the turmoil. The boys, their eyes wide, peered around her skirts; Arabella stood behind her, sobbing quietly; and Honor, wrapped in a worn cloak, lay in her arms.

Unable to resist his own impulses, Robin approached her. "Another pretty lady!" he said thickly, leering at her.

"Please, sir!" She endeavored to keep her voice steady. "The children are cold and the little one is sick. They have nothing you want. Could they not return to the carriage?"

He gave a quick nod. Lucia laid Honor in the coach, then helped the boys and Arabella inside. She would have followed them had Robin not grabbed her arm. "They go, but not you, my pretty." He stepped a little closer, his pulse pounding. "Not you!" With a groan, he pulled her to him, desperate to feel her in his arms. His mouth crushed hers hungrily, urgently, his tongue forcing her lips open to savor the warmth and softness of her mouth. His arms tightened around her and his kiss deepened as he suckled, in some small part, the hot, ravenous need for her that churned inside him.

She stirred in his embrace and his lips reluctantly left hers. "Your Grace!" she whispered, peering up at

him in bewildered amazement.

Robin glanced at Pamela who, having been revived a second time, was going into loud hysterics. He looked down at Lucia, still cradled in his arms, staring dumbfoundedly at him in the moonlight. From somewhere within the coach behind them, he heard Honor screaming for her Cothy.

"Giles be damned!" he muttered. He slipped one arm beneath Lucia's legs and scooped her up.

"No!" she screeched, beating him about the head with her small fists. She twisted and kicked and scratched at his face, tears streaming down her cheeks. "No! No! No! No!" When she tried to jab her fingers into his eyes, he shifted his burden so that he was carrying her, writhing and screaming, over one shoulder.

Georges held everyone else at bay while Robin, using a rope attached to his harness, tied her, struggling and sobbing, face down across his horse, then mounted behind her.

As the highwaymen disappeared into the forest with their prize, Honor wailed her grief, shrieking "Cothy! Cothy! Cothy!" again and again.

The gentlemen rode cross-country toward Brackenwell Hall, avoiding the main roads and the bright moonlight as much as possible. Lucia's futile pleas soon subsided into broken sobs.

Robin pulled his watch from an inner pocket. "Half past nine! We'll have to hurry."

"So 'tis to be la petite governess after all, mon ami," Georges grinned.

"She recognized me."

"Vraiment! I am not surprised, considering the ample opportunity you gave her to examine your features!"

"Meaning?"

"Only that I have never seen a man linger so long over a single kiss. I cannot credit it in an Englishman. Are you absolutely certain you are not French?"

Robin shrugged. "I enjoyed it! What good is all that money to me if I can't have what I want occasionally?"

"Et votre cousin?"

Amberley stared straight ahead, silent for a long while. "Giles be damned!" he repeated at last, urging his horse to greater speed.

"Mountheathe's opinion may no longer matter to you, but can you live with this deed? You insist upon ruining a lady!"

"I've committed worse," Robin said, adding as if Lucia were not present, "Miss Cothcourt has been an outcast most of her life. She'll have no trouble adjusting to it again. It's a great deal easier with money, mon ami, and we'll have no shortage of that. Besides, she'll have me."

"Certainement, she'll count you a blessing!"

"Even my company must be preferable to loneliness, Georges. N'est-ce pas, ma douce?" Amberley finally acknowledged his captive by slapping her derriere. When she cried out in a mixture of indignation and alarm, Robin laughed, spurring his horse toward Brackenwell Hall.

Chapter 6:

In Which His Grace Proposes Marriage Once More With Greater Success

When the abductors arrived at Brackenwell, Georges led the horses away while Robin freed Lucia from her bonds. Lifting her off his horse, he threw her over one shoulder and started toward the door.

"Please, Your Grace! Please! I promise I won't fight you! Let me walk!" Lucia's voice was muffled and breathless against his back. Her cap and pins lost in her struggles, her loose ebony tresses curled and cascaded wildly.

"très bien!" Robin shrugged. Hugging her tightly, his eyes darkening with desire, he slid her body against his as he lowered her to the ground and captured her wrist. He propelled her into the house, dragging her, pell-mell, through the entry hall and up the stairs. As they burst into the Green Salon, Mr. Gleason and Reverend Stanfield jumped to their feet.

"My bride, gentlemen!" Robin's eyes glinted as he shoved Lucia into the room. She fell against a table, the clatter thundering in the thick silence. The men wordlessly watched her struggle to her feet, her face flushed with humiliation and her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. Exhaustion crept over her like thick syrup and she craved sleep desperately after two grueling days without it.

"Mon Dieu, but I need a drink!" Robin said, striding over to a sideboard. He reached for a brandy decanter and filled a glass, emptying it in one swallow. Splashing more brandy into the goblet, he turned to face the room. "Abduction is thirsty work!"

Stanfield peered at Lucia in surprise. "But this is not Miss Pamela! 'Tis the Saddewythe's governess, is it not?"

Robin downed his brandy and shrugged himself out of his coat. "I changed my mind," was all he said. "Here is the special license. Now marry us! Quickly!"

"It's almost half past eleven, Your Grace," Mr. Gleason said. "It must, indeed, be quickly."

"It shall not be at all!" Despite her weariness, Lucia straightened and glared. "I declined to marry you once, Your Grace, and I must decline again. I find this entire escapade outrageous and insulting in the extreme. How dare you try to force me to the altar!"

"If the lady will not be wed, Your Grace -- " Stanfield shook his head.

"She'll wed me, never fear! Ready yourself to perform the ceremony." Grasping Lucia's wrist, Robin dragged her into the hall. "Well now, ma douce, if you are not to marry me, what do you propose to do?"

"We do not live in the Dark Ages, Your Grace! You cannot force me to wed you!"

"I can and I will," he said silkily. "Should it become known that you have been alone with me in my house, your reputation will be in shreds and, I can make quite certain the world hears all about our 'liaison'. You won't be able to find a respectable position in any household in England. The on dit should reach the Continent, as it most assuredly will." Shrugging, Robin grinned, pulling her roughly into his arms. He ran his hands down her body to her hips, his groin pressing against her as his eyes darkened with lust. "I intend to bed you with or without the church's blessing, ma belle. Refuse to say your vows and I will take you anyway, casting you out like so much filth when I have finished with you. After that, you will have but two choices; life as an adventuress or as a strumpet. There really isn't much difference between them, n'est- ce pas?"

Her shocked blue eyes met his, full of contemptuous amusement at her dilemma. She studied his face, searching for some sign of relent. "You are serious!" she cried at last, stunned.

"I want you, Lucia Cothcourt," he murmured against her ear, his brandy-laden breath warm and heavy as his lips caressed her temple. His hands splayed across her rear and ground her body against his, forcing her to feel his hardening desire. "You have fired my blood and I am determined to have you, one way or another. Will you be my bride or bear my bastard? The decision is yours, but you had better make it quickly, lest I take you right here in the corridor."

Pressing her hands against his chest to force some distance between them, Lucia turned her face away from his wanton leer, her blush deepening from coral to rose. Unbidden, all her unhappy memories, all those years of hunger and cold, of loneliness and fear, flooded into her mind. She had tasted so briefly, so delightedly, of comfort and security. The thought of returning to her old life filled her with horror and

revulsion.

"I am waiting," Robin said, nuzzling her ear as his hands caressed her through her thin dress. "Bride or bastard?"

"B-bride," she murmured, closing her eyes against his lascivious gaze and bold hands. Her stomach knotted in an ache familiar to her from childhood; an unerring warning of impending disaster.

"I thought as much," he said, sneering. "Come along, then, and let us be done with the formalities. Mon Dieu, but I'm ready for the wedding night!" He pulled her back into the salon. "We are agreed! Marry us!" he commanded the vicar.

"I cannot perform the ceremony until the marquis is here, Your Grace. Mr. Gleason informs me that your grandfather's will stipulates two witnesses," Stanfield said, praying that even a slight delay might somehow bring this insanity to a halt.

Gleason cleared his throat. "That is correct."

Lynkellyn whirled toward the door, scowling. His face smoothed as de Valière entered the room. "At last! Georges, it's time for the ceremony!"

Facing the vicar, Robin grabbed Lucia's arm and jerked her to his side. His fingers bruising her skin, he held her fast beside him and nodded to Reverend Stanfield. "You may begin."

The vicar smiled sympathetically at the pale and exhausted bride. "What is your Christian name, Miss Cothcourt?"

"Lucia." She spoke in stricken tones. "Lucia Danielle Elise."

"The ceremony, Stanfield!" Lynkellyn urged him sharply.

"Yes! Yes! Very well!" The churchman plunged into the wedding rites. When the time came for Lucia to pledge her vows, she hesitated, wanting to run from this nightmare as far and as fast as possible. The duke's hand tightened painfully on her wrist. Terrified and pleading, her eyes met his, but the smoldering menace in his glare compelled the words from her lips.

After she stumbled through her vows, Robin pledged his devotion in a crisp, detached voice. He slipped a heavy gold ring on her finger and she curled her hand to keep it from falling off as Reverend Stanfield said, "I now pronounce you man and wife."

The full significance of the vicar's declaration struck Lucia like a sword's blow. 'Married!' she thought. 'I

am married! And to such a man! A cruel, terrifying, heartless villain!" She stood frozen with sick horror as his brandied lips brushed hers.

"What is the time?" Robin called.

"A quarter until midnight, Your Grace," Gleason said. "You have met the dictates of the will with fifteen minutes to spare. I have a few documents that require signatures." He began to pass papers around.

After signing Gleason's documents, Stanfield bowed and left, in a hurry, as he witheringly informed his host, to wipe the night's disgraceful work from his memory. Announcing his departure for London the next morning, Gleason gathered his papers and retired.

"We did it, mon ami!" Robin exulted, thumping de Valière's back.

"What happens next, Robin?" Georges inquired, grinning.

"We, too, shall leave for London tomorrow. Her Grace and I shall open the ducal house in Berkeley Square. As befits our consequence, tu comprend." He bowed with mock solemnity, his eyes laughing. "Tonight, however, I intend to dally with my bride." He glanced toward the middle of the room where his new duchess still stood, looking dazed and exhausted.

"I don't think she is fit for anything but sleep tonight, Robin," Georges said.

"A little brandy will revive her! A bit of Dutch courage to help her face her marriage bed, héin?" Brushing past de Valière, Robin collected the brandy decanter from the sideboard and grabbed Lucia's arm. With a bawdy jest, he bid the marquis good night and dragged his scarlet faced bride out of the room, her small wrist crushed in his powerful hand as he tumbled her after him like a rag doll.

Robin swept down the hall and took the stairs at a spanking clip, his stride lengthening as he crossed the dark corridor on the second floor. Flinging open an ornate oaken door, he swung Lucia into his arms and carried her across the threshold.

With one arm firmly around her waist, Robin set her on her feet. Kicking the door closed with his heel, he emptied his brandy decanter with one healthy swig and pulled his bride close, crushing her lips beneath his. He raised his head to look down at her, a haunted, hungry passion burning in his eyes as he tightened his embrace. "Mon Dieu! I have waited so very long!" he whispered raggedly.

Tossing the decanter onto the carpeted floor, he lifted her again, carried her to the bed, and dropped her unceremoniously onto the ivory sheets. "Off with your clothes, ma chérie! I've not much patience left," he urged as he doffed his coat.

Lucia took a deep breath and sat up. "Your Grace, I implore you..."

"Robin! Je m'appelle Robin!" He threw himself into a chair to tug at his boots.

"Robin," Lucia conceded as she rose from the bed. "This is surely some jest! You didn't want to marry me! You don't even know me! You have had your amusement. Now, please, please let me go!"

"The wedding ceremony was legitimate, ma chérie. I am your husband. I have won the right to bed you and I intend to enjoy it." Robin tossed his boots aside.

"No!" Lucia backed away from him. "I refuse to come to your bed, Your Grace, merely because some words on a sheet of paper give you dominion over me."

Lynkellyn rose, his stockinged feet quiet on the Turkey carpet. In one stride, he was at her side. "Willful, are you? Have a care, ma vie. I've been gentle with you so far, but I'm not averse to using force to achieve my ends."

Lucia stared at him. "Gentle? Gentle! Abducting me, slinging me over your shoulder, tying me face down to a horse, and -- and spanking me is what you consider gentle? Violence and force are all you know, Your Grace!"

Robin grinned wolfishly. "I kissed you first, héin? That should be courtship enough for any spinster 'of four and twenty with no future'! And I saved you from a fate worse than death! A governess! C'est ridicule!"

Lucia's chin rose. "I did not require rescue! I am not a child! I can make my own decisions."

"And damnably stupid ones they've been, too! You turned down a ducal title, tates and fortunes worth a hundred thousand pounds and more, all so you could enjoy the enticing prospect of fading away in some musty schoolroom! C'est une acte démentiel!" Robin threw up incredulous hands. "très bien! Since you know no better than to whistle a fortune into the wind, I have taken charge of your affairs. You are my wife and I insist upon my conjugal rights."

"I shall not grant them, Your Grace." Her head high, she turned her back to him. "Please show me to another bedchamber. I am extremely weary."

"I can make you yield, Lucia." Robin's voice was deceptively soft as he stood behind her. "Do you remember the kiss we shared at Saddewythe Manor? I gave you a small sample of my strength then. Shall you have another?" His left arm banded her waist, holding her hard against him, while the long, white fingers of his right hand curled around her throat and slowly began to tighten. Lucia gasped for breath, her eyes widening in pain. Her arms flailed wildly and silent tears streaked down her face.

"Have I your compliance, ma douce?" Robin's breath was hot against her ear as he loosened his grip so she could answer.

Lucia dragged air into her lungs with a rusty, rasping gasp that ended in a fit of coughing. "Very well, Your Grace," she panted. "I -- I will bow to your wishes, but you are a coward and a bully, sir, to treat me so."

Robin shrugged, flinging himself into an overstuffed chair. "As your husband, I have won the right to use you as I see fit. Now, off with your clothes and let us go to bed. I'm growing impatient."

Beneath Amberley's malevolent regard, Lucia's trembling fingers worked at buttons, laces, and fastenings, her eyes smoldering. She turned away, unwilling to face him as she unlaced her gown. "You've stolen, not won, any rights you have over me, Your Grace! You may have my body, sirrah, but nothing else. Nothing save my hatred and contempt."

His eyes devoured her as her gown slumped off her shoulders. He removed his shirt and breeches. Muscles rippled through his lean, scarred frame and his gleaming auburn hair, freed of its riband, curled rampantly about his broad shoulders.

Lucia's stays and petticoats slid to the floor, leaving only her white chemise. She glanced at him, then turned her burning face away.

"Have you never seen a nude man before, ma chérie? I should have thought, considering your past..."

"That I was a slut, sir?" she interrupted, still looking away, her hands clenched. "My mother raised me to be modest, Your Grace. Indeed, I spent most of my life in breeches to avoid men like you. Perhaps I may know more about -- life -- than most unmarried women, but I've never -- actually -- been with a -- a man -- before." Her words trailed away into an embarrassed whisper as she lowered her eyes.

"Well, well," Robin sneered, spinning her around to face him. "A virgin bride! Faith, 'tis more than I expected. Off with your chemise, then, and we shall rectify any omissions in your education!" Deftly lifting her chemise over her head, he stared, thunderstruck, at the white cloth that encircled her body. "What the devil?"

"My-my bindings, Your Grace." Lucia blushed again, futilely trying to hide her nakedness behind her slim white hands.

"Robin!" Lynkellyn corrected her distractedly. "I don't understand..."

"When I confine my bosom beneath these bandages, fewer men -- notice me and I stand less chance of losing my situation."

"So this is of a piece with those ridiculous damned caps!" Robin fumed. He went over to his riding boots and drew a dagger from a hidden sheath in one of them.

She gasped when she saw the blade, glinting in the firelight. She had agreed to his demands! Was he going to murder her anyway? Her stomach twisted like a gale-tossed bridge and her knees almost buckled as he strode toward her with the knife.

Sliding the sharp blade beneath her bindings, he sliced through them. "There will be no more caps and no more bandages! Mon Dieu! You are a very lovely woman. You should never hide that!"

As the cloth fell away, her breasts blossomed, unexpectedly ripe and full. Roaming over every sweet curve and enticing shadow her bare body offered, his eyes darkened with desire. He tilted her face to his, smiling. "I am not such an ogre if you please me, Lucia. Obey me and we shall deal well together." She jerked her head away from his fingers and his smile vanished.

Dropping his dagger, he cradled her face in his hands and coerced a thorough kiss from her reluctant lips, tumbling her back on the bed. His mouth trailed down the gentle curve of her neck, his eager fingers stroking her satin skin. Powerless, she closed her eyes against his caresses, terrified that if she did not obey him, he might injure her, or worse.

She had heard that losing one's virtue was painful. She hoped the duke would be gentle with her, but since he had treated her ruthlessly almost from their first meeting, she had little reason to expect anything but coarseness and brutality on her wedding night.

She swallowed hard on this new fear, then her eyes flew open. Suppose she liked it! She had met women who could not survive without a man to warm their beds. Such an addiction would be disastrous for her. Her own body's treachery would be the most powerful weapon in His Grace's arsenal. She must remain calm and detached. Let him touch her body, but never her soul!

His lips and tongue flicked over her breasts, pausing to tease her hardening nipples, as his hand slid down to stroke the sensitive place between her thighs. She closed her eyes again, struggling to remain passive and remote, forcing her mind elsewhere, but his touches were relentless, dragging her back again and again to contemplate the sweet, unwelcome fire that started to leap within her at his coaxing. Of its own volition, her body trembled and writhed and arched, basking in his wanton caress.

The last shreds of her detachment were wispy memories as she instinctively pushed herself against his agitating hand, his tongue dancing with hers in a frenzied, primeval kiss. She ached with a deep, savage hunger, craving something even stronger and more soul-shaking than the spiraling torrent of pleasure his churning hand provoked inside her.

His tongue replaced his fingers, its hot, tormenting caress sending wave upon wave of mindless, wanton pleasure crashing through her. It engulfed her; it ruled her; it enslaved her!

As if from far away, she could hear her own soft, whimpering moans, her own panting gasps; could feel the cool bedclothes crushed in her clenched fists. Quivering, she pressed herself against his mouth, seeking, demanding more, but he ceased tonguing her to drape his trembling body over hers. "Ma chérie! I want you so much! Give yourself to me!" he whispered.

He plunged his tongue into her mouth and she met him hungrily, relishing the blazing heat of his kiss. She tasted her own juices on his lips and the musky flavor only drove her deeper into lascivious intoxication.

His hand caressed her breast then stroked the inside of her thigh. She parted her legs for him, eager to feel the pleasure again. He slowly, gently entered her. Arching her hips to meet him, she moaned softly, wanting whatever was to come next; wanting the pleasure.

Suddenly she felt a twinge of pain and stiffened. Pressing her shoulders into the bed, he drew back and thrust harder into her once -- twice -- thrice. At the unexpected agony, she screamed, bucking her hips to throw him off as she thrashed wildly at his head and body. Tears streamed from beneath her tightly closed eyelids. He gripped her wrists above her head as she writhed beneath him, weeping and begging him to let her go. His mouth smothered hers, hushing her.

Throbbing inside her, he rested a moment, listening to her sobs. He buried his face in her dark, rose scented tresses, guilt warring with desire. But the damage was done, he thought; she was his and he would not deny himself his hard-won enjoyment.

His lips caressing her ear, he whispered hollow words of love as he pulled out and thrust slowly into her again. She whimpered, struggling a little beneath him, as he shoved harder; and again; and again, growing hotter and stiffer and more frenzied with every sweet stroke into her.

Plunging faster, he was soon mindless of all save his own driving need, save the feral, unbridled pleasure burning through him, blazing ever higher, ever more savage, ever more compelling until it exploded in his soul and mind and body. "Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!" he gasped, forcing himself deeply into her as he poured out his essence. He collapsed atop her, covering her tear- streaked face with kisses.

Cradling and caressing Lucia as she shook with silent sobs, Robin slowly regained his senses. When at last he rolled off her, she turned on her side, her back to him, and brought her knees to her chest protectively.

Rising, he crossed the room and took two dressing gowns from a large wardrobe against the wall. Laying one on the bed, he donned the other and moved to a washstand to cleanse himself, staining the water red with the aftermath of Lucia's violation.

Filling two glasses with brandy, he downed one glass immediately and refilled it. He took the other to

Lucia's side of the bed and sat beside her. "Drink this, ma chérie. You'll feel better," he promised, smiling.

She sat up, clutching the bedclothes to her chin with a furious blush, her eyes lowering shyly when they met his. Accepting the brandy without a word, she took several sips. "Thank you," she said with fragile dignity.

Robin reached out to stroke an errant ebony curl and she cringed as he drew near. He dropped his hand abruptly and rose from the bed. "Here is something for you to wear." He waved his hand toward the second dressing gown. "It's a bit large, but it's warm. There is a pitcher and basin in the corner should you wish to cleanse yourself."

He sat on the sofa, sipping his brandy and glowering into the fire as unaccustomed guilt overwhelmed him. Lucia had flinched at his touch, he thought. And why should she not? He had offended her in every possible way! Had practically raped her not twenty minutes ago! And now, perversely, he wanted her to become his friend. Sneering at such a sentimental impossibility, he drained his goblet of brandy and refilled it.

Her mind leaden with fatigue and her present situation nightmarishly unreal, Lucia rose slowly. She ached with the bruises and scrapes suffered during her humiliating ride to Brackenwell Hall and the duke's assault had left her shaken in body and soul.

She donned Robin's robe and was almost lost in its voluminous folds. At the washstand, she soothed her agony of flesh and spirit in a basin of cool water, then tied the robe securely around her. Picking up the dragging hem, she started toward the bed, hoping that at last she might be allowed to sleep.

"Come sit by the fire with me." Amberley's invitation was a cold command.

"Your Grace, please! I am very tired and..."

"My name is Robin!" He turned icy grey eyes upon her.

Lucia bristled, but she knew she had to keep her temper and tongue in check with this dangerous, omnipotent man. Reluctantly approaching the sofa, she sat down at the far end, putting as much distance between Amberley and herself as possible.

"I trust you are somewhat recovered?" Robin asked, moving the length of the couch to close the gap between them.

"Yes, thank you, Your G -- Robin."

"Bon." He poured two glasses of brandy and tried to give one to her, but she shook her head, glancing at

the first one, still on the night table, purposely unfinished. She dare not let spirits dull her wits in his presence.

"Take it!" he insisted, thrusting the goblet into her hands. "I detest drinking alone! Mon Dieu, but I've done enough of it!"

He gently touched her shoulder where a large, round, white scar showed at the open neckline of her robe. "Tell me about this," he said, smiling as her eyes widened with surprise. "Oui, ma chérie, I noticed all the scars," he said. "On your shoulder! On your back! Even over your heart! Badges of survival that speak eloquently of your life's battles."

Lucia stared down at her hands. "My scars do me no credit. They are but shameful reminders of my disgrace."

"'Tis your family that has disgraced itself, ma chérie! Abandoning an innocent child to starvation and the streets! Forcing her to beg and steal and cheat to live! Subjecting her to all the horrors of -- " Halting in the middle of his tirade, Robin flushed slightly. "Just thinking of your situation makes me furious, Lucia. You have no reason to be ashamed."

He sipped his brandy and stared darkly into the fire. After a moment, he said, "I would like to know you better. Après tout, we are destined to be in each other's company constantly for at least a year. Won't you tell me about these -- er -- souvenirs of your adventures?"

"I received the shoulder scar from a pistol ball. I held up a coach and -- it went badly." Her face was grim with the memory. Glancing furtively at Robin, she was relieved to see no spark of insight in his eyes. "As for my back, the weals were punishment for an orange I stole when I was ten years old. Papa had gone off to find a card game. Maman was ill and we were both starving. After begging futilely in the streets of Barcelona for an entire day, I stole some fruit. The shopkeeper caught me and I received thirty lashes as a thief." Lucia stared bleakly into the hissing fire.

"And the heart-wound?"

"'Twas a duel of swords on my twentieth birthday! It had rained the night before and just as my opponent's blade found my heart, he lost his footing in the mud. He fell backward and his sword only scratched me. If he had fallen forward instead -- " She shuddered, drawing the dressing gown closer around her. "After so many brushes with death, I wrote to my relatives, begging for a little charity. I was so. -- so tired of the world and the way it is that the sheltered life of a poor relation or governess seemed infinitely preferable."

"And has it been?" Robin tossed off his brandy and refilled the glass.

"It has had its own humiliations," she admitted, "but nothing to compare with staggering, alone and

bleeding, down a dusty road with a pistol ball in your shoulder." Suddenly her voice surged with bitterness. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears and, her glass trembling, she gulped down half a goblet of brandy all at once. "I shall never go back to that life! Never!"

Robin tilted her face up to his. "You need only to obey me in all things, *ma chérie*, and your security will be assured. If you choose another course, however, you may find yourself leading the very life you wish to avoid."

In contrast to his threatening words, his lips brushed hers with a playful caress, then his kiss deepened, his tongue plundering her mouth as his passion rekindled. "And now, let us go to bed, my pretty duchess," he murmured in her ear. "I intend to be an expectant father by sunrise."

When Robin joined Georges in the breakfast room the next morning, he was immaculate in a full-skirted velvet coat, its color matching the copper of his unpowdered hair. These tresses, carefully coiffed, were caught in a black silk riband at the nape of his neck. Ebony lace foamed at his throat and wrists and a quizzing glass hung around his neck on a black solitaire.

Partaking heartily of the English fare he claimed to despise, Georges smiled a welcome. Robin surveyed his friend's heaping plate through his quizzing glass. "Do you propose to eat me out of house and home, Georges?"

The marquis grinned. "Hardly, *mon ami*! The fortune you secured for yourself last night would make such a feat impossible."

Robin laughed. Waving away the footman who approached to serve him, he filled a plate from a large selection of food laid out on the sideboard and sat down beside de Valière at the breakfast table. Amused, Georges flicked the dark froth at Robin's wrist with his fingers. "Black lace! *très joli*! Rather arresting, *en effet*!"

"*Merci*. It pleases me." Robin bit into a scone.

Georges watched the solitary footman bow and leave the room. Then, leaning closer, he asked, "And did the governess, pardon, the duchess please you as well?"

Robin looked up from his plate in surprise. "Georges! That is an unseemly question to ask a man after his wedding night!" The Frenchman arched an eyebrow and waited patiently for an answer. "*très bien*!" Robin grinned, relenting a bit. "If you must know everything, *mon ami*, she did please me, very much. There is a wealth of passion in that woman and I intend to savor every golden drop of it in the fullness of time."

"But you won't have time, Robin. You will have only one year, during most of which, avec un coup de chance, she will be enceinte. You will not want to jeopardize the babe and thus lose your legacy, will you? And after the child is born, you promised her, amongst a great many foolish things, her freedom."

Robin's smile was charmingly wicked. "So I did," he conceded, "but that was before, when she could have accepted my proposal willingly. I married her under my rules and I'm not going to let her go until I grow weary of her."

"You did not satisfy your appetite last night, then?"

"She is addictive, mon ami, like opium! The more I sate my desire for her, the more I want her. I made love to her until dawn, until I was exhausted, Georges, but when I awoke this morning, I wanted her more than I did last night! She was sleeping so peacefully after yesterday's adventures, though, that I had not the heart to wake her. Besides," he laid down his fork to massage his temples, "I've the devil's own head this morning."

Georges sipped his tea and smiled. "A legacy of last night's brandy, hors de doute. You were pouring it down your throat as if you thought the stuff would disappear forever with the dawn."

"I was trying not to think about what I was doing, Georges. Until yesterday, I sincerely believed that I had killed my conscience, but it has risen from its grave to haunt me over this business."

"Your conscience does not seem to have influenced you to a significant degree, mon ami. You have a king's ransom at your disposal this morning and your stolen bride lies upstairs asleep, exhausted, naturellement, by your ardor."

Robin savagely stabbed a hapless sausage with his fork. "That wench is dangerous!" he said. "It would be too damnably easy to fall under her spell. I should have taken the Saddewythe chit last night. I must have been drunk, or mad! Why didn't you stop me, Georges?"

De Valière smiled and mumbled something unintelligible into his teacup.

Invading her darkened bedchamber through slightly parted curtains, a mischievous ray of sunshine danced across Lucia's face. She opened her eyes warily, then closed them tight against the blinding light, her head aching from all the brandy Robin had pressed upon her. Still exhausted, she was extremely sore in flesh and spirit. He had taken her again and again throughout the night until, his desire finally sated, he had fallen asleep, his body curled around hers, back to belly, his arms encircling her like iron bands, binding her to him lest she try to escape while he slept.

As the painful and humiliating memories of the night before flooded into her mind, she blushed, burying

her face in her pillow. At the same time, the thought of her husband's touch caused her to shiver with a newly awakened sensuality. Ashamed of her body's treachery, she rolled onto her back and opened her eyes, determined to face the day. When she realized that she was alone in the bed and Robin was no longer holding her, she shrugged off a vague sense of disappointment.

A knock sounded at the door and Lucia pulled the covers to her chin before bidding the visitor enter. A young woman came in, curtsied, and said, "Good morning, Your Grace. My name is Anne Forster and His Grace said as how I was to be Your Grace's personal maid." She curtsied again and advanced into the room. "His Grace requests that you join him for breakfast as soon as possible. We are to leave for London in an hour."

"London? In an hour?" Lucia's eyes widened as she rose, throwing Robin's dressing robe around her. "What time is it?"

"Almost gone eleven, Your Grace," Anne said.

Half an hour later, having followed Carter to the breakfast room, Lucia smiled at the gentlemen who stood to greet her as she entered. She wore the same torn, soiled, grey dress she had worn the night before and the bodice strained against her breasts, now free of their bindings, but it was the only garment she possessed. Anne had braided and curled her hair into an intricate pattern, giving her a regal air despite her ragged gown.

"We are honored that you have finally deigned to join us, Your Grace," Robin sneered. "Already you have the manner of a duchess, lying abed all day."

"I apologize, Your -- " Noting the grim set of his mouth, she hastily amended, "Robin. 'Tis only that I got no sleep the night before last with Miss Honor and last night -- " She blushed.

"Miss Honor?" Robin raised a brow.

"She has the earache. Indeed, the children and I would never have been part of that dreadful remove to London if Lady Saddewythe had not insisted that Honor must have a mother's care during her illness."

Georges filled a plate for Lucia as she sat down at the table. "You must hurry!" Robin said. "I want to leave as soon as possible."

"Since I have only the clothes on my back, Your Grace, I shall delay you no longer than it takes to eat my breakfast." Lucia smiled at Georges as he set the food before her.

Unaccountably irritated by that smile, Robin turned to gaze out the window at Brackenwell's rolling green lawns. "It looks a fine day for traveling. We should arrive in London around dusk if we leave soon. I had better see to the final preparations for the journey." With a curt nod to his companions, he

strode out of the room.

Drinking his tea, Georges watched Lucia fascinatedly while she ate. After encountering his gaze for the third time, she lowered her fork and lifted one dark brow. "Is something amiss, my lord?"

"How can you sit there, eating so calmly after -- after last night? You should be hystérique!"

"The duke does terrify me, my lord," Lucia said, "but hysterics will not save me from him." Fear knotted her stomach and her appetite deserted her as she contemplated the powderkeg that was her husband. Pushing her plate away, she rose and walked to the window, clasping her hands. "It looks a bit windy outside. I hope it isn't too cold. Since Honor was wrapped in my cloak, it was left behind when -- "

Her words trailed away as she thought of her modest belongings, worthless to others perhaps, but everything to her. All her treasures, all the precious mementos of her family were lost. Suddenly her soul ached with loneliness.

Georges cleared his throat. Awakened from her reverie, she turned bleak, blue eyes on him.

"I -- I should like to apologize for my part in last night's unfortunate adventure," he said. "It did not appeal to me, then, and already I am full of remorse over the entire sad affair."

"Then why did you do it?"

"Je ne sais pas, Your Grace. Perhaps because Robin needs my friendship. He really is very alone, vous comprenez, and he has un charme diabolique when he chooses to use it."

Carter entered and the pair turned. "His Grace requests that Your Grace and your lordship join him in the courtyard."

"Voyons! Does the man never rest?" Georges cried, exasperated. "très bien! We are coming!" Collecting his redingote, hat, and gloves from a footman, de Valière escorted Lucia outside to join the impatient duke.

Chapter 7:

In Which His Grace Renews Old Acquaintances

As Lucia and Georges descended the stairs, the carriage arrived at the door. The packed baggage coach followed, surrounded by mounted guards. Cloaked and gloved, his tricorne tucked beneath his arm, Amberley stood in the courtyard waving a riding whip as he barked commands.

"There you are at last!" Robin said, striding toward them. "How will you travel, Georges?"

"I'll ride, s'il vous plaît, but first I would like to check my room for anything forgotten. Pardonnez moi?" Georges bowed and returned to the house.

Amberley ordered two riding mounts and glanced at Lucia as several grooms headed toward the stables. "You have eaten?" he asked, a cold breeze ruffling his red-gold curls.

Lucia nodded, hugging herself for warmth as the chill wind hit her unprotected arms. He beckoned a footman who stood in the doorway. "You will find a black driving cape hanging in my wardrobe. Bring it, s'il vous plaît!" The servant bowed and left.

Silence fell between the newlyweds. At last, Lucia said, "London will be most unpleasant for me, I fear. My family does not own me."

Robin frowned. "It won't be particularly enjoyable for me either, but my cousin Giles will want to see you and satisfy himself that I have complied with Grandpapa's will. Beware! Giles Bridland, Baron Mountheathe, is a scoundrel. He may try to destroy me through you. Never trust him."

"I gather that Lord Mountheathe will inherit if you do not fulfill your grandfather's wishes."

"Yes!" Robin's grip tightened on his riding whip. "But that is not going to happen. When our child is born, Mountheathe may go to the devil with my blessing!" Robin's teeth clenched, his eyes blazing with raw, rampant hatred.

De Valière strode out of the house. "'Just as I suspected, mon ami! My valet neglected to pack my favorite snuffbox. I really must speak to the man. The quality of his services has fallen lamentably since we came to this wretched country. English servants are a bad influence, mon vieux! A bad influence!"

A footman appeared with a black cape laid across his arms. Robin placed the cloak around Lucia's shoulders. "I would not have my hundred thousand pounds per annum catching a chill," he sneered, their moment of rapport forgotten.

"Nevertheless, I am grateful, Robin." She pulled the cloak close about her and fastened it at her throat.

Lynkellyn handed Lucia and her maid into the traveling carriage. The gentlemen mounted and the ducal entourage rolled out of the courtyard.

At noon, the Lynkellyn party stopped at an inn for food and fresh horses. Accepting Robin's arm, Lucia descended from the carriage. "Where are we?" she inquired, blinking in the sunlight.

"About to enter Epping Forest. Come! I have bespoken a private parlor and a meal. Once we enter the forest, we shall stop for nothing. The risk of meeting a highwayman, even during daylight, is too great," Robin said in all sincerity, his brow creased in a worried frown. Smiling at the irony of his words, Lucia allowed him to escort her into the inn.

The travelers made little conversation during luncheon and that of a very general nature. The marquis was still embarrassed by last night's episode and his part in it while Robin was enduring emotions he thought he had exorcised from his soul long ago.

Guilt and remorse stabbed his heart every time he looked at Lucia. Part of him wanted to say that the entire episode was a joke and that she could return to her quiet, respectable life, but the former was untrue and the latter no longer existed. Marriage with him was her only honorable course in any event. After her scandalous abduction, no proper matron would consider hiring her as governess, companion, or even scullery maid.

Lucia sat across from him, sipping her tea, a sweetmeat in one hand. When she sensed his eyes upon her, she looked up. "Your Grace?"

"Nothing!" he muttered, tearing his gaze away. He had noticed that she was still wearing the ragged, stained, ill-fitting dress she had donned the day before. That, at least, he could rectify. She would have a whole room full of beautiful gowns when they reached London, he promised himself. Unwilling to be bribed, his conscience would not hold its tongue.

Lucia still watched him, worried that she had displeased him in some way. He was unlikely to do her any serious physical injury because he needed her to help him gain his legacy, but she was certain that life with him could be hellish if he chose to make it so. Fear tightened her chest as she thought how powerfully and completely this blackguard ruled her future.

Robin caught a glimpse of terror in her eyes before she lowered them to her teacup. He moved to stand behind her, one hand resting possessively on her shoulder. She stiffened, but he pretended not to notice. His long, graceful fingers caressed her throat as he said, "We must leave soon. As it is, we won't reach London until after dark and we'll still have to find an inn for the night."

"We're not staying at Lynkellyn House?" Georges asked, surprised.

"I don't believe Lynkellyn House has been opened since my parents died twenty years ago," Robin said. "I daresay the place is nearly unlivable now. 'Twill be your task, ma chérie, to restore our home to its former glory."

At sunset, Lynkellyn's coaches and outriders swept into the courtyard of the Pelican in London. The innkeeper was all obsequiousness as their graces stepped through his door and his wife hurried forward, curtsying deeply, to offer the duchess a room in which to rest and refresh before dinner. When she saw

Lucia's ragged gown, her enthusiasm checked a little, but another glance at the gentlemen's finery reassured her.

Lucia started to follow the innkeeper's wife upstairs, but Robin pulled her aside. "You'll not run away?" he said in rapid French.

"Where could I go, Your Grace, without money or friends?" she replied in the same language, her gaze meeting his steadily.

"Nevertheless, if you try to escape me, I will hunt you down and drag you back in chains, my lady wife!" Still gripping her arm, Robin searched her eyes for any intention of betrayal. "très bien! Pray join us in our parlor when you are done." After Lucia disappeared with the innkeeper's wife, Robin went to the taproom to join the marquis.

Scanning the room, his eyes widened, lingering for a moment upon two men huddled over a table against the far wall. With a slight shrug, he strode over to de Valière's table, took a chair and called for ale. "Lucia is upstairs resting from the journey, if she hasn't already bolted out the back door," he said, nodding to Georges, his face grim with worry. He barely acknowledged the barmaid who served him, but took a healthy draught of the ale.

"Robin! You cannot cage her forever! Especially once you settle into your new life in London. You'll have to give her some freedom or people will think you are mad, héin? You will have to trust her."

Amberley laughed. "She is hardly here of her own free will, mon ami. She is my prisoner, enfin. Were I in her place, I would run the instant I saw my chance."

"Where would she go? I doubt she knows London well enough to hide in the city, at least, not safely," de Valière countered.

"She said as much, but I never underestimate my enemies, Georges, no matter how strong my position seems." He took another swig of ale.

"Ah, there is where we differ, mon ami. You have always approached her as if she were an adversary; a citadel to be stormed and taken by force."

"What would you suggest?"

"Use that devilish charm of yours, Robin! I've known you to steal a lady's heart in the space of an afternoon. Beguile your bride with gentle smiles and pretty words! Seduce rather than force her to your will and she'll do anything you ask!"

Robin stared at him with narrowed eyes. "She has seen me at my worst, Georges! You can't possibly

believe she'd trust any lover's overtures from me after yesterday."

"Once I accidentally killed a man when he stepped out in front of my carriage during a race. When I called on the man's family to apologize and met his sister, I found her enchanting! I immediately set out to seduce her. She spat in my face the first time I tried to kiss her, but I persisted. I fêted her, petted her, and treated her like a great lady. Within a month, she was my mistress! Charm won the day, mon ami!"

"And then?" Robin quirked a brow.

"She was only a bourgeoisie," Georges shrugged. "I tired of her. The conquest was exciting, but once she was mine, I found her clinging ways and her family's animosity tedious."

"And after you cut the connection?"

"Je ne sais pas. Suicide, I think."

"And you were outraged at my behavior?"

"But, Robin! 'Tis not the same at all. My girl was only a bourgeoisie! You committed a crime against a lady!" Shaking his head, Robin leaned forward, tankard in hand, to debate the point in earnest.

At a table on the other side of the room, the gentlemen who had momentarily captured Robin's attention sat talking. "When are you expecting Lady Malkent to arrive, Tracy?" Sir William Blayne asked.

"Soon, I hope," Malkent sighed. "The children are ill, mumps, of all things, and she wants to see that they are comfortable at Malkent Park with Nurse before she comes up to London for the Season."

"I would have thought that you would open your house in Grosvenor Square."

"I've become too dependent on Valeria, Will. I would rather stay at an inn than face the house without her."

"You are the most devoted husband I know, Tracy. Careful or you will bring married love back into fashion. 'Tis especially remarkable, considering -- " Blayne paused, suddenly embarrassed.

"Considering the inauspicious beginning of my marriage? Well, I was ready to put my sword through Amberley's foul heart at the time and I would have, too, if the blackguard had not fled the country in disgrace. 'Twas wicked enough to abduct Valeria in the first place, but to lie about it over and over afterward, trying to fix the blame on poor Giles! I never met such a cowardly cur as was Rogue Robin."

"I've heard rumors he's returned home to assume his title and legacy." Sir William sipped ale from a

tankard at his elbow.

"That money won't last! The fellow always was a wastrel." Malkent snorted "Why? Has someone seen him in England?"

"Nigel Saddewythe." Blayne took another swig of ale. "The man arrived in London yesterday night, livid with rage. Seems his coach had been held up in Epping Forest."

"And so?" Malkent lifted a brow.

"The highwaymen didn't take anything of value, but one of them forced his attentions on Pamela Saddewythe, then abducted the children's governess. 'Tis rather comical, really. Ignoring Saddewythe's purse, but stealing his governess? Most original."

"Yes. It is odd, but what does it have to do with Amberley?" Sudden laughter floated across the taproom. Malkent looked up, then stiffened.

"Well, it seems the Rogue had the effrontery to offer for Miss Saddewythe. Nigel refused him, of course. Saddewythe said Amberley was in a hurry to marry and thinks, though he has no proof, you understand, that the duke was one of the highwaymen. What Nigel doesn't fathom, if it was the Rogue, is why he took the wrong girl."

Malkent had gone pale. "Speak of the devil! Rogue Robin is sitting right over there as shameless as you please. Damn his impudence!"

Blayne's gaze followed Tracy's and he raised a quizzing glass to his eye. "Looks like a damned Frenchman! Acts like one, too!" he said, noting Amberley's expansive gestures and quick smiles.

"Probably decked himself out with the money Giles should have had," Malkent said.

"Who is that with him?"

"The Marquis de Valière. I met him in Paris a couple of months ago. I saw the Rogue there as well, riding brazenly through the Bois de Boulogne." Tracy's lips thinned to an angry line. "Georges de Couvrelle belongs to one of the finest families in France. A likable fellow! I cannot imagine how he comes to know Rogue Robin."

Across the room, Lynkellyn was still shaking his coppery head. "I cannot disagree with you more, mon ami. We are talking about people here, not possessions. I've lived among the lower orders and..." Through the open taproom door, Robin saw the duchess descend the stairs. "There is Lucia! Shall we retire to supper, mon vieux?"

As Malkent and Blayne watched the ducal party's departure, Sir William turned to the earl. "May we surmise that the lady on the staircase is the Saddewythe's governess?"

Conversation over supper in the duke's private parlor was livelier than it had been during luncheon. No longer pressured to secure his legacy, Robin was relaxed and disposed to talk. He told Lucia and Georges about Lynkellyn Castle in Cumbria, regaling them with happy childhood tales of favorite dogs, silly pranks, and fishing expeditions. De Valière countered with stories of his Gascon youth, modestly assuring his listeners that he had been the terror of the countryside.

"And what of you, ma chérie? Have you any childish escapades or deep, dark secrets to reveal?" Robin asked, his eyes shifting to Lucia.

Lucia blushed and looked at her plate. "No."

"You must have led a blameless life, en effet!" Georges marveled.

Lucia met the skeptical stares of the men, twin spots of color warming her cheeks. "When I was small, I danced in the street for the coins people threw or dressed like a cripple to beg in busy thoroughfares. When I was older, I picked pockets, flattered and seduced foolish people out of their savings, and fleeced young striplings of their gold at any game of chance you would care to name. I spent my childhood learning to gamble and fight and lie and steal and cheat and, most importantly, to scuttle away like a scared rat at the threat of discovery. A truly genteel education, was it not? And just the sort of well-bred upbringing so necessary to a blue-blooded brigand's bride!"

She rose from the table and Robin stood as well. "Ma chérie," he said a little helplessly. She ignored him, going to the hearth to stare into the crackling fire, unwilling to let her companions see her pain.

After awhile she felt Robin's hands caressing her arms as he stood behind her. "Lucia," he said, his voice soft and resonant in her ear, "your past makes no difference to me or to Georges."

"I don't want your pity," she said, jerking away from his touch.

His hands fell to his sides. "You shall never have it."

"I -- we -- I did what I had to do."

"You don't have to convince me, ma chérie," he said, drawing closer to her. "I know."

Turning to look into his sympathetic eyes, she discovered that he did know better. And more fully than

anyone she'd ever met. His arms went around her and, with a little sob, she buried her face in the soft cloth of his coat. "You survived, Lucia," he whispered. "You've won! Let the demons go! Let them go, ma chérie! 'Tis what we both must do."

She rested in his comforting embrace, ignoring the small, persistent voice inside her that warned her not to trust him, that insisted that his touch was poison. She reveled in the sweet illusion of warmth and tenderness radiating from him, unable to deny her loneliness and her hunger for the affection that had been lacking in her life for so very long.

Robin stroked her hair and whispered against her ear. "How about a cup of tea, ma chérie, and a wild, disgraceful tale from my past to cheer you?" Looking tearfully up at him, she nodded and he led her back to the table. "Have you ever been to Venice, ma chérie? 'Tis a most agreeable city, unless you unwittingly steal an emerald studded chamber pot from the Doge." He launched into a mad tale of wealthy beggars, scandalous loveletters, secret messages scratched into porcelaine, and a beautiful lady assassin in a gondola. At the story's end, all three were laughing.

As a servant cleared away the dishes, Georges rose. "I am for my bed, mes amis. I bid you bonne nuit!"

"Get a good night's sleep, Georges. We have a great deal to do tomorrow," Robin warned. The marquis lifted his eyes to the ceiling in resignation, bowed, and left.

The evening fire crackled and hissed in the intensely silent room. Robin crossed to a corner table and filled a glass from a bottle of claret. "So," he said softly, "here we are."

"I am sorry if I spoiled your meal, Your Grace," Lucia said. "I am not usually prone to tears, but the last few days have been rather tiring."

"Not tiring, but terrifying, ma chérie." Robin frowned into his wine. "I have acted the part of a beast rather than a gentleman and I fervently apologize, although I can do nothing to change our present circumstances." He looked into her face, seeking, but not expecting, some sign of forgiveness. She remained silent, standing behind her chair by the dinner table, her fingers nervously tracing the carved decorations on its polished oak back.

"I can ape the gentleman, you see," Robin said after a moment. "I know his ways, for I was one once. During my years abroad, I abandoned that honor and humanity which raises one above the common herd. I refuse to abide defeat and I take what I desire by any means necessary, regardless of others. Once the deed is done, however, that small part of me that remembers a gentleman's honor begins to regret. I am not proud of the animal I have become and I do regret my actions of the last two days." He crossed the room to take her hands. "I simply couldn't afford to lose my chance at Mountheathe and, kissing you there in the moonlight, suddenly I was damned if I was going to let you waste away in Saddewythe's schoolroom."

Robin leaned toward her and his lips brushed hers. Enticed by this caress, he pulled her into his arms, coaxing her mouth to open to his tongue, gently demanding her surrender. He felt her lips growing warm and pliant, her body trembling within his embrace and his body answered. Knowing a serious discussion lay before them, he reluctantly released her, saying, "Come sit by the hearth with me."

He escorted her to a chair and sat down beside her. Holding her hand, he traced the heavy gold signet that served as her wedding ring while he spoke. "No doubt you have heard rumors and gossip pertaining to my celebrated past?"

"I was told that, in your youth, you abducted another lady," Lucia said, searching his face. "Did you love her very much?"

"Would God that I had!" Robin laughed harshly. "It would have given that whole fiasco some meaning, but, no, *ma chérie*, 'twas only youthful infatuation although I thought otherwise at the time."

"Then why did you?"

"I didn't! I did not abduct Valeria Ashwell. It was my cousin, Giles Bridland, who carried her off. I tried to stop him before the worst happened and his life became like the ones you and I have lived." He paused, sipping his wine and staring into the fire.

"Why did he abduct her?" Lucia inquired after a moment's silence. "Were they in love?"

"Giles was obsessed! He was certain that once they were married, Valeria would fall into his arms. The bloody fool! It was clear to anyone with half a mind that she only had eyes for Malkent!"

Robin's features darkened. Painfully drawing forth each bitter memory, he recounted Mountheathe's perfidy for Lucia as he had for Georges, patiently answering all her questions.

"Since Mountheathe had always hidden his indiscretions while I shamelessly flaunted mine," Robin ended, "and since Giles was Grandpapa's darling while I was the proverbial thorn in his side, my grandfather accepted Bridland's lies over my protestations of innocence. I was cast off and cast out." He drained the last of his claret and refilled the glass. "That is God's truth, *ma chérie*, although no one will believe it. At least, when they start telling you tales and hinting darkly, you will know the facts." His eyes searched hers in the firelight. "Ma chérie, I know I have treated you badly. Nothing can pardon my actions and you have every right to despise me, but, as your husband, I need your loyalty. Promise me you won't run away."

"You have my word, Your Grace," she said. "Since I have no place to go, I have little choice but to help you."

"You may help me best tonight, *ma belle*, by going to sleep. You look bone-weary." Smiling, he rose

and pulled her to her feet, his eyes caressing her as he led her from the room. He watched her ascend the stairs, then returned to the parlor, smiling to himself as he contemplated the delicious enigma that was his bride. He sat by the fire sipping his claret, memories of their wedding flooding his mind. He frowned at his reprehensible conduct that night, but guilt was not an emotion he entertained with patience. He quickly dismissed it, dwelling, instead, on the milky softness of Lucia's skin beneath his fingers, the way her sapphire eyes deepened to violet as she quickened to his caress, that final exquisite moment of pleasure when the feel of her body against his nearly drove him mad.

Her history had touched his heart as nothing had in a long time and he knew an urgent desire to keep her from the world's cruelty; to see that she never again needed to place a wager or waylay a coach; never again faced starvation or flogging or pistol balls. He tried to imagine her as a highway robber and a vision of the bandit he had shot outside Vienna leaped into his mind. He had only caught a glimpse of the brigand's eyes before pulling the trigger, but they were vivid in his memory now. Those eyes had been intensely, magnificently blue! He sat up abruptly. "Mon Dieu! Lucia! Ce n'est pas vrai! C'est impossible!"

"Do you always spout French to the empty air, Rogue?" asked a cold, contemptuous voice from the open door.

Robin glanced over his shoulder and then sank back in his chair. "So it's you, Malkent. I'm amazed you deigned to acknowledge me."

"You knew I was here in this inn?"

"Naturellement!" Robin sipped his claret. "Not knowing my surroundings and the people who inhabit them could cost me my life. Won't you come in and have a seat? Some claret?"

Malkent hesitated, then entered the room. Taking a chair, he declined the wine and studied the duke.

A decade ago, Lord Robert Amberley had been a devil-may-care young buck, full of laughter, wit, and charm. He had been a favorite with the ladies; indeed, with everyone save his grandfather whom he was very like. He had earned his sobriquet, 'Rogue Robin', within three months of coming to Town and had borne it proudly, striving to increase his celebrity by pursuing ever more outrageous exploits. He had been a rakehell, a gamester, a sporting blood, and something of a fop, but, beneath all his wildness and affectation, he had possessed a romantic heart, a quick intelligence, and a compassionate nature. Malkent had seen him kneel beside a beggar child in the street on a cold, rainy day and, with a gentle smile, press both his purse and his cloak upon the shivering urchin.

Tracy could not imagine such behavior of the man who sat before him. Robin's eyes were hard as granite, his smile unpleasant, almost a sneer. Bitter lines were etched around the grim mouth and the drawl he had adopted added sinister undertones to his conversation. His whole attitude as he lounged beside his guest was faintly insulting.

"Well," Amberley said, "how may I help you? We won't pretend that this is a social call."

"Why are you here, Rogue? You are not welcome in England."

"I have returned to accept my legacy, naturellement," Robin drawled. "I can't let a minor irritation like social disgrace keep me from a hundred thousand a year."

"How can you dare to face me or, more especially, Valeria?"

Robin's drawl disappeared as his steely eyes met the older man's. "I can face you both because I am not guilty of the charges leveled against me!"

"But Mountheathe said..."

"Mountheathe is the perpetrator of the crime, not I!" Robin tossed off his claret and sprang to his feet. "To what end is this discussion? I said it all ten years ago. To Grandpapa; to Clayton; to Valeria; to you, even to Giles! How he enjoyed watching me twist and writhe on his spit! If none of you believed me then, you certainly will not believe me now." He moved to the hearth and leaned one hand against the mantle, staring into the fire. "But I have done with soul searching, mon ami," he said after a moment. Sauntering back to his seat, he refilled his glass from a decanter on the table beside his chair. "You may put your fears to rest, Malkent. I do not wish to discomfit anyone. I will not approach you or Valeria or, indeed, anybody who does not desire my company. My wife and I shall remain in London until those who have an interest in the fact are satisfied that I have been married in accordance with Grandpapa's will. Then we shall retire to Lynkellyn Castle to raise our family."

"That dark-haired woman I saw with you is your wife?"

"Oui, enfin! We were married last night."

"The Saddewythes' governess?"

Lynkellyn cast him a sidewise glance. "You know about that, do you?"

"Cavanleigh said that Saddewythe would not be silenced. He kept raving about highwaymen, his daughter being assaulted, and his governess abducted."

"Well, I kissed the fair Pamela, but did not find her to my taste. A pretty child, but witless. The governess, on the other hand, has courage and wit and she's as cozy an armful as a man could want. I stole her from Saddewythe and left him his insipid daughter." Robin grinned defiantly and took another swallow of claret, aware, but suddenly uncaring, that the wine was loosening his tongue more than was wise.

"You abducted her just like Valeria!"

"No! Not 'just like Valeria'! I did not abduct Valeria! I was not so lost to all decency then!"

"But you are lost to all decency now," Tracy concluded.

"Mon Dieu! Mais oui, mon ami! I have earned the epithet, 'Rogue', in its vilest sense, a thousand times over. I do what I must to win."

"So fair play means nothing to you," Tracy said. "You would betray a more honorable man without a qualm."

Mockery twisted Robin's features. "If you are speaking of Giles, his honor is a paste jewel he displays for fools to admire!"

"Don't think to tarnish your cousin's good name, Rogue. No one of any breeding will listen to you. Indeed, if you think Society will welcome you because of your wealth and your dukedom, you're off the mark. I daresay every fashionable door in London will be slammed in your face."

"I don't give a damn about Society, Tracy. I am going to refurbish Lynkellyn House, fill my stables with decent cattle, and garb my pretty governess as becomes her new rank. I intend to live as befits the Duke of Lynkellyn, whether the world approves or not." Robin stretched his legs before the fire.

"I trust you will understand if I do not change my opinion of you," Malkent said, rising.

"Perfectly."

"I bid you good night, then, Rogue. I will not know you in the morning." Tracy bowed and left, closing the door behind him.

Robin glowered into the fire, sipping his claret. Malkent was but five years his senior and, during his one honorable year in London, Robin had striven to emulate the older man in all matters of dress and conduct. Together, they had ridden in Hyde Park, taken shooting lessons at Manton's Gallery, and polished their fencing techniques with a private master they had hired together. He had visited his first hell and his first brothel in Tracy's company.

Tracy Wallenham, Earl of Malkent, once his dearest, closest friend, now unequivocally despised him. Despair washed over him as his mind rolled the years away and the hauntingly familiar faces of other old friends and companions surfaced. They would all turn their backs on him if they encountered him in the street tomorrow, yet every one of them would hail Giles as friend.

Suddenly his fists clenched and he ground his teeth in fury. He could not live in undeserved disgrace any longer. He would drag Mountheathe's perfidy into the light for all to see or die in the attempt.

Chapter 8:

In Which His Grace Greet's London...Discreetly

At dawn, Robin awakened Lucia with his kisses, stroking her and caressing her until she shivered with yearning desire. When at last they joined, she no longer felt pain, only a delicious warmth, slowly swelling to a white-hot blaze as he moved inside her. Her body fell into a rhythm with his, arching and undulating to his thrusts, urging him to take her ever closer to that exquisite explosion of primeval pleasure to which he had addicted her in a single night.

Her mind cried out at the same time that she was betraying herself by succumbing so readily to his advances; that she should be like ice when he touched her. Alas, she could not remain passive and aloof. Although it spoke against all decency, she wanted him to stroke her until her senses reeled. With this silent, shameful confession, she gave up thinking entirely and abandoned herself to his seduction.

"Give me your soul, my tigress!" Robin whispered against her ear as he plunged into her "Give me your heart! Your passion! Your essence! I want all of you!" As his thrusts deepened, the pleasure she wanted and needed grew stronger, swelling until it overwhelmed her mind and flooded her soul. She arched her back and cried out, her fingers kneading his back convulsively. He brought his mouth down on hers and thrust into her again, exploding gloriously inside her. Damp ebony tresses intertwining with wet copper curls, they lay together, trembling in each other's arms as wave upon wave of voluptuous rapture engulfed them.

At last, Robin moved to lay beside her in the bed, his dove- grey eyes, warm and gentle, searching hers. Seeing embarrassment and confusion in them, he asked, "Qu'est-ce que c'est, ma chérie?"

"I am ashamed," she whispered, pulling the covers higher. "I - - I conducted myself like a waterfront harlot when you -- when we -- " She stared down at her hands. "My mother raised me to be a lady. What would she think?" Lucia's voice trailed off as a blush stained her cheeks.

"My sweet, passionate tigress!" he laughed, brushing a lock of ebony hair away from her face. "I find your wildness exciting and your wantonness delightful! You are only responding to our lovemaking as nature intended you should, ma chérie."

She shook her head. "'Tis not at all respectable to -- to feel like this."

"No," Robin said, a tremor of laughter in his voice, "but, then, we are not at all respectable people, are we?" When he received no smile in answer to his sally, he tilted her face up to his. "A bit of advice, ma

chérie. Today's happiness may vanish with tomorrow's dawn. Take your pleasures while you can and devil take the world's opinion. Surely, life has taught you that much? Besides," he whispered huskily, nuzzling her ear, "you were made for passion. I've never known anyone so exciting!" His voice was heavy with desire as he pressed her into the bed, his lips seeking hers.

A soft knock sounded at the door and Anne's muffled voice floated into them. "Beg pardon, Your Grace, but you did say to wake you at eight o'clock."

Robin lifted his head, smiling wistfully down at Lucia. "The world beckons, ma chérie." Anne knocked more loudly as he climbed out of bed. "Non!" he muttered resentfully. "Il demande!" He donned his dressing robe, shouting, "Yes! Yes! We are awake! Give us but a minute!"

While Robin crossed the room to open the door, Lucia, still in bed for lack of anything to wear, slid farther beneath the blankets, blushing hotly as Anne hurried in carrying a pitcher and basin on a tray, garments draped over her arm. She curtsied to the duke, informing him that, if it pleased his grace, his valet would attend him in the marquis's room. Nodding his acceptance of this arrangement, Robin cast one last forlorn glance at his lady and left the bedchamber.

"I have your dress here, cleaned and pressed, Your Grace, but I fear it doesn't look much better for it. If -- if Your Grace -- " The maid's voice became low and nervous as she set down her burdens and poured warm water into the basin. "That is, we are of a size, Your Grace, and I -- I have brought my best Sunday frock which you may borrow, if Your Grace would condescend."

Lucia flushed with shame, her eyes avoiding Anne's, full of sympathy and commiseration. Goose bumps prickled her bare skin as she climbed out from under the warm covers to stand by the basin. "Thank you," she said as the maid began to bathe her. "I would be most grateful."

During breakfast, Robin outlined his objectives for the day. "This morning, Georges, you will take Lucia to Lynkellyn House, the servants following in the baggage coach. Stay at the house until I arrive. Look the place over and see what has to be done. I need to see Gleason about some business and make certain arrangements with my bankers. Then I shall stop at Lynkellyn House, collect the two of you, and return here for a noon meal. After we have eaten, ma chérie, you and I shall go shopping for a new wardrobe for you. A trousseau, as it were." He smiled at her, his gaze lingering on her lips still pink from his kisses. "I fear you will have to find your own amusement this afternoon, Georges," he said, his eyes still on Lucia. "I have no further plans for you."

"I am excessively relieved to hear it, mon ami. I had begun to think the ordering of my life was one of your greatest pleasures."

When Georges and Lucia arrived at Lynkellyn House an hour later, they were shocked at the mansion's state of decay. Sunlight streamed in through the open front door as they entered, illuminating dust devils and thick cobwebs in the foyer. Beyond the sunshine, the rest of the house was cloaked in blackness, its

windows barricaded with heavy, faded velvet draperies. A stench of mildew and rot hung over all.

Lucia turned to Georges, her brows furrowing in distaste. "I hope we do not see too many insects. I can't abide vermin, especially spiders! When I was child, my family and I often slept in alleys when we could not afford lodging. I used to wake up during the night and feel all those creepy creatures crawling on me." With a shudder, she looked warily around the dark entry hall. "Perhaps the carriage lantern would help," she said.

De Valière nodded and sent the footman who accompanied them out to get a lantern. When the servant brought the light, Georges lit it with a flint he carried in his greatcoat pocket. He and the footman followed Lucia, illuminating her path as she moved from room to room throwing back the filthy curtains to let in the sunlight.

Dusty holland covers swathed the ancient furniture. Filth and grime coated paintings and tapestries. Cobwebs nestled in corners and festooned the doorways. Dust devils whirled and danced across the floor, spurred by the unaccustomed breeze that rushed through the open door. Lucia shook her head sadly as she surveyed several Amberley treasures that she feared had been ruined by neglect and vermin.

The latter could be found in abundance. Insects and rats crawled or scurried into their secret places as Lucia and the marquis defiled their sanctuary with light. Suddenly Lucia screamed, flinging herself frantically into Georges's arms and almost causing him to drop his lantern. "I saw one!" she jabbered, her eyes wide with panic. "It was big and black and -- kill it! Oh, kill it!"

"Calm down, Your Grace!" Georges said. "It's only a little spider! It cannot hurt you!"

The ferocious insect chose that moment to crawl across the floor toward her. She almost knocked Georges over trying to hide behind him. "I know it's a spider! It's attacking me! Kill it! Please! Please! Kill it!"

With a sigh, de Valière stepped forward and crushed the spider with his foot. "voilà! At your command, it has been executed, Your Grace."

She peered around fearfully. "I -- I daresay there may be more of them!"

"Probablement!"

Lucia shuddered again. "I cannot stay here, then. Mice, even rats, I can accept, but insects -- spiders. No! I must leave!"

"Perhaps if I lead the way and murder the little fiends for you, you will find the courage to continue," Georges suggested. "Robin did ask us to tour the house. He will be angry if we let mere insects chase us away." Lucia met Georges's eyes above the lantern. The one thing she feared more than household pests

was the duke's fury. She swallowed hard and nodded.

Following Georges, Lucia explored the kitchens, still room, and storage rooms, the public rooms and bedchambers, the nursery, the grand ballroom, and finally the servants' quarters and the garrets above them. De Valière lost track of the number of insects he trampled in response to her gasps and shrieks, but he was convinced that he had killed every creepy, crawly creature in the place. When they had seen the entire house, Georges and the footman escorted Lucia out into a small stableyard. While he dismissed the servant, she sat down on the steps, looking defeated. De Valière joined her. "Is something worrying you, ma cousine?"

She looked surprised at his manner of address.

"My father and your mother, my Tante Elise, were brother and sister. We are first cousins."

"If that is true, you are, indeed, kind to befriend me, considering the contempt with which the rest of the de Mondecharles family regards me." She stared, unseeing, at the traffic passing in the street.

Georges stared at the ground. "It is not the entire family, but only Monsieur le Duc, your grand-père, who is against you. He is in very fragile health and no one, including me, has the courage to risk his life by defying him openly, but I will stand your friend and help you when I can, ma petite. For instance, if you feel that you do not wish to remain with Robin any longer, I shall find a place for you to live on one of my estates. It might be nothing more exalted than a cottage, but -- "

She rose eagerly. "You don't believe he would search for me?"

"He might, perhaps, but I doubt he could find you hidden away in the French countryside."

For a brief moment, hope shone in her eyes, then abruptly vanished. "We would never get out of London. These servants -- " she gestured at the grooms who had already begun to muck out the long-neglected stables, "are not here merely for our comfort and safety, my lord. They are His Grace's spies and my gaolers. Haven't you noticed how they are always with us? Unobtrusive, but always there. Look! We are being watched even now."

Georges followed the direction of her gaze and saw one of the coachmen, apparently lounging at his ease against a stable wall, his eyes resting intently upon them. "Perhaps later, when Robin has lowered his guard a little, we may find an opportunity."

"Perhaps," she said with no conviction. "If you will excuse me, my lord, I'd best set my maids to work. It will take a century to clean this house properly."

As several women filed through the door a few minutes later, Georges smiled to hear the duchess say, "Mind the insects! They're everywhere!" He strolled over to the stables to supervise the grooms,

resolutely ignoring the scream that issued from the mansion a moment later, scream that ended with a loud stomp.

When Robin visited Mr. Gleason, the solicitor happily informed him that his legacy with accumulated interest had been deposited at his bank along with the financial records pertaining to his grandfather's personal properties and the ducal estates. The solicitor gave Amberley the deeds to his new holdings and Robin tossed a sheaf of papers onto the solicitor's desk. "I want all these deeds transferred to my legal name. Everything is to be above board."

Taking the documents, Gleason looked through them, not divulging by the flicker of an eyelid his astonishment at the amount of far-flung property Lynkellyn had accrued during his exile. France, Italy, Spain, Denmark, Holland, the West Indies -- he had apparently claimed them all as home at one time or another. Finding the papers in order, Gleason said, "Very well, Your Grace. It shall be done."

Both gentlemen rose. "One last thing, Your Grace!" Gleason said. "I took the liberty of informing Lady Blayne of your presence in London. After all, it was at her expense that my firm set out to locate you."

"No doubt she was thrilled to hear of my return." Robin's voice was thick with irony.

"Yes, she was! She sincerely considers herself your friend, Your Grace."

Robin adjusted his lace-trimmed tricorne in a mirror Mr. Gleason kept on his door. "Then I shall grant her the greatest favor a man in my position can bestow. I shall stay as far away from her as possible." Collecting his cane and gloves, he bid Gleason good day.

At the bank his family had patronized for generations, the banker, Mr. Parks, informed him that his grandfather's fortune was at his disposal. "très bien," Amberley said, "and what is the total amount of mortgage debt on all the ducal estates?"

Mr. Parks looked up in surprise. "If you will excuse me, Your Grace, I shall find out." Bowing, he left.

He bustled back into the room several minutes later, a portfolio beneath his arm. With a respectful nod to Lynkellyn, he sat down at his desk, opened the file, and sorted through the papers, emitting little hums of enlightenment and noting figures on a chalkboard as Robin waited in impatient silence.

At last, Mr. Parks looked up. "The sum of the mortgage debt, including interest to date, is eighty-three thousand, five hundred sixty-two pounds, four shillings and sixpence, Your Grace."

Without so much as a blink, Robin said, "I should like to pay off this debt out of the funds now at my disposal."

Mr. Parks sat very still for a minute. "The-the wh-whole amount, Your Grace?"

Robin nodded. "Oui! The whole amount! I want to hold that property free and clear."

An hour and a half later, Robin left the bank, his heart lighter, his step jauntier than it had been in years. Lynkellyn Castle, his beloved home, was free of debt. He yearned for the Season to end so that he could take Lucia home to the Border. In his mind's eye, he saw the future; his children romping merrily through the garden he had loved as a boy; Lucia strolling on his arm, her love for him shining in her eyes as she laughed. He blinked. Where the devil had such a maudlin daydream come from?

"I say, sir! Kindly watch where you're going!" said an indignant voice.

Near collision with a stranger jolted Robin back to the present. "Pardonnez moi, monsieur!" he said automatically, then his eyes focused on his victim. "Jeremy! Jeremy Boniface! Tiens! Is it really you? It has been much too long, mon ami!" He held out his hand eagerly.

Looking into Robin's face, the gentleman suddenly recognized him and stepped back, nodding curtly. "Sir!"

Robin stiffened. His hand fell and the joy drained from his face. "Pardon my error, sir. I mistook you for an old friend. Good day to you, sir." Bowing, he walked, stone-faced, past Mr. Boniface, determined not to open himself up to such humiliation again.

Half an hour after his grace had left Mr. Gleason's office, Giles Bridland, Lord Mountheathe minced through the door, flourishing a lace handkerchief. His lordship was a palely handsome man, made paler and more fashionable still by a heavy coat of white paint upon his face. He was of average height with pleasing proportions and large, fawn-like brown eyes that could seduce a lady without a spoken word. He had blackened his lashes and plucked his eyebrows, painting them back in thin and dark. His nose was aristocratically aquiline, his lips full and sensuous. His face boasted two patches; a moon by the left corner of his mouth and a diamond on the rise of his cheekbone just beneath his right eye. "I have come to claim my legacy," he lisped with a syrupy smile.

Surprised, Gleason leaped to his feet. "My lord! Weren't you informed? Your cousin has been found and he has fulfilled the demands of the will. The legacy is his!"

"You gave him my money!" Mountheathe shouted, dropping all pretence of the beau.

Gleason paled. "My lord, I was legally bound to do so! He met the stipulations of the late duke's will

and..."

"Married and all?" Giles sidled into a chair, still glaring at the solicitor.

"Yes, my lord! To Miss Lucia Cothcourt." Gleason sank into his own chair, relieved to see Giles calmer. "At fifteen minutes before midnight on the twenty-eighth of March by special license at Brackenwell Hall, Essex. Reverend Alfred Stanfield officiated."

"Fifteen minutes before midnight! An odd hour for a wedding!" Giles said.

"His Grace's time was running out, obviously."

"Obviously! I've a mind to visit my dear cousin and meet his precious bride. I suppose they are here in London?"

"His Grace is planning to open Lynkellyn House."

"I crave the privilege of being the first to welcome Their Graces to Town." Giles said, sneering. He bid Gleason good day and departed, resolving to discover what some of his more gossipy friends might know of the Duke of Lynkellyn's marriage before confronting his cousin.

An hour later, armed with several on dits about Amberley's wedding, Giles strode purposefully to the front door of Lynkellyn House. He started to pull the bell, but then noticed that the door was slightly ajar. Glancing around to see if anyone was watching, he slipped quietly into the house.

He wandered from room to room, finding them all empty, but with evidence of recent occupation. At last, he located someone, a maid by the look of her, in one of the drawing rooms. She was busily sweeping up a pile of dust and debris. A smudge of dirt caressed her cheek and her cap and apron were grey with filth.

As Giles admired her full breasts, tiny waist, and the inviting slope of her hips, she turned slightly, allowing him a glimpse of large, cerulean eyes and rosy pink lips. 'Well! Well!' he thought with a smirk, 'my cousin has acquired a fine eye for servants!' He crossed the room to stand behind her.

Suddenly aware that she was not alone, Lucia whirled to find a stranger confronting her. "Who are you? How did you get into the house?"

"Why, through the front door, certainly! It was open. No one was about so I let myself in. I've come to see the Duke of Lynkellyn."

"He is not at home," she answered guardedly, wondering where her husband's spies were when she

needed them.

"I shall see the duchess, then."

The telltale knotting of her insides instantly made Lucia wary. Deciding that she neither liked nor trusted this man, she looked straight into his eyes and lied as fervently as she could. "Her Grace is from home as well, sir. If you will leave your card, I will tell Their Graces of your visit."

"I'm certain they will be overjoyed to hear of it. Perhaps I should give you a more interesting story to relate, love."

"I do not take your meaning, sir." Her expression all innocence, Lucia curtsied demurely. "When His Grace returns, I am certain he will receive you most cordially."

"Will he, by God!" Giles laughed. "Well, I know a capital way to pass the time until the master returns, my girl." He reached for her, but Lucia sidled out of his grasp.

"Please excuse me, sir. I have a great deal of work to do." Turning her back on him, she began sweeping again.

Giles grabbed her broom and flung it across the room. "You are far too pretty to be a mere maid, my girl, and quite impertinent, besides. I daresay you are some little strumpet with whom my cousin has an understanding. How delicious the Rogue must find it to fall into your bed every night after his compulsory visit to his bride's." Giles leered. "Wife and mistress living under the same roof! I must congratulate Amberley."

Lucia blushed at the beginning of Giles's string of insinuations, but, by the end of his speech, she was quite pale. "Sir! You mistake the matter!"

"Do I?" His brows rose. "No, I cannot credit that! My cousin would not hire a wench who did not fulfill all his requirements."

Outrage burned in Lucia's eyes. "I am not a wench..."

"Enough of this banter! I've a mind to sample His Grace's goods."

He clamped a large, elegant hand around her wrist and dragged her into his arms. Crushing her body against his, his mouth assaulted hers, bruising and biting her. Disgust washed over her when he touched her and she shuddered. He tightened his hold and deepened his kiss, ignoring her struggles.

She flailed at him, beating at his chest and head. Her hand landed in his hair and her fingers clutched

wildly at his curls. She pulled with all her might and, to her dismay, his silver tresses slid off his head. Revolted, she threw the wig down and brought her knee up sharply into his groin.

With a howl of agony that became a curse, he doubled over in pain, letting his quarry escape. She ran to the fireplace and grabbed a rusty poker, turning, weapon in hand, to confront her assailant.

Still gasping, Giles straightened. Murder burned in his eyes as he started toward her. "You little harlot! You little slut! You shall pay dearly for that filthy gutter trick! Aye, and for ruining my new peruke!"

Lucia tightened her grip on the poker. "If you come near me again, I swear to God I shall dash your brains out!"

Laughing, Giles strode toward her. Lucia raised her weapon, ready to strike him.

"Non, ma chérie! Don't kill him just yet!" a silken voice drawled from the doorway. "That pleasure is reserved for me, in the fullness of time."

Relief flooding Lucia's features, she lowered the poker. Giles whirled around in astonishment.

Amberley stepped into the room, surveying the situation through an elegant quizzing glass. "Giles," he almost hissed, dropping the glass to greet his cousin with a curt nod. His smile mocking and his smoky eyes glittering with malice, he retrieved the wig, grey with dust and grime, from the floor and offered it to Mountheathe with an impudent bow.

"So you have had the barefaced brass to return to England!" Giles said, ignoring the wig.

"Why not?" Robin countered. "You have had the barefaced brass to remain here all these years in spite of your treacherous lies, or have you managed to convince even yourself that your version of the Ashwell scandal is the truth?"

"The truth!" Giles laughed. "The truth is whatever you can make people believe, Rogue! Your vagabond years must have taught you that much."

"Mais oui! My vagabond years!" Robin laughed. "'Tis you who should have been the happy wanderer, mon cousin, only you didn't have the decency, the courage, or the honor to own up to your crimes!"

"I've never been a damned knight on a white charger like you, if that's what you mean, cousin," Mountheathe snorted, "but, as for honor, I don't think you can claim that one any more. The on dit is that you abducted your new duchess from a coach on the King's Highway. I'd hardly call that honorable! What's more; they're saying she is naught but a drab, dowdy little governess. I should like to see your prim and proper mouse of a wife. No doubt you share a 'grand passion'!"

Robin grinned. "Why, you have already met her, my lord." He crossed the room to Lucia, gently removing the poker from her hand. "Ma chérie, this rag-mannered ruffian is my cousin, Giles Bridland, Lord Mountheathe. Giles, my wife, Lucia Cothcourt Amberley, sixth Duchess of Lynkellyn."

"You are the Saddewythes' governess?" Mountheathe gaped at her, but his astonishment, quickly became derision. "Your new duchess looks adorable in her dirt, Coz, but I should think you could afford to hire at least a small staff on the bundle you stole from me." He paused to take snuff from a delicate porcelain box, then returned it to his pocket. "You were ever adept at bending pretty women to your will, Rogue, but don't you think waiting to take a bride until fifteen minutes before Grandpapa's deadline was shaving it a bit close? And then, to drag this 'lady', whose own family, so Cavanleigh tells me, refuses to acknowledge her, into our clan? Well, you're slipping, Rogue! Damned, if you ain't!"

"My bride and I were wed before midnight on March twenty- eighth, Giles, and she is of good family. Those are the only stipulations the late duke laid down and I have fulfilled them. If you wish to see the legal documentation relevant to the affair, you must visit Mr. Gleason."

"Bride!" Giles hooted scornfully. "When I came in, I thought she was one of your doxies, doubling as a servant, but I don't suppose it matters to you whether you take her as wife or wench, does it, Rogue, as long as you do take her? And when you tire of her, as you inevitably will, she can discreetly sell her charms to some other man -- very rich, of course -- who will shower her with gold and jewels for the privilege of bedding a duchess. Only think how the family coffers will swell with the -- the fruit, so to speak, of her -- er -- labors! I even know a few men who might be interested! Let's see, there is Lord Mancroft. Does she mind crowds? Surely you recall how fond he is of performing before an audience? Then, of course, the Earl of Chilcot would undoubtedly pay a pretty penny. You remember him, don't you, Rogue? Has a habit of leaving his mistresses bruised and bloodied."

Robin took a step forward. "Damn you, Giles! You are treading dangerously close to a challenge. I would relish any chance God granted me to splatter your brains all over a field of honor. An insult to my lady wife is a fine excuse to do it!" As his anger rose, Lucia hurried to his side and laid a hand on his arm. Glancing at her, he forced his temper into calmer channels. "Give it up, Giles! Grandpapa's fortune is mine and you can't do a damned thing about it!"

"That fortune may be swelling your pockets today, but they'll be empty again soon enough. I quite recall how you used to gamble away your quarter's allowance, then beg for loans from your friends. Money always did flow through your fingers like water. I suppose the bulk of last year's income is already gone?"

"C'est vrai," Robin said.

Giles grinned nastily. "How much?"

"Eighty thousand pounds." Robin's his eyes never wavered from Giles's face.

Lucia gasped and Giles's mouth fell open. "Eighty! You've lost eighty thousand pounds in one day?"

"Not lost exactly, Cousin. I paid off the mortgages on the ducal estates. The Amberley family is no longer in debt. And now, I really must ask you to leave, Giles. Her Grace and I will be receiving callers in a fortnight if you wish to honor us." Robin bowed, holding out Giles's wig a second time. "And do take your hair with you, s'il vous plaît."

Mountheathe snatched the unfortunate wig from Robin's hand. He started for the door, then turned back to say, "You do realize that you won't be received by anyone who matters?"

Amberley studied a speck of dust on his coat sleeve. "My dukedom and its attendant fortune are all that matter, Giles. People who do not choose to acknowledge me are of no consequence." He brushed the dust away with distaste.

Giles slammed his dusty wig on his close-cropped head and stomped toward the door, suddenly whirling as he reached the threshold, a wicked gleam in his eye. "Before I go, I want to congratulate you on your marriage, Rogue. Such a lovely bride! When I held her in my arms and tasted her sweet lips," Bridland kissed his fingertips, "'twas heaven! I can hardly wait to sample her charms more fully. You will send me word when you've tired of her, won't you? Or perhaps we could share?" He bowed and was gone, his laughter floating back to them from the hall.

Their graces waited in silence until they heard the front door close. Fury glinted in Robin's hooded eyes and a sardonic smile played about his mouth as he looked at Lucia. "And did you find 'heaven' in Giles's arms, ma douce?"

"Certainly not! He forced his embraces upon me, Robin! I found the whole incident extremely distasteful." She turned away to stare out a grimy window.

"Vraiment! And what of my embraces, Lucia? After all, I have forced a marriage upon you!"

An uncomfortable silence hung in the air. "You are my husband. The law and the church say that I cannot deny you," Lucia said at last.

Crossing the room, Robin whirled her around to face him. "Yes, I am your husband, ma douce, and you'd best remember it!" His fingers dug deeply, painfully into her shoulders. "I'll not be cuckolded by Mountheathe or anyone else. You are mine, Lucia, and I'll have the life's blood of any man who tries to steal you from me. If I lose you, I lose everything."

"Robin, I assure you I did not encourage your cousin! I am doing my best to obey you and submit to your wishes." She cringed.

His blazing eyes met her terrified ones and he relaxed his grip a little. "I don't want your submission! I don't want you to fear me! I want your companionship, your loyalty, and your friendship. I need you to stand staunchly beside me through the coming ordeal. I don't want a slave! I want a comrade-in-arms! How I yearn to trust you, Lucia, but I leave you for only a few hours and I return to discover that Georges has been offering you an escape and Mountheathe has been making love to you!"

"I'd hardly call it that!" she cried indignantly.

Fury danced in Robin's eyes and surged roughly in his voice. "If he so much as looks at you again, I shall run him through swiftly and with great joy."

"Lord Mountheathe was not making love to me, Robin! He accosted me. How can you believe otherwise when I have given you my word that I will not betray you? I have promised that I will not leave and I will add to that a vow to remain loyal and faithful for the year that I must live with you. I do not fathom your anger, sir. Lord Mountheathe's kiss meant nothing to me. It was, in fact, repugnant!" She searched his face, bewildered. "You have no cause to be jealous, Robin!"

He jerked his hands away from her as if physical contact burned him. "I am merely protecting my fortune," he said. "That means guarding you from anyone who might seduce you away from me. Do not play me false, Lucia! You will only jeopardize your own freedom, and mayhap your life. I do know how to deal with a Judas!"

Chapter 9:

In Which Their Graces Ride in the Park

In a frenzied campaign to make the mansion liveable, Lucia's household staff attacked every room in Lynkellyn House with soap and water. Drapes, tapestries, and carpets threw off their dirty grey for brighter colors. The floors and woodwork glowed with a rich, warm sheen and the windows, flung open to let in the air, sparkled in the spring sunshine. Day by day, the accumulated dirt and grime of twenty years retreated as the duchess advanced.

The morning after the Amberleys moved into their abode, Lucia, armed with a list of household needs, sallied forth with Anne and a footman to challenge the London shopkeepers. Since Robin and Georges had already gone riding in the park, Lucia asked Laddock, the new butler, to inform the duke, upon his return, that she had gone shopping.

It was late afternoon before Lucia finished her errands. As she handed Laddock her bonnet and gloves, he said, "If it pleases Your Grace, His Grace wishes to see you in the library immediately."

Outside the library's open double doors, Lucia hesitated, nervously smoothing her skirts, then stepped

across the threshold and closed the doors behind her. Lynkellyn sat at his desk, his quill whispering steadily across the paper as he wrote in a ledger. She stood before him unconsciously twisted her fingers as tense, silent seconds ticked by. Finally shattering the stillness, she said, "You wished to see me, Robin?"

Shining through large French windows, the afternoon sun turned Robin's auburn locks to fire as he returned his pen to its holder and looked up. "To speak the truth, my sweet, I had despaired of ever seeing you again."

"Didn't Laddock give you my message?"

"That you had gone to the shops? Mais, oui!" Robin sat back in his chair. "Was it a passage to Spain you purchased? Maybe it was Italy or America? Or perhaps you've decided to accept Georges's kind offer of sanctuary?"

Lucia squared her shoulders. "I bought scrub brushes, bed linens, and bolts of drapery fabric, Robin. I had no intention of running away!"

"Indeed?" Robin raised one auburn brow. "I fear I must lay down a few rules, Your Grace, lest your intentions change. From this moment forward, you will personally inform me before you leave this house for any reason and I will want a list of the places you intend to visit. Also, you will take along a servant of my choosing."

"A spy, you mean!"

"A guard! I'll not have my newly acquired fortune fleeing to the Continent the minute my back is turned."

"You seek to imprison me!"

"If it is necessary!" Robin rose and skirted his desk to confront her. "I'm determined to keep my legacy away from that bastard, Mountheathe, and you will not jeopardize my only chance for revenge."

"Have you nothing in your heart but greed and vengeance?" she said.

Flushing, Robin paced the length of the room, his eyes glinting with anger. Halting before the French windows, he watched the genteel traffic passing in the square. "It isn't only about revenge, Lucia. You and I both know what it is to be starving and homeless. When my luck changed and I began to win, I guarded my little horde of coins well, determined that I would never go hungry or sleep in a filthy alley again. I have lived as befits a gentleman for years now, but, in my dreams, I still bed down in a stinking gutter, the stench of the chamberpot clinging to me and a demon hunger three days old shredding me inside." He turned to face her. "You know that nightmare. I've seen it in your eyes and in your struggle

to hold onto a governess's fragile respectability. My grandfather's fortune will ensure that we and our children shall have food and clothes and a home for the rest of our days, ma chérie."

"In a year I shall be free to go where I wish and live as I choose," Lucia said.

Danger glinted in Robin's eyes. "Oh, no, my sweet! You shall never be free of me! You please me more than any woman I've ever bedded and I want you as much today as I did on our wedding night; so I'm certainly not going to let you go, beloved wife, especially since both church and state will uphold my claim to you. Besides, my child will need his mother."

Lucia paled. "What of your promise?"

"Only honorable men keep promises. I am a 'shameless blackguard', héin?" He smiled mockingly. "It won't be so bad, ma chérie. You will always command wealth and luxury and Lynkellyn Castle is a beautiful place to raise our children!"

"I don't want your money! I don't want your children! I don't want genteel imprisonment in your castle! I only want to be as far from you as possible. You are the most hateful, hurtful man I have ever met!" Fury at her husband and her powerlessness was driving her almost to tears.

"You will stay with me, Lucia," Robin said. "You are mine and I'll not lose you. Try to flee from me and I shall find you no matter where you go. This world is not large enough to hide you."

Lucia stared into those steely grey eyes. "You are despicable!"

He stepped toward her. "We are twin souls, you and I. We understand each other in a way no one else ever can.

Shaking her head, she backed away from him. "Never am I your twin! You are a monster! A devil!" When she felt the library doors at her back, she turned, flung them wide, and burst into the hall, ignoring a surprised footman scrambling to attend his duties. Running down the hall to the staircase, she lifted her skirt and took the steps two at a time.

When she reached her room, she locked the door and began to pace, her fists clenched at her sides. She would leave him, she fumed. It was exactly what the scoundrel deserved. The problem was how to escape and where to go. She could not afford to hire a coach to the corner, much less buy passage out of England. She had nothing to sell and Robin had given her no pin money, lest she use it for the very purpose she was contemplating. She thought wistfully of the guineas she had stashed away in her portmanteau for just such a flight, but her baggage had been left behind in the Saddewythes' coach. Her lips tightened. Alas! All an escape promised was a return to her old life, anyway.

Shuddering at the thought, she slowly sank into a chair, forced, for the present, to admit defeat. She had

been hunted, trapped, and caged for display like some zoological exhibit.

Bitter tears scalded her cheeks. The truth of this whole unhappy tangle was that, even had she the opportunity, she would not leave Robin; at least not for this one year. She had pledged herself to stay and a Cothcourt, no matter how angry, no matter how disgraced, did not break a promise.

Robin watched Lucia flee the room, his face impassive. Only the hard set of his mouth and his smoldering eyes, partially concealed beneath sleepy lids, suggested that he was fighting his temper. Filling a glass from the decanter on his desk, he tossed off the wine.

"Devil, am I?" he muttered, glaring out the windows at the passing world. After fuming for another moment, he crossed the room and pulled the bell. Laddock appeared.

"Convey my compliments to Her Grace and ask her to join me here at five o'clock, ready for a ride in the park," he commanded. "Saddle Belshazzar and Diablo."

"Very good, Your Grace. Begging Your Grace's pardon, but a trunk just arrived a few minutes ago. The footman who brought it didn't offer an explanation, but merely said that his employer, whom he wouldn't name, told him to leave it here. What would Your Grace like me to do with it?"

Robin shrugged, irritated. "I've no inclination for mysteries just at present. Put it in my chambers. I'll examine it later. Pray convey my message to Her Grace."

When Anne bustled into the duchess's chamber, Lucia was laying on her daybed, gazing at nothing. Dejection had settled over her like a blanket of snow. She sat up, dismayed, when the maid announced that Lynkellyn requested her company yet again. "Ask His Grace to excuse me, Anne. I am quite exhausted from this afternoon's outing."

"Very well, Your Grace." She left the room to carry out her orders only to return a few minutes later, extremely flustered. "Your Grace! His Grace insists! Laddock says as how he said he would come up and dress you himself if you refuse." She blushed rosily. Lucia blanched.

"My habit, if you please, Anne," she said in a small, shaky voice.

Lucia sat before her dressing table as Anne combed her ebony tresses into a fashionable style. "Shall I powder your hair, Your Grace?" she asked, reaching for the box.

"No time. The duke is waiting for me." The maid helped her into her habit and she picked up her gloves from the dressing table, saying reluctantly, "I suppose I must join the duke."

A few minutes later, she stepped into the library wearing a blue velvet habit with a double set of ivory buttons down the front. A small, blue velvet hat reminiscent of the cavaliers of a century before set at a rakish angle on her head, the bonnet's brim caught up on one side with a silver brooch with a white feather curling down to caress her cheek. "I am ready to ride in the park, Robin." She said, speaking barely above a whisper.

"And in very good time!" His drawl held a congratulatory note as he looked up from his ledgers. "You see, ma chérie, we deal very well together if you do as I bid you."

Lucia's chin lifted and a martial gleam lit her eyes. She opened her mouth to speak, but, rising from his desk, Robin forestalled her. "I've had enough of your tongue for one day, my sweet! You will obey me docilely or I will lock you in your chambers for a few days without so much as your maid for company."

"It's you who should be locked up! In Newgate! Preferably forever!" Lucia flung at him savagely, all traces of fear washed away in the swift current of fury.

Robin skirted the desk to grasp her wrist. As he tilted her face up to his with a hand beneath her chin, the glint in his eyes made her shudder. "I intend to tame you, my tigress, so retract your claws and resign yourself to my company and my guidance," he said. "'Twill be the most pleasant course for you and the least troublesome for me."

His eyes bored into hers, daring her to challenge him. At last, she wrenched her gaze away, daunted by his fiery glare. "I am not an object to be paraded about, then stored away until you have need of it, Your Grace, and I will not be treated like one!"

Robin laughed. "No, my sweet, you are not an object. You are the means to a most satisfactory end. As long as I have you and the child you are going to bear me, Mountheathe will never inherit a farthing of the old duke's fortune; so you are going to stay with me and be my obedient little wife. I shall do whatever is necessary to gain your compliance. Now as to the purpose of our sudden public appearance: unsavory tales of our singular wedding have already spread through Town, due, sans doute, to Saddewythe's busy tongue. Since the truth is damaging to my campaign for respectability, we must demonstrate to the world that our union is a love match and that Saddewythe witnessed a scandalous, but romantic elopement, not a criminal abduction. While we are riding in the park this afternoon, we are newlyweds in love and you will act accordingly. Enfin, we will play at this charade any time we are in public."

"Very well, Your Grace, since I cherish the little freedom you allow me, I will live your lies for you, but I doubt that anyone will believe such a farce," she said.

"Just see that your performance is credible," Lynkellyn snapped, "and my name is Robin. Please contrive to remember it! Come! The horses are waiting."

The short trip to Hyde Park passed in stony silence. Warmer than usual for April, The sun caressed Lucia with its balmy rays and lifted her spirits, in spite of her companion and her predicament. It had been so long since she had ridden that she yearned to give her prancing white stallion his head, but, instead, she trotted sedately beside her husband into the park.

"Nous somme amoureux!" Robin said, his voice crisp and cold. "Talk to me! Flirt! Laugh!"

He turned to her with an adoring smile that did not quite reach his steely eyes and waited expectantly.

"I -- what shall I -- speak of?" Lucia asked, flustered.

Robin gave a slight shrug as they joined the fashionable throng which slowly circled the park. "Do you read?"

"Oh, yes. When I open a book, I forget -- everything."

"Novels, I suppose?" He skillfully maneuvered his horse past two carriages which blocked the road while their occupants conversed.

"I enjoy novels, but I also like poetry, history, and philosophy. My parents were very liberal in my formal education when they could afford to provide any at all. I fear I am something of a bluestocking. Only proper, I suppose, for a governess."

"You will never hold such a position again. As the Duchess of Lynkellyn, you will soon have a family of your own to raise," Amberley said. Lucia's mouth tightened and her eyes flashed. "Smile, ma chérie!" he grinned. "Je t'adore, héin? How did you ever manage to keep a servile schoolroom tongue in your head with a temper like yours?"

"I have had to swallow a great deal of anger and pride over the years."

"And to escape into a great many books?"

"I had free access to Lord Saddewythe's library. I was the only one who ever went there and some of the books had not been off the shelf in years." Her anger momentarily forgotten, she smiled saucily up at him from beneath long, black lashes, her eyes sparkling like sunlight on water. "I especially enjoyed reading Aristophanes. 'Lysistrata' is my favorite play."

An answering gleam lit Robin's eyes. "You've had a liberal education, indeed, little minx!" he grinned. They looked at each other and broke into laughter. The emotional tension of the past few hours dissipated and an unspoken truce sprang up between them.

Their conversation wandered freely from literature to art to their travels and touched at last upon the duello. "The pistol has always been my weapon," Lucia confessed. "When crossing swords, I sometimes run out of stamina before my opponent, but with a pistol, I am a crack shot." She wrinkled her nose, frowning. "At least, I used to be. It has been more than four years since I pulled a trigger."

"I will enjoy testing your metal," Robin smiled. "At the castle, we shall have room to pursue both swordplay and target practice. I daresay the servants will be quite shocked to see Their Graces have at each other with rapiers in the Long Gallery!"

Polite London swirled about the oblivious couple in all its disapproving hauteur. Some people turned pointedly away from them as they passed. Others gaped in open curiosity at the notorious profligate duke and his abducted duchess. Acid tongues flung insults at their backs. They did not notice until Lucia heard a familiar voice from a passing landau.

"So that is the Duchess of Lynkellyn!" A rotund lady in an orange turban said to her companion in the coach. "When I took her in as befitted my Christian duty, she was nothing! A ragged little hoyden without a shred of reputation or a farthing to her name! I lavished every luxury upon her and how did she repay me? The worthless jade cast immodest lures at Laddon! I was never so shocked in my life! But, being the charitable Christian woman that I am, I found her a position with Lady Saddewythe instead of turning her out into the street as she deserved. Well, 'tis obvious the brazen baggage served poor Winifred no better than she served me!" As the carriage rolled on, the woman glanced back with a malevolent smirk.

Lucia sat stone still in the saddle, all color drained from her face. Her grip on her reins tightened and her horse halted. Amberley stopped beside her.

"Lucia..."

"That was Lady Laddon, my aunt." Her voice hardly rose above a whisper. "Truly, Robin, I never tried to attract Lord Laddon. I avoided him when I could, but he -- he kept pursuing me, cornering me, until I had to go somewhere else or risk -- " Her words trailed away as a blush suffused her cheeks.

"She is just a sharp-tongued, old harpy, ma chérie. Pay her no heed," Robin said, covering her hand with his.

"She is my family, Robin. Save for my parents, she is the only person who ever helped me or cared about me and now," Lucia's eyes darkened with anguish. "Now she despises me."

"I daresay she always despised you, ma chérie! I know I sound cruel, but the only reason such a woman would take in a poor relation would be in the expectation of securing an unpaid servant. Admit that you were little more than a slave in her house."

"She did me a kindness. She gave me a home when no one else would. She merely asked me to earn my keep."

"From well before sunrise until after midnight, I'll wager, and in every capacity from governess to scullery maid."

"She is my family," Lucia insisted with a sad shake of her head.

"I am your family now, Lucia," Robin said, bringing her fingers to his lips. "Let us rely on each other."

She pulled her hand away, an angry flush flooding her cheeks. "You are not my family, Your Grace. You are my gaoler!"

Robin drew away. Pain flickered in his eyes and was swiftly veiled. "If you will have it so." He urged his horse forward. Lucia brought her mount alongside his and they continued their trek through the park in silence.

Without the distraction of conversation, the insults of passersby leaped out at them. Weary of hatred and rejection, Robin thought wistfully of his beloved Paris. A gallop through the Bois de Boulogne amongst laughing, joking friends would do much to soothe his frayed spirits. He shrugged. No one said claiming his legacy was going to be pleasant, he reminded himself.

"Gustav! Gustav!" A grinning man astride a frisky chestnut bore down on the duke, three reluctant companions in tow. Robin reined in his horse, Lucia at his side. As he watched the party advance, he saw shocked disapproval in the eyes of the man's friends.

The gentleman halted before Amberley, an eager smile on his face. "Gustav Mohlenbruck! By all that's holy! Surely you remember me! Captain Anthony Bellefield! Only I'm Lord Anthony now! What the devil are you doing in London, old man? I -- " As he looked into Lynkellyn's cold, haughty features, his words died on his lips.

"I fear you have mistaken me for someone else, sir," his grace said icily, his perfectly modulated tones contrasting sharply with the broken and thickly accented German-English Lord Bellefield remembered Mohlenbruck to have spoken.

In this rebuff, Bellefield's friends recognized the escape from scandal that Robin was offering and pounced upon it. "Come on, old fellow! All a mistake!" One of his companions touched Bellefield's arm. Bellefield looked into the pleading eyes of his friends and then turned back to meet Amberley's indifferent gaze. After a minute's hard scrutiny, Bellefield tipped his hat, saying, "I apologize for my intrusion, sir. You closely resemble a man I knew while serving in the American colonies?" He allowed his voice to trail into inquiry, his eyes narrowing.

"I have never been there," Amberley lied smoothly.

"I trust you will forgive my error, sir." Lord Bellefield lifted his hat, wished Lynkellyn a good day, and rode away with his friends.

Robin watched the gentlemen disappear, hearing something of the hastily whispered gossip Bellefield's companions were only too eager to provide him. The duke urged his mount forward, his heart heavy and his face grim.

Lucia reined in beside him. "He was a friend from your past."

"Yes! I was a fur trapper in Virginia when I met him. We fought Frenchmen and Red Indians together. He was a close friend and I'll not let him ruin himself by acknowledging my acquaintance." Robin's shoulders sagged. "Let us return home. I've had my fill of the park and the ton for one day."

At dinner that evening, Georges announced that he was sailing for France on the morrow.

"This is sudden, Georges," Robin said.

"I miss Paris, mon ami, and now that I've helped you settle your affairs, the criminal life no longer appeals to me. Perhaps I'll go home and find myself a wife, in a more orthodox manner, naturellement." Georges sipped his wine, a hint of laughter in his eyes.

"Not planning to turn respectable, are you, Georges?" Lynkellyn grinned.

"And why shouldn't my aspirations match yours, Your Grace? By next year, you will have turned from a sow's ear into a silk purse, héin? I still want to be worthy of your regard!"

Robin laughed and raised his wine goblet in salute. "This sow's ear will always cherish your friendship, mon ami. You must return to visit us whenever the fancy strikes you."

Lucia rose from the table. "Yes! You must come back to stay with us. We will be quite dull with just each other for company, I fear." Curtsying, she left the gentlemen to their port.

When she had gone, Robin filled Georges's glass. "I shall miss you dreadfully, mon vieux."

"You shall have ma belle cousine!"

"Mais oui. She is your cousin, isn't she?" Robin's voice dripped with suspicion. "What the devil do you intend by offering to hide Lucia from me on one of your estates? I thought you were with me in this venture."

De Valière was silent for a moment. "Her family -- my family -- has abandoned her. She is not happy, mon ami, and I wanted to help her a little. You must promise me that you will treat ma petite well, Robin. She needs something good to happen in her life."

"What's this? No denials! No excuses! Georges, you surprise me!"

"I am not going to defend my actions to you, Robin. Offering my cousin sanctuary is the only decent thing I've done, regarding her future. I want to befriend you, mon ami, but she is a member of my family and I must also do what is best for her. Ce dilemme est enrageant!" Georges shook his head. "I shall end in -- how do you call the place -- mais, oui! Bedlam!"

Amberley decided to let the matter drop. "Marriage with your cousin is like to drive me into Bedlam as well," he muttered darkly as he swirled the port in his goblet.

"Problems, mon ami?"

"She fights me at every turn! She is the most stubborn, willful, exasperating woman I have ever met. She will not be ruled at all and she feels not a dash of good will toward me!"

"Are you surprised?" Georges raised a brow.

"No, I suppose not," Robin said. "I had hoped, though, that we'd have at least a semblance of friendship by now. We've had ten days to achieve a truce."

"As long as you treat her like a prisoner of war, Robin, you will be at odds with her."

"Meaning I should trust her not to bolt," Amberley concluded. "I can't afford the risk."

"I believe you will have to take it. If she truly intends to escape, she will, unless you literally lock her up. Such a course would not look good, héin? What's more, I would be compelled as her kinsman to do more on her behalf than merely offer sanctuary."

Robin met Georges's eyes. "A threat, mon ami?"

"I am concerned for ma petite," he shrugged. "Your temper is legendary, Robin. I'll not have Lucia feel the full brunt of it."

"I won't hurt her, Georges, but I won't provide her with an easy opportunity to flee, either. That would spell disaster for me. It isn't just escape that worries me, though. What of other men?"

"Other men?" Georges's jaw dropped. "You've only been married ten days!"

"Yes, I know, but once Lucia tastes freedom, she might take a fancy to someone and I've no desire to be cuckolded. If you could have seen the way those so-called 'gentlemen' in the park leered at her today, you would understand." Robin's frown deepened. "That cur, Mountheathe, has already pawed her and I'll wager others will follow him if I don't protect what's mine."

"Mon Dieu! You don't think she'd really be unfaithful?"

"Why shouldn't she? There's precious little affection between us. She might do it merely to spite me."

"Do you intend to be un mari fidèle yourself, mon ami?"

Robin shrugged. "I don't know, Georges. I can't stop thinking about Lucia and our situation. I've hardly noticed any other women since our wedding."

"Then your marriage is not a lost cause, mon ami. Woo her and win her! But, above all, try to trust her a little. That is my advice to you."

Amberley shook his head, smiling. "A courtship would be rather hypocritical at this late date, Georges."

"Perhaps! But it couldn't hurt!" the Frenchman said.

Robin laughed. "You are an eternal optimist, mon cher!"

Chapter 10:

In Which Their Graces Lose a House Guest and Receive Callers

The next morning, Robin and Lucia said goodbye to the Marquis de Valière. Georges kissed Lucia's cheek, promising to advance her cause with their family. As the gentlemen walked to the waiting carriage, Georges again adjured Robin to be gentle and understanding with his bride. The two men clasped hands and, French to the last, hugged each other farewell.

After Georges was gone, Robin buried himself with his estate ledgers in the library and Lucia threw herself into setting Lynkellyn House in order. During the day, they saw each other only at meals, formal affairs eaten in a strained silence at opposite ends of a long dining table.

After dinner, Robin returned to his accounts, leaving Lucia to a lonely evening by the fire with a book or a deck of cards. She occasionally sought his companionship, but his face and demeanor were always icily unapproachable, his voice cruel and cutting. She retreated in pain and confusion every time.

Nevertheless, he came to her bedchamber each night to make love to her and stayed until dawn. Lucia's hungry heart began to relish his visits to the warm darkness of her room and to yearn at noon for the fire and joy they shared at midnight.

A sennight after Georges's departure, the Earl of Malkent faced his countess across the breakfast table, open-mouthed. "You intend to do what, Valeria?"

"Pay a morning call on the Duchess of Lynkellyn today," her ladyship said. "After all, she is a member of your family."

"Only because my second cousin insisted on marrying into Laddon's clan. A more vulgar set than the Laddons I've never met!"

"Nevertheless, I am going to call upon Her Grace. She cannot be any worse than Lavinia Laddon, surely."

"But -- but," Malkent spluttered, "How will it look, Valeria? And what about the Rogue? What if he should try to -- to -- " Tracy was at a loss for words.

"What could he do in broad daylight with his wife present, Tracy? And besides, it has been ten years. His ardor for me must have cooled by now. Why else would he have married this girl?"

Tracy gazed across the table at his beloved. A decade and four children had come to pass since his wedding day, yet he found Valeria as bewitching as ever. His teeth clenched in fury as he envisioned that beast assaulting her as she lay helpless. "Amberley abducted that woman and forced her to the altar in order to get his hands on Giles's legacy. He is the same animal he always was! If you will not accept my word, ask Mountheathe. He says the man has already run through eighty thousand pounds! Wastrel!"

"Well, if that is, indeed, true, then I'm certain the new duchess could use a friend in London. I pity her, married to such a man, and I want to help her. Is that so wrong?"

"No, Valeria, but suppose the Rogue manages to get you alone and tries to-to..."

"To what? To seduce me? To ravish me? Why, I shall scream and every servant in the house will come to see what is happening. He will be mortified!"

"Nevertheless, I wish you would not go!"

"Oh, my love! I hate to see that poor girl suffer for her husband's sins. Perhaps if I befriend her, she

won't feel so lost and frightened here in London. I can't hold a grudge forever and I want to do this! I'm going to do it!"

Tracy sighed. "Very well, Val, but don't expect me to support your efforts. I should have prosecuted that viper before he had a chance to slither to the Continent. I'm certainly not going to grant him any more favors."

In another breakfast parlor some distance away in Mount Street, Lady Amaryllis Blayne and her lord were engaged in a similar discussion on the same topic. "But Ryl, you can't be serious, love! The man's a..."

"The man is my cousin, William," Ryl reminded him coldly.

"Come now, dearest. The whole world knows what he tried to do to Valeria! How can you even think of acknowledging him?"

"I know what Giles convinced everyone Robin tried to do, but Robin denied it and kept denying it until the day he left England. I, for one, choose to believe him. I will always stand his friend."

"You are the only one who believes him, then. Thank the Lord that the rest of Society is not so gullible."

Lady Ryl's brows rose, her teacup clattering in its saucer. "I am not gullible! Really, William! How can you insult me so?" A large tear coursed down her soft pink and white cheek.

"But, my love," Sir William reasoned, "suppose you are wrong. Suppose-suppose he -- acts dishonorably -- toward you!"

"Robin is like a brother to me. He would never behave in such a manner!"

"People change, Ryl. The Lord only knows what Amberley's life has been like during the past ten years. This bride of his, for instance! The talk is that he abducted her! Held up a coach in Epping Forest and carried her off tied to his horse! Some poor, terrified, little governess, Ryl! And he only married her so he could lay claim to Mountheathe's legacy from the late duke. Are these the actions of a man you would want to call 'brother'?"

Her chin rose defiantly. "I don't believe a word of it! Robin told me once that he intended to marry for love and love alone. He has obviously fallen in love with a girl who is beneath his station. She might welcome a friend to show her how to get on in Town. The poor little creature must be quaking with terror at her sudden change in circumstance."

Blayne sighed as he picked up the morning post. "Do what you think best, my love. I know you shall do so anyway, regardless of my feelings in the matter."

Impulsively, Amaryllis jumped up and ran around the breakfast table to Sir William's side. "You are a dear, Will," she said with a dazzling smile as she hugged the seated gentleman to her bosom. Releasing him, she announced, "Well, I'm off to call at Lynkellyn House. I do hope you will count Robin among your friends again, William. It would be wonderful to have the duke and duchess at Blayne for Christmas!" She danced happily out of the room.

In the act of sipping tea, Sir William choked, spluttering, "Entertain that blackguard! At Blayne! Never!"

In yet a third household, conversation concerning the Duke of Lynkellyn dominated the morning meal. "I'm certain the man I met in the park the other day was Gustav Mohlenbruck. That red mane is unmistakable, German accent or not. The more I think about it, the more convinced I become!" Lord Bellefield said to his sister, Teresa.

"Then why did he deny it?"

"I don't know, Teresa. I suspect there is a great deal I don't know about the man." Tony sipped his coffee thoughtfully and bit into a blueberry muffin.

"Perhaps he doesn't want you to know him, Tony. Maybe he was warning you to keep your distance. They do say the Duke of Lynkellyn abducts ladies and all sorts of wicked things. He is not received, you know." Teresa's eyes widened. "Even his own family disowns him!"

"That doesn't matter! The man saved my life -- pulled me, wounded, out of battle while carrying a ball in his own body. Took another one saving me! He almost died. Devil take it, I almost died! Would have, too, if it hadn't been for Gustav! I owe the man!"

"But, Tony! Think of the scandal if you were seen with him! Society would cut us. We would be ruined!" Teresa almost wailed.

Lord Bellefield struck his fist into his palm. "Once I call a man 'friend', I don't turn away from him merely because Society disapproves. I'm going to call on him!"

Her soft, golden curls bobbing, Teresa shook her head. Large, pearly tears gathered in her brown eyes. "No, Anthony! Please! I wish you would not."

He eyed his sister with scorn. "Don't turn your tears on me, my girl. I'm not one of your lovesick beaus. I'm impervious, remember? Anyway, my mind is made up."

Lady Malkent and Lady Blayne had the misfortune to meet each other face-to-face on the doorstep of Lynkellyn House. For the past eight years, since the night Amaryllis had vociferously defended her erring cousin at her debutante ball, the two women had studiously ignored each other at all social functions. Since neither lady could hit upon another approach in this singular instance, each turned pointedly away from the other to stare hard at his grace's door.

When Laddock opened the door, Amaryllis said, "I am Lady Amaryllis Blayne. I would like to speak to Her Grace." She presented her card with a toss of her pale gold curls.

Valeria also produced a card. "The Countess of Malkent to see Her Grace."

"If you will step in, I will see if Her Grace is receiving." Laddock showed the callers into a small parlor to wait.

After a long silence during which the ladies surveyed their surroundings in minute detail rather than look at each other, Amaryllis said a little self-consciously, "I must say, I've never seen this house looking so well!"

"Indeed!" Valeria settled herself in a comfortable chair.

"Yes. Grandpapa always said money was to enjoy and he didn't enjoy squandering it on a new roof when he could buy a fine hunter for half the price. This house was falling apart when I visited here as a child."

"Obviously the present occupant has no qualms about spending his money lavishly on household improvements; doubtless, because it isn't his money to spend."

Amaryllis turned wide, angry, eyes on her companion. "I find your insinuations detestable, particularly when you voice them in His Grace's own house!"

"Oh, come now, my lady! Everyone knows the Amberley fortune should have gone to Lord Mountheathe! Robert Amberley usurped that legacy and if he thinks his inheritance is going to buy him forgiveness for his past and a renewed entree into Polite Society, he is sadly mistaken." Valeria smoothed a crease from her skirt, gazing smugly at a porcelain shepherdess on the mantelpiece.

"If that is your attitude, whyever did you come here?" Amaryllis said.

"To help the wretched creature who is his latest victim, surely. The child will be desperately in need of aid and solace after being at the mercy of that -- that -- " The countess shuddered. "That blackguard!"

Amaryllis clenched her fists at her sides, angry color suffusing her cheeks as she tried to form a polite reply. Valeria quirked an eyebrow, awaiting her response.

At that fortuitous moment, Laddock opened the door and bowed. "If you will be so kind as to follow me, ladies." Both women came to a sense of their surroundings and the tension was broken. Amaryllis turned her back pointedly on her companion and flounced out of the room. Valeria followed at a statelier pace.

Laddock stopped at a set of polished oak doors and threw them open, announcing, "The Countess of Malkent! Lady Blayne!"

The ladies were thrust into chaos. Everywhere, servants scoured, scrubbed, swept, and polished. Two men were measuring some windows for draperies and others were holding up samples of silk, velvet, and brocade for the inspection of a young woman standing on a stool in the middle of the room, her back to the door.

In a muslin blouse, a blue cotton skirt, and a white apron, all of which were smudged and dirty, the duchess was hardly any better dressed than her toiling servant girls. Contrary to the duke's wishes, her hair was hidden completely beneath a lacy linen cap.

"No! No! No!" She shook her head distractedly. "I want blue for this room. That color is decidedly green! Don't you have anything else?"

"Your Grace!" A footman called frantically from a far corner. Two men, balanced precariously on footladders, were endeavoring to hang a huge tapestry depicting medieval battles and hunting scenes. The panorama covered the entire wall.

"It still is not straight," her grace opined. "Perhaps if you raised your side a little higher, Fletcher?"

Lucia's maid, Anne, hurried over to Laddock. She glanced at the ladies and whispered, "You were supposed to show them to the Gold Salon!"

"This is the Gold Salon!" the butler hissed back.

"No! No! This is the Blue Salon. Her Grace is changing the color. The Gold Salon is upstairs. It's the one which used to be green!"

Laddock raised his eyes to heaven. "What do you suggest we do?"

Anne glanced again at the bewildered ladies huddled just inside the room and shrugged. "I shall inform Her Grace and let her deal with them."

Relief flooded Laddock's eyes as Anne threaded her way through the busy servants to the duchess's side. "Your Grace!" she said urgently.

"One moment, Anne!" Lucia's attention was wholly taken up with the tradesmen. "Yes! That is the design I want, but perhaps a shade darker?"

The draper held up another sample. "That is it exactly." She turned to the footman. "Fletcher, that is perfect. We'll never get it any straighter. I'll leave the hanging to you. Please be careful with the tapestry and do try to work quietly. His Grace is but two doors away in the library." Lady Malkent and Lady Blayne exchanged startled glances.

Lucia finished her business with the draper. As he and his assistants began to gather their samples, Anne became more impatient. "Your Grace! The ladies..."

"Yes! Yes! I have not forgotten them! They are waiting in the Gold Salon. I shall need but a minute to change into a suitable gown."

"Your Grace, Laddock made a mistake! He thought this room was still the Gold Salon and he showed them in here. They are standing by the door."

Lucia turned toward the door, her eyes widening as she saw the two stylishly dressed women standing there. Taking a deep breath, she stepped off the stool and walked over to her guests. "Ladies," she curtsied, smiling nervously. "I fear you find me at a disadvantage. If you will allow Laddock to escort you to another salon, I shall join you presently. I do sincerely apologize for receiving you in this manner. I hope you will forgive me?"

Amaryllis smiled. "Yes, of course! One must allow for a bit of confusion in a new household." Still staring at the pandemonium, Valeria nodded.

"Laddock, please show the ladies to the Gold Salon. It is upstairs," Lucia said. Heightened color suffused the butler's otherwise impassive countenance as he led the visitors from the room.

When the door closed behind them, Lucia sagged against it.

"Your Grace! Are you ill?" Anne cried in alarm.

"I can't believe! Callers! Robin said no one would acknowledge us!" Lucia sprang up. "I must change into something suitable! But what? Anne, you must help me dress! And ask the cook to send up a pot of tea and some of those wonderful cakes I smelled baking this morning."

Anne wrung her hands "Your Grace! She can't! One of the kitchen maids knocked the tray with all the freshly baked cakes on the floor, so Laddock says, and the cat ate them!"

Lucia wanted to cry. "All of them?" she asked faintly.

"Yes, Your Grace. That is, what the cat didn't eat, Flossie -- that's the kitchen maid -- stepped on, trying to shoo away the cat. The cook set about making more right off, but I believe it will be another hour..."

"Do you know the pastry shop in the next block?"

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Good. Have Laddock send someone for two-no, make it three dozen cakes. Then come help me dress. Tell Laddock I wish tea to be served as soon as possible. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Your Grace. It shall be as you say."

Fifteen minutes later, Lucia entered the newly christened 'Gold Salon', prepared to entertain her callers. She wore a simple morning gown of blue damask embroidered in gold at the neck, sleeves, and hem. The soft folds of silk caressed her body, giving her a sensual allure while the quiet simplicity of the gown's design lent an air of gentility and innocence.

Her gleaming tresses, no longer hidden beneath a cap, were woven in an intricate design of heavy, black braids, his grace having delivered a thunderous "No!" to the suggestion that her hair be cut to a stylish length.

To the ladies who watched her enter the room, she was calm, confident, and regal. They could not know that fear and embarrassment had put the roses in her cheeks nor that her palms were moist with anxiety.

"Good day, ladies!" She curtsied before sitting opposite her guests on a divan newly upholstered in a gleaming gold brocade. She hesitated, uncertain as to how to begin a conversation. "I -- I understand that you are His Grace's cousin," she said after an uncomfortable silence, focusing her eyes on a spot somewhere between the two women.

"Oh, yes! Robin and I used to play together as children when he visited my home on holiday," the blonde effused. "Those were glorious days!"

Lucia silently congratulated herself on having discovered which of her guests was Lady Blayne. Her other caller, therefore, must be Lady Malkent. Her heart sank a little as she surveyed the woman who had so captivated Robin in his youth.

The lady was lovely. Huge brown eyes glowed in a perfect oval face framed by vibrant chestnut curls. A pixie nose and delicately sculptured lips coupled with a creamy white complexion and a willowy, seductive shape made Lucia wonder that only three gentlemen had been in serious competition for her

hand a decade ago.

Valeria's voice was crisp and cool as she said, "I hope you are enjoying your stay in London, Your Grace."

"Lucia! Please, both of you, call me Lucia. In truth, I find 'Your Grace' a little daunting."

"I've come to welcome you into the family, Lucia!" Amaryllis smiled. "I am certain we shall be like sisters. It will be such fun! We can take tea together and go shopping together and I would love to help you when you have little ones! Robin is such a dear that I know the woman he loves must be someone truly special."

The countess cleared her throat and glared at Lady Blayne. Lucia stared uncomfortably down at her hands, at a loss for words. Amaryllis looked from one to the other of them, confused, then shook her head vigorously. "Oh, but what they're saying about an abduction can't be true! It was a moonlight elopement, was it not? So romantic!" Ryl clasped her hands together and smiled dreamily. "I can't believe my dear Cousin Robin could ever do those terrible, wicked things. He is a good man! He is!"

Exasperated at Amaryllis's naivete, Valeria impulsively reached out to touch Lucia's arm. "You must forgive Lady Blayne. She is forever misguidedly defending that scoundrel."

Lucia squared her shoulders and lied for the duke in a clear, steady voice. "But she is right, my lady. Robin is a fine man and I love him very much. There was no abduction. It was an elopement."

Valeria stared at Lucia, patently incredulous, and even Amaryllis's confidence wavered at such a forthright, rehearsed speech.

"Nevertheless," Amaryllis said suddenly, "my cousin has a fierce temper. I well remember how cruel and unthinking he could be when he was crossed. If you... if my cousin should make you uncomfortable or unhappy in...in any way, you have only to tell me. I can provide a...a change of scenery, perhaps, or whatever you may require. In the strictest confidence, of course."

Valeria searched Lucia's eyes. "We both want to be your friends, Lucia. You may rely upon us if you are in trouble. If His Grace is cruel, as Lady Blayne says, then..."

"I am quite content here with my husband, thank you, although I appreciate your concern," Lucia rushed to say. Amaryllis and Valeria regarded her intently, skepticism writ large upon their faces. "Indeed, His Grace is very good to me!" she insisted.

Sir William Blayne entered White's in a brown study, the scowl that played about his mouth lending

menace to his normally warm hazel eyes. With a sigh, he flung himself into a chair next to the Earl of Malkent.

Tracy lowered his newspaper. "What's got you so blue- deviled, Will? Your morning can't have been as disastrous as mine."

"'Tis that damned Lynkellyn rogue!" Sir William snarled. "There was nothing for it, but Ryl must needs call at his house this morning. I daresay he's seducing her even now while I kick my heels here, a cuckolded fool!" Fuming, he picked up Tracy's paper, glanced at it without seeing it, and tossed it down.

"Then it must be a veritable orgy, for Val is over there too, intent on rescuing the duchess from her husband's clutches. When I think of that animal's paws on my wife! 'Tis not to be borne!" Tracy sprang out of his chair to pace furiously.

Sir William twisted in his seat. "We should go over there and confront him before he does our ladies any damage. I'll put a ball through the bloody villain if I have to!"

"Yes, you're right, Will! We can't just sit here and let it happen! Let us be off! If our wives have been harmed in any way, the Rogue shall pay with his life!"

Half an hour later, the knocker at Lynkellyn House sounded imperatively as the gentlemen prepared to confront the duke. The door swung open and a very proper butler faced them.

"Announce the Earl of Malkent and Sir William Blayne," Tracy challenged him, ready to demand that Valeria be brought forth at once.

"Very good, my lord." Laddock acquiesced without the slightest struggle. "If you will follow me, please." The gentlemen entered, surprised at the butler's lack of hesitation.

Just as Laddock was about to close the door, another man climbed the stairs, saying, "Lord Bellefield to see His Grace, please."

"Very good. This way, please." Laddock led the party up to the Gold Salon and threw open the doors, announcing in stentorian tones, "The Earl of Malkent, Lord Bellefield, Sir William Blayne."

Lucia rose to greet the new arrivals with a beaming smile that totally belied the cold panic at the pit of her stomach. She did not know how many more covert offers of sanctuary she could face.

The belligerent husbands swaggered into the room and Lucia invited them to be seated. They exchanged sheepish glances, realizing that their wives were in no danger from the wicked duke. Indeed, he seemed to be in no hurry to put in an appearance at all.

Having reached the same conclusion, Lord Bellefield was disappointed. He wanted a closer look at Lynkellyn. He had listened to all the gossip about the duke and it had only confirmed his suspicions that Amberley was indeed his old comrade, Gustav.

Despite Lucia's efforts to amuse her guests while steering politely around all the topics they most wanted to discuss, the conversation returned again and again to her past, her family, her courtship, and her marriage. She endeavored to answer their courteous, but persistent questions with as little of the truth as possible while not telling an obvious lie. It was not easy. Lord Saddewythe's account of her abduction had passed like an Olympic torch from one gossip to the next until there was no one in London who had not heard the tale.

"I must say, Your Grace, that, according to Lord Saddewythe, at least, your marriage was extremely sudden and-er- unexpected," Valeria remarked, inquiry in her tone.

"His Grace was anxious to marry. His -- ardor -- would not be denied," Lucia blushed, all the while wishing herself back in the schoolroom at Saddewythe Manor.

Tracy leaned toward Sir William, his lip curling as he muttered, "I wonder which spurred the Rogue more, his passion for his bride or his lust for Giles's fortune?" Sir William grinned.

The flustered duchess, who had been near enough to overhear Malkent's disdainful quip, was saved from a totally embarrassing moment by the timely arrival of Laddock with the tea tray. The recently purchased cakes were heaped on a delicate china platter. Dainty little cups and saucers, matching the platter's pattern, awaited her grace's pleasure and an exquisitely engraved silver tea service completed the set. Lucia's puzzled gaze fell upon the unfamiliar dishes then flew inquiringly to the butler's face. "Family heirlooms, unearthed yesterday, Your Grace," Laddock whispered as he set the tray before her.

"Thank you, Laddock," she said as he bowed and departed.

Since their arrival at Lynkellyn House, Lucia's guests had heard of thumps, bumps, and shouts from the floor below. As Lucia handed the first cup of tea around, she flinched at an incredibly loud thud. A high-pitched squeal and mournful lamentations over an injured toe followed and a door slammed. An inquiring voice was raised and answered, then footsteps pounded on the stairs.

A few seconds later, the duke entered the room and the sun streaming through the sparkling windows turned his coppery curls to fire. "Ma chérie!" he said to Lucia. "How the devil am I to concentrate with all this noise! Je te supplie." Suddenly becoming aware of a wider audience, he bowed to the visitors. "My apologies! I was not aware that anyone had called or I would have been here earlier to welcome you."

"You said you did not wish to be disturbed, Robin," Lucia reminded him.

"So I did! Nonetheless, I'm ready for a little diversion." Taking Amaryllis's hand, Robin smiled at her, much to Sir William's consternation. "Ryl," he grinned, "I hear you are my champion."

"I believe in you, Robin. I always have."

"I thank you, Cousin." When Amberley kissed Amaryllis's hand, only Tracy's firm hold on Sir William's arm prevented him from lunging forward in righteous fury to protect his lady. As it was, Blayne sat rigidly in his chair, fuming and wishing for his horsewhip.

Robin's gaze shifted to the countess and Tracy visibly stiffened. Lynkellyn bowed formally, saying, "I am honored to meet you again, my lady."

A little daunted in spite of her obvious safety, Valeria glanced at her husband, then nodded slightly to her host. "Thank you, Your Grace," was all she could manage.

He next bowed to Tracy and Sir William. They inclined their heads curtly and he passed on without comment to Lord Bellefield.

"Your Grace," his lordship said with a bow and an affable grin, "I fear you will think I intrude, but I had to be sure." his voice trailed off, then he said more certainly, "and it is you, isn't it?"

"Why did you come here, Tony?" Robin's voice was low. "Don't you realize an association with me could ruin you? I lied to you in America! I'm a dishonored man! An adventurer! I want you to cut my acquaintance before our friendship stains your good name."

"Cut your acquaintance? Nonsense, man! A comrade-in- arms! Saved my life! Besides, you owe me some explanations. Shall we cry friends?"

The duke grinned as he clasped Bellefield's hand. "I couldn't ask for a better, Tony! My friends, rare though they are, call me Robin these days."

Having served everyone else tea while Robin was greeting his guests, Lucia handed him a cup as he sank down on the sofa beside her. Tony was on his right and the two men began to rehash old times.

Amaryllis devoured Robin with her eyes. It had been so long since she'd seen him, so many years of fighting and arguing for him, of weeping, worrying, and praying for him. Now he sat across from her; elegant, smiling, yet so very distant. The mocking drawl and the cruel hardness in his eyes were new and they made her shudder. Her once laughing, loving cousin had become a forbidding stranger.

The duchess smiled at her guests as she gave a vague, evasive answer to yet another question concerning her marriage. Ryl watched as Lucia looked nervously at Robin before speaking and wondered if perhaps

the tales were true and Robin had been -- unkind -- to his bride.

"I am going to my modiste's tomorrow. Would you care to accompany me, Lucia?" Ryl asked impulsively, ignoring Tracy's frown. Lucia's eyes widened and she glanced furtively at the duke. Lynkellyn was deep in conversation with Lord Bellefield, apparently oblivious to all else.

Lucia hesitated. "I -- I will have to ask Robin. He -- always likes to know where I am."

"But, surely, if Lady Malkent agrees to accompany us, His Grace will consider you safe," Amaryllis said, casting a pleading glance at Valeria. "And, of course, we shall have a footman. His Grace certainly could not object, then?"

His attention suddenly caught, Robin turned to Lucia. "Are you plotting something, ma chérie?"

"Lady Malkent and I would like to take Lucia shopping with us tomorrow," Amaryllis said. "We will do everything possible to insure her safety."

Robin's eyes shifted from Amaryllis's eager face to Lucia's anxious one and, although his lips smiled, his eyes hardened to stony ice. "Contemplating an escape -- from the house, ma douce?" Suspicion hissed in his steely voice.

"It will be quite -- safe, Robin." Lucia's teacup rattled as she set it down. "I shall be positively surrounded with people; Lady Blayne, Lady Malkent, our maids and footmen."

He held up his hand to halt her tumbling words. "très bien! You may go! But if anything -- untoward -- happens, you may be sure I shall be by your side in a flash, to protect you, naturellement." Robin's eyes challenged Lucia's and her proud, chin rose.

"You seem inordinately concerned about Her Grace's safety, Rogue," Tracy said.

Robin's gaze never wavered from his lady's face. "I have many enemies, my lord."

Laddock entered the salon with another calling card on his silver tray. He bowed, offering it to the duke. Robin glanced at the card and frowned. "By all means, show him in and let us be done with this circus," he muttered as genteel conversation flowed around him.

When Laddock announced Lord Mountheathe, that conversation died. Giles, a vision in a maroon coat, apricot smallclothes, and a beribboned, silver-grey wig some six inches high, minced into the room. He paused on the threshold, surveying the duke's stylish guests through a quizzing glass, then flourished a white lace handkerchief as he bowed. Rising, he clasped the scrap of lace to his nose and grimaced as if he'd just detected some foul odor in the air.

As Mountheathe sauntered into the room, Robin gritted his teeth. How he itched to knock that saintly smirk off the bastard's face!

Seeing the dangerous glint in Robin's eyes, Lucia hurried toward Giles. "It's a pleasure to see you again, my lord. Won't you have a seat?"

"Thank you," he drawled, still holding the handkerchief to his nose as he sat down.

"Would you care for tea?" Lucia asked. Not waiting for his answer, she handed him a steaming cup. He sniffed suspiciously at its contents..

Hoping to diffuse the tension that hung thickly in the air, Amaryllis smiled at Lucia. "This is a lovely room, Your Grace. I'm amazed at how fine you've made this house look in such a short time. When Giles and I were last here, the place was falling apart, was it not, my lord?"

"Indeed, Cousin, but don't you think -- that is, does it not seem -- I mean, is the present decor not rather -- gaudy? Quite as if one were in a -- a bordello!" Giles's voice grew fainter as he finished his assessment and again brought his handkerchief delicately to his nose.

Mountheathe had stunned his audience into silence. Every lady in the room blushed scarlet. "I beg your pardon?" Lucia said incredulously.

"A bordello, my -- 'lady'. I'm certain you must be familiar with them." Giles lowered his scented square of lace to leer at the duchess. Lucia gasped in shock and indignation.

Robin stretched his legs, his eyes almost closed to hide the fury that was roiling within him. "How does a moral, upstanding man like yourself know so much about brothels, Giles? You told us you were above that sort of thing!" he drawled.

Giles reddened. "I have rescued several unfortunate females from such filthy holes. Employed them as chambermaids at Heathe Manor. Philanthropy is my life, Your Grace."

"Not much of a leap from making your bed to warming it, n'est-ce pas? Especially for an 'unfortunate female' of that stamp," Robin sneered.

"Gentlemen!" Sir William jumped to his feet. "There are ladies present!"

"I offer my apologies," Robin said with a respectful nod toward the women in the room.

"I also tender my apologies to the ladies." Giles rose to bow to Lady Blayne and Lady Malkent. Sitting, he sneered at Lucia. "A drab who grew up in the gutter can have no sensibilities to offend, so I see no

need to excuse myself to your fortune-hunting little strumpet, Rogue."

Martial fire flashed in Lucia's eyes, but before she could speak, Robin sprang to his feet. "Nom de Dieu! 'Tis very brave how you attack women, Sir Poltroon! If you've something nasty to say, say it to me and have done!"

Giles leaped out of his seat as well. "You and your doxy won't get away with this farce for long. There are quite a few irregularities in your so-called marriage and I intend to expose them all!"

"I assume you have seen the legal papers, every one duly signed and sealed. My wedding contract is ironclad. I know nothing of your 'irregularities'!"

"A quarter before midnight is an odd time for a wedding," Giles fired at him.

"When lovers elope, they don't wait until a respectable hour to wed! We married as soon as we found a parson!"

"And you found one at just a quarter of an hour before your chance to claim Grandpapa's inheritance disappeared. Most convenient for you, Coz!" Mountheathe sneered. "It doesn't matter, however, because I shall still have Grandpapa's fortune in the end. You certainly don't believe your strumpet is going to risk her beauty to bear you a child, do you, Rogue? After all, how will she attract another protector once you've finished with her if she is a cow?"

Loathing lit Robin's countenance as his hand clamped around a pistol in his pocket. Sensing impending disaster, Lucia leaped between the combatants and confronted Mountheathe. "You may believe what you choose, my lord, but I would have married my Robin gladly, rich or poor, noble or commoner, because I -- " Playing her part to the hilt, she lifted shining eyes to meet Robin's bemused gaze. "I love him more than anything in this world."

"Ma chérie!" He brought her hand to his lips, warm appreciation in his eyes. He pressed a second kiss on her blushing cheek, whispering in her ear, "Brava, ma petite!"

Giles laughed. "Love! A Whitechapel alley cat knows more about love than the pair of you do! This 'marriage' is nothing more than a blatant attempt to steal my inheritance. Everyone knows what you and your harlot are! Why don't you give it up, Rogue, and crawl back under your rock? Bah! I can no longer stomach such unsavory company. Bad 'cess to you, Rogue!" He strode from the room without a backward glance.

Tracy looked from Robin to Lucia in surprise, remembering his conversation with Robin at the Pelican three weeks before. Why were they suddenly claiming their marriage was a love- match? He resolved to call on Amberley and quiz him on the matter.

Lady Valeria rose, an embarrassed blush still tingeing her cheeks. The other callers followed suit, each thanking her grace with more civility than sincerity, for a lovely visit as they filed out.

When she and Robin were finally alone, Lucia sank into a chair, her legs suddenly too weak to hold her. "Vraiment, ma chérie," Robin smiled, "that went fairly well."

"It was an unmitigated disaster! All they wanted to talk about was our imaginary courtship and our sham of a marriage. Then, as if that were not enough, Lord Mountheathe appeared! I am loath to face any more of his insults and insinuations, Robin."

He sat beside her and took her hands in his. "This will all be over in a month or two, ma chérie, then we shall go up to Lynkellyn Castle and tranquility. My nearest neighbor is ten miles away. We shall be quite -- " he brought one of her hands to his lips "quite -- " then the other "alone." He gently kissed her sad little mouth. "In any case, I'm proud of you. 'Twas a fine performance you gave today. No one ever 'loved me more than anything in this world' before. I rather liked it."

Gazing into the warmth and approbation in his eyes, Lucia almost fancied she read affection in those grey depths. Her hungry heart yearned to reach out to him, but she knew that his affection, like everything else about him, was false.

She pulled her hands out of his and crossed to the window. "I was only play-acting, Your Grace. Nothing has changed between us. I am still your prisoner, still forced to bow to your will, and when we are alone, I shall not pretend otherwise."

After their wives bade them farewell in front of Lynkellyn House, Tracy and Sir William strolled back toward White's.

As the ladies waited for their carriages, Amaryllis said, "My lady! I would be honored if you would follow me to my house. I feel we have a great deal to discuss."

Valeria stared at her. "A great deal to discuss?"

Amaryllis moved closer. "We have to help Robin and his bride." Valeria continued to stare and Amaryllis conceded grudgingly, "Well, I think the duchess needs friends, anyway. She seemed rather -- frightened."

"I am willing to aid the duchess, but I'll not befriend that -- that wretched man!"

"Come back to my house and we can decide, over a dish of Bohea, how best to help Her Grace," Amaryllis coaxed.

Half an hour later, the two ladies sat in Amaryllis's drawing room, cups of steaming tea before them. "First, I would like to settle our old quarrel, my lady." Amaryllis faltered, unsure of her next words.

"I would hardly call your blatant championship of the man who abducted me a mere 'quarrel', madame. You have been calling me a liar for years!"

"I -- I know it must have seemed that way, my lady. However, it is not your veracity I question, but Lord Mountheathe's. Giles's story contains too many discrepancies for me to credit it. Besides, Robin is too honorable a man to commit such an act."

"Then how do you explain his abduction of that poor governess? I, for one, do not believe that Banbury story about an elopement the pair of them concocted this morning."

"I don't believe it either." Amaryllis chewed her lower lip. "Lucia was definitely afraid of Robin and there was something about him, a hardness, that was foreign to him before. It even frightened me a little. Perhaps his years abroad have changed him." She stared forlornly into her tea. "Robin used to be such delightful company! He was never like...the man I saw today. I don't know..."

"Well, I do," Valeria said. "Tracy accepts Lord Mountheathe's story and my husband has no reason to lie."

"You will certainly want to befriend the governess, though?" Amaryllis urged, banking her impatience. She needed the countess's assistance if her plot to storm Society on Robin's behalf was to succeed. "This morning you practically offered her a home if she wanted to leave the duke."

Valeria arched a brow. "Exactly what do you mean by 'befriend'?"

"Well, if you and I sponsored her, introduced her into the *ton*. But, of course, Robin would have to be included in any plans we made for his wife."

"They say the duchess is not received in her own family. Her uncle is the Earl of Cothcourt, you know. If the earl will have nothing to do with her, I'm not sure that we should, either."

Amaryllis bristled. "If you did not want to lend her countenance, why did you call on her today?"

Valeria shrugged. "She is my husband's kin. I was prepared to offer my aid to her should it seem the proper thing, but if helping her means disgracing the Wallenham name or benefiting Robert Amberley, then I cannot agree to it!"

"You are willing to accept Giles's word regarding Robin, then!"

"He is my husband's friend," Valeria said uneasily.

"Do you like him?"

Lady Malkent rested her slim white hands in her lap. "No," she said. "He makes me nervous. He appears to be a fine, upstanding gentleman, innocent of vice, but his eyes, his voice, his very presence is somehow...lascivious. He never misses an opportunity to touch me... my hand, my shoulder, my hair... but always in the guise of a compliment or a gallantry. Afterward, I sense that he has taken a liberty, but I cannot quite say what he has done or how he has done it. I feel humiliated and I can do nothing about it. How I wish he and Tracy were not friends!" Valeria sipped tea from a cup that shook a little.

"If we promote the Amberleys in Society, perhaps Giles will cut his connection with the earl," Amaryllis said.

"I'm afraid!" Valeria admitted. "Robin is quite terrifying, isn't he? I must agree that I don't remember him being so intimidating, so imposing, in the old days! Besides, the beau monde will be scandalized if I -- we befriend him!"

"I care nothing for the *ton's* opinion. I am going to sponsor my cousin and his wife in Society. My efforts will mean so much more if you support them!"

Valeria sighed heavily, striving to come to a decision. "Very well. I suppose I'd already begun to accept them when I called at Lynkellyn House this morning. I had best leap in with both feet, though, before I lose my courage." She stared into her tea for a moment, thinking. At last, she raised her head. "I know! Let us give a welcoming ball at Malkent House in Their Graces' honor!"

"A splendid idea!" Amaryllis said. She refilled Valeria's cup and they began to discuss all the arrangements attendant upon the proposed entertainment.

Chapter 11:

In Which Her Grace Smiles Upon Her Family and His Grace Uncovers a Secret

As luncheon ended, the soft tread of the servants' feet whispered in the thick tension as they departed the dining room. At one end of the long table, Lucia finished her custard, studiously avoiding her husband's stony gaze. At the other end, Robin brooded into his wine, scowling at her. At last he drained the goblet and slammed it down, his voice low and intense as he spoke. "Damnation, Lucia! Must you meet all my overtures of friendship with insults and barbs? I know that our marriage began badly and I am at fault for that, but we can salvage something, can't we? We can be friends!"

"Perhaps! If you take away your guards and allow me a little freedom," she said.

"Freedom! Freedom so you can buy passage on the first ship out of England!"

"I have given you my word that I will not leave."

Robin laughed, a short, joyless bark. "I'm supposed to trust you, enfin!"

"I always try to behave honorably, Your Grace." Lucia pushed her dish away.

"Oh, I know all about your honor, madame!" Robin sneered. "You were the epitome of honor, were you not, when you held up my coach the day I left Vienna!" She looked up in guilty surprise. "Yes, I finally recognized you! Highway robbery! A damnably stupid thing to do!"

"I don't believe you, of all people, can call me to account for my past." Lucia's eyes flashed with indignation. "I am tired of this game. I loath both you and your cousin, barbarians that you are, and I despise my life as your dishonored duchess, compelled into your lies and into your bed. Although I cannot escape from your public farce, Your Grace, I shall no longer countenance your private embraces!"

Rising, Robin towered over her. "Are you with child, madame?" She blushed, lowering her eyes. "Then you may expect a visit from me tonight as usual," he said.

She leaped to her feet. "I shall lock my door!"

"Then I shall be forced to break it down, ma douce!" Robin's smile was evil as he bowed and strolled from the room, leaving her furious and alone. With an exasperated stamp of her foot, she grabbed a crystal water goblet and threw it at the door.

Unfortunately, Laddock chose that moment to enter. Cringing, he threw an arm up to protect his face as the cup shattered against the woodwork. Picking his way through the sparkling crystal shards, he presented a silver tray laden with calling cards to the duchess.

"Oh! I am sorry, Laddock!" Lucia gasped. "Are you hurt?"

"No, Your Grace," he said, brushing a few splinters of glass from his coat.

She chose a card at random from the tray. "More visitors?"

"The Earl of Cothcourt and his family, Your Grace. I took the liberty of showing them to the Gold Salon." She glanced up, cocking a delicate brow. "The new Gold Salon, Your Grace," Laddock assured her. "I do not make the same mistake twice."

"Where is His Grace?" Lucia dreaded another explosive situation if Robin should decide to confront her family.

"He has retired to his chambers, Your Grace."

"Good! I will go to my guests. Thank you, Laddock."

In his bedchamber, Robin slumped into a chair, heartily regretting his decision of a month ago to return to England. Was it only a month? It seemed a century! He did not enjoy having the Polite World gape at him as if he were a circus freak whenever he went out. It was worse still to meet with Lucia's reproachful glances and sharp tongue at home. Robin sighed. Perhaps he deserved Lucia's animosity, but that did not make it any easier to bear.

A wave of longing for sweet Paris engulfed him; Paris where he met smiling friends instead of glowering enemies and gawkers who crossed the street to avoid him. He missed his little hotel in the Rue de le Roi and the quiet, comfortable life he had created there. Mon Dieu, but he ached for home!

He stared at the trunk Laddock had placed in his chamber the week before. His curiosity stirring, he knelt to examine it. Its' lock little more than flakes of rust, the battered valise was secured with buckles and worn leather straps. When he cut the straps with his boot knife, the trunk shed a few chips of scarlet paint, hinting at long vanished elegance.

As he opened the trunk, his fingers brushed the blue woolen gown that Lucia had worn the day she pulled Honor from his coach's path and he surmised that Saddewythe must have sent Lucia's belongings around to Lynkellyn House. Under that dress were three more of the same shapeless, much-mended caliber, a threadbare silk robe de chambre, a faded flannel nightgown, and a small box of toiletries. Beneath this meager wardrobe lay a dented silver brandy flask engraved with the Cothcourt crest, an embroidered silk scarf with unicorns gamboling around some initials, and miniature portraits of a man and a woman. He carefully placed the portraits on the scarf and drew out a boxed set of dueling pistols. The weapons were well kept, but showed a great deal of wear.

At the bottom of the trunk, he found some frayed books and a small brass jewelry casket. Inside, an elegant enameled brooch and a couple of ivory combs, encrusted with paste diamonds lay atop a packet of letters, yellowed with age and tied with a blue ribbon. The Cothcourts' marriage lines and a few of their love letters lay on top of the little stack. Further down, he discovered a letter with the crest of the Ducs de Mondecharles.

The letter had apparently been in reply to Lucia's plea for assistance from her family and the venom in the ornate lines made him almost physically ill. The Duc de Mondecharles made it painfully clear that he despised his granddaughter. He threatened to horsewhip her should she endeavor to benefit from her

kinship with him and expressed a rabid desire to see her 'bleeding in the gutter'. Robin shook his head in disbelief as he retied the papers and returned them to the brass box.

As he placed the jewelry casket back in the valise, his fingertips brushed a tiny piece of velvet at the bottom of the chest. The material seemed to disappear where the floor of the trunk joined its side. Quickly, he took out the box and pried at the bottom of the chest with his fingers. After a few seconds, he lifted it up to disclose a secret compartment.

The black velvet which had aroused Robin's curiosity proved to be a waistcoat intricately embroidered with silver thread. Beneath it, he found a full suit of gentleman's garb, leather shoes with steel buckles, a battered, black tricorne, gloves, and a mask. Hidden under the clothing was a purse, heavy with coins.

Lucia must have been ready to bolt from the Saddewythes' without a moment's warning if the necessity arose, he thought as he repacked everything. He fully intended to return her belongings to her, but he knew she would bear even closer watching once she had them.

Lucia forced a smile and entered the Gold Salon, hoping to find friends among her family, but her foot barely crossed the threshold before Lady Laddon attacked. "You wicked, ungrateful wretch! How could you disgrace your family so?"

Stung, Lucia looked from her aunt to the leering Lord Laddon, then to the Earl and Countess of Cothcourt and their children, the pompous Mr. Henry, esquire, and the giggling Miss Sophia. "I was under the impression that my very existence disgraces my family," she said.

Lady Laddon's face flushed a furious, ugly red. "Don't be impertinent, girl! You know what I'm talking about. How could you marry a man like Robert Amberley?"

"I love him." Lucia's eyes met her aunt's without apparent guile.

"Love -- " Lavinia choked out. "Love!" Miss Sophia tittered.

"Perhaps you have not heard about Amberley's escapade with Lady Malkent," Lord Cothcourt said. "Any man who would abduct a lady of quality is not deserving of your love, my dear."

Lucia stiffened. "He has told me of the incident and swears that he is innocent. I believe him."

"Poppycock!" Cothcourt's thick jowls shook. "Everyone knows he abducted her! Even his own family admitted it when they turned him off. You are as gullible as my poor brother was! Running off with that French doxy! Had a fine marriage arranged for him with an heiress from one of the best families, but the fool had to have his little French slut!"

"My lord! You are speaking of my parents, whom I loved and respected."

"Your father was a halfwit and your mother was a designing coquette who ruined his life," Lavinia shouted, jumping to her feet, "and you are just like them! The Cothcourt family will be forever shamed to claim the Duchess of Lynkellyn as a relation."

"Then don't claim me! You never wanted me! Not really! And since I no longer require your assistance, we may all happily ignore each other from this moment forward. I thank you, Lady Laddon, for your past kindnesses. You need have no further concern for my welfare."

"Past kindnesses!" Lavinia spluttered. "I took pity on you and gave you a home! And you repaid me by casting lures at my husband! I believe you have a great deal more of your mother's character than your father's!"

"Seduction is my uncle's forte, not mine, milady. He is the terror of your female staff and you know it! How many unfortunates have you dismissed from your service this year alone because they were in the family way courtesy of his lordship?"

"Well, I -- well!" Lady Laddon's mouth opened and closed until she resembled nothing so much as a flustered goldfish.

Clamping her hands over her smirking daughter's ears, the Countess of Cothcourt glared at Lucia. "Lavinia's right! You are a harlot just like your mother! How dare you speak of such things in front of my sweet, innocent, little Sophia!"

"How dare you! How dare all of you to come into my house and insult my family!" Lucia's voice shook with fury. "I will not have it! You've never had any concern for me before and it's too late now to offer advice! I loved my parents very much. I also love my husband and I'll hear nothing against any of them so if your only purpose in coming here is to heap hot coals upon our heads, I must ask you to leave." Sparks danced in Lucia's eyes as she gestured toward the door.

Lady Lavinia stalked out. Leering at Lucia, Lord Laddon rose and made as if to kiss her hand. She drew it out of his reach and glared. Shrugging, he sauntered out. Behind him, Cothcourt stopped to confront her.

"Duchess or no, you will never be acknowledged or received by any member of the Cothcourt family nor by anyone else of breeding, I'll wager! A more unsavory pair than you and your -- 'husband' -- I've never had the misfortune to encounter."

"Good day, my lord!" Lucia said. The earl marched out, nose in the air, his family following.

Having heard raised voices, Laddock had a line of footmen waiting in the foyer with the departing guests' belongings and the Cothcourt clan was shown out with expedience.

Just descending the stairs, Robin witnessed the mass exodus and lifted an inquiring brow at the butler. "The Earl of Cothcourt and his family have called, Your Grace." Laddock said. "Her Grace requested them to leave -- vehemently."

Robin discovered Lucia in the Gold Salon sitting on the divan, her shoulders slumped, her eyes moist with tears she was fighting to conquer. Twisting a hapless lace handkerchief around her fingers, she stared miserably into space.

He ached to hold her in his arms and caress away all the anguish that haunted her soul, but he dared not. They had hurt each other; spurned each other too often of late. Fear, anger, and distrust had raised a seemingly insurmountable wall between them and Robin could not bear to throw himself against that barrier again so soon after their last quarrel. Instead of going to her, he held himself back, his own pain curling like a cobra in his breast. "I've engaged a box at the theatre for us tonight, Lucia. We will leave after dinner," he said.

"Very well." She did not look up.

Disheartened, he left her staring dismally out the window at the late afternoon sun.

While Anne waited anxiously, Lucia stood before her mirror, inspecting her appearance. Draped over a slip of pale gold silk, her gown of forest green satin embroidered with flowers and leaves shimmered when she moved. Her hair, coated with silver powder, was piled in intricate curls atop her head, the pale tresses intertwined with green and gold ribbons. A cluster of ringlets, intermingled with the ends of the ribbons, had been coaxed onto her shoulder. Satisfied, she collected a gilt-edged fan from her dressing table and headed to the library where Lynkellyn awaited her.

All through the afternoon, she had mourned the realization that her family had made a special point of calling on her to insult her. Her kinsmen had felt no joy upon seeing her, no commiseration at her plight. Their only concern had been how her predicament would affect their standing in Society. They had cared nothing for her or her parents' welfare during the last twenty-five years. She could hardly expect them to change their attitudes over night. Robin was right. He was the only family she possessed. She was irrevocably tied to a scoundrel who had taken advantage of her in every possible way. Her jaw hardened and resentment reddened her cheeks as she joined Lynkellyn in the library.

Robin sat on the arm of a chair, one leg dangling. His coat of black and gold brocade gleamed in the candlelight, an amber brooch nestling in the folds of his cravat. White lace, edged with gold, foamed at his throat and wrists. Clocked stockings encased his muscular legs. Golden shoes with amber buckles

and amber studded heels glowed like brandy in the firelight. He raised his quizzing glass and surveyed her critically.

"You look lovely, ma chérie," he smiled, standing as she entered the room. Searching her face, he said, "Are you feeling quite well? You seem a little flushed."

"I am perfectly fit, Robin." She lowered her eyes to hide the storm that still roiled within her.

"If you are fatigued, we can stay at home."

"No. I'm looking forward to going out," she said with forced brightness, hoping that a little diversion might lift her spirits.

"Bon!" Robin picked up a decanter of claret and two glasses from a side table. Splashing claret into the glasses, he gave one to Lucia. "To fortify us for the impending battle," he grinned.

Lucia accepted her goblet without her usual protest and drank deeply. Robin sipped his wine, a frown playing across his features as he watched her. "Those swine are not worth so much heartache, ma chérie," he said.

"I beg your pardon?" Lucia looked up, her tone sharp.

"I am speaking of Cothcourt and his clan. I have always found it best to have no use for those who have no use for me. It saves everyone a great deal of trouble."

"I had hoped that perhaps they might accept me now that I can live as they do. It isn't as if I were Papa's -- by-blow. I am a legitimate member of the family and I -- I only wanted their friendship." Her voice broke on the last word.

"Tiens, ma chérie! I have never met such a one as you for sentimentality! Always babbling of love and friendship! Most 'friends' are just watching for a chance to stab you in the back, sometimes literally; and as for 'love', anyone who allows himself to be seduced by such a suspect emotion deserves all the ill that befalls him. Look at your own parents!"

Lucia's chin rose. "They were very happy!"

"Were they? Without a home? Without family? Without funds? Without honor?"

"Sometimes when we hadn't a penny and we were sleeping in some alley, love was all that kept us going," Lucia said. "I remember chilly nights snuggled between Maman and Papa under a ragged cloak, listening to their stories about Paris or London. Their voices made me feel all cozy and warm inside

despite the hunger and cold. When Maman and Papa were together, love permeated the air, softening the bad times and enriching the good."

"People who live on love tend to starve," Robin sneered. "Cold, hard guineas will fill an empty belly a great deal quicker than romantic fantasies, ma chérie."

"I gave up all my dreams of love when you threw me over your horse, Your Grace," she said sharply. "I merely hoped to be wanted -- esteemed -- a little by my father's family."

Robin shook his head. "You don't need them, Lucia! You will soon have your babe to love."

"What if I don't conceive a child? I might be barren. Had you thought of that?"

"A woman of so passionate, so voluptuous a nature as yours cannot possibly be barren, ma chérie. When your infant is born, you may lavish all this misguided affection on it." Robin tossed off his wine and set down the glass. "We must leave now if we do not want to miss the first act."

When the Amberleys entered their box at the theater, it lacked but a few minutes until the play began, much to the disappointment of the rest of the audience. Even as darkness descended, the curtain rose, and the actors launched into "The Tempest", curious eyes strayed toward the Lynkellyn box. Seated within this focal point of interest, Lucia, oblivious, traded her own troubles for those of Miranda, if only for a few hours.

When the theater was lit at intermission, Society got its first good look at the infamous Rogue Robin and his stolen bride. Conversation lulled for a moment and then swelled as the Amberleys became the only topic on every wagging tongue.

Suddenly aware of the many eyes upon her, Lucia glanced at Robin. "Are we such freaks that people are compelled to stare at us?"

"We are merely notorious! It isn't often that a black sheep tries to force his way back into the fashionable fold." He smiled grimly as she unfurled her fan to hide her face. "Accustom yourself to the *ton's* censure, ma chérie. It will not disappear, I think, unless a miracle clears my name and softens a few Cothcourt hearts. Tiens! Let us speak of something more pleasant. Are you enjoying the performance?"

"Oh, yes! The last time I saw Shakespeare performed was in France a year after my parents died. I was trying to earn my way on the stage."

Robin grinned. "Let me guess! The play was 'Taming of the Shrew' and you were Kate the Cursed."

She lifted her chin, a smile curling the edges of her mouth. "'Twas the role of Viola in 'Twelfth Night', my dear Petruchio, and the director said I was quite good. I had hoped life in the theater would provide

me with family and security after my parents passed away."

"And did it?"

A shadow crossed her face. "For a time, but -- men tried to -- a rich and powerful man wanted to... to buy me and I had no choice but to flee."

A knock sounded on the door of their compartment and Robin rose. "It appears that one brave and foolhardy soul wishes to commit social suicide in our company, ma chérie. Pardonnez moi?"

When he opened the door, Lady Amaryllis Blayne swept into their box, dragging an unwilling Sir William by the arm.

"Robin! We're delighted to see you here." she beamed. "If we had known that you and Lucia intended to attend the theater tonight, we would have invited you to share our box."

One glance at Sir William's dismayed face brought a mocking gleam into Robin's eyes. "We would have been honored, Ryl, but we do not wish to impose upon you," he said, bowing over her hand.

"Nonsense!" Amaryllis answered airily, moving toward Lucia at the front of the box. As she came into the theater audience's view, conversation almost died again, then climbed to a considerably higher volume than before. "Your Grace." Amaryllis smiled and held out her hands as Lucia rose. "What a lovely gown!"

"Thank you. Won't you be seated?" Lucia nervously smoothed a wrinkle from her skirt as they sat.

"I trust you had a pleasant afternoon?" Amaryllis asked.

"My family -- that is, the Earl of Cothcourt and his family came to call," Lucia said with a tight smile.

"They wished to congratulate you on your marriage?"

Lucia looked directly into Amaryllis's eyes. "They despise me even more because of it, my lady. Surely you must realize that Robin and I are not received? We are scandal-ridden outcasts and, while I am grateful for your ladyship's kindness on our behalf, I cannot but fear that association with us may destroy your standing in Society."

Amaryllis snapped her fingers. "That for Society, my dear. I am extremely fond of Cousin Robin and I will not forsake him, regardless of the *ton's* opinion."

"That is exceeding gallant of you, my lady!"

"You must call me Ryl, my dear. Everyone does. I am so looking forward to our shopping expedition tomorrow. Valeria and I shall call for you at ten o'clock sharp. I suppose that seems rather early, but I loathe the afternoon crowds."

"Lady Malkent still wants to come?"

Ryl searched her face. "I hope that meets with your approval?"

"Yes! Yes! It is just that, well, I thought that the countess might not wish to be -- that is, considering the past, she would hardly welcome my company -- " Lucia faltered.

Standing behind the ladies, Lynkellyn bowed stiffly to Sir William. "I would like to apologize for this morning's contre-temps, my lord. Mountheathe and I do not rub well together."

Blayne gave him a hard, contemptuous glare. "He has a right to be angry, Rogue. You shamed his family and usurped his legacy. Giles was counting heavily on that inheritance."

"Nothing is absolute in life, mon ami. Personal experience has taught me that. One day I was a fashionable young buck with a family, a fortune, and a future; the next day -- " Robin's voice trailed away significantly and he shrugged. "Ten years later, I am a fine gentleman able to command every luxury once again."

"But Society despises you."

"C'est vrai! However, since I detest Society quite as heartily, it cannot matter overmuch, n'est-ce pas?"

"Ostracism doesn't bother you?" Blayne was incredulous.

"Why should I wish to be among people who hold me in suspicion and contempt? As soon as Mountheathe pronounces himself satisfied with the legality of my marriage, Lucia and I shall wish a swift and eager farewell to London. And to your damned Society!" Robin spoke the last few words through gritted teeth.

Another knock sounded at the door. Robin opened it to greet the Malkents. If the Blaynes' presence in Lynkellyn's box had set the *ton* abuzz, Lord and Lady Malkent's appearance stunned it into profound silence for a full thirty seconds; then a thunder of voices rolled through the theater.

Robin welcomed his visitors, bowing formally as a restrained Valeria curtsied and moved toward the ladies. Malkent nodded, eyeing Amberley with distaste.

Robin spun his quizzing glass lazily upon its ribbon. "This evening is full of unexpected pleasures, my

lord," he drawled. "I find your visit most remarkable, considering our present antagonism. If I were a suspicious man, I would wonder what motivates such goodwill."

"Only a desire to indulge my wife, Rogue. Valeria will drag me into your company," Tracy said.

Blayne nodded. "Ryl is just as eager! Like a moth to a flame!"

"I shall not scorch anyone, messieurs; however, if you want your ladies to give up what even I must concede is a potentially disastrous reacquaintance with the Amberley family, I shall insult them -- loudly. You will all be properly outraged at such treatment and depart in an affronted fury, never to acknowledge Lucia or me again! A good plan, n'est-ce pas?"

"Ryl wouldn't give you up even then. Feels she owes you her loyalty for saving her in the woods or some such," Sir William sighed.

Robin stiffened suddenly, his eyes hooded. "Mais oui! That incident. I had almost forgotten. So long ago. She owes me nothing and so you may tell her. I merely warned the fellow away from her."

"Saved her in the woods? What fellow?" Malkent's interest was caught.

Robin did not speak and Blayne was left to take up the story. "When she was a schoolgirl at home on holiday, Ryl was playing hide-and-seek in the woods and some blackguard accosted her. The Rogue rescued her."

Malkent turned to Robin. "Well? What happened? Who was it?"

"It is Amaryllis's story, not mine. I will reveal nothing without her permission."

Tracy lifted a brow and looked at Sir William, who shrugged. "I have pleaded and bribed. I cannot get a name out of her," he said. "She says it will only stir up hard feelings if I know and she's right. I'd have the bastard's head on a platter!"

Valeria's voice wafted into the gentlemen's conversation. "Look for us at ten, then, Lucia."

Lucia's answering smile encompassed both ladies. "I shall be ready."

"We had better return to our seats. The second act is about to begin." Ryl's satin gown whispered as she rose. Pressing Lucia's hand, she moved toward Lynkellyn, smiling. "I am overjoyed to have you home, Robin. You and Lucia must call on us soon. She is a wonderful girl. Much too good for you."

"With that I concur, ma belle. Let us hope she never finds someone worthy of her. I daresay she'd leave

me without a backward glance."

Amaryllis tapped his chest playfully with her fan. "As if she ever would."

The Blaynes departed while Robin and Lucia were bidding farewell to the Malkents. Valeria had passed through the door and Lucia had resumed her seat when Tracy muttered to Robin, "I would speak to you privately, Rogue."

Amberley lifted a surprised brow. "très bien. Call on me tomorrow after the ladies have departed. Around half past ten."

"I will be there." Bowing, Tracy went back to his box.

As the curtain rose on the second act, polite London fidgeted, anxious for the performance to end. The Duke and Duchess of Lynkellyn had enacted a much more riveting spectacle than any on the stage and elegant tongues were eager to spread the tale.

Chapter 12:

In Which Malkent Demands An Explanation and Her Grace Wins Her First Campaign

Having already eaten, Robin was closeted in the ballroom with his new Italian fencing master when Lucia sat down to breakfast. She sipped her tea and nibbled at a scone, nervously anticipating Lady Blayne's arrival.

As odd as it seemed, Amaryllis appeared to want her for a friend. She had never had a friend before. When she had tried to play with other children as a girl, her mother whisked her away, telling her to trust no one. As she grew older, she learned well how to keep people at arm's length while she charmed their money into her pocket. It had been a staple of survival. Now, as an adult, she only vaguely understood what a friend was and hadn't the slightest idea how to be or acquire one.

Indeed, the whole concept of friendship made her uneasy. She could never trust anyone enough to allow such a potentially perilous intimacy. Even now, she feared to find Lady Blayne's social dagger thrust into her ribs.

When the ladies arrived, Lucia joined them in the Blayne carriage, a purse full of Robin's guineas in her reticule. The footman the duke had assigned as her escort leaped onto the back of the coach and it rumbled away toward Bond Street.

Her grace's army of servants had yet to penetrate to the ballroom where a valiant sun struggled to shine through ceiling- high windows caked with grime. Dust devils danced through tangled footprints on the dirty floor and the musty smell of rotting velvet hung over the room.

A ringing clash of swords echoed off the walls as Laddock showed Tracy into the room. Settling in a dusty chair, the earl watched Robin and his opponent duel with frantic precision. Robin had dispensed with his coat, waistcoat, and boots, tossing them onto a chair. Muted sunlight streamed through the dirty windows, glinting on his loose copper tresses as he danced around his adversary in his stockinged feet. Despite the Italian's obvious skill with a sword, the duke slowly, but inexorably forced him back. After a quicksilver succession of parries, feints, and thrusts, the fencing master found his back to the wall. With a sudden twist of the wrist, Robin sent his opponent's sword skittering across the floor, leaving an odd pattern in the dust. Amberley pressed the protected point of his foil against his antagonist's heart and tossed the weapon aside. The defeated man stared at him, open- mouthed, for a moment then laughed, breaking into an excited stream of Italian.

The fencing master crossed the room to retrieve his sword. Amberley answered him in the same tongue, lazy amusement tempering his tones. After a few minutes of conversation, the Italian said with an apologetic smile, "Please, Your Grace, could we not speak English? I need to practice it even though I am happy to speak my own beloved tongue with a compaesano."

"Very well, Giovanni," Robin said, switching easily to English, "but you are mistaken. I am an Englishman."

Giovanni stared at him incredulously. "You speak my language very beautiful, Your Grace! You have visit Italia?"

"I lived there for a time. You have the advance I paid you?" Robin briskly changed the subject as he tossed the fencing master a towel.

"Your Grace, I -- I cannot take your money."

"Indeed?" Robin's eyes hardened to granite. "Something is wrong with my gold?"

"No, Your Grace! No!" Giovanni took a step back. "It is only that I can teach you nothing. My skill is -- how you say -- not so good like yours. Realmente, I would be pleased to have you teach me."

"You are still a challenging opponent, Giovanni, and I need a practice partner. If you enter my service, however, I must be your only patron. You will wait upon me at my whim and travel with me when I go to the country or abroad. Naturellement, I am prepared to pay you well." Robin offered him an extremely generous sum.

Giovanni's mouth dropped open in amazement. "So much money, Your Grace! It is too much for merely

a practice partner!"

Robin lifted a brow.

"Very well, Your Grace!" Giovanni said. "I accept. Thank you! Thank you, Your Grace."

"You will earn every penny, je vous assure. That will be all for today," Robin said.

Giovanni donned his clothes, gathered his equipment, bowed to Lynkellyn, and was gone.

As Robin took a black riband off his pile of clothing and brought it up beneath his auburn locks, he saw Malkent sitting in the shadows.

"Tracy." he drawled, tying a reckless bow at the nape of his neck. "Pardonnez moi! I forgot you were to call. Giovanni's arrival drove all else from my head."

Tracy watched Robin move about the room, collecting stray blades. "Your swordplay has certainly improved over the years, Rogue."

"A skill necessary to my survival. If you will excuse me, Tracy, I would like to change clothes before our interview. I am devilish damp. Laddock will show you to the library and I will join you presently." He rang the servant's bell by the door and Laddock entered a minute later. "Please show his lordship to the library, Laddock. Would you care for some refreshment, Tracy?"

"A cup of tea would be welcome."

"très bien. Laddock, bring a tea tray to the library in half an hour."

Laddock ushered Malkent into the library and left. The quiet room was graciously comfortable with soft, dark carpets and overstuffed chairs upholstered in shining leather. Polished cherry tables reflected the sunshine streaming through spotless windows. A massive desk, piled high with ledgers, sat at one end of the room. Two account books lay open, awaiting Robin's return.

Tracy sat for a moment, listening to Laddock's footsteps recede. His exploring eyes strayed to the cluttered desk, then resolutely looked away to study the floor to ceiling volumes that covered the far wall.

Finally, his curiosity overcoming his sense of propriety, Tracy rose and strolled casually to the desk. One glance at the open account books informed him that the contents of an older ledger were being transferred to a new one with mathematical corrections. A pile of notes written in French lay next to the ledgers. Tracy picked up the first paper, endeavoring to decipher the reckless hand.

"I am gratified that you are so interested in my affairs, my lord," Robin said as he sauntered into the room. Elegant in velvet and lace, he looked altogether a different creature from the swashbuckling duelist of the ballroom.

Tracy jerked around guiltily. "I was only..."

"They're merely ledgers, Tracy! Quite dull, *je vous assure!*" Robin closed the books with finality and stacked them with the others.

"Rumor has it you've already run through eighty thousand pounds in the month since you've been in London," Tracy said. "No doubt you are looking for new ways to milk your estates!"

"Do you accept rumors so readily, then? I have not found it to be a sound practice." Robin took a chair, waving Tracy to another. "I trust only my own eyes and ears. Much more reliable."

Tracy sank into his chair. "I had this information from Giles."

"Mon cher cousin!" Robin laughed hollowly. "Worst possible source."

"Damnation, Rogue! Just tell me where the eighty thousand went."

Amberley's smile faded. "I know of no reason why I should, my lord. You have no legal, moral, or personal hold over me. To put it bluntly, sir, 'tis not your business to inquire into mine."

Laddock entered, set a tea tray down on a table, and bowed himself out. Robin poured the tea and handed Tracy a cup. Malkent sipped his tea and set it down. "You lost all that money in some gaming hell or other, didn't you? You never could gamble, Rogue. Why won't you tell me the truth? No need to be ashamed of your shortcomings. Devil take it, I'm your friend."

"Non, mon cher! You are not my friend. You were never my friend, i' truth." His tea untouched, Robin rose to prowl the room like a caged tiger, halting at last in front of the earl. "My friend would have accepted my word regarding my innocence! If you truly felt you couldn't trust me where Val was concerned, Tracy, you could have at least tried to verify my story. You could have made some inquiries regarding my presence at the posting inns along the Great North Road. The shade of my hair is quite distinctive and I had not powdered it that day. Believe me, I would have been remembered. Did you ask Tulley, the landlord at the Crown and Thistle, whether it was Giles or I who had arrived in the carriage with Valeria? Did you ask any questions at all? Non, *naturellement!* That would have required some effort on your part."

Robin stalked back to his tea, gulping down the lukewarm liquid as he struggled to control his mounting temper. Calmer, he faced Tracy again. "Much easier for you, for everyone, to dismiss my claims and

shame me into exile. I was a mere younger son, after all. A wastrel! A libertine of no consequence. Giles Bridland, in contrast, was wealthy. Titled. Respected. Certainly not the sort of man who would abduct a virtuous young woman! Certainly not the sort of man who, fearing the hand of justice, would hiss out a lie to save his own sanctimonious skin!" Robin's voice was thick with bitter fury and his teacup shook. "My peers! My supposed friends! My family! You all eagerly took the path of least resistance. Believed the worst of me, despite all my pleas and protestations of innocence. You never even gave me a fair hearing, Tracy. Bah! Vous n'êtes pas mon ami!"

Robin's condemning eyes bored into Tracy's as Malkent searched for an answer to his accusations in uncomfortable silence. "If you truly are innocent, Rogue, I am sorry," Tracy said. "I simply cannot believe Giles would ever abduct anyone. The man goes to church faithfully every Sunday and he's founded any number of charities over the years since you left. I attended the opening ceremonies of an orphanage he was funding just last month."

"Trying to atone for his sins, no doubt," Robin muttered. "I suppose my innocence in Val's case no longer matters. I've committed a thousand darker deeds since I left England."

"Ending with the victimization of that poor governess in order to steal Mountheathe's money. Or are you, too, going to insist that the pair of you are in love?"

Robin grinned ruefully. "I had been drinking a little too deeply the night we met at the Pelican, my lord. I should never have told you about Lucia."

"Then the story you told me that evening was the true one? You coerced that poor girl into wedding you? And you are -- husband and wife?"

"In every sense of the phrase." Robin took the chair next to Tracy's and stretched out his long legs, crossing them at the ankles. "How else will I beget a child so I can hold on to Grandpapa's fortune and have my revenge on mon cher cousin?"

The thought of the Rogue forcing himself on his sweet little duchess, then insisting that she lie to the world about loving him infuriated Tracy. His mouth became a grim line of condemnation. "Then why are you fostering this myth of a run-away love match?"

"A whim!" Robin shrugged. "A futile desire to appear a little less villainous than the truth suggests, I suppose."

"And do you really think people are going to believe you?"

Robin sighed. "I truth, Tracy, they may believe what they like. I just want to go home. It has been so long since I've seen the Castle. I wish Giles would accept the legitimacy of my marriage so Lucia and I could leave this accursed city."

"Eager to quit London, are you? I'll wager you already have a bevy of creditors nipping at your heels!"

"What is it you want, Malkent? I told you that I would not thrust myself into your presence and I meant it. Yet you seem to be everywhere I am. If the purpose of this visit is to issue threats or offer bribes, I do not yield to intimidation and nothing you could offer can compare to what I already have."

"I want to see justice done, regarding Mountheathe..."

"As do I!"

"...before you run through his fortune!" Tracy said. "How could you possibly spend eighty thousand pounds in one month?"

"So we're back to that, are we? It took one, maybe two minutes at the most. I signed my name and the money was gone." Robin shrugged. "It was amazingly easy."

"I'm certain it was." Tracy sneered.

"My banker was rather astonished, though."

"Your -- banker?"

"When I paid off my mortgages, Tracy. I've satisfied all the claims against the ducal properties. I want to begin my new life free of debt. As usual, Giles only told you half the truth!"

"Oh!" Tracy said, subdued, but he rallied after a short silence. "And the governess?"

"Is my responsibility. As my wife, she shall lack for nothing."

"Except love!"

Robin shrugged. "Love has never brought me anything but grief. Enfin, she's better off without it."

Lucia stared uncomfortably at her lap as Amaryllis and Valeria settled beside her in the Blayne carriage. The amount of money she had just spent on dresses staggered her. She could remember a time not so long ago when she had starved for the lack of a few pennies.

"I have good news." Valeria said as the coach jolted into motion. "My niece, Concordia Lannington, is

coming to stay with me for the Season. I plan to give a grand come-out ball for her. I can hardly wait. It will be such fun."

"But what of the other matter we discussed? Have you forgotten?" Amaryllis said.

Val stared at Amaryllis blankly, then enlightenment dawned. "Oh, yes! Of course! Well, you must host it, Ryl. We still have plenty of time to settle dates."

Amaryllis turned to Lucia. "Valeria and I have a wonderful surprise for you, my dear. We are going to present you and Robin to Society at a ball in your honor."

Lucia's eyes widened. "But-but surely no one will accept your invitation?"

"When the Earl and Countess of Malkent and Sir William and Lady Blayne appear together as your sponsors on the invitation, Society will attend, I assure you. The *ton's* curiosity will be greater than its disapproval," Valeria said.

Lucia looked from one smiling face to the other. "You would do that for Robin and me after -- after everything that has occurred?"

Valeria leaned forward to pat Lucia's hand. "It's time to forgive the past, I think."

"Robin will be grateful for your kindness, of course, but I'm not sure he will welcome a ball," Lucia said. "It has not been easy for him, returning to England in disgrace. Old friends cut him wherever he goes. He says it does not matter, but I have seen the pain and fury in his eyes. He may feel that attending a ball in his honor is akin to being thrown into the lions' den."

"Oh, dear! I had not thought of that." Ryl frowned. "And it would not be very pleasant for you either, would it?"

Lucia smiled. "I am prepared to meet with a great many insults if it will ease Robin's way back into Society. I just don't think he will condone this scheme, well-intentioned though it is."

Silence descended on the coach momentarily. "It seemed like such a good idea!" Ryl sighed.

Lucia's heart went out to her new friends. Very few people had ever endeavored to do her a genuine, unselfish act of kindness. "Let me ask Robin about the ball," she said impulsively. "He wishes Society and, most especially, Lord Mountheathe to acknowledge our marriage. What could be more persuasive than a ball in celebration of our union?" As the ladies chattered around her, Lucia contemplated possible arguments to convince Robin that Amaryllis's ball was in his best interests, but she held little hope of swaying him.

After Tracy's departure, Robin attacked his ledgers with a will, determined to drown his anger and resentment toward the earl in work. At noontime, he absently waved Laddock and his luncheon tray away. Three hours passed, during which only the scratching of his quill disturbed the silence. Robin sat back and rubbed his eyes, ready for a little diversion, when Laddock entered to announce, "A Mr. Handon and a Mr. Baldrake to see Your Grace. Tradesmen, I believe."

"Tradesmen?" Robin stretched his arms and stifled a yawn. "Probably something to do with the new draperies, I suppose. Show them in."

The callers entered the library, hats in hand. The first gentleman was portly, a peacock in a bright red coat and a green waistcoat. His colleague, evidently of a more somber character, was tall and thin in a tan coat and dark brown smallclothes.

"Gentlemen." Robin rose and bowed.

The visitors returned the courtesy nervously, then the somber one said, "Thank you for receiving us, Your Grace."

"Be seated. How may I help you?"

"I am Mr. Baldrake," said the peacock, "and this is Mr. Handon. We represent the Bridland Home for Orphans." Mr. Baldrake halted expectantly.

"I have never heard of your institution, gentlemen, but, judging from the name, I'll hazard a guess. One of Lord Mountheathe's charities?"

"Yes, Your Grace," Mr. Handon said. "Only..."

"Only we've not heard from his lordship since the beginning of this venture a year ago," Mr. Baldrake finished.

The duke leaned forward. "Explain."

"When we decided to open the orphanage last year, we needed a rich patron to help us with the financial burdens of our new charity. Having heard of his philanthropy, we approached Lord Mountheathe, and he was eager to aid us. He gave us a thousand pounds toward construction of the orphanage and pledged to cover half the annual cost of operation. In return, we were to name the orphanage after him.

"As soon as the building was finished and Lord Mountheathe's name was upon it, Your Grace, we

received no more money. We wrote letters and called on his lordship several times, but to no avail," Mr. Baldrake said.

Mr. Handon took up the story. "Suspicious, we inquired into his lordship's financial background. As a banker, Your Grace, I have access to such information. What I discovered appalled me. Lord Mountheathe owes incredible sums of money to tradesmen and moneylenders all over the City. His estates are heavily mortgaged and he has yet to settle gaming debts amounting to thousands of pounds which he incurred in some very unsavory establishments.

"And we found that we are not the only charitable institution to which Lord Mountheathe has made commitments he cannot or will not honor," Mr. Handon said. "He has pledged support to many worthy causes over the years, but as soon as his name is on the building and the opening ceremonies, amply attended by his noble friends, are over, he refuses to acknowledge the charity any longer."

Mr. Baldrake smiled nervously. "I trust we have not offended Your Grace with this bit of plain speaking, but it has been a very lean first year for our little orphanage without the proper funding."

"All of which brings us to the reason for our visit, Your Grace. Since you are his lordship's cousin, we were hoping that -- er -- " Mr. Handon hesitated.

"That I would meet Lord Mountheathe's commitments," Lynkellyn finished for him with a sigh.

"Well, yes." Mr. Handon admitted, eyes lowered. "We are barely able to keep the children above starvation, Your Grace, and -- "

Robin held up a slim hand. "Spare me. I already know a great deal too much of starvation and homeless waifs." He rose from his chair to pace the room. His guests glanced at one another, each reading pessimism in the other's eyes.

"très bien, gentlemen," Robin said. "I will assume Lord Mountheathe's responsibilities, but I have a few stipulations of my own."

Mr. Baldrake leaned forward. "Do you want his lordship's name replaced with yours, Your Grace?"

"Hardly!" Robin sneered. "My name would only harm your endeavor. My background is every bit as unsavory as Mountheathe's and a great deal more public. I have more practical demands to make." He returned to his desk. "First of all, I want my involvement in your charity to get as little publicity as possible. You have undoubtedly heard the scandals about me. My black reputation will not help your cause."

"Second, I want the right to examine the orphanage's books and to visit the place without warning at any time, day or night, to see that all is as it should be. I deplore abuses, gentlemen, especially when children

are involved. There will be no beatings, mistreatment, or starvation and, when it is cold, I want a warming fire in every occupied room."

Mr. Baldrake and Mr. Handon nodded their consent.

"And last, gentlemen, each child, male or female, will be taught a trade. I will pay for the apprenticeships, if necessary. Perhaps, knowing a skill, the little ones will fare better as adults and their children will not end up abandoned in your orphanage. Maintenant! How much money is involved?"

"His lordship pledged two thousand pounds a year," Mr. Handon said, "and we will match that amount."

"I will give you thirty-five hundred. That should provide for a few luxuries like an extra log on the fire or occasional sweets for the children, héin? I'll have my solicitor draw up the papers and give you a bank draft. Call upon me in three days' time to settle our business."

"Thank you, Your Grace. Until our next meeting, then." The gentlemen bow and moved toward the door.

Suddenly Robin stood. "One moment, Mr. Handon! Mr. Baldrake! I've a mind to see the orphanage today."

"Now, Your Grace?" Mr. Baldrake lifted a brow.

"Is there a problem, gentlemen?" Robin looked from one man to the other.

"No, Your Grace." Mr. Handon answered. "It is merely that the orphanage is a depressing place in a filthy part of town. Not a diversion for a gentleman like yourself."

"Nevertheless, I want to visit the children and see what needs to be done." He held the door open for his guests. "Lead on, s'il vous plaît."

Lucia glanced down the length of the dinner table at Robin and took a deep breath. The meal was drawing rapidly to a close. They had discussed Robin's orphanage project and her shopping expedition at length, but she still had not dared to broach Amaryllis's proposed party.

Dessert was served and the servants bowed themselves out. Lucia took another deep breath, fixed a brilliant smile upon her face, and initiated an admittedly Machiavellian conversation. "I want to thank you for today, Robin," she said sweetly.

Frowning, Amberley looked up from his strawberry tart. "Today?"

"Why, yes. You weren't here waiting when I returned as you usually are. I am grateful for your trust."

"Oh! Well, I told you about the orphanage. I wanted to tour it today." Robin realized uneasily that for a few hours he had dropped his guard.

"And I also want to thank you for restoring my portmanteau to my possession. It holds all my keepsakes and mementos, everything I could not bear to leave behind at Saddewythe Manor while I was in London."

"You're welcome," he said, suspicious of this entirely too pleasant conversation.

"In the spirit of that trust," Lucia plunged on, "I will tell you that the trunk contains my Papa's dueling pistols, thirty pounds that I have scraped together over the last four years, and certain articles of male attire put by in case a hasty departure was necessary."

"Well. Well." Robin leaned back in his chair. "Quite a confession."

"You seem surprised."

"I am! Oh, not that you have these things hidden away. That is but self-preservation. I am amazed, however, that you would tell me about them."

"You trusted me a little, Robin, so I will trust you -- a little. Perhaps we shall go on rather better than we have been. You shall want us to appear a loving couple at the ball after all."

"The -- ball?" Robin frowned, genuinely at a loss.

"Amaryllis wants to give a ball in our honor and launch us into Society."

Robin stared at her for a full minute, thunderstruck. "Have the pair of you run mad?" he roared. "Even assuming I agreed to such a fiasco, which I will not, who do you think would attend?"

Lucia's voice shook a little as she answered. "Amaryllis says that if both the Blaynes' and the Malkents' names appear on the cards of invitation, people will come. Out of curiosity, if nothing else."

"Amaryllis says!" he mocked. "Ryl is a silly little widgeon and always has been. No one with sense would listen to her. I will not lend myself to a situation which will subject us both to intense ridicule and humiliation. 'Come out of curiosity', enfin! Mon Dieu! So we're to be displayed like carnival freaks for every blue-blooded jackanapes in London to gawk and laugh at! And we must not forget, naturellement, that you shall doubtless find your chance to bolt while I am fetching you a glass of ratafia like some ludicrous Bond Street Beau! Non! Jamais! A ball is out of the question! C'est finis!"

Lucia lowered her eyes. "I'm sorry, Robin. I didn't realize that you felt so -- so strongly about this. We all meant well. Truly we did." She let the hint of a sob enter her voice. "And I swear I never thought for a second of escape. I have promised that I will stay, haven't I?"

"Ce bal est une mal idée," Robin said gruffly, trying to ignore the hurt in her eyes.

"Amaryllis merely thought that the Blaynes' and Malkents' sponsorship might foster forgiveness and acceptance of us within Society, but I quite understand your reluctance to..."

"Forgiveness! Lucia, there is nothing to forgive! I am innocent!" Robin leaped from his chair.

Knowing immediately that she had blundered, Lucia summoned the last weapon in her arsenal. Calling forth bitter memories to force tears, she looked up at Robin from beneath moistened lashes. "Yes. Yes, I know you are innocent, Robin. Now I've made you angry. Oh, I wish I'd never heard of this wretched ball. You are right. It was a stupid idea and so I shall tell Amaryllis." Her face woebegone, a tear sparkled on her cheek.

"Ma chérie. 'Tis only that -- " Robin sat down with a sigh, despising himself for making Lucia cry. Over the years, he had faced and ignored thousands of feminine tears without the smallest stirring of guilt or compassion, but Lucia's weeping pierced his armored heart. Perplexed that her unhappiness should touch him so, he sipped his wine and tried to sort out his confusion. "Ryl's ball would be a nightmare, ma chérie." he said, his voice a coaxing caress. "These people detest us, héin? They only want to ridicule us!"

Lucia sniffed, dashing away the tears that seemed to flow faster and faster. "Just as you say, Robin. There shall be no ball."

Robin stared at her, willing her to give up her foolishness. Candlelight glinted on her wedding ring and visions of their first night together flooded his mind. Had he not vowed to make amends? This party was not such an outrageous request, considering his past conduct, and she did want to go, although he could not fathom her reasons.

Lucia had not mastered the art of weeping prettily. Her eyes puffy and her nose red, she sniffed again, inadvertently banishing the last shreds of Robin's resolve. "très bien! très bien!" he said, lifting his hands in defeat. "As you wish. We shall go to Ryl's ball, but you will see. It will be a truly horrendous evening."

Lucia tried to smile, but her tears would not cease. Moving to her end of the table, Robin knelt to hug her. "Don't cry, ma chérie. I daresay it will not be so bad. I daresay we'll enjoy it immensely."

"Y-yes, I'm certain we will." she sobbed, laying her head against his shoulder. "Thank you, Robin.

Thank you. I am ever so pleased. I cannot wait to tell Amaryllis."

Endeavoring to bury his misgivings, he pulled a handkerchief from his sleeve cuff and dabbed at the tears on her cheek. "How can you weep, Lucia, when I am looking forward to dancing with you around a ballroom?"

"Are you?" She searched his eyes, her sobs slowly abating.

"With infinite joy. Absolument! We must certainly attend Amaryllis's ball." Robin gazed into her bewitching blue eyes, gratified that his capitulation had brought such a gleam of happiness into them. He dropped a light, gentle kiss on her salty, smiling lips.

Her tears finally under control, Lucia left a bewildered Robin to stare into his port. In five minutes' time, he had gone from "jamais" to "absolument". He sipped his wine with the confused and distinctly uneasy feeling that he had, as a former mistress liked to phrase it, just been 'managed'.

Chapter 13:

In Which Miss Lannington Considers Her Beaux and Lord Mountheathe Ruminates Upon His Troubles

At eighteen, Concordia Lannington bore a striking resemblance to her aunt, Lady Malkent, save that her chin was more determined, her mouth fuller, and her eyes an arresting green rather than Valeria's warm brown. If she also possessed a modicum of spirit and determination foreign to the countess, these were not deterrents to the many gallants who clamored for her attention. Although she had only been in London a fortnight, she already found herself drawn to two gentlemen in particular.

Giles Bridland, Baron Mountheathe, sent her flowers daily, paid her extravagant compliments and treated her rather like she was made of porcelain. She liked the way he dressed; always point de vice. His manners were exquisite and he gave her every consideration -- and those golden brown eyes of his. They bewitched her, gently lulling her into acquiescence in any love- struck folly his lordship might care to propose.

Peter Tallant, Viscount Norworth, in contrast, paid little more attention to her than any other lady, flirted outrageously when he did choose to look her way, and, with his curling black locks and finely chiseled features, was quite the handsomest man she had ever met. He affected a reckless, rakish style, disdaining the fastidiousness in dress that Giles cultivated. Norworth radiated excitement and danger -- and something more. When those bored, black eyes met hers, her heart galloped, her body burned with an insistent, primeval hunger she barely understood, and she felt such a delicious giddiness that she could not help blushing in his presence.

According to her uncle, Norworth possessed a roving eye, a tarnished reputation, and was, not to put too

fine a point upon it, wild to a fault. She tried to obey the earl and refrain from encouraging Norworth, saving all her smiles for Lord Mountheathe. The viscount, however, seemed particularly displeased with Mountheathe's gentle but determined courtship, seeking her out whenever Giles was escorting her.

At Lady Fortescue's musicale only the night before, she had been sitting beside Mountheathe through most of the evening, listening with polite boredom to a tone-deaf soloist who sang an interminable aria. When intermission came, Giles had hurried away to find her some lemonade.

The viscount, who had arrived at the musicale unconscionably late with only the most casual apology to his hostess, sauntered up to her as soon as Mountheathe left and bowed over her hand. "Good evening, Miss Lannington. I trust you are enjoying yourself?"

"The concert is pleasant enough, I suppose," Concordia said noncommittally, trying to still her pounding heart.

"Why, Miss Lannington." Norworth grinned. "Do I detect a lack of enthusiasm in your response? Could it be that you don't share Lady Fortescue's taste for opera? Or perhaps 'tis her choice of tenors with which you have found fault?"

Concordia opened her fan, held it before her face, and glanced left and right as if she were about to impart a secret. "The soloist is awful!" she said in a low voice, leaning a little closer to him. "If I could escape without offending our hostess or upsetting my aunt and uncle, I would run off to some ball and dance all night!"

"Would you take me with you, I wonder?" Peter mused, gazing into her intriguing green eyes, beguiled by the untamed innocence he saw there.

"Here we are, Miss Lannington." Mountheathe's cheerful voice shattered Norworth's reverie. Peter frowned as Giles handed Concordia a glass of lemonade and made a great show of settling her comfortably in her seat.

Glaring at Norworth with thinly veiled hostility, Giles took his seat beside Concordia. Norworth, for his part, did not bother to mask his animosity toward Mountheathe at all. He turned his back pointedly upon Giles and addressed Concordia. "The concert is about to start again, Miss Lannington, so I will bid you good evening." Casting an angry, suspicious glance at Mountheathe, he said cryptically, "If you are ever in need of rescue, you may call upon me." He bowed, fixed Giles for a moment with a killing stare, and strolled away, leaving Concordia feeling, despite the conscientious attentions of her swain, unaccountably bereft.

During the last few weeks, as news of Robin's return to England spread, more and more tradesmen

demanded that Giles settle his accounts with them. Once, broad smiles had greeted him whenever he stepped into a commercial establishment, but now those smiles had dimmed and he found credit increasingly hard to get. Clarissa, his mistress, too, seemed colder lately and he had the strong, unpleasant impression that she was looking about her for a new protector. Even his old friends in the quiet back-street hells he frequented hesitated to accept his drafts and vowels.

Giles sat by the fire in his study one evening, subjecting a gilt- edged invitation to hard scrutiny. Sipping brandy from a crystal goblet, he read the card once more with a discouraged heart. 'Sir William and Lady Blayne, with the gracious support of the Earl and Countess of Malkent, request your presence at Blayne House to attend a ball honoring the Duke and Duchess of Lynkellyn'. Somehow, the Rogue had managed to worm his way back into Tracy's good graces.

Fuming, Giles crushed the elegant card. "Hell and damnation! If only Robin had died on the point of my sword ten years ago!" he muttered. 'It could still be arranged,' an inner voice prompted him. An insult at Ryl's ball might push the Rogue into a challenge. No, that would never do. Giles had sorely neglected his swordplay over the years and, as for pistols, he had always been a sorry shot. A duel was more likely to get him killed than the Rogue.

This business required a subtler hand. A ruinous intrigue accomplished with finesse was worth a thousand duels. Amberley's bride was the weakest point in his defenses, Giles decided. If she were to disappear, Robin could not claim Grandpapa's fortune because he would have neither wife nor child.

Perhaps the little strumpet might be persuaded to leave him. Considering her past, her loyalties were undoubtedly available for purchase, but if a bribe failed, he could always spirit her out of the country somehow.

Giles balked at the thought that leaped into his mind. He had never actually murdered anyone and was not eager for the experience; unless it were absolutely necessary. His hands curled into fists.

Glancing at the pile of bills stacked on his desk at the far end of the room, he knew that he needed to find money somewhere soon. Persistent duns and monumental gambling debts were eating into his dwindling funds at an appalling rate. Although in the end he would certainly crush his cousin's claim to the Amberley wealth, he needed an interim income to sustain him until he achieved his victory. Therefore, he had been pursuing alternative solutions to his financial problems.

He was courting Concordia Lannington, an heiress with a dowry of forty thousand pounds. With her elfin figure and chestnut curls, Concordia even reminded him a little of his dearest Val although he found the younger lady's independence of mind irritating and coarse. That willful streak would have to be beaten out of her after they were married.

Although spectacular to most people, Concordia's dowry could hardly compare with the overflowing Amberley coffers, but Giles was facing destitution and running out of options. He was prepared to settle

for forty thousand and be happy, at least until he'd spent it all.

He tossed off his brandy, refilled the glass, and sank back in his chair to watch the hungry flames dancing in his hearth, determined to line his pockets with somebody's gold, even if it meant mayhem, marriage, or murder.

Chapter 14:

In Which Death Looms Upon His Grace's Horizon

Robin and Lord Bellefield rode daily in the park in the afternoon, ignoring the outraged sensibilities of Society. After the first week or so, fewer people gawked or glared at Robin, but no one with any pretense to respectability acknowledged him. However, the ladies of the demi-monde, always the first to forgive a rich man his trespasses, smiled and nodded whenever they saw him.

For Bellefield, the duke's notoriety was a boon. Delighting in the courtesans' attention, he twisted in his saddle to get a better view. "By Jove, Robin. Look at the bosom on that one! And I think she likes you if that enticing smile she's tossing your way is any indication. Stap me, if you don't have every bit o' muslin in London casting out lures after you. Envy you, old man."

"Don't! It's only my fortune they want to lure."

"Have you decided which one you'll have yet?" Bellefield said. "I'd take Lady Clarissa Chalfont. She's beautiful, refined, discreet and, as Sir Cuthbert Chalfont's widow, she is received everywhere. She's expensive as the devil, though."

Robin lifted his quizzing glass to survey the throng of women parading seductively before him. "Chalfont? Which one is she?"

"That one." Tony gestured with his riding crop toward a willowy woman dressed in pale green. Sitting in an open carriage, she smiled at Lynkellyn, invitation in her sultry hazel eyes. Her chestnut ringlets gleamed in the sun and her breasts, barely contained in her low-cut gown, hung over the coach door, tempting closer inspection.

"Is this some sort of joke, Tony? She looks like Lady Malkent!"

"Oh, Lord! I didn't think -- that is, she was just the most attractive to me and -- I am sorry, Robin."

"It doesn't matter. I don't intend to take a mistress. It's all I can do to manage my wife."

"Her Grace seems a very sweet and gentle soul."

"You've never made her angry, mon ami."

"Mountheathe will be relieved, at any rate," Tony said. "They've been laying odds at the clubs on whether you'd steal La Chalfont from him out of spite."

"She's Bridland's mistress?"

"Until someone with more money comes along. Are you interested after all?"

"Just imagine the *ton's* furor if I took a mistress who resembled Val! Not to mention Giles's irritation if I stole her from him," Robin grinned. "The amusement it would afford me might almost be worth the aggravation; but no. I'll not pander to the gossips. I've better things to do with my time."

He urged his horse forward and Bellefield followed suit. "So you are just going to ignore all those gorgeous creatures."

"I have had my fill of strumpets, mon ami. I'm ready to settle down to married life and a staid old age." Robin glanced at Tony's doubtful face and laughed. "You are young, sir. Someday, you may feel as I do."

"Impossible!" Tony scoffed. "I enjoy my freedom too much. In fact, if you don't mind, Robin, I believe I'll go back and pay my-er- 'respects' to the 'ladies'."

"Good hunting, mon ami." Robin smiled. Looking up, he suddenly stiffened in his saddle, staring at a short, stout, sallow man talking to one of the women. "Nom de nom! What the devil? Who is that?"

Bellefield frowned. "That, my friend, is Sir Winston Rochedale, a sharper and a thoroughgoing rotter. He lurks on the fringes of Society, preying on fools and innocents and grabbing any chance he can to move into higher circles. He's beggared at least three young bucks in the last six months. One of them blew his own brains out. I avoid the blackguard and I'd advise everyone else to do the same. Do you know him?"

Robin's eyes lingered on the distant gentleman. "I met him in the Caribbean, but his name was Archibald Tarney then. I'm not best pleased to see him here."

"He is thick as thieves with Mountheathe," Tony said.

"Indeed!" Robin's mouth tightened. The thought of an alliance between Giles and Tarney twisted his stomach.

"Well, I'm off to flirt with the pretty ladies." A wide, white grin split Bellefield's tanned face. He raised his hand in salute as he rode away. Frowning a little over Tarney's presence in London, Robin turned his

horse toward Berkeley Square.

When he arrived at home, Laddock informed him that her grace had gone out with Lady Malkent, but was expected back shortly. An increasingly familiar uneasiness gnawed at the pit of his stomach. When, to his great surprise, he and Lucia began to accumulate a few friends, he had been forced to allow her more freedom. Every time she left home, however, he worried that she would not return.

Laddock took Robin's hat, cane, and redingote, saying, "The Dowager Countess of Easterbury awaits you in the Gold Salon, Your Grace." Robin's brows rose. "She asked to see either you or Her Grace and insisted upon waiting when I told her you were both from home."

In the Gold Salon, Robin discovered an imposing woman of perhaps sixty years pacing the room, clad in green and gold brocade, her unpowdered silver hair curled close to her head. She turned sharp, disturbingly familiar blue eyes upon him. "You are the Duke of Lynkellyn?"

Robin bowed. "I am. How may I help you, milady?"

"I've come for my niece!"

Robin blinked. "Pardonnez moi?"

"My niece, man! Lucia Cothcourt. I intend to remove her from this snake pit at once!"

With some amusement, Robin eyed the charming white and gold elegance of his snake pit. "Lucia Amberley," he stressed the surname, "is my wife. Her place is by my side."

"Lord Saddewythe told me the circumstances of your marriage, sirrah! You are an unabashed rapscallion! I intend to remove that poor child from your clutches and request an annulment."

"Has it ever occurred to you that she may not wish to leave?" Robin asked. Lady Easterbury harrumphed skeptically. "And then, naturellement, there is the very real possibility that Her Grace may be enceinte," he mused. The countess blushed, unprepared for such a situation. "The marriage was consummated and we have been living as man and wife," he thrust home in gentle tones.

Lady Easterbury sank onto a divan, shaking her head. "Why? Why did you abduct Lucia? She was finally beginning to overcome the shame of her parents' mésalliance."

Robin conveniently fell back upon half-truths. "Abduct Lucia, my lady? She consented to our marriage and we eloped! Allow me to assure you that she is safe in my care. I can give her every material comfort."

"You are as ostracized as she is! How do you intend to overcome that?"

"I can't, my lady, but at least I won't abandon her to the world's whims like the Cothcourts have!"

Robin's eyes narrowed. "If you or your fine family care so much about her, my lady, why did I find my duchess slaving away in the Saddewythe's schoolroom?"

"I do care! More than you can know. I want to help her now." Lady Easterbury dabbed a lace handkerchief she was carrying at the tears that trickled down her face. "I want to atone for my nephew's wretched marriage and my brother's hidebound reaction to it. Oh, but they seemed so happy."

"Who?" Amberley queried, bewildered.

"Albert and Elise, of course. When they eloped, I -- I helped them," her ladyship confessed, her voice hardly above a whisper. Her shoulders slumped and she suddenly looked very old. "I thought my brother would surely relent and accept the lovers after they were wed, but I was wrong. That stiff-necked old buzzard preferred to take his vengeance on Patrice by destroying poor Albert and his bride."

"Patrice?" Confused, Robin sank onto the sofa opposite his guest.

"French girl who jilted him!" The countess sniffed tearfully. "Anyway, the newly-weds left England under a cloud and the only news I had of them came from Albert's occasional letters, until Martin, my late husband, discovered I was receiving them. He ordered any other correspondence from Albert to be brought directly to him and he sent it to my brother. I was not aware that Albert and Elise had even had a child until my husband's death three years ago. Then Mr. Gleason told me of Lucia's birth and dear Albert's death, and Elise's too, of course." Her ladyship shook her head. "I have no patience with the present Earl of Cothcourt or his sister. Lavinia Laddon is enough to drive anyone to Bedlam! I never call on her, of course, so I did not see Lucia while she was living at the Laddons'. When Gleason told me she was at Saddewythe Manor, I drove up to Essex and paid Lady Winifred an afternoon call. Since she and I are barely acquainted, I daresay she found the whole episode rather odd, especially when I asked to visit her schoolroom, but I wanted to see Lucia without interfering in her affairs."

"And?" Robin prompted when the countess fell silent.

"She seemed reasonably content and she was safe enough in her humble, but respectable life so I didn't tell her I was her great aunt. I just left her there and cultivated Lady Saddewythe's acquaintance in order to get news of her when I wanted it. But now..."

"Now I have opened the Pandora's box to which the Cothcourt family had consigned its' pesky black sheep and she's back to haunt you." Robin said. "If you had really cared, my fine lady, you would have taken Lucia home with you and allowed her to live a gentlewoman's existence or perhaps even have found her a proper husband!"

"What man would have her to wife after the life she's lived?"

"I would, my lady. Lucia and I are both of age and our marriage is legal. You are too late to change anything!"

"Did you know of her past when you wed her?"

Robin's tone softened. "Yes. Our common experiences serve as a sturdy thread to bind us together."

The room's ornate double doors swung open and Lucia stood on the threshold. Her gown of white silk trimmed with dark blue ribbons caressed her figure and gave her an oddly bride-like quality as she stepped into the room.

Robin rose to greet her. "Ma chérie!" he smiled, taking her hand and leading her toward Lady Easterbury. "You have a visitor. My lady, this is my wife, Lucia Amberley, Duchess of Lynkellyn. Lucia, may I present the dowager Countess of Easterbury? She is your great aunt."

Lucia made a hesitant curtsy and extended her hand. "How do you do?" she said coolly, mindful of the last visit her kinsmen had paid her.

Her smile bittersweet, the countess flung her arms around Lucia's neck. "Oh, my dear child! I am so sorry!" Suffering this embrace passively, Lucia's eyes met Robin's in confusion over Lady Easterbury's shoulder.

"Let me look at you," Lady Easterbury said, stepping back. "Are you well, child? You look a little tired. Are you eating and sleeping properly?"

"I am doing wonderfully, my lady."

"You must call me Aunt Corinna." the countess chided gently. "I've come to take you home."

Robin wandered away from the women to a window on the far side of the room. He stared down into a small walled garden, refusing to face the possibility that Lucia might choose to leave Lynkellyn House with her aunt. He ignored his plummeting heart and tried to divorce himself from the ladies' conversation.

"To take me home?" Lucia's amazed eyes flew to Lady Easterbury's face.

"Certainly! You don't think I shall allow you to stay here with this -- this profligate, do you? Oh, my poor lamb! How hard it must be for you to be imprisoned in this shame-ridden house and forced to endure the Lord only knows what vile acts at the hands of that dreadful creature." She jerked her head

angrily in Amberley's direction.

"All is not as it seems, my lady," Lucia said patiently as Laddock entered, holding a silver tray with a calling card upon it.

"Lord Mountheathe is below, Your Grace," he said, bowing to the duke.

Robin's mouth tightened in disgust. "très bien! Show him to the library. Ladies, if you will excuse me?" As Laddock left, Amberley bowed and started for the door.

"Robin!" Lucia said.

He turned in the doorway. "Ma chérie?"

"Be mindful of your temper, Your Grace. Lord Mountheathe has a way of roiling you."

Robin smiled. "Giles is not worth your concern, ma vie."

Glancing at Lucia's face, Lady Corinna knew that the girl cared nothing about Mountheathe's safety. Her gaze shifted to Lynkellyn whose granite grey eyes, so coldly challenging toward her, had gentled and warmed as he regarded his wife and the countess wondered if perhaps she had misjudged the situation.

"I would feel more at ease, Robin, if..." Lucia was saying.

"If, ma chérie?"

"If you would leave your weapons here." She spoke in a breathless rush.

"But I never go unarmed!"

"Nevertheless, it is my wish."

Their eyes locked. Robin took a step toward Lucia; toward the trust, strength, and tranquility she radiated. "très bien!" he sighed as he took a pistol from his pocket and laid it on a table. He added his dress sword and a sheathed dagger removed from a hidden pocket in his coat lining. "Satisfied?"

"You have forgotten your boot knife, Robin." She blushed at the memory the mention of it evoked.

"So I have." He laughed as he bent down to pull a wicked looking blade from his right riding boot. Tossing it on the table, he said, "I am now completely unarmed, ma chérie, save for my bare hands."

Lucia smiled. "Keep your hands in your pockets and my fears will be laid to rest."

Robin grinned, bowed, and was gone.

"What a lot of weapons!" Lady Corinna remarked in an awed tone. "Does he always go armed to the teeth?"

Lucia shrugged. "My Papa never ventured out with less than three loaded firearms secreted about his person," she said. "Robin's years of hardship have left him suspicious of his fellow man and he keenly feels the need to protect himself. I only hope he and his cousin don't come to blows in the library."

As Corinna watched Lucia's hands clasping and unclasping, her eyes narrowed. "A second tale is circulating that you and Amberley eloped; that your marriage is a love match. Which rumor is the truth? Don't try to protect that wretched man. Just tell me what happened." Silent, Lucia stared down at her twining fingers. "Well?" the older lady urged. "I only want to help you, child. I will not force you to do anything against your will, but I need to know everything if I am to befriend you."

"Very well," Lucia said at last. She gave Lady Easterbury an abbreviated account of her wedding and her six weeks of marriage, her calm detachment contrasting sharply with the wildness of the tale she unfolded.

After listening to the entire story, Corinna rose, her lips tight with disapproval, and scooped up her cane. "It's time we were leaving. We will send for your things."

"I'm sorry, my lady, but I cannot go with you."

"For heaven's sake, why not? Surely you do not intend to remain with this villain after his outrages against you?"

Lucia sank onto the divan. "I know he seems black-hearted, but beneath all his wildness, he is a lonely, aching, vulnerable man."

Lady Easterbury laughed. "You are extremely young, my dear. Accept the guidance of an older and wiser head. The man is poison! You must come home with me for your own welfare. Then we shall see to dissolving this nightmare of a marriage."

"I am to abandon him like everyone else has, then, my lady? Just turn my back and walk away? No, I can't do that! He has been hurt so many times already. His heart has been broken at least once, I think, and he dies a little inside each time someone he loves condemns him for a crime he did not commit." As Corinna stared incredulously, Lucia added, "Yes, I do believe he is innocent of Lady Malkent's abduction and I have promised to stay with him for a year. I will do so. I have pledged the honor of the Cothcourts."

Corinna snorted. "The honor of the Cothcourts! You are the only member of the family to give a fig for the Cothcourt honor since Albert left. A busier set of gamesters and profligates would be hard to find."

"Nevertheless, I gave Robin my word. In any case, I -- I suspect that I am increasing." She turned wide eyes and blushing cheeks to her aunt. "I shall know for certain within a fortnight."

Corinna admitted defeat. "If life becomes unbearable, if you need a safe place to go, please come to me, my dear," she said softly, concern in her eyes.

"Thank you, my lady, I will. And, of course, you may visit me whenever you like. May I call on you?" Rising, Lucia smiled and held out her hands.

Corinna clasped them warmly. "Yes, of course, my love. Does he know about the blessed event?"

"No. Not yet." Lucia fell in step beside her aunt. "I want to be certain before I tell him."

The ladies walked in companionable silence to the door. While waiting for her carriage, Corinna turned to Lucia, searching her face. "He -- he doesn't beat you or -- or treat you harshly, my dear?"

Lucia smiled. "No, Aunt Corinna."

"I shall call often. Tell him that and tell him I shall be alert for any signs that you are suffering violence at his hands."

When the carriage arrived, Corinna embraced Lucia and boarded, waving through the window as the coach rolled out of the drive.

Outside the library doors, Robin breathed deeply, steeling himself for the coming interview. He felt naked and defenseless without his personal arsenal. Footmen opened the doors and he sauntered in, pausing only a second to gauge the mood of his caller.

Scowling, Giles paced the room in long, angry strides, halting when he heard Amberley's footstep on the threshold. "It's just like you to keep me waiting, Rogue! Trading a deal too much on your new rank, if you ask me."

"Is this a social call or have you some business with me, my lord?" Robin said.

"I would know, dear cousin, why you seem to have made my charities your concern."

Robin shrugged. "You have not met your commitments so I have done it. The family's honor and all that."

"The family's honor! You can speak of the family's honor after you have completely destroyed it?" Mountheathe's nostrils flared and his brows snapped together.

"Doing it rather too brown, mon cousin." Robin brushed an imaginary speck of dust from his riding coat. "You know the truth as well as I do, héin?"

"The truth!" Giles sneered. "The only truth that matters is the one people choose to believe. The world accepts my story as fact and you are powerless to change that."

"The truth, Giles, is that you don't have enough money to support your own extravagances, let alone a worthy cause. I have made inquiries into your financial situation and I have never seen such a morass of mortgaged estates, unpaid accounts, and gaming debts; the last owed to an extremely dangerous and disgusting set of vultures."

"You haven't changed, Rogue!" Giles shouted, his face flushed. "You are still pushing in where you don't belong. I'll thank you to keep your nose out of my finances and I would have you know that those 'vultures' are my friends!"

"Some of your 'friends' would run you through for a shilling, Giles. I know them. I've been one of them. Take my advice and cut the lot. If you lack the funds to settle your debts and put your estates in order, I'll advance you all that you require. Let us call a truce to our hostilities, héin?"

Mountheathe's eyes narrowed. " Why would you help me?"

"A whim." Robin shrugged. Remembering only too well what it was like to be without funds, he could find little sympathy in his heart even for the contemptible Mountheathe in a comparable situation. Besides, Giles, in spite of his deceit, was still family.

"Are you suggesting that we could be friends?" Giles cried incredulously.

"Hardly!" Robin's smile was strained. "I am suggesting that we ignore each other's existence. A polite avoidance, if you will. However, 'tis plain from your financial state that you were counting heavily on Grandpapa's money. Because you are a member of my family, I am prepared to help you mend your fortunes if you promise to give up your 'friends'; especially a certain Sir Winston Rochedale whose name has been linked with yours."

"You have become extremely cunning, haven't you? You think that if I take your money, you will have the right to choose my companions and control my life. It won't work, Rogue! I shall be rich as Croesus

after you and your doxy fail in your plot to wrest my legacy from me. As for my choice of friends, let me tell you that Rochey is the best of good fellows and I'll certainly not give him up on your advice."

"'Rochey', as you call him, once signed Articles of Confederation with me, then turned me over to the authorities in Kingston to win a five guinea wager. He was willing to let me hang for a fiver, Giles, and I doubt he's softened over the years."

"Articles of-! Pirate articles?" Mountheathe was momentarily diverted.

"Yes. Pirate articles," Robin brushed the implied inquiry aside. "Rochedale, not his true name, I assure you, is totally untrustworthy."

"A dishonored reprobate who usurps another man's fortune is hardly in a position to point a damning finger at Sir Winston Rochedale, who may go anywhere and is received by everyone. Rochey has taken me under his wing and introduced me to all his intimates. I have made his friends my friends."

Robin's eyes flashed, his mouth tightening. "You are drowning in debt, Giles! Rochedale and his cronies are pushing you further and further into deep waters. Rid yourself of them."

Crossing the room, Giles thrust his face into Robin's. Since the duke was a good head taller than he was, he was forced to look up to meet Robin's eyes. "I have no reason to suspect Rochey of treachery, but you would love to see me damned, Rogue. Admit it! You married your filthy little slut in the dead of night with the singular intention of keeping me from Grandpapa's money and now you are trying to foist your tart off on London Society as a lady of quality."

"Her Grace will not be part of this discussion," Amberley said through gritted teeth, his voice suddenly swollen with fury.

"She does not fulfill the intent of Grandfather's will!" Mountheathe spat, his fingers curving into fists. "She's a fortune- hunting whore who saw her opportunity to get rich and grabbed it."

"She's worth a thousand of you, you filthy cur!" Fire danced in Robin's eyes. Instinctively searching for a weapon, his hand stole into his pocket and curled around nothing. With a silent curse, he said, "If you think she doesn't fulfill the stipulations of the will, challenge us in the courts!"

"Believe me, I've consulted several lawyers to see if it was possible. They all say her ancestry is unexceptional and that's all that matters, but I will find a way to defeat you and your doxy yet."

"Call her one more foul name, Giles, and you won't live long enough!"

"Is that a challenge, Cousin?" Mountheathe thundered, scarlet-faced.

"Call it what you will!" Robin's hooded eyes smoldered. "I'll not stand by and let you hurl insults at my wife. She has been stalwart and courageous in the face of undeserved calamity while you, you bastard, haven't even the guts to admit your own crimes and accept the consequences. You are a cowardly, contemptible prig without a single scruple. My scullery wench would be a more gallant adversary on a Field of Honor than you!"

Giles's fist suddenly rushed toward Robin's jaw. He blocked it with his left arm and plowed his right fist into Giles's face, sending the shorter man sprawling.

Walking into the library, Lucia stopped in the doorway, staring at Giles. Flushed and spluttering, he struggled to his feet, a ribbon of blood trickling from his nose. "My friends will call on yours, Rogue! If you can find any!" he snarled.

"I believe Lord Bellefield will act for me, my lord," Robin drawled, fury still burning in his eyes.

"And Sir Winston Rochedale will act for me!" Giles announced with a triumphant gloat.

Lucia hastened out of his path as he turned to leave, but she was not quick enough. Giles shoved her roughly against the doorframe as he stalked out.

She came into the room, rubbing a bruised shoulder as Robin dropped onto a settee. "So," she said, "you're going to fight a duel."

"Oui! I had hoped to postpone the inevitable for awhile, but it couldn't be helped."

"Couldn't be helped! What quarrel is so important that bloodletting is required to solve it?"

Lynkellyn hesitated. "You!" he said at last. "We were arguing over you!"

"Me." she repeated, dumbfounded. "You would risk two lives over me?" Robin was silent, his eyes following her as she wandered about the room, absently running her fingers along the soft leather upholstery of a chair or the gold-embossed spine of a book. At last, she asked, "When is it to be?"

"We haven't settled the details yet, Lucia, and it is none of your concern, in any case. I insist that you stay out of it."

"Even if I stay out of it, I'm involved, Robin. Whether we wish it or not, our lives are entwined. What -- what if you die?"

Robin stared at her woebegone face, surmising that she was afraid lest she lose her comfortable circumstances and be forced to return to the streets. "There is naught to fear, ma chérie. You will have to

give up grandfather's fortune and the ducal holdings, but I am a rich man in my own right. I earn fifty thousand a year from my properties and commercial ventures. I shall have Gleason draw up a will, leaving it all to you. You will also retain the title, *naturellement*."

Lucia whirled to face him, anguish in her eyes. "I don't care about the money or the title! I only want -- " She stopped, appalled at the direction her mind and her heart were taking her. She had been about to say that she only wanted to know that he was alive and safe at home with her. Paling, she refused to travel any further down this disturbing and dangerous new avenue of thought. As if the confusion in her mind had communicated itself to her body, she sank limply into a chair, suddenly dizzy and weak.

"Are you feeling ill, Lucia?" Robin hurried over to her and took her hand. Her pulse raced at his touch and the last bit of color drained from her face. "You look so white, *ma chérie*! Perhaps you had better go upstairs and rest." He helped her to rise.

"I do feel rather -- rather unsteady."

"Would you like me to escort you to your chamber?"

"No! I shall be perfectly well after a short nap," she assured him with a shaky smile. She rushed out of the library, her hand pressed to her mouth. By the time she reached her bedroom, she was definitely queasy.

She flung open the door with a clatter and Anne, who was mending a gown, looked up. "Quickly, the basin!" Lucia cried. It had been an oft-sung refrain of late.

Lucia bent over the bowl and was violently unwell. "Perhaps Your Grace should see a physician," Anne suggested, hovering anxiously around her mistress. "You are ill so very often these days."

"You know the cause as well as I do, Anne," Lucia gasped, accepting a cloth to wipe her mouth. "I am with child and I can no longer ignore it."

Lucia sipped at a glass of water as the maid helped her out of her dress. "I must ask Lady Blayne to recommend a physician when next I see her," she muttered to herself, yawning. "I am so very weary, Anne."

"I'll just unlace these stays and then off to bed with you for a nap, Your Grace, to dream of holding a wee, sweet babe in your arms."

Seething with white-hot fury, Mountheathe left Lynkellyn House. Pausing on a street corner, he took a deep breath to calm his temper. As his anger faded, his stomach roiled at the thought of meeting

Amberley. He had let his rage rule his head and the result was potential disaster.

But with a little ingenuity, he could yet come about, he thought. He allowed himself a brief, satisfying vision of his sword sliding cleanly through the Rogue's body and grinned.

"Giles, old man. Judging from that beatific expression, you must be in love." Malkent's teasing voice invaded his reverie.

"Tracy. Well met. I am merely planning to rid the world of a great menace."

"Indeed! What menace is that, my lord?"

"Why, the Rogue, of course! He has called me out! I intend to teach him, at sword's point, the folly of inflicting himself upon decent people. Or perhaps I shall choose pistols. I haven't decided yet. What do you suggest?"

"If it is Rogue Robin you're meeting, I would suggest that you cry off altogether," Tracy said.

"Cry off? Certainly not!"

"I've seen Amberley fight, my lord. The man's a demon with a blade. If you choose rapiers, you're dead!"

"If you will recall, Tracy, the Rogue lost our last encounter. I shall have no trouble besting him this time either."

"But that was ten years ago, Giles. You've not kept up your fencing skills and everyone knows it. He'll kill you!"

"He won't kill me, in any case, Tracy! Stands to reason. Everyone would claim it was murder, of course, and he would have to flee the country again. Thought you'd be pleased that I'm getting rid of him for you. Must be damned uncomfortable for you and Val to have him around."

"As surprising as it sounds, he's been the perfect gentleman around Val, though he still swears he did not abduct her."

Giles snorted. "When I found the Rogue with Val at the Crown and Thistle, he had nearly shredded her gown. She was laying there, drugged and defenseless while he -- he -- " His voice faltered and he rubbed his eyes. "I'm sorry, Tracy. I'm just so ashamed. Who would have thought that my cousin, my own flesh and blood, could be such a pitiless profligate?"

Tracy cast him a sidelong glance. "Who, indeed?" he frowned. "Have you named your second for the

encounter?"

"Rochey will be my man!" Mountheathe said. "The Rogue has taken the most absurd dislike to him."

Since Tracy agreed with Robin's assessment of Sir Winston, he offered no comment on the gentleman, saying only, "I suppose Bellefield is acting for Amberley?"

"Well, he is the only friend Robin has, after all!" Giles smirked. "I was about to go over to Rochey's to enlist him in my cause. Care to accompany me?"

Malkent shook his head. "I think I'd prefer to look in on the Rogue."

"Don't allow him to cry off, Tracy. I'm looking forward to meeting him. Aye! And to drawing his claret."

After Lucia left, Robin dashed off an urgent note to Tony, requesting that he call at Lynkellyn House without delay. Laddock entered just as he was sealing this correspondence. "Lord Malkent to see you, Your Grace."

"très bien. Show him in, Laddock, and send this message to Lord Bellefield in Half Moon Street. Have it delivered directly into his lordship's hands if possible." He gave Laddock the letter and the servant bowed himself out.

A moment later, the Earl of Malkent entered the room and Robin rose to greet him. "You work quickly, Rogue." Tracy accused him without preamble. "You've not been in Town two months and you've challenged Mountheathe already."

"News certainly travels swiftly these days, my lord. My cousin left only ten minutes ago."

"I met him by chance in the street." Tracy said.

Robin smiled. "Won't you have a seat, Tracy? Some claret?"

Malkent took the nearest chair. "No, thank you. Val is forever after me to cut down."

"We have something in common, then, mon ami." Robin filled a glass from a crystal decanter on his desk. "Lucia insists that I alter my drinking habits as well. She claims her father would have survived some fiery catastrophe had he not been in his cups. I have occasionally discovered that she has replaced my wine with- " He took a cautious sip and spluttered. "Nom de nom! Grape juice! That little wretch! Grape juice! Why will she never learn that I am master in my own house and when I want wine, I'll

damned well have it?"

Tracy grinned. "Are you enjoying married life, then, Rogue?"

"Grape juice!" Robin slammed his glass down on the table. "Allow me to enlighten you regarding married life, Tracy. Lucia has completely disarmed me. I'm not even carrying a penknife. And she's substituting that," he glowered at the decanter of juice "for my best claret! As if that weren't enough, she's also gotten me to agree to attend Ryl's wretched ball, which is certain to be a nightmare. The devilish part of it is that when I try to talk her out of all these mad starts, the conversation somehow gets twisted around and I find myself agreeing with her. I'm beginning to suspect that she's one of those damned managing females! So much for my tame and biddable governess."

"I'm surprised she hasn't discovered your dueling plans and forbidden the whole affair." Mirth danced in Malkent's eyes.

"I'm not that far beneath the cat's paw, Tracy! Why the devil are you snickering?" Robin stared at the earl whose shoulders began to shake.

"I am merely happy for you, Rogue. The duchess sounds a very capable wife. She certainly has you well in hand." Malkent laughed.

Exasperated, Robin changed the subject. "Do you have some business with me, Tracy, or is this another 'social call'?"

"Although I came for quite another reason, now that I know about it, I want to discuss your duel with Mountheathe, Robin. I don't think..."

Lynkellyn held up one long white hand. "I do not wish to speak of it. Bellefield is my second. You may discuss it with him."

"But, Rogue..."

Robin remained adamantly silent upon the subject, saying only that the details had not been finalized.

"Well, you can at least tell me what you quarreled about." Tracy said. "It won't be a secret for long anyway. You know the wagging tongues of the *ton*."

"Yes, unfortunately I know them all too well." Robin sighed. "We fought over Lucia. Giles hurled one more insult at her than I could stomach. Are you satisfied?"

"Quite."

"And your other purpose for calling on me?"

Malkent beamed at him. "I wanted to tell you that I've thought over everything you said about Val's abduction; how we should have questioned the innkeeper and all, and I have decided you're right. We should have inquired further before assigning guilt. We will never know the truth for certain now, though, will we?"

"I know the truth," Robin said witheringly, "and I told it to you."

"Yes, well, I -- that is, Val and I want to forgive and forget. I'm ready and willing to stand your friend, Robin." Tracy held out his hand, a wide smile creasing his face.

Robin drew himself up stiffly. His eyes were molten granite, his knuckles white against the back of his chair. "I do not require your forgiveness, my lord, for I've never wronged you or yours and I cannot merely 'forget' ten years of my life wasted in exile, as you blithely seem to suppose. My grandfather and my brother died believing I was the worst sort of profligate and I shall never, ever be able to clear myself in their eyes. 'Tis infuriating and damnably depressing to think on."

"If you were innocent, why didn't you stay in England and stand up to your accusers?" Tracy said. "Fleeing the country certainly did not lend credence to your story."

Robin pulled his chair away from his desk and sat. "Despite my rakish reputation, Tracy, at twenty, I was still in many ways a babe in the woods. When Giles and you and Grandpapa, even Clayton, all swore that I had abducted Val, that I truly was a rogue in the vilest sense of the word, I was horrified and ashamed. In one day, I went from popular young buck to reviled pariah. Everyone I loved, respected, or admired was speaking against me. No one would listen to my side of the story. Then Grandpapa disowned me. He had his footmen throw me bodily out of the Castle. After that, I was sure that you would immediately swear out a warrant for my arrest. Emotionally devastated and terrified of imprisonment, I hadn't the stomach or the sense to stay and brazen my way through such a debacle. I took all that was left of my quarter's allowance, packed what few belongings I could carry, and ran first to France, then Italy, Austria, and America. Otherwise, as far from England as I could go. At the time, I didn't realize that others might interpret my flight as an admission of guilt." Robin's shoulders slumped and his hands coursed through his unpowdered locks distractedly. "My family; all my friends; even strangers were giving me the cut-direct. It was more than I could endure to see the mockery and laughter in Giles's eyes when the world praised him for his heroics. My life was crashing down around my head like a burning building and I was helpless to stop it. Terrified, appalled, and despairing, I fled. Can you blame me?"

"No, I suppose not," Malkent said, "but your presence here now would suggest that the situation has changed."

"Non, mon cher. I have changed. I've grown older and wiser. I am prepared to face Society's accusations

with strength and dignity. Enfin, mon ami, after ten years of exile, I am ready to fight for the justice due me."

"I could still call a magistrate." Tracy said.

"If you intended to press charges against me, Malkent, you would have done so the minute you discovered I was back in England. Instead, you come here offering me a back-handed friendship that I cannot honorably accept."

"I don't understand you, Rogue, but I will stand your friend whether you wish it or not. I'd like to be at that duel, if you will permit it?"

Robin shrugged. "As you please, but you will have to apply to Tony for the details. I don't wish to speak of it."

When Sir Winston Rochedale's man, Bertie, answered an imperious knock on the door, Mountheathe stormed past him into an untidy drawing room. "Rochey! 'Tis the damnedest thing!"

Rochedale rose, tossing the newspaper he had been perusing aside. "Giles! Well met, dear boy. Is there a problem?"

"That blackguard has dared to challenge me! I've said you'd second me, Rochey."

"I'd be honored, my lord. You and your cousin have had words, then?" Sir Winston correctly inferred that 'that blackguard' must be the Duke of Lynkellyn, a gentleman whose name had haunted Giles's conversation of late.

"Words! I'll send the bastard to hell for meddling in my affairs!" Giles was pacing Sir Winston's parlor like a caged beast.

"Have you decided upon your weapon?"

"Yes. I was going to choose swords, but Malkent says that the Rogue has mastered the blade, so perhaps I'll select pistols, although firearms are not my strong suit. Bellefield is the Rogue's second. I'd be obliged if you'd call on him and arrange things."

"I shall do so in the morning, dear boy. Would you like to dine with me tonight? I've found a new gaming house that I thought we might visit afterward." Sir Winston's voice was a lyrical siren.

"Sounds amusing. Anything to take my mind off that damned interloper."

Just before dawn the next morning, Sir Winston Rochedale stumbled into his bedchamber while a drunken Mountheathe lurched off into the darkness, some three hundred guineas the lighter. Sir Winston smiled as he set Giles's purse full of clinking coins on his dressing table and disrobed. Mountheathe was one of the fattest pigeons ever to come his way and although his lordship's pockets were almost milked dry, Giles was good for several thousand yet. Rochedale intended to have every penny he could squeeze out of the man.

Unless the duke cut Giles's career short, and if Mountheathe died, all those golden guineas would slip through Rochedale's fingers. A grim thought, that. Sir Winston had never met the duke, but he had heard about him and the gossip didn't augur well for Giles. The duel would have to be stopped.

Getting into bed, Sir Winston blew out his candle and lay in the quiet darkness, considering his options. Perhaps Mountheathe might be persuaded to cry off, he thought, but when he recalled the way Giles had lambasted Lynkellyn all evening, he dismissed that possibility.

With a shrug, Rochedale rolled on his side and prepared himself for sleep. A solution would undoubtedly occur to him before long. One always did.

When Sir Winston called on Lord Bellefield the next morning, Tony was already entertaining the Earl of Malkent. Agreeing that it would be best for all concerned if the principals were persuaded to make peace, the gentlemen visited first Lord Mountheathe, then the Duke of Lynkellyn.

In Giles's library, Tracy reiterated past warnings, to no avail.

"If he is as good a swordsman as you say, I'll choose pistols! I'll not let him insult me, gentlemen," Giles said.

"Pistols won't answer at all." Bellefield said, leaning against the fireplace mantle, his arms crossed over his chest. "I served with His Grace in America and, although it has been some time since I saw him shoot, I never remember him missing his target. He could bring down a rabbit, or a man, at fifty paces. At dusk, mind you. And I doubt that he has allowed his aim to get rusty."

"Accusing me of cowardice! Meddling in my affairs! Telling me -- me -- whom I may befriend and whom I may not!" Railing on as if Tony had not spoken, Giles paced the room, fury in his stride. "He stole my legacy. Him and his little slattern! Hay-market ware, she is, and none can deny it! They've cheated me, the pair of them, and they deserve to die!"

Giles's guests stared at him uncomfortably. He stopped pacing and endeavored to calm his temper. "I choose rapiers and if the Rogue begs off, it will be clear who the coward is, will it not?"

"Well, my lord, when and where shall it be?" Sir Winston asked.

"Tomorrow at sunrise. In Hyde Park at the northwest end of Queen Caroline's new lake, the Serpentine." Mountheathe picked up a wine decanter and a glass from a small table. "May I offer you something, gentlemen?"

A flash of inspiration suddenly overwhelmed Sir Winston as he stared at the sparkling decanter in Giles's hand. An inebriated Mountheathe might be coaxed into missing the duel or perhaps the duke might consider him too drunk to fight. Rochedale accepted Giles's offer of refreshment with alacrity.

Leaving Giles and Sir Winston to their wine, Bellefield and Malkent called upon Robin to confirm the details of the encounter. Once the gentlemen were comfortably settled, refreshments in hand, in his study, Amberley said, "Well, my lords, may I hazard that you've come about my proposed encounter with Giles? I take it he has selected the place and the weapon?"

After glancing at Tracy, Bellefield leaned forward. "Well, yes, but..."

"He chose swords, did he not? Giles always favored the blade." Robin watched Tony over the rim of his wineglass.

"He's asked for rapiers, Robin, but we've come to ask you to cry off," Bellefield said.

"Cry off?" Robin's brows rose. "Do you doubt my prowess?"

"No, Rogue. It isn't your ability we're questioning, but Mountheathe's. The man hasn't touched a weapon with serious intent in years!" Malkent said.

Tony nodded. "It would be tantamount to murder, Robin. You'd be forced to flee the country!"

"Ah. The pair of you would add cowardice to the list of my sins. I am to cry craven, lest I spill a little Bridland blood and outrage the sensibilities of Society. I returned to England expressly to force the truth upon Mountheathe, messieurs. Perhaps, skewered upon my blade, he will finally admit his treachery."

"Robin! Be reasonable! What can you hope to gain by killing Giles?" Tony argued.

"Satisfaction and justice!" Robin said. "But you need not worry, mes amis. Giles will not die at my hands. Not yet, I want him to suffer for awhile. A bit of poverty and humiliation may humble him. Make him fit for human company. At the very least, he will get a taste of the fine life he missed by foisting his crimes onto me. How do you think he'll look with a scar just here," Robin drew two fingers from the corner of his eye to the rise of his cheek, "like the dueling students in Heidelberg, héin? On the Continent, 'tis considered quite dashing to be marked so."

"Won't you forgo this madness?" Tracy begged.

"No!" Robin said. "Giles may cry off, if he chooses. I have too much at stake."

"Very well." Tony sighed. "Let us discuss the details."

Chapter 15:

In Which Treachery Triumphs

A single burning candle illuminated Mountheathe's library, playing indiscriminately over the fine brocade of his robe de chambre and the wine-stained tatters of his midnight guest's filthy waistcoat. The visitor flung himself bodily onto a spindly chair which creaked in outrage at such punishment. "Got yer summons, guv'nor! What's the work?"

As his companion's singularly pungent aroma assaulted his senses, Giles lifted his scented handkerchief to his nose. "For heaven's sake, stand up, Garch! I'll not have my furniture soiled and smashed, if you please."

"Sorry, guv." Garch said, spitting green slime onto a fine Aubusson carpet. He hauled his hulking frame out of the chair and sheepishly tugged at his forelock.

"I sent for you because I am to fight a duel on Thursday."

"An' ye wants me to put the uvver cove's lights out afore the brawl."

"I want you to -- put his lights out after the -- brawl."

"Arter! 'At's a queer lay, guv'nor. Ain't ye afeared this uvver cove'll kill ye afore I can do 'is business fer 'im? What good would 'arter' do?"

"He isn't going to kill me," Mountheathe said, exasperated, "nor am I going to kill him, at least, not outright. I want his murder contrived so that I appear blameless in the affair. And it must be soon! I'll wager his doxy is already increasing."

Confused, Garch remained silent, thinking his lordship must have had a shove in the mouth too many. Mountheathe, who had had occasion to employ him before, always rambled on foolishly when he was in his cups.

In this instance, Garch's speculations were correct. Giles had needed to empty an entire decanter of brandy before he was sufficiently fortified to mandate his cousin's murder.

"We are to meet in Hyde Park at the northwest end of the Serpentine tomorrow at dawn," Giles said, his diction slightly slurred. "Before the encounter, you will hide in a tree. After the duel is over, I will drive off in my carriage. As soon as I am well away, you will shoot my opponent. Aim for the heart or head so he'll die instantly. Once you have done that, I suggest that you run. If you are caught, you will most assuredly hang and don't even think that mentioning my name will save your wretched hide. I shall deny the whole affair and, furthermore, I will be believed. Do you understand?"

"Lor', yes, guv'nor! Werry good at 'igh-tailin' it, I am!" Garch grinned. "But I'm queered if I knows what your lay is. Why not do 'im in yersel' whilst ye got 'im at yer mercy, 'stead o' wastin' yer blunt, 'irin me?"

"I told you. I don't want anyone to know I had anything to do with my cousin's death. The world will think he was killed during a chance encounter with a footpad in the park. Society will say that he got a proper punishment for his wickedness and that will be that. Now, as to payment, you shall have your customary fifty guineas when the job is done."

"Don't gammon me, guv!" Garch drew one grimy, grey sleeve across his running nose. "We bofe knows 'at murder is a cut above me usual line. I'm not that fond o' killin' people so I insists on more brass for it. I want five 'undred Yellow Georges afore I moves a inch towards that dook."

Giles stiffened. "How do you know he's a duke? I never told you!"

"I ain't a nodcock, milord. I listens to the gossip. The 'ole world knows you only got two cousins an' one of 'em's a gentry mort. Since you ain't likely to be duelin' wi' 'er, it must be yer uvver cousin, the Dook o' Lynkellyn." Garch grinned. "A dook ought to be worf at least five 'undred! Up front!"

"Two hundred fifty now and the rest to be paid when the work's done," Giles bargained. Garch nodded his acceptance of the offer.

Giles crossed to his desk and took a purse heavy with coins from a drawer. Counting out two hundred fifty guineas, he gave them to Garch, who swept his fee into a grimy cloth bag. "Come back tomorrow night for the rest of your money; and, Garch, you'd better do the job right or you'll face the magistrate, alone."

On Thursday morning, several hours before dawn, an insistent pounding upon Giles's front door roused him from a fitful sleep. He lay abed, listening as his butler, McGiver, answered it. Rochedale's voice floated up to him. It must be time to go to the encounter, he thought. His stomach rolled like an ocean wave.

A few minutes later, Barker entered his bedchamber on chary feet. "My lord?" he ventured hesitantly.

"My lord, Sir Winston Rochedale is below. He says you're expecting him?"

"Yes! Yes! What is the time?" Giles growled as he sat on the side of the bed, holding his head.

"Half past three, my lord."

Giles groaned. "Very well. The plain black, Barker! And no jewelry."

"Your mourning clothes, my lord?"

"Yes, damn you! And be quick about it!" Mountheathe lifted his head to glare at his servant. "I don't want to keep Sir Winston waiting."

An hour later, Giles found Rochedale pacing the Jade Salon, anxious and excited, his words tumbling out like acrobats. "Giles, dear boy. I trust I find you in spirits this morning. Won't do to be moped when you're going to an encounter."

"Calm yourself, Rochee." Mountheathe glowered. "We've some time yet. Shall I ring for brandy?"

"An excellent notion, dear boy." Sir Winston said, amazed to see his plan fall so easily into line. "It will put heart into you, not that you need any, of course."

For quite some time, the gentlemen remained in the Jade Salon, drinking brandy. As soon as Mountheathe's glass was empty, Rochedale encouraged him to fill it again. For every glass Sir Winston downed, Giles downed two.

When the gentlemen had emptied the first decanter, they rang for a second. Giles paced the drawing room, favoring his guest with a pithy diatribe on every aspect of the Duke of Lynkellyn's existence. Rochedale listened with complacent amusement, his smile broadening when Giles began to stagger, giggling inanely at his own clumsiness.

"'Tis almost six, dear boy." Sir Winston grinned. "We'd better be going or the duke will start without you." Tittering at this sally, he stood unsteadily.

"Just one more for luck." Mountheathe's words slurred as he stumbled over to the decanter. He shakily poured the last of the brandy into his glass, saying in a sing-song voice, "So sorry, all gone. None left for Rochee."

Sir Winston smirked. "Drink up, dear boy! The Lord knows you need it more than I."

"Why, so I do." Giles blinked hard to bring his vision into focus and made a toast. "Death to the Rogue,"

he said and downed his brandy in one swift gulp.

The cold, steely grey of the early morning sky echoed the bleakness of Robin's eyes as he stepped from his carriage at the appointed dueling site. Lord Bellefield followed him, gingerly placing elegantly booted feet on the drier patches of ground.

"Curst rain!" Tony muttered. "It would have to fall last night."

"It seems we are the first to arrive," Robin said. "Bon. I shall have time to go over the ground." He paced the dueling site, endeavoring to memorize any small hazards that might cause him to trip.

Watching him, Bellefield shivered in the dawn chill. He pulled his cloak closer about him and leaned against the coach, his hands shoved deep in his pockets. Above him, the trusted Fletcher, serving as Lynkellyn's driver, lounged at his ease on the box.

Clutching a loaded pistol, Mr. Garch eyed this scene from his perch on a tree branch, trying futilely to focus his gaze on his quarry. He had chosen to spend some of the advance money Mountheathe had paid him on vast quantities of gin and the winsome favors of a certain free and easy lass. Consequently, it was almost all Garch could do to balance himself, much less take clear aim at his target. Like Lord Bellefield, he shivered in the chill air, wondering sullenly why the nobs couldn't butcher each other at noon when it was warm.

The Earl of Malkent rode up on horseback, dismounted next to the duke's carriage, and joined Lord Bellefield. "Well?" Tracy asked, watching Robin from a short distance as he tossed a rock out of the combat area and started toward the gentlemen.

"Robin's as cool as if he were taking tea in milady's salon. He's always been that way. I remember riding with him into battle. I was quaking with fear, ready to cast up my accounts, but he laughed and joked as if living and dying were all the same to him. I laughed with him and his devil-may-care attitude steadied me. I don't think I'd have gotten through that hell without him."

"You mentioned you and he fought together in America, I believe." Tracy tried not to betray his keen curiosity.

"Yes, against the French. Damned good man to have at your back was Gustav, Robin, I mean. My Friday-faced Cousin Jasper would hold my title today were it not for him. He saved my life."

Tracy's eyes narrowed as he watched Robin approach. The Rogue had certainly pursued a full and varied career since his disgrace.

"Tracy. Well met." Robin smiled. "You did not travel with Mountheathe?"

"I chose to come alone. I wish to remain impartial."

"Ah." Robin glanced sharply at the earl, curious as to his lack of total commitment to Giles, then looked up at the darkening sky. "If Giles does not arrive soon, we shall be dueling in the rain. I, for one, would rather forgo that adventure."

"It is getting windier," Malkent agreed.

"And colder." Tony shivered. "I'm going to sit in the carriage until he comes." Tony climbed back into the coach while the other men stood in the wind, clutching their cloaks about them for warmth.

"So you are determined to go through with this duel?" Tracy said, still hoping to quash the encounter.

"I am." Robin leaned against Garch's tree and crossed his arms.

Silence reigned. At last, to fill the uncomfortable gap, Malkent said, "Tony says you served with him in the American colonies."

"That was long ago, Tracy." Robin said. The earl waited, his brow raised.

"What is this extreme fascination you have with my past, my lord?" Robin fumed. "Oh, très bien! I'd been fur trapping in Virginia for several months and knew the woodlands well. When Captain Bellefield asked me to scout for the British, I leaped at the chance. 'Twas a way of coming home a little. English manners, English voices." A bitter twisted smile contorted his lips. "Much more pleasing to hear than the thick, rasping German I was speaking. I spied for the regiment and even rode into battle with them, but I daren't tell my comrades my true name or nationality. I couldn't bear, you see, to have those fine British officers turn their backs on me in disgust and contempt."

Tracy stared out across the park, moved more than he cared to admit by the stark pain shadowing Robin's eyes. In the distance, he could see a carriage lumbering slowly toward them. "Here comes Giles."

"I see." Robin stood away from the tree, his misery hidden beneath a sardonic mask.

The coach halted before the waiting gentlemen and Sir Winston Rochedale lurched out the door. Giles tumbled after him, barely able to stand. He stumbled against Sir Winston, giggling inanely, then recalled the gravity of the situation and forced his face into a ludicrous parody of solemnity, exploding into more giggles a moment later.

Tracy tried unsuccessfully to hide a smile and Bellefield, emerging from the other carriage, scowled.

"It's about time! Good God! The man's foxed!"

Giles vigorously shook his head. "Only had some brandy to warm me. Don't have a pretty doxy to heat my bed like the Rogue does."

Robin's lips tightened, but he said nothing. Giles's eyes focused vaguely on Tracy. "Or a goddess like your Val. Should a' been my Val. You stole her, you damned -- " Giles lunged at Malkent, his fists flailing, but Robin and Tony grabbed his arms.

"Easy, Giles! Your quarrel is with me, not Tracy!" Robin said.

Silent from the moment he'd laid eyes on the duke, Sir Winston reeled over to Lynkellyn's side and peered into his face. Robin stepped back, buffeted by the reek of brandy emanating from the other man.

Sir Winston grinned, staggering a little. "Golden Gus! You're dead! Left you to hang in Jamaica, that I did." Rochedale's brow furrowed and he frowned as he digested the evidence of his eyes. "A mite lively for a corpse, though, ain't you, Gus? Why ain't you dead, Gus?"

The Rogue's eyes were granite. "Now you know I would never go to hell without taking you along, Tarney." he said, steely mockery in his voice.

"Let go of me, you filthy -- " Giles jerked himself out of Tony's grasp. "I've come here to kill the man who gave my Valeria back to that Tracy!" Staggering and stumbling, he finally managed to draw his sword. He waved it first at Tracy, who stepped quickly back, then turned to face Robin, taking a crouching stance. "En garde!" he warned thickly as Lynkellyn stared at him with amused contempt. Suddenly he pitched forward into the grass in a brandy- induced stupor. Malkent rushed to relieve him of his weapon before he fell on it.

"What a fine guardian of truth, justice, and honor is mon cher cousin." Robin sneered. "Obviously, he is in no fit case to cross swords with me today, gentlemen. Let's pour him into his coach and send him home."

From his perch in the tree, Garch had watched the entire exchange with growing impatience. He wished Mountheathe would fight the damned duel so he could identify the duke, shoot him, and go home to a most welcome bed. When Garch saw Giles keel over, he rolled his eyes, causing his own less than sober head to spin. 'Drunk as a lord' he thought, grinning at his own wit.

As he watched the gentlemen bundle Giles into his coach, Garch remembered a tidbit of gossip he had heard at the tavern the night before. The duke's hair was said to be extremely red; 'coppery' had been the word used. Other than Mountheathe himself, only one of the men gathered in the clearing fit that description.

As Giles's carriage rumbled away, Garch brought up a pistol to sight on Lynkellyn. Still reeling from last night's debauch, his stomach suddenly turned into a raging sea and his vision swirled and blurred. His confidence failing, he drew a second pistol from his pocket lest his first shot should miss its mark. However, with a weapon in each hand, he was unable to hold onto his branch. Balanced precariously upon his haunches in the tree, he waited for his head to clear and his belly to settle.

Robin paused beside his coach for a last word with the driver. Bellefield had already entered the carriage and, some distance away, Malkent was mounting his horse.

With the pistol in his right hand, Garch took wavering aim at his grace, but his arm and fingers felt weak, his grip shaky. The muzzle of the trembling weapon circled about Robin's head, refusing to center on its target as it should. Garch resolved to fire as his point of aim wobbled across a vital spot, but just as he squeezed the trigger, his stomach twisted again, trying to empty itself. His shot went awry.

Weak and dizzy with nausea and unbalanced by the recoil of his gun, Garch tumbled from his gripless perch in the tree. Half way to the ground, his finger involuntarily squeezed the other pistol's trigger.

Sudden, searing agony ripped along the side of Robin's head and a second blow sent him staggering into Fletcher as the servant slumped forward. Blood coursed in thick rivulets down Robin's face and stained the tawny broadcloth of his knee breeches where the second ball had torn into his thigh. Beside the duke, Fletcher collapsed, an angry crimson blotch spreading across his chest as blood oozed through a ragged hole in his livery.

Garch hit the ground, scrambled to his feet, and ran with the mounted earl in furious pursuit. He had not stumbled far when Malkent grabbed his collar with one hand and yanked him off his feet to dangle above the ground.

Tracy glanced back at his companions. Tony was helping the Rogue get Fletcher into the carriage. Robin's face was bathed in blood and he dragged his injured leg as he moved.

Glaring at Garch, who was fighting and squirming to escape, he said, "It's the magistrate for you, Sir Footpad! Confess now and perhaps it will go easy with you at your trial."

Garch's eyes bulged. "I ain't no footpad! I was 'ired! Lord Mountheathe, it was, paid me for the offin' o' the dook." he rasped out in a desperate effort to save himself.

This bit of intelligence so stunned Malkent that he momentarily loosened his grip on his prisoner. Garch twisted out of Tracy's grasp and fled into the woods. "Come back here, you!" Malkent shouted, but his quarry had disappeared into thick brush.

"Never mind him, Tracy!" Bellefield called to the earl, panic ringing in his voice. "Come help me get Robin into the coach. He's fainted!"

Chapter 16:

In Which Her Grace Worries and His Grace Dreams

Staring at her breakfast plate, Lucia found the steamy muffins and gleaming pink ham totally unappealing. She pushed the food away, too worried about Robin and his senseless duel to eat. Listening to the birds singing, she gazed through an open window into the garden, a sweet, quiet oasis amidst all the bustle and dirt of London. The gentle breeze kissed her face and she closed her eyes to savor the peace of this restful haven, endeavoring to banish from her mind all its ghastly visions of Robin lying in his own gore.

"Lucia!" Amaryllis's voice crashed through her fragile serenity as Laddock bowed out of the room. "Pardon me for calling so early, but when I received your message, I could not wait. Oh, my love! A babe! 'Tis, of all things, wonderful!"

Lucia rose, smiling. "Good morning, Ryl. I did not intend to tear you away from your breakfast. I had only hoped that perhaps you might advise me in the choice of a physician."

"I have done better than that!" Amaryllis said. "My doctor, Dr. Lindley, is waiting in the hall. I summoned him from Blayneham. I know he isn't a fashionable Town physician, but he has delivered all my babies and he is the equal of any London doctor."

"Amaryllis! You must have dragged the poor man from his bed at dawn to get him here."

Lady Blayne shrugged. "He's waiting to examine you, my dear."

An hour later, after Lucia had seen the doctor, she served tea and cakes to her guests in the Gold Salon.

"I can hardly wait until you tell Robin he's to be a Papa!" Ryl grinned. "Where is he, anyway? He should be here at a time like this."

Upon hearing Robin's name, all of Lucia's fears rushed into her mind again, but she could not bring herself to mention the duel. "He's driving with Lord Bellefield," she said faintly. That wasn't a total lie, she told herself. The two men had left together in a carriage before dawn.

"Well, he should be here!" Amaryllis insisted after a moment's silence. Finishing her tea, she rose. "I pray you will excuse me, Lucia, but I must be leaving now. You should take Dr. Lindley's advice and rest today."

"I will try, Amaryllis, but I have a few things I must do."

"Oh, Cousin!" Amaryllis beamed at Lucia. "I do feel I can call you cousin now! I am so happy and thrilled for you and Robin. My congratulations!" She flung her arms around Lucia and hugged her.

"Thank you, Cousin." Lucia hesitantly returned the embrace.

As Ryl departed, Dr. Lindley stood. He was a tall man in his mid-thirties with soft, laughing brown eyes and dark hair pulled into a modest queue. He had an air of knowledge, competence, and compassion that invited confidence. "I, too, must go, Your Grace. I've yet to find lodging for the night," he said.

Lucia leaped to her feet. "I pray you, stay here tonight, Doctor. Indeed, I would be most grateful if you would."

"I daresay you are anxious about your situation, Your Grace, but you will be fine as long as you get a little rest. Your morning sickness should pass in a month or so and I shall remain in Town to see you through it all. My father is also a physician and can take care of my patients in Kent."

"I'm not asking for my sake, although I'm pleased that you will be here. 'Tis just that -- " She entwined her fingers nervously, considering how to explain her apprehensions.

Lindley was staring at her. "If I can assist Your Grace in some other way -- " His words trailed to silence.

"A duel!" Lucia blurted in a choked voice. A tear trickled down her cheek and she dashed it away with the back of her hand. "My husband has gone off to fight a duel and I was hoping that you might be here when he returns. I -- I fear for him."

Lindley's mouth tightened with disapproval. The duke must be a wild and ramshackle fellow, indeed, to be fighting duels at a time like this, he thought. Looking into Lucia's anxious face, he smiled. "I shall be honored to bear you company, Your Grace."

Lucia paced before the windows in the Gold Salon, braiding her fingers as she scanned the quiet square, waiting for Robin to come home. Dr. Lindley sat on a brocaded divan, watching her. He was beginning to doubt at least part of the shocking tale he had heard. She did not act like a woman forced into marriage with a man she feared.

Suddenly a carriage clattered outside the window and Lucia ran out of the room. The doctor jumped up and looked outside to see a parked coach and a horseman just dismounting.

He bolted downstairs. By the time he reached the foyer Lucia had already pushed past Laddock and rushed, pell-mell, out the door. Collecting his medical bag from a hall table, Lindley followed the butler to the carriage.

When Lucia reached the coach, Malkent was calming the sweating horses while Bellefield helped Robin alight. "Fletcher!" Robin gasped faintly as he sagged against the carriage door, his face, hair, and clothes a sticky scarlet. "Tend to Fletcher first. He's hurt far worse than I am."

As Tony and Laddock carried the coachman up the stairs, Lindley followed them, trying to staunch the bubbling blood.

"Take Fletcher to the daybed in the Blue Salon," Lucia said.

Turning to see Robin stagger and sway in the drive, she caught him, tumbling down with him as his knees buckled. Steadfastly ignoring his ghastly appearance, she draped his arm over her slim shoulder and straightened to use her body as crutch to hold him up. Crushing her panic as his warm blood trickled down her hand and over her gown, she hugged his waist, bearing most of his weight as they struggled and staggered into the house. In the Blue Salon, she led him to an overstuffed chair where he sank into the cushions, closing his eyes as the pain he had battled during the interminable journey home finally engulfed him.

Lucia made hurried introductions among the gentlemen. Dr. Lindley called for water and clean cloths, then knelt to examine Fletcher. After Laddock brought the supplies, Lindley washed away the blood from around the wound and searched it with deft fingers, shaking his head. He looked up at the three people who anxiously awaited his opinion. "It doesn't look good, Your Grace. I think the ball missed his lungs, but only time will tell. I'll have to cut out the lead, of course, or it will poison him and that procedure has its own risks. After I perform the surgery, he'll need constant care if he is to have any chance at all." Lucia nodded numbly, remembering her own experiences under the knife.

"The butler and I will carry him to the servants' quarters, doctor," Tony volunteered.

As they carried him out, Tracy moved over to Robin. "What about the Rogue, doctor? I do believe he's fainted again."

Lindley knelt beside Robin, feeling his pulse as he wiped blood from his head. "It looks as if the ball just grazed him here. A flesh wound."

Tracy and Lindley gently rolled Robin onto his stomach on the floor and bent to examine the back of his right thigh where a stiffening crimson stain around a hole in his knee breeches betrayed a second wound. "Took a ball here," Lindley announced after he had cut away the garment and cleaned the injury. "It will have to come out, of course. He may finish with a limp."

"But he'll live, doctor?" Lucia's hands were clenched, knuckles white, at her sides.

Lindley got to his feet. "Aye, he'll live, more's the pity! Out fighting duels with a delicate wife at home! Has the man run mad? Dueling is tantamount to murder!"

"You're not going to report this to the authorities, are you? Please say you will not!" she said, laying a beseeching hand on his arm.

Looking into her pleading eyes, Lindley began to understand how a man might be tempted into moonlight abduction. "No," he promised. "Not if you do not wish it."

"Thank you, doctor." Robin's agonized moan brought her back to the matter at hand. "We'd better get him to bed."

Lucia was firmly exiled from the patients' rooms while Bellefield, the earl, and the doctor, with Laddock's assistance, endeavored to rid the patients' bodies of lead. Having changed out of her blood-soaked gown, Lucia paced the Gold Salon, trying to ignore the muffled screams and oaths coming from down the hall. Tears burned in her eyes and she dashed them away, hugging herself against the cold fear and helpless fury that overwhelmed her. How she detested duels.

Finally, Lindley came in. "The duke returned to consciousness just before surgery, Your Grace. He refused laudanum; insisted on brandy instead. He is asking for you, but I fear he is very drunk."

"How is he, otherwise, doctor?" Lucia asked.

"If his bandages are changed regularly and you can keep him in bed for a few weeks, he should be fine, save, perhaps, for a slight limp in his right leg."

"You are asking a great deal, sir! My husband has an iron will and seldom listens to sensible advice, but I shall do my best. What of Fletcher?"

"He is doing as well as can be expected, Your Grace, but it'll be touch and go with him for the next several weeks, I'm afraid. Between the injury and the surgery, it will be a long while before he wakes." Lindley handed her some papers. "I have written out special diets and prescriptions for each man and one for you as well. I will call upon all my patients tomorrow, but now I must be going. As I said, I have yet to find lodging."

"I was sincere in my earlier invitation, doctor. You may stay here, if you wish."

"Your household is going to be at sixes and sevens, as it is, without an additional guest to consider, Your Grace. I will be satisfied if I may include my shot at Grillon's in my fee."

"Yes, of course." She glanced distractedly toward the stairway.

"I will not keep you from the duke any longer, Your Grace." Lindley bowed again. "I will find my own way out. Until tomorrow, then."

When Lucia entered Robin's bedchamber, she found Bellefield and Malkent ensconced in chairs on either side of his bed, watching him grimly. Propped up on pillows, his head crowned with bandages, Robin was belting out snatches of a bawdy sea shanty, switching easily from English to French to Spanish to German, and giggling at the song's risqué lyrics.

Upon seeing Lucia, Robin's warbling abruptly stopped and his eyes followed her approach intently. As she bent over him to adjust his blankets, he slipped a surprisingly strong arm around her waist and pulled her into the bed. "My pretty lady," he said thickly in a voice reminiscent of the Saddewythes' highwayman. "Stay awhile with me, pretty lady. You won't regret it." His warm breath stirred the curls near her ear as his free hand caressed the soft ivory hillocks above her bodice.

"Robin, please! We have guests." Blushing, she struggled to escape, but he held her fast while he glared at Malkent and Bellefield.

"Go away!" he ordered.

"Perhaps you had better leave, gentlemen," Lucia said with as much dignity as she could muster under the circumstances. "You may call upon us tomorrow. I do want to know what happened this morning."

"Do you think you can handle him?" Tracy asked doubtfully.

"We'll be fine." Lucia's smile was strained.

Robin was still glaring at the men. "Go away!" he repeated more vehemently. Tracy and Tony bowed and departed.

"Now, pretty lady, we are all alone." Robin grinned. "Come show me that you love me 'more than anything in this world'."

"You are injured, Robin! You will only make your situation worse if -- " Lucia fought once more to free herself.

Suddenly Robin's arms tightened around her and she quietened, lest she hurt him. She lay very still in his embrace as his mouth found hers. He reeked of spirits, but his kisses were tender and caressing and she found herself warming to him.

After a few minutes, however, she lifted her head to stare into his eyes. "Let me up, Robin! You will only do yourself further injury."

"At least lie nex' to me awhile, Lucia," he said, his breath hot on her skin as he cradled her head on his

shoulder. "Lie nex' to me and le' me tell you how lucky I am to have you to kiss." His lips caressed her hair and his arms tightened around her. "It's so sweet to touch you; to hol' you in my arms. I don' deserve -- such -- good -- luck -- " His voice faded as he slowly relaxed. His breathing deepened and he drifted into sleep.

Sliding out of his arms, she rose and settled his blankets around him. Dropping a gentle kiss on his forehead, she brushed a heavy red-gold curl out of his face with a caressing hand. "Sleep and get well, my Robin," she whispered. Giving him a last fond look, she hurried out to see to Fletcher's needs.

Giles faced the glaring light of day with a pounding head. Staring around balefully, he concluded after several minutes of hard thought that he was sleeping on Sir Winston Rochedale's hearth. Swift on the heels of this revelation came the conviction that there was something he was supposed to do, an appointment.

He closed his eyes against the light and tried to clear his muddled brain. "The duel!" he said thickly.

"That was yesterday, dear boy." a mournful voice lamented. "The coward refused to fight you! Sent us home!"

Mountheathe sat up, staggered blearily to his feet, and stumbled toward Sir Winston, who sat at a cluttered table. Rochedale silently poured a cup of coffee from a pot at his elbow and shoved it toward his guest. Giles sank into a chair, cradling his aching head with one hand and moaning, "What the devil did I do to deserve a head like this?"

"What didn't you do?" Rochedale's lips parted in a silent laugh. "There were the cock fights and the clubs and we looked in at Clarissa's. Don't think she was too happy to see us, what with Norworth there and all. Then we hit a few more hells and ended up at Angel's."

Giles jerked his head up to stare in dismay at Sir Winston, wincing at the consequent daggers of pain that stabbed through his skull. "Angel's! My God! That unholy pit!"

"Dragged you out at dawn, dear boy. You didn't want to leave. You were wild! Singing and boasting. Said you were coming into a fortune and wanted to bed every strumpet in the place in celebration."

Giles dropped his face into his hands. "Oh, Lord! Did I say anything specific?"

"Only that you were going to inherit the old duke's fortune. I thought it was all going to your cousin, Golden -- er -- the duke."

Giles framed his answer carefully. "I merely meant that if I can prove the Rogue's marriage a fraud, I

shall get Grandpapa's blunt." He dared not mention his murder plots, even to Roche. "Have -- have you heard anything else about the duel?" he asked, gulping his coffee.

"I've not been out this morning. Not feeling well. Not at all well." Sir Winston stood unsteadily, his face pale. "If you'll excuse me, dear boy, I've got to -- to -- " He ran from the room.

When Mountheathe staggered into Heathe House an hour later, his butler informed him that Lord Malkent was waiting in the Jade Salon. Hoping Tracy brought news of the Rogue's death, Giles smiled as he entered the room to greet his guest.

"So you have returned home at last!" Tracy growled. "Are you afraid to face your own misdeeds or are you bastard enough to go out and celebrate the supposed success of your infamies?"

Giles paled. "What are you babbling about, Tracy?"

"At Lynkellyn House, two men lay injured, one nigh unto death, and you are responsible!"

"What the devil do you mean? Nigh unto death? Who?" Giles asked, his brows rising over widened eyes.

"The Rogue's man, Fletcher. The Rogue fared rather better, although the doctor says he may limp for the rest of his life. After you left, they were shot by a brigand in a tree who, curiously, had your name on his lips when I caught up with him. It must be a grave disappointment for you to learn that your tree-climbing monkey only winged his target."

Hiding his frustration, Mountheathe sank into a chair, apparently stunned. "Are you accusing me, Tracy, of hiring a cutthroat?" He flushed. "How dare you suggest, sir, that I would commit such a reprehensible deed!"

"What else can I think, Giles? The footpad specifically told me that you hired him!"

"He was lying! He probably heard my name somewhere and..."

"I don't think so." Tracy shook his head. "The man was talking to save his life. He didn't pull your name out of the air. He was confessing the truth to avoid the gallows!"

Mountheathe drew himself up stiffly. "I do not consort with criminals, my lord, and I resent your insinuations! Leave my house at once!"

Tracy stared at his former friend. "I am beginning to believe Robin is telling the truth about that nasty business with Valeria," he said after a moment.

"So now I am a liar and an abductor as well as an aspiring murderer! I thought we were friends, Tracy! How can you think such things of me after all the years we've known each other?"

"I'm not certain now that I ever really did know you, Giles," Malkent said. "You have ordered me out of your house. I shall depart gladly. Good day." Tracy bowed, turned on his heel and strode from the room.

"His fever broke during the night, doctor, but he hasn't awakened yet." Lucia's hushed voice penetrated Robin's hazy, half-conscious dreams. He moaned and slowly opened his eyes, then slammed them shut against the brightness of the room. He eased them open again, his head pounding and waves of agony crashing through his body at his slightest move. Lucia's weary face blotted out the blinding sunlight, then a stranger's head replaced hers.

"I'm Dr. Lindley, Your Grace. Welcome back," the stranger smiled. "You've been feverish."

"How long?" Robin rasped, his throat cracked and parched.

"Two days," the doctor said, filling a cup with water. "No doubt you are thirsty. Drink this." As Robin gulped down every drop, Lindley asked Lucia to order some fresh water for him.

Robin watched her go, suddenly aware that he was ravenous. He raised himself a little in the bed, wincing at the consequent pain. "Perhaps Lucia could order some food as well."

"Later, Your Grace, and nothing but broth for you for the next few days, I think. No need to rush things." The doctor pulled away the blankets to examine Robin's leg.

Robin closed his eyes and gritted his teeth as Lindley's probing fingers sent hot streaks of pain from his toes to his groin. "Is Lucia ill?" he asked, forcing his mind away from the pain. "She looks exhausted."

"Rest easy, Your Grace. She is with child; that is all."

"That is all!" Robin's eyes flew open. "How is she faring? She's not been well lately and..."

"Calm down, Your Grace, or you will do yourself harm. She will be fine if she gets her rest. With two invalids to nurse and this great house to run, however, I don't think she's gotten more than three hours sleep out of the last twenty-four. No one can get her to slow down. Do you not have a female relative, perhaps Lady Blayne who can come in and take over Her Grace's responsibilities temporarily? She is completely overwhelmed, Your Grace, though she will never admit it."

Robin shook his head. "Lady Blayne is far too busy with her own family, doctor. I can only think of one

woman who might help us, but she detests me."

"You need to put personal feelings aside, Your Grace. If you want Her Grace to survive this pregnancy and your baby to thrive, you are going to have to find someone."

"très bien! I will consider your advice, doctor. When is the babe to be born?"

Lindley smiled. "Sometime in December, I think, Your Grace. A Christmas blessing."

When Lucia returned, a footman followed her with a full pitcher and glasses on a tray. Setting the provisions on Robin's night table, the servant bowed and left. The doctor gave Lucia his last instructions for the day, sternly ordered Robin to stay in bed, and departed.

Lucia filled a glass with water, stirred a sinister-looking powder into the cup, and handed it to Robin. "Drink Dr. Lindley's medicine and Laddock will bring you some broth in a few minutes." Sniffing suspiciously at the cup, Robin drank its contents in one gulp, grimacing at the bitter taste. Exhausted by the past half hour's exertions, he sank back into his pillows and closed his eyes while Lucia bathed his forehead with a cool, damp cloth.

Laddock brought the promised broth a quarter of an hour later. Lucia offered to feed him, but Robin firmly refused. Sitting up so he could reach the tray, he ate slowly, the spoon trembling a little in his weak fingers as he cast furtive glances at his wife. He noted with alarm and disapproval the dark circles wreathing her eyes and the way she sagged in her chair when she thought he wasn't watching. How tired and haggard she looked. Lindley was right. She needed help. Thoughts of Lindley reminded him of his impending fatherhood. "Why didn't you tell me you were with child, Lucia?" he said. "Why did I have to hear it from a stranger?"

"Dr. Lindley told you, I suppose. I didn't want to raise your hopes until I was absolutely sure. The doctor confirmed my suspicions on the day of your duel and then, of course, I could not tell you because you were injured."

His meal finished, Robin handed her his bowl. "Lindley says that you have been doing far too much, considering your delicate state of health. I will invite Lady Easterbury to stay with us until the babe is born. She can take care of your domestic duties so that you can rest."

Lucia set the bowl on a tray for a maid to take away. "But, Robin, what about you and Fletcher? You are both still far from fit and will require a great deal of nursing."

"We have servants for that."

"And then, of course, the renovations must be overseen. The music room and some of the salons are only half done. The ballroom and the nursery have hardly been touched."

"Those rooms have waited twenty years for refurbishing, ma chérie. They can wait a little longer."

Staring at the floor, Lucia said, "If you are unhappy with the way I'm doing things, you have only to say so, Robin." Accusation tinged her voice.

"You have done wonderfully well, Lucia. This house is returning to life under your ministrations. Now that the babe is sapping your strength, you need to fill your days at a more leisurely pace. You would not want to lose the infant, would you?"

"No." she answered softly.

"Bon. I shall write Lady Easterbury tomorrow."

"How ironic it would be for you to have come so far in your machinations only to lose your grandfather's fortune because I had a miscarriage. What a waste of time it would all have been!"

"Is that what you believe this is about, ma chérie? My grandfather's damned money?" Robin stared at her, thunderstruck. "Do you think I am so callous that I care for nothing else?"

"Oh, no! You have your revenge to nurture as well!" Rage suddenly roughened her voice. "You almost got yourself killed, and another man as well, over your wretched vengeance!"

"I offered Giles a truce, Lucia! Even offered to pay his debts! He would have none of it! He insisted upon insulting you! Insisted upon a challenge!"

Lucia paced the room, endeavoring to release some of her anger. Staring into the empty fireplace, she spoke more calmly. "Of course, I do not know all the details of your encounter, Robin, but it appears to me that you were lured into a trap. Do you remember anything at all about that duel?"

Robin cast about in his mind, endeavoring to dredge up reluctant memories. "There was no duel," he said after a moment. "A shot was fired from behind me! I don't understand! Giles and I were to meet with rapiers!"

"Lord Malkent can explain it all better than I can. He has promised to attend you this evening so that I may sleep." She paused beside the bed to straighten his blankets. "Rest now while I see to Fletcher."

As she turned to leave, Robin reminded her firmly that soon Fletcher would be Lady Easterbury's responsibility.

Jolted awake, Robin sat up with a gasping sob, his eyes springing wide open. Sweat beaded his brow and soaked his nightshirt. Confusion darkened his countenance for a moment as he surveyed the candlelit room, but his face cleared when he recognized his own bedchamber.

"Anything I can do for you, Rogue?" Tracy inquired from the shadows as he entered the candle's sphere of light.

"Water!" Robin croaked.

Tracy filled a tankard from a pitcher on the night table and gave it to him. He gulped it down. "More!" His voice stronger, he held out the glass. Tracy refilled it and Robin emptied it a second time.

"Another?" Tracy offered. Robin shook his head, setting the empty tankard on the night table and sinking into the pillows. "What's the matter, Rogue?" Tracy pulled his chair closer to the bed. "Do you need something for the pain? You've been twisting and turning and muttering all night."

Robin ran shaky fingers through his wild copper tresses. "I'm having nightmares, Tracy! I haven't had them for years, but suddenly they're back!"

"Nightmares?"

"They plagued me constantly right after I left England, then dwindled to once a week or so until a few years ago when I acquired my fortune and settled in Paris. Then they disappeared entirely, until now."

"What are these dreams usually about?"

"Each one is different, but terror is the common thread. My past and present become entwined so very darkly, horribly." Robin shuddered. "I don't like to remember the details."

"Take your mind off your nightmares, then. Tell me of your travels and adventures," Malkent said.

"Shall I tell you the truth, Tracy, or merely ruminate upon the marvels of America and Araby?"

"The truth, Robin. Unvarnished."

Robin told Tracy of slums and stews, hells and brothels, castles and cathedrals, gaols and gutters all over the world. He described his wild days on the High Toby and the high seas, his adventures among the Arabs and the Americans, and his soldiering in three different armies, patiently answering all of Tracy's questions.

At last, Tracy sat back with a deep breath. "You have certainly lived a full and varied life, Rogue!"

Robin smiled ruefully. "When you are forever on the run, my lord, adventure and disaster follow you like faithful hounds."

"And what of Angelina?" Malkent asked.

Robin paled, his hands clenching his blankets. "Angelina?"

"You shouted her name in your delirium. Said you loved her; wanted her to marry you!"

After a second's hesitation, Robin said, "I suppose Lucia heard me?"

"No one could fail to hear you, Rogue! Cannon fire is quieter! In any case, you were speaking Italian most of the time. 'Twas Lucia who translated what you were saying for the rest of us."

"Damn!"

"Since you called Lucia's name just as fervently and just as often, Robin, I daresay she will forgive you, but we are all exceedingly curious about this Angelina."

"Angelina? Merely a wench!" Robin scowled, wincing as he shifted his injured leg. "A wench in the basest, meanest sense of the word."

"And so?"

Robin glared at him. "I don't wish to discuss it."

"Obviously, this 'wench' touched you deeply."

"What happened on the dueling field the other day, Tracy?" Robin interrupted him abruptly. "I can remember very little after putting Giles into his coach."

"I will tell you, but you must tell me about Angelina first. I have some startling information to impart in return, I promise you."

"I do not understand why you concern yourself so closely with my affairs, Tracy," Robin said peevishly. "Whatever happened to 'I shall not know you in the morning, Rogue'?"

"Perhaps I'm having a change of heart about the past. In any case, I've a wealth of curiosity."

"A deal too much curiosity for my taste!" Robin cast him a skeptical glance. Tracy looked at him

expectantly. "Very well," Robin sighed, "I will tell you about Angelina, but the story goes no further than this room, s'il vous plaît. Angelina's father owned a ramshackle tavern in a remote corner of Italy that catered exclusively to cutthroats and highwaymen. I was a member of the last order."

"I had just turned one and twenty when I took up residence at the 'Bird and Bell', having spent my birthday fleeing a furious French nobleman and his personal army. The inn was cheap and secluded and I was fairly certain Monsieur le Marquis would not find me there. I took to the highways to get my living and I met Angelina who began to teach me Italian."

""Twas at her side that I realized I have a gift for languages. I discovered that if I immerse myself in any given language for a month or so, I can master it well enough to pass for a native. I also realized, within a fortnight's time, that I was in love with her."

Robin had been staring at the far wall as he related his tale, but a movement on Tracy's part caused him to look around. Malkent's countenance was frozen with shock. "You certainly were not contemplating marriage with a -- a -- " He wrinkled his aristocratic nose in distaste.

Robin smiled. "You did not see Angelina, my lord. She set my senses afire, stirred my blood in such a way -- I had never felt so passionately drawn to a woman before. I suspect now that once I had bedded her, I would have lost interest, but there was no one to tell me it was mere infatuation and, since my family had turned its back on me, I felt no loyalty to my aristocratic heritage. I was no longer Lord Robert Amberley, but Antonio the highwayman and I was in love."

"I spent many heavenly hours with her, drinking in her smiles while I strengthened my Italian. I brought her gifts of jewelry, money, and finery purloined during my nightly forays on the public roads and she accepted them with predictable alacrity." Robin's lip curled. "After a month had passed, she allowed me to kiss her. Within another fortnight, I asked her father for her hand."

"What happened to your pride, man? Your sense of your own worth? The grandson of the Duke of Lynkellyn and a common tavern wench? You might take her to bed, perhaps, but take her to wife? 'Tis unheard of!"

"The Duke of Lynkellyn had informed me quite clearly and vehemently that I was no longer his grandson!" Robin snarled.

Hearing the anger in the Rogue's voice, Tracy quickly urged him back to his tale. "What was her father's answer?"

"He said he would have to consider my proposal. I took to the highway that night as usual, hunting new riches for my Angelina." Robin's eyes darkened with pain and he plucked at his blankets with anxious fingers.

Tracy tensed, watching him. "You speak as if you may still love this Angelina!"

"Non, mon ami! Non!" Robin laughed bitterly. "Angelina long ago cured me of love. I find lust to be much more honest and forthright. That was what I really felt for ma petite Italienne after all, although I was too inexperienced, despite my raking in London, to know it." He took a deep, shuddering breath and ran his fingers through his sweaty copper locks. "Mon Dieu! I need some brandy!"

"Both the doctor and Her Grace have stated firmly that you are to have no spirits," Malkent said. "Did Angelina turn you down?"

"Ha! If it had only been that!" Robin's fists clenched.

"While I was stabling my horse after my night's work, I heard Angelina call my name. She was standing in the doorway, bathed in lantern light, looking so lovely. She said her family had come to a decision about my proposal. As she spoke, the innkeeper and his three sons loomed out of the shadows. I stared at them, nonplussed, as she told me that she was betrothed to a rich old farmer from a nearby village and had only encouraged my attentions to win a wager she had made with her brothers. She said that she would never seriously consider marriage with a penniless brigand and called me a fool for daring to raise my eyes to her. Then she laughed. 'Twas the ugliest sound I've ever heard.

"Her father and brothers rushed at me and grabbed me, determined, as they said, to teach me my place. Kicking and punching me as they went, they dragged me over to a support post with a ring embedded in it a few inches above my head. Threading a rope through the ring, they bound my wrists to the post so that I was facing away from them and ripped the back of my shirt open. Then -- then they -- they took turns horse -- horsewhipping me." Robin's voice broke on a ragged, sobbing breath, his eyes dark and moist with the agony of his humiliating memories. "The torture went on for an eternity. I faded in and out of consciousness so often that I could no longer track the passage of time. The ripping, burning bite of the whip was my whole world.

"Around the edge of the post I could see Angelina, her eyes glowing lasciviously as they followed the flight of the whip. I heard her laughing -- laughing. Her derision filled my ears, lashing me, searing me inside until my heart resembled the bloody mass of raw flesh that my back had become." Robin halted his narrative, staring into the candle's flickering shadows, his hands clenching convulsively on the hem of his blanket.

"And then?" Tracy prodded gently after a long, bitter silence.

"Then, mon ami, they cut me down and beat me with their fists," Robin said almost casually. "The last thing I remember before blackness overwhelmed me is Angelina's laughter and the humiliating, excruciating impact of her boot against my face. That I shall never, never forget." He lapsed into a brooding silence for several tense moments.

Malkent pulled a silver flask from his pocket and offered it to Robin.

"What's this?" he asked in surprise.

"Brandy! We both need a drink after a tale like that!"

Robin drank deeply and returned the flask to the earl who did the same. "Now what of the duel and your 'startling information' about Mountheathe?" Lynkellyn asked.

After Tracy related the tale of Giles's tree-climbing cutthroat, Robin's eyes searched his face. "You believe the man was aiming particularly for me?"

"Yes. The motive could not have been robbery. We had him outnumbered four to one. He wouldn't have had a chance against all of us. So why would he bother to attack us at all unless he wanted to target someone in particular? Both Bellefield and I were closer to him, but he didn't try for either of us. Why? The only explanation is that he specifically wanted to hit either you or your man and I don't think your servant is likely to have any enemies that dedicated. I have not told you the most shocking and intriguing part, however. I caught the brigand for a brief time and, before he twisted out of my grip, he told me that Mountheathe had paid him to kill you!"

Robin fell back against his pillows. "So Giles has raised the stakes in this mad little contest of ours. I didn't realize he was desperate enough to hire an assassin." He closed his eyes. "I'm suddenly exhausted, Tracy. I shall think about Giles and his treacheries tomorrow. I must sleep now, s'il vous plaît."

Chapter 17:

In Which His Grace Recovers and Lord Mountheathe is Chagrined

The dowager Countess of Easterbury erupted into Lynkellyn House, roaring orders like a battlefield general, and Lucia soon found herself without responsibilities. She spent most of her time reading or playing games with Robin. Under her care, he swiftly graduated from his bed to an overstuffed chair where he sat with his injured leg propped on a stool. The dressing for his head wound dwindled to a single large white bandage.

Lady Easterbury spent three days under Lynkellyn's roof before she deigned to visit him. She finally acknowledged him when Lucia stayed overlong in the invalid's room. "You should be resting, Lucia," Lady Easterbury scolded from the threshold of Robin's chambers. "Dr. Lindley specifically stated that you were to nap for two hours every afternoon."

Their graces glanced up from their chessboard. "Yes! In a moment, Aunt Corinna," Lucia called distractedly as she moved her man. "Checkmate, sir!" Her triumphant smile revealed a pair of charming

dimples as her laughing eyes met Robin's incredulous ones.

"That's the third time!" he cried, astonished. "You should be commanding some army, ma chérie!" They both laughed. Lady Easterbury sharply rapped out her niece's name.

"Yes, I'm going, aunt. Let me gather up the chess set." Lucia collected the board and game pieces, promised Robin she would share dinner with him, and left the room. Casting a withering look toward the chair where Amberley sat, his leg propped up on pillows, Lady Corinna followed Lucia out of the room, deep in thought. She had been laughing and joking with her infamous husband. She had been happy. Indeed, as each day passed she seemed to resemble less and less a prisoner of marriage and more and more a cherished bride.

After a great deal of pestering from Lucia and Amaryllis, Dr. Lindley finally agreed to allow the duke and duchess to attend Lady Blayne's ball if they followed his orders strictly until that time. "Plenty of rest and regular meals, Your Grace!" he said to Lucia, then turned to Robin. "And no dancing for you at the ball, Your Grace!"

Robin grinned from the depths of his armchair. "I doubt I'll feel the urge to do much of that, doctor. Just standing is an ordeal."

"You'll need to carry a cane," Lindley advised. "You are lucky that that ball entered only the flesh of your leg and not the bone or muscle as I had at first thought. Take care of yourself and with time, you should recover completely."

Surprised to receive Lady Blayne's invitation to a dinner party honoring the Duke of Lynkellyn, Peter Tallant, Viscount Norworth, stared at the gilt-edged card, considering whether to attend. Since he had not come to London until two years after Robert Amberley's spectacular scandal, the man was a stranger to him.

Although Society was abuzz with gossip, old and new, about the duke, Peter had listened with no more than polite interest to the old tale of Lady Malkent's abduction and Amberley's futile attempts to blame Lord Mountheathe for it. After trading a few bawdy jests with his friends over the diverting story of the stolen governess, he had completely forgotten about the duke until this invitation arrived.

Peter was curious to see the man who had managed, by his mere presence, to set polite London on its ear, but he didn't fancy being shunned for his association with a scoundrel. Still, Norworth reasoned, Lynkellyn must have some influential friends or he would not be holding Lady Blayne's invitation.

His grace had one circumstance in his favor, Norworth thought. Lynkellyn, like he himself, had a quarrel with that blackguard, Giles Bridland. If supporting the duke made Mountheathe's life unpleasant, Peter would be happy to oblige.

Curiosity finally prompted Peter to accept the invitation. One party with the Rogue, as he had heard Amberley styled, certainly could do little harm to a reputation already plagued by several dark spots of its own. Besides, Concordia Lannington would most likely attend and he was damned if he'd let Mountheathe have her without a fight.

The embarrassing tale of Giles's drunken conduct on the field of honor was spreading all over London. Mothers steered their daughters out of his path and warned their sons against him. Sniggering bucks made loud and malicious jokes at his expense. Amaryllis was crowing about the duchess's 'interesting condition'.

Giles knew something had to be done about Robin's so called wife before she whelped and he found himself at point non plus both financially and socially. Perhaps it was time to call on the wench and discover whether she was his blessing or his curse.

Giles could not have chosen a better day to call at Lynkellyn House. Robin was sleeping and Lady Easterbury had, at Lucia's insistence, gone out upon a round of morning calls. The duchess was, to all intents and purposes, alone.

When Laddock opened the door, Giles handed him a calling card and asked to see her grace. The butler frowned, not unaware of the tense situation between Lord Mountheathe and his master. He considered telling his lordship that her grace was not at home, but, fearing the possible unpleasant consequences of lying, he elected to admit the visitor and then alert the duke to Mountheathe's presence in the house.

"I will see if Her Grace is at home, my lord," Laddock said with cold formality. He showed Mountheathe into a small receiving room and bowed himself out.

The butler discovered the duchess reading in the Rose Salon, a small sitting room toward the back of the house that Lucia had taken for her own retreat. "Lord Mountheathe is here, Your Grace. Will you see him?" he said.

Lifting a delicate brow, Lucia wondered at Mountheathe's audacity. For a moment, she considered refusing him an audience, then laid down her book. "Show him to the Blue Salon, Laddock. I will be there directly." After the butler departed, she smoothed her skirt and took a deep breath, shuddering at the memory of her last meeting alone with Mountheathe. At least this time she would have a house full of servants for protection. Gathering her courage, she started for the Blue Salon.

She entered the room, purposefully leaving the door ajar. Giles bowed, smiling. "Your Grace! I trust I find you well?"

Alarm bells clanged in Lucia's mind. This sweetly false cordiality seemed incredible to her after his blatant contempt. Instinctively, she took a step back. "Lord Mountheathe." She nodded coolly.

"I heard of the unfortunate mishap which befell my cousin and I have come to inquire after his health," Giles said a little self-consciously, aware that she knew his sentiments were suspect. "I hope he is much improved?"

"He is doing better," she said, "and his manservant shall survive."

"His manservant was hurt, too? Well! Well!" Giles shook his head in mock disbelief. "I say! Footpads have become increasingly bold these days. It's quite shocking!"

"Yes, indeed. We are all exceeding grateful to Fletcher, though. He took the brunt of the attack! Saved Robin's life!"

"That must have been a grave disappointment for you." Cynicism crept into Giles's voice.

Lucia stiffened. "I beg your pardon, my lord?"

"Why, I merely meant that you would be a wealthy woman, free to pursue your own aims in life, if the Rogue were dead. Of course, there are other ways to fill your pockets, as I'm sure you're aware."

Lucia felt her stomach knotting in the old familiar warning. "I don't take your meaning, my lord."

Mentally planning another mortgage on Heathe Manor, Giles said, "I'll give you ten thousand pounds to leave the Rogue. If you want more, I'll find you a well-heeled roue who'll take you into keeping and shower you with guineas!"

Just outside the door of the Blue Salon, Robin stood, cane in hand, shamelessly listening. When Laddock had awakened him to say that Mountheathe was below, he had flung on his robe de chambre and insisted upon coming downstairs to confront Giles, his uncertain steps muffled by his doeskin slippers. He had paused by the open door as Giles's words carried into the foyer.

'... Ten thousand pounds to leave the Rogue...' Amberley's hand tightened on his cane and he took an angry step toward the door only to halt at the sound of Lucia's voice.

"You have gone beyond the line of what is pleasing, my lord!"

"Come now, my pretty jade," Giles leered, circling her. "Sleeping with peers of the realm beneath scented sheets and being paid a small fortune to do it has to be preferable to leading ruffians into dark alleys for tuppence. If you accept my offer, you won't have to go back to that alley when Amberley is finished with you. You could rise from the filth of the gutter to the glitter of the demimonde in a twinkling!" Mountheathe's hands caressed her shoulders from behind. His mouth was close to her ear, his voice intimate and disturbing. "And think of all that money! All you have to do is abandon Amberley."

"Get your paws off me, sirrah!" Lucia shrugged out of his grasp and moved a few steps away, turning to face him with smoldering eyes. "I am not on the auction block awaiting the highest bid, my lord! And I will not accept carte blanche from anyone! Anyone! I am not, as you have so blithely assumed, a -- a lightskirt and I refuse to behave like one! Or to be treated like one! I love Robin and I intend to remain by his side."

"Gammon, madame! Everyone knows the truth about you and the Rogue. Saddewythe made certain of that! So you may cease this romantic little farce of yours!"

"I have given His Grace my word of honor and I do not break my promises. I am not for sale, my lord, to you or to any of your friends." Lucia's voice shook with fury.

Giles's eyes raked her insolently. "How much honor may be found in a slattern's promise, I wonder?" he sneered. "You will be sorry that you did not accept my offer, little doxy. Damned sorry!"

"I must ask you to leave my house, my lord, and if you choose to call again, neither His Grace nor I shall be at home to you. Please go before I am forced to call my servants." Lucia stared at him unwaveringly, a challenge in her eyes.

"You shall regret this very stupid decision, madame! You will not be given a second chance to consider my offer." Giles crossed the room, stopping near the door. His voice low and menacing, he said, "Do be careful, Your Grace! One never knows where a footpad may lurk. The Rogue's unhappy misadventure should have convinced you that death may threaten anywhere anytime."

"Leave my house, my lord!" Lucia crossed her arms and waited expectantly, meeting Giles's glare unflinchingly. At last, he turned on his heel and strode from the room.

As he passed into the foyer, he saw Robin standing by the door. Smiling broadly, victorious laughter in his eyes, the Rogue flourished him a triumphant bow. Furious, Giles flung open the front door before Laddock could reach it and slammed it loudly behind him.

In the Blue Salon, Lucia drew a deep breath, willing herself to relax. Feeling a distinct need for fortification, she walked over to a table by the front windows and picked up a brandy decanter. Pouring the golden liquid into a glass, she took a large swallow. Suddenly spluttering, she held the glass away

from her, staring at it incredulously.

"Hoist on your own petard, ma chérie?" Robin laughed from the doorway. "I must confess I have not found apple cider to be a satisfactory substitute for brandy. Shall I ring for -- Lucia, you're trembling!"

Robin hobbled over to her. Relieving her of the shaking glass, he set it on the table and clasped her hand in his, endeavoring to warm it. "Your hands are so cold, ma chérie!"

"I sometimes have this reaction after I have met a crisis," she said unsteadily. "It will pass."

"Still, Giles Bridland can be a most distressing guest! You had better sit down." At her questioning glance, he said, "Laddock told me he was here." He led her to a sofa. "You are looking exceedingly pale, Lucia. I shall definitely ring for some real brandy." He limped across the room and pulled the bell-rope. Laddock appeared almost immediately.

While they waited for the brandy, Robin sat beside Lucia and drew her close. "I had no idea you were so formidable, ma chérie; my lady knight fighting my dragons for me," he murmured against her ear.

"You should be in bed, Robin," she said sternly, trying to ignore the tumult he was causing inside her. Suddenly remembering the brandy they had ordered, she added, "And no spirits! You know the doctor said..."

"Damn the doctor! I refuse to lay abed in the middle of the afternoon unless you are with me." Robin pulled her closer. Lucia blushed, but tilted her face up to accept his kiss, her senses reeling delightfully as his lips touched hers. Happiness, strong and insistent, pulsed through her, and she did not pause to question it. The answers, she knew, were certain to be painful and unsettling. Better to enjoy what you can while you can, she told herself as her arms encircled his neck. Tomorrow it might all disappear.

Chapter 18:

In Which Their Graces Attend a Ball

As Hercules, his valet, put the finishing touches on his toilette on the evening of Lady Blayne's ball, Robin tried to mentally prepare himself for the snubs that would fill his evening, assuming, of course, that anyone attended Ryl's party at all. She had assured him, however, that she had received dozens of acceptances. Society was eager to welcome him back, she crowed.

"Oui! After all, a free meal is a free meal even if one must dine with a scoundrel," Robin sneered.

"You are not a scoundrel, Robin! And I hate that drawl you've adopted! It makes you sound -- " Amaryllis hesitated, "wicked!" she said at last.

"But I am wicked, Ryl! Lucia has told you, certainement, about the way I..."

"She says you are very good to her. She certainly seems happy enough."

Robin frowned into the mirror, remembering how much Lucia had feared him only a few months ago. That terror had slowly faded from her eyes and he prayed to God he would never see it again. He wanted her to be happy.

"You are ready, Your Grace," Hercules announced. Robin inspected his reflection in the glass. Elegant in deep violet velvet, he selected an amethyst from his jewel case and centered it in the ivory lace foaming at his throat. Slipping a ring of amethysts and pearls on his finger, he cast a last glance at his hair, intricately curled, powdered, and gathered in a carved amethyst buckle at the nape of his neck, the queue caught in a black silk bag. He picked up an ebony cane bedecked with fluttering purple ribbons and hobbled out.

In the Blue Salon, Lady Easterbury and Lucia waited for him in silence. Lucia paced the room, her silken gown altering its hue in the firelight with her slightest movement. The deep blue overdress, its hem and bodice embroidered in silver, dipped daringly across her bosom and draped gracefully over a chemise of pale lavender brocade. A mass of ringlets, coated with silver powder and studded with violets, crowned her head, cascading over her shoulders and down her back.

Lucia frowned, her mind in turmoil. She tried to tell herself that she only pursued Robin's goals because she feared his retribution, but during their weeks together, she had come to view Robin as an ally of sorts, although not a completely trustworthy one. She enjoyed his company when he was not trying to dominate her and she relished their physical intimacy. After the nightmare of their wedding night, he had become a gentle and considerate lover, always catering to her pleasure.

Their companionship, however, was leading to unforeseen consequences. When he was with her, she found herself struggling to hide emotions she had no desire to feel in the first place. She reacted to his lightest touch, his slightest smile, his mere presence with a giddy delight that had nothing to do with survival and went far beyond lust. Often, when he was out, she caught herself listening for sounds of his return, straining to hear his tapping footstep or his rich, resonant voice. Once he was home, she felt safe, comfortable, and happy.

But she knew that this happiness was a one-sided illusion. If this was love, it was naught but a miserable cheat! Robin was contemptuous of everything she valued. By his own admission, he was a ruthless brigand who stole what he wanted without a qualm. He wouldn't hesitate to exploit any weakness he found in her and loving him would definitely be a weakness. Lucia's shoulders sagged a little.

Clad in a gown of scarlet velvet over an underdress of gold brocade, Lady Corinna sat in a straight-backed chair by the fire, embroidery in hand. "It's growing late!" she said, glancing at the clock. "His

Grace had better hurry."

"Had I known what beauty awaited me, ladies, I would have sprouted wings to be here sooner." When Robin appeared in the doorway, Lucia's heart danced. Smiling calmly, she tried to quash the sudden tumult.

Lady Easterbury tossed her embroidery aside. "The carriage is waiting. Shall we go?"

The elegant rooms at Blayne House echoed with laughter and happy voices as the dinner guests arrived. Tracy and Sir William stood in a corner of the drawing room, watching the glittering crowd swirl and undulate. "Will it answer, do you think?" Blayne asked. "I don't relish the thought of finding myself an outcast."

Tracy shrugged. "Society is so easily swayed; who can tell? The *ton* may cut the Rogue dead or make him the rage."

"The second possibility would certainly make life uncomfortable for you."

"Perhaps I deserve to be uncomfortable, Will. Over the past few weeks, I've begun to fear that a massive miscarriage of justice has occurred." Tracy gazed toward the door as a late guest arrived. "Damn! Mountheathe! What the devil is he doing here?"

As Tracy watched Amaryllis greet Giles, Blayne replied, "Ryl thought that if Mountheathe and the Rogue met on neutral ground, they might settle their differences."

"Aye! With teeth and claws!" Tracy snorted. "What the devil was in her mind? Beg your pardon, Will! It is merely that..."

"That Ryl is a meddlesome, well-meaning widgeon. I'm the first to admit it! But I love her and my life would be damned bleak without her, so here I am!" Sir William grinned.

Mountheathe crossed the room and greeted his host. Sir William returned the courtesy, but Tracy gave Giles only a curt, distant nod. After Giles made his bow, he strolled toward Concordia and Tracy stiffened. Excusing himself to Sir William, he started to follow. Blayne laid a restraining hand on his sleeve. "Regardless of what Giles may or may not have done, Tracy, he is a guest in my house."

"He had better be a gentleman with my niece," Tracy said after a tense moment.

"Viscount Norworth," the butler announced. As Peter sauntered in, dozens of female eyes locked upon

him. Tall and graceful, he sported a finely tailored coat of burgundy brocade over striped satin smallclothes. Lace dripped from his wrists and floated at his throat, the delicate material subdued by a single blood ruby, its twin glinting against the paleness of his right hand. His hair was powdered with care so that no hint of its true color showed, but his brows were dark and his eyes, gleaming with amusement and good humor, were so brown as to be almost black.

"Norworth, too! Does Amaryllis extend her hospitality to every notorious profligate in London?" Tracy grumbled.

"Come now, Tracy! Norworth isn't so bad. I rather enjoy his company."

"So do I when I don't have to guard my female kin from him. If ever there was a wolf in sheep's clothing -- "

Sir William laughed. "You are certainly in a foul mood tonight, my lord. I hope our little entertainment will cheer you."

"With the guests she's invited, your good lady has set the stage for an explosive scandal that will cause people to rake up every sordid detail of Val's abduction. There is bound to be a confrontation either between Norworth and me over Concordia or between Giles and the Rogue over the past!"

"Nonsense! This ball is for Robin's benefit. Why would he jeopardize his chance to rejoin Society?"

"When Amberley's temper flares, he forgets logic. Forgets everything but his fury! And as for Norworth..."

"Ryl invited Norworth because he reminds her of the Rogue before the scandal. Remember Robin's easy laughter? His joie de vivre? And that unexpected streak of gallantry? You have to admit that Tallant, beneath all his wildness, is very like that. Ryl is hoping that they will become friends. Perhaps Norworth's jaunty attitude toward life might bring back the old, lighthearted Robin she remembers."

"Hare-brained! Amberley's been through too much to ever be the devil-may-care boy he was when he left. The Rogue has changed. Profoundly!"

"So I've heard. Do you know, Tracy, that he's not in debt to anyone? The lad was constantly outrunning the duns in the old days. And now -- why I've heard he's even bought all his family's mortgages!"

"That's true enough. He told me so himself."

"Furthermore, no one's seen him at a gaming hell since his return to London. He's not made a single wager of any sort. You know how it always was with him! He could never pass up a bet!"

"Perhaps he's been busy, Will. After all, he has a new wife, a large inheritance, and a difficult social situation to manage."

"That could be. Shall we offer him a hand of cards this evening if we can find a fourth?"

"Yes! The very thing to keep him occupied and thus keep the peace!"

Viscount Norworth, having presented his personal compliments to all the ladies of his acquaintance in the room, bowed to Tracy and Sir William. "Gentlemen," he drawled, "I daresay this will prove a most enlivening evening," then the drawl disappeared and an impish grin lit his eyes, "and I'd not miss the fireworks for the world."

"I'm certain it will be interesting," Tracy allowed frostily.

The butler announced, "Lord Bellefield. Miss Bellefield."

Norworth turned, bringing his quizzing glass into play. He let his warm, brown gaze roam lazily over Miss Bellefield from top to toe, then turned back to his companions. "I take it the guests of honor have not yet arrived?" he asked as if there had been no break in the conversation.

"They are rather late," Sir William said. "Perhaps the Rogue's leg is paining him."

"Indeed? What happened to his leg?" Peter asked. After listening with interest to Tracy's tale of the duke's duel, the viscount made his bow and sauntered over to speak to Bellefield.

Some fifteen minutes later, after the butler had left his post by the door, the Lynkellyn party quietly slipped into Lady Blayne's salon. As Lucia entered the room on Robin's arm, Peter raised his quizzing glass to his eye. "Faith, but there's a beauty!" He leered wolfishly at the duchess. "I've never seen her before. Who is she?"

"That, my friend, is the Duchess of Lynkellyn. Damned pretty woman, but I'd not get too close, if you take my meaning," Tony said.

"Then the limping gallant escorting her is the infamous Rogue Robin!" Peter said. "A firebrand?"

"Aye!"

"How does a scoundrel like that rate such a magnificent creature? She is not the Saddewythes' governess, surely?"

Tony nodded and both gentlemen watched their graces as they greeted Amaryllis. "Well, well,"

Norworth murmured, "I shall have to visit all my married friends and haunt their schoolrooms. Governesses have improved vastly since I was a boy. Fancy old Saddewythe keeping that prime bit of fluff hidden away all these years! Crafty devil!"

Bellefield cleared his throat, embarrassed. "Appreciate it if you wouldn't speak of Her Grace in that manner, Peter. Granted, she's in a questionable situation, but she's a lady, for all that."

Peter excused himself to seek out Lady Blayne and secure introductions to the Amberleys. When Amaryllis made them all known to each other, Robin favored the viscount with a distant bow, steeled for the cut-direct, but Peter greeted him with a smile. When the bowing viscount brought Lucia's hand to his lips, however, Robin's answering smile vanished.

Later, at the dinner table, Viscount Norworth was pleased to find the duchess on his left and Miss Lannington on his right. On Concordia's right, Giles seethed silently. The last event he wanted to attend was a party honoring Amberley. He feared, however, that should he not appear and show his complete contempt for the duke, Robin might sway the *ton* just as he had won Tracy to his side. Besides, Ryl's ball might tell him whether Society intended to welcome the Rogue's return or cut him dead.

The ball also gave Giles another chance to court the beautiful Miss Lannington and her equally enchanting dowry. He could not afford to waste his opportunities. He suspected that Norworth was trying to steal a march on him and he refused to let a second fortune fall into enemy hands.

His fawnish brown eyes devoured Concordia with passionate intensity. "It seems an age since last we met, Miss Lannington," he murmured, "but then, every day we are apart feels like a century to me."

Gazing at him from beneath silken lashes, Concordia smiled and waved her fan. "Truly, sir, it has only been three days and I daresay I've not spent above three minutes in your thoughts."

"Three days? Three centuries, belike! But I am content to grow grey waiting for your favor so long as I may bask in your sweet presence. One small sign of your partiality, a single token of your affection, and I shall be young again."

On Concordia's left, the conversation was comparatively prosaic. "Is this your first visit to London, Your Grace?" Norworth asked.

"Yes," Lucia said, "but I hazard a guess that you have been here many times."

"I must confess that I tend to live in Town and visit my estates instead of the other way 'round, much to the consternation of my parents. When I do go home, my mother parades a stream of prospective brides before me and my father glowers at me without saying a word. Between us, Your Grace, my mother is much the worse of the two. Imagine me caught in parson's mousetrap!" He shuddered eloquently. "Respectability! A horrible fate!"

Lucia laughed. "The very future you wish to avoid is all my husband yearns for, my lord."

"Does he, indeed?" Peter glanced across the table at the duke. When their eyes met, he was startled by the intense anger flashing beneath Lynkellyn's half-closed lids. He quickly turned back to the duchess.

"He is tired of being vilified and longs for a taste of the family life you take for granted," she said.

"Wait until his mother comes to visit! He'll change his mind then! Mine has been in residence with me at Sandhaven House for a month! She questions my every move and thinks I'm about to betroth myself to every young lady I dance with! She's sweet and I love her, but -- " Peter shook his head ruefully. "Thank God my father stayed in the country instead of coming with her. Those glowers, you know!"

"Robin's parents are dead. Lady Blayne and Lord Mountheathe are the only close family he has."

"And you, of course."

"Yes. And me." She sighed. "I fear Robin's reputation is so damaged that he will never achieve his dream of respectability."

"Aye, he did sow his wild oats rather deeper than most of us. Abducting a lady of quality," Norworth glanced at Lucia and corrected himself. "No, two ladies! The man has more hair than wit!"

Lucia bristled. "I beg your pardon, sir, but Robin did not abduct anyone. We eloped and, as for Lady Malkent, it was Lord Mountheathe who tried to force her to Gretna Green."

Peter was admiring the icy sparkle in Lucia's eyes when her accusations against Giles caught his attention. "What's this about Mountheathe?"

"I said that Lord Mountheathe carried off Lady Val," Lucia repeated impatiently. "Robin rode to her rescue and fell into a trap of his cousin's devising."

"I thought Mountheathe saved Lady Malkent. So the on-dit runs."

Lucia shrugged angrily. "Believe what you will, my lord!" She turned to speak to Malkent on her other side.

"Your Grace!" Peter touched her arm and she looked around. " You seem very sure of your facts. Where did you hear them?"

"From Robin, of course. Why?"

"All of Mountheathe's antics fascinate me. I have my own grievance against the man." Peter frowned, then brightened. "Surely we can find something more pleasant than Giles Bridland to discuss? You've seen all the sights in Town, I suppose?"

"I have been to the theater."

"What? Not to Westminster Abbey or the Bloody Tower?" Peter feigned shock.

Lucia laughed. "Setting up a new household takes time, my lord. No doubt your marvels will still await me next week or next month."

"Or tomorrow!" Norworth grinned.

"Tomorrow?" she countered, suddenly breathless as she gazed into his beguiling black eyes.

"If you would like to go driving with me tomorrow, say ten o'clock, I will engage to show you all the beauties and oddities of London." He smiled at her and her heart beat like a hummingbird's wings. Was this how the serpent enchanted Mother Eve?

Quelling the tumult within her, she focused her mind firmly on Robin. She could not allow the viscount's dangerous charm to lead her into foolishness. Schooling herself to smile calmly, she said, "I'm honored by your invitation, my lord, but I really don't think I can accept. His Grace has been injured and requires a great deal of care." She glanced almost furtively across the table at her husband, flushing guiltily as her eyes met his. Then Amberley turned a countenance so full of poison upon Peter that he paled slightly and looked away.

As Norworth watched the pair, Lucia's blush faded. Her chin rose defiantly and an angry challenge lit her eyes. An answering fury glinted in Lynkellyn's granite gaze and his smile mocked her. He brought a silver flask from his coat pocket, silently and impudently saluted her, then drank deeply, his eyes never leaving her face.

With an angry shrug, Lucia smiled brightly at Peter. "I find that I would quite enjoy driving out with you tomorrow, my lord." Looking into Lucia's triumphant eyes, Peter realized that the newlyweds had just had a fierce argument in absolute silence and that the duke had apparently lost this little skirmish. Smiling archly, he began to flirt with the duchess while Lynkellyn glared daggers at them across the table.

"I trust the refurbishing of Lynkellyn House is going well, Your Grace." Valeria's soft voice did not at first penetrate Robin's mind, focused, as it was, upon Lucia and her swain. When he realized that Valeria had summoned the courage to speak to him, he swallowed his anger and forced himself to be civil.

"It has halted for the present, my lady. In her delicate condition, Lucia must rest."

Val smiled. "Ryl told me you're expecting a 'blessed event'. Congratulations!"

"Merci." Robin's eyes strayed back to the couple across the table.

Discomfited to be sitting beside the man whom, for a decade, she had believed to be her abductor, Valeria looked down at her plate, trying to think of something else to say. If Tracy's new-found doubts about Robin's guilt proved true, she had been instrumental in the destruction of an innocent man's life, condemning him to ten years of exile. What words could make amends for that?

Robin was still staring at Peter and Lucia, his mouth set in a hard line, his eyes smoldering and his fists clenched.

Valeria glanced across the table at the laughing pair. Nothing more exceptional passed between them than a few pleasant gallantries courteously parried. Their behavior would not infuriate the most exacting spouse.

Impulsively, she touched Robin's arm. He tore his gaze away from Lucia and glared at her. "They are only talking, Your Grace. Polite conversation is expected. They're doing no more than that."

"Am I so transparent?" Robin said.

"You look like you would dearly love to pounce on poor Norworth and tear him apart. Tracy acted just like that for nearly two years after -- after the abduction. Whenever any man -- a footman or a groom, even -- approached me, he growled like an old bear."

"Like Tracy, I'm just trying to protect my own."

The couple across the table reclaimed Robin's attention and Valeria shook her head. The duke was going to have a very uncomfortable evening if he intended to take exception to every man who admired his duchess.

Further down the table, Lord Mountheathe and Lord Norworth were eagerly vying for Concordia's attention. Well, Mountheathe was vying anyway, she admitted to herself. The viscount seemed to be totally captivated by the duchess. Concordia pouted a little. Her grace was married and old, well past twenty. What could Norworth possibly see in her?

Giles was going on about Concordia's likeness to some flower or other. She listened with half an ear while she peered around Peter to get a glimpse of the duchess. Old or not, her grace was lovely and Concordia's heart sank as she overheard Norworth offer to take her driving.

"...servant forever, if you will only grant me the supper dance," Mountheathe pleaded.

Giles truly seemed to care for her. He talked to her, spent time with her, courted her. She was lucky if Norworth greeted her in passing. And Giles had the most beautiful, beguiling, brown eyes, so much more pleasing than mocking black ones, always laughing at one.

Mountheathe was obviously the better choice, so why did she live for Norworth's teasing glance, hunger for that quiet moment of conversation, revel in that long anticipated dance?

She smiled at Giles and told him the supper dance was already bespoken, praying, as she glanced hopefully down the table at Peter, that Mountheathe would not discover the lie. She suggested that Giles stand up with her for another dance and dropped a heavy hint that she would like to go driving the next day. Mountheathe immediately offered to escort her.

After dinner, Robin stood in the receiving line beside Lucia and greeted arriving guests, graciously accepting their good wishes and ignoring their snubs. A surprising number of old acquaintances sought to renew their ties with him. He also received quite a few cuts, of course. The Cothcourt family walked past him as if he were not there and Lady Saddewythe and her daughter were decidedly cool, but, overall, the smiles outnumbered the insults.

Nevertheless, he could not forget that one breath of scandal had left him bereft of allies. In the old days, he would have greeted his friends with the hearty boisterousness of a man sure of his welcome. Now, amongst those same friends, he was cautious and reserved like an abandoned pet coaxed out of the wild. He had been an outcast too long.

As the ball began, Robin sat down, propping his throbbing leg on an ottoman. Watching Lucia go down the first set with a frog-faced young buck adept at crushing her toes. Robin fumed at his helpless state; unable to dance with his wife; unable to protect her from unkind remarks; and unable to interrupt the steady stream of gallants eager to lead her onto the floor. No amount of glaring on his part had prevented Lady Malkent and Lady Blayne from introducing her to every fop who clamored to be presented.

Robin grimly watched her smile at one new acquaintance after another. Until tonight, his notoriety had forced an isolated intimacy upon them. Fighting, laughing, or crying, they had needed each other. Now that Lucia had all these new friends, she would need him no longer. She might even feel strong enough to break his hold on her. What if she charmed some swaggering young puppy into helping her escape him? Or even worse, what if she fell in love with a handsome buck like Norworth? It was all too likely!

Fingers taut on his chair arms, Robin silently blasted Lucia's latest swain as that worthy led her into the dance, then cursed the damned useless leg that prevented him from partnering her himself. When the despised limb retaliated with an agonizing throb, he cursed Giles Bridland and his hired assassin for

putting him in this crippled state.

The music ended and Norworth approached Lucia to claim his second dance of the evening. Robin's eyes widened, his body tense as he leaned forward.

"It would seem your doxy's found a better prospect, Coz," Mountheathe drawled as he took a chair next to Robin. "Less impressive title, but deep pockets and a relatively untarnished reputation. What's more, he's a whole man with two good legs."

Robin glared at Mountheathe. "I am not in the mood for your insults and calumnies this evening, Giles. Be gone with you."

When the set ended, gentlemen thronged around Lucia, seeking an introduction or begging a dance. As he watched her laugh, it seemed to Robin that she had totally forgotten her marriage vows.

"Look at her, Rogue!" Giles purred. "What a practiced Cyprian she is! Such enticing smiles! Such wanton glances! How she relishes the adulation of all those men! Which one shall she take into her bed, I wonder?"

"Damn you, Giles! I've a mind to -- "

"To what, Coz? To call me out?" Mountheathe's eyes danced as he raised his quizzing glass to inspect Robin's injured leg, propped up on a tapestried ottoman. "You should be more careful, Rogue. Brigands are everywhere these days! Especially in the parks!"

"You seem to have no trouble finding them, certainement!" Robin snapped, his eyes still on Lucia.

"You've lost me, Coz. I haven't the faintest idea what you are talking about. Ah, but then I know nothing of such matters." He waved his glass around airily. "I am convinced that you, with your vast experience, must be the family authority on thieves and cutthroats."

Robin seethed silently, struggling to control his temper. It would not do to ruin Ryl's ball with petty squabbling. He must be patient. When the time was right, he would have Giles spitted on his sword like a roasting pig. He smiled at the thought.

A strident whisper behind him drew Robin's eyes to Lady Clarissa Chalfont, in a heated conversation with Giles. "You seem to think I'm going to seduce him here and now!" she said. "I only want you to introduce me!"

Robin's smile broadened. "By all means, Giles, introduce us. I would be delighted to meet so charming a lady." He pressed the tip of his cane against the floor and pushed himself to his feet. His eyes brazenly raked Clarissa and she fanned herself, simpering.

Giles reluctantly introduced them and Robin bowed over her hand. As he rose, he surprised a hard, calculating look in a pair of hazel eyes as cold and corrupt as rusted iron, but when those eyes met his, they softened and her lips parted in sensual invitation. His smile became predatory.

"I am thirsty, Giles. Would you be so kind as to bring me some wine?" Clarissa's request closely resembled a dismissal. As he reluctantly went off to procure the refreshment, she took the chair next to Robin's. Amberley lowered himself back into his seat with an anticipatory gleam in his eyes.

"I know we are going to be fast friends, Your Grace. I'm certain we shall find we have a great deal in common," she said, leaning toward him at an angle calculated to show him a wide expanse of bosom. She patted his thigh with a small, smug smile on her face that was already proprietary.

"Mais oui, madame! We already have one mutual passion in the person of Lord Mountheathe." Robin's teeth glinted, shark-like, as she waved her creamy, white cleavage in his face like a red flag before a Spanish bull.

Her hand still on his leg, she smiled back at him, pleased with her progress. A man was a man, she thought, whether he was a beardless youth of sixteen or a jaded man of the world like Lynkellyn. Just a little encouragement, just the unspoken suggestion that he might possess her abundant charms, and a man would give her anything she wanted; his fortune, his love, his soul.

"Perhaps over supper at my house tomorrow night, we may discover another 'mutual passion'." Her tongue slid sensuously over her red lips as she caressed his thigh. "Say, about ten?"

Suddenly Robin leaned forward, cursing under his breath as Lucia strolled into Blayne's garden, hanging on Norworth's arm. His hand tightened on his cane and he struggled to his feet. Beside him, Clarissa rose and tried to take his arm. He shook her off, hardly aware of her presence, and hobbled toward the garden.

Across the room, William and Tracy watched Robin limp after Peter and Lucia, his face a thundercloud. "Trouble!" Tracy predicted succinctly. "We'd best head the Rogue off before he gives the *ton* more fodder for drawing room gossip."

Malkent and Blayne intercepted Robin halfway across the room. "Rogue!" Tracy said, "Well met! A word, if you please!"

"Out of my way, Tracy! "

"But Will and I are trying to get up a game of cards, Robin."

"Devil take your cards!" Robin pushed past the earl and lurched onward. Following, Will and Tracy caught up with him when he halted a few feet from the French doors.

Leaning heavily on his cane, Robin stared at Lucia and Norworth as they strolled back into the ballroom. Her smiling face was turned up to Peter's as he gazed into her eyes, laughing softly. Her fingers curled around his arm and his hand covered hers. To Robin, they appeared too damned intimate by half.

"Norworth!" Sir William cried. "A perfect fourth." He strode past Lynkellyn to invite the viscount to join the proposed game. Peter looked up at the sound of Blayne's voice and discovered the duke's stormy, steely eyes accusing him.

Peter was amused. Having been gently, but firmly rebuffed in his one attempt to kiss her grace, he had, from that moment, behaved with a circumspection that would have stunned his intimates, indulging in nothing more than light flirtation with this delightful creature. For once, he was innocent of the slightest impropriety, yet he found himself facing a fire-breathing dragon of a husband who appeared to be inordinately jealous of a woman whom he supposedly married for convenience.

"I say, Norworth! Are you up for a round of cards?" Sir William pleaded frantically at his elbow. Peter tore his eyes from Amberley's face and looked toward the duchess. Over her head, he could see Lady Winifred Saddewythe bearing down upon their tense little band. He bowed to Lucia, kissing her hand. "If Your Grace will excuse me?"

"Yes. Of course. I think I see Lady Saddewythe hailing me, in any case," she smiled. From the moment she had entered the ballroom on Norworth's arm, she had avoided Robin's gaze. Although she had done nothing wrong, somehow she felt incredibly guilty.

Peter left Lucia's side and Robin took his place with a proprietary air. "I hope you are enjoying yourself, ma chérie," he said in tender tones that belied the chill in his eyes.

"Yes, indeed, Robin!" She forced herself to look at him.

"Bon! Then I shall leave you to your amusements and adjourn to the cardroom." Robin cast a look of triumphant challenge at Norworth and, tipping Lucia's head up with two fingers beneath her chin, planted a swift, but passionate kiss full on her mouth, heedless of the crowded ballroom. He casually turned away from her, an unrepentant half-smile playing about his lips. "Lead on, gentlemen."

"Well, that should give the tabbies something to purr about over their saucers of tea tomorrow!" Malkent murmured to Sir William as they strode toward the cardroom.

Sir William grinned. "The man hasn't changed completely, has he? Still listens to his heart more often than he does to his head."

Tracy nodded. "Once a Rogue, always a Rogue!"

Lucia stood, stunned, as Robin hobbled away. She touched her mouth, shaking her head in disbelief. 'So much for respectability!' she thought angrily. Aware that people were staring, waiting for her reaction to such a public caress, she had no choice but to put a bold face on the whole incident. Her chin lifted and she strolled with apparent unconcern toward Lady Saddewythe who had stopped dead in her tracks upon seeing Lynkellyn's outrageous impropriety.

"Well met, my lady," Lucia said.

"Oh, my dear! Such a Dreadful Man! Thank Heaven his fancy didn't light on Pamela!" Lady Saddewythe fanned herself vigorously. "Ah, but I am saddened that you were sacrificed in her place, Miss Cothcourt. No! I must call you 'Your Grace' now, mustn't I?"

The duchess shook her head. "'Lucia' will be fine. I feel we are old friends."

Lady Winifred's face crinkled with pleasure at the familiarity her former governess was granting. "It must have been horrendous for you that awful night when -- I hope you were not hurt?"

"No! His grace merely took me back to Brackenwell Hall where Reverend Stanfield was waiting and -- and we were married. It was rather business-like, really, with the duke's solicitor waiting with papers to sign and all," she said, aware that Lady Saddewythe wanted reassurance, not truth.

"Well, thank heaven it's over! You did receive your portmanteau, did you not? I had to send it to Lynkellyn House when Saddewythe was from home. He was all for cutting the ties completely and tossing your things in the Thames, but I thought you had suffered enough already at the hands of that Dreadful Man!"

"Thank you, my lady, for your compassion," Lucia said with heartfelt gratitude. "Can we not find a quiet place to sit? I feel very -- er -- conspicuous here." Lucia glanced around at the other guests, their eyes still on her as they whispered their shock and outrage at Robin's reprehensibly public kiss.

The women soon discovered a deserted corner and seated themselves. "How are the children?" Lucia asked.

"They are doing very well, only -- " Winifred hesitated, then straightened her shoulders determinedly. "Lucia, I have a favor to ask. Could you visit with Honor?"

"Honor? Is something wrong? Has she gotten over the ear- ache?"

"Yes, but ever since that horrible night, she has refused to ride in a carriage! At night, she wakes up screaming or in tears, convinced that you are dead, murdered by that Dreadful Man! Derrick put that

notion into her head, I suspect. She won't believe any of us when we tell her you are alive. If you could just see her, talk to her a little, put her fears to rest -- " Winifred twisted the end of her shawl.

Lucia rested her hand on Winifred's arm. "I would be glad to visit you, my lady..."

"No!" Winifred almost jumped out of her chair, her eyes bulging. "No!" she repeated more calmly. "You mustn't do that, my dear. Nigel would have kittens if you called at Saddewythe House. When Pamela and I left this evening, I had to lie and say we were going to Lady Whitforth's musicale. Nigel doesn't want us to have anything to do with the duke or-or-"

"Or with me," Lucia finished for her.

"I am sorry, my dear." Winifred stared at her hands, embarrassed. At last she said, "The children stroll in Hyde Park with their new governess, Miss Twyll, every morning at eight o'clock. Perhaps -- perhaps you could meet them there. I can't accompany them or Nigel might become suspicious, but I shall alert Miss Twyll to watch for you."

Lucia shook her head. "Robin would never allow..."

"Please, Your Grace! I came here expressly to see you. No matter what Nigel may think, we need your help! Honor won't eat! She can't sleep! She never laughs or plays anymore. She's heartbroken at losing you! I'm at my wits' end!" A tear trickled down Winifred's cheek. "Please!"

"I -- Very well. If I can get away, I shall see the children in the park tomorrow. Perhaps I can say that I wish for an early ride..."

"Oh, thank you! Thank you, Lucia!" Winifred gushed. "This means so much to me! You are too kind!"

Engrossed in their conversation, the ladies took no notice of the uninvited Sir Winston Rochedale. Having slipped quietly past the busy servants into the house, he stood on the threshold of the ballroom, scanning the crowd in search of Mountheathe. As Lucia and Winifred strolled away, the movement caught his attention. He blinked, then stared hard at Lucia, examining her thoroughly.

The ladies stopped gratifyingly within Rochedale's hearing. "Thank you once more, Lucia! I shall not forget your generosity."

"Nonsense, my lady! I am looking forward to seeing the children again, especially Honor. Hyde Park tomorrow morning at eight o'clock. I shall be there!"

"Oh dear!" Winifred groaned. "Here is Pamela about to stand up with Lord Farmont for the third time this evening as if neither of them knew better! That child never gives me a moment's peace! I pray you

will excuse me, Your Grace." Curtsying, Winifred gave Lucia a look of martyred long-suffering, and hurried away.

Stifled in the hot, stuffy ballroom, Lucia strolled out onto the veranda overlooking the garden, her mind and heart in turmoil. Dealing with Robin wearied her spirit.

Three months ago, she would have said the duke was incapable of loving anyone. He had regarded her as nothing more than a weapon against Lord Mountheathe.

At that time, she had had a healthy and intense fear of Robin and he -- what? What had he felt for her? Apathy? Pity? Contempt? Desire had burned in his eyes when he looked at her, 'twas true, but she knew that often a man's lust, once sated, became indifference.

Robin was not indifferent. Indeed, he was growing more possessive every day, glaring at any man who approached her as if he wanted to savage the poor unsuspecting soul.

Nevertheless, he had begged for the mysterious Angelina from his sickbed, not her. Although the lady must have hurt him deeply, Lucia was certain he must still love her. With such a great passion in his past, how could he possibly feel any affection for his wife?

Since Robin could not love her, his jealousy, if one could call it that, must spring from the fear that she might betray him and cause him to lose his grandfather's fortune. Her heart ached a little. She wished he was as protective of her as he was of his legacy.

When Robin left his cards, he searched in vain for Lucia among the throng of guests in the ballroom, fighting hard to stem a rising tide of panic. She must have bolted, he concluded furiously, or perhaps Giles -- but Mountheathe was in a corner, engaged in intense conversation with a mocking and supercilious Clarissa.

Amberley found Norworth in the supper room, laughing with Miss Lannington as he filled her plate. Robin limped up to him. "Where's my wife, Norworth?" he demanded, ignoring Concordia.

"I haven't the slightest idea, Your Grace. I've not seen her since we returned from the garden." Peter's smile was open and friendly in distinct contrast to Amberley's dark scowl. "I believe she said something about talking to Lady Saddewythe."

With a swift bow, Robin hobbled away to find Lady Saddewythe. When he questioned her, Winifred, pale and nervous, told him that she left Lucia by the garden doors. Robin rushed into the garden, the duchess's moonlight stroll with Norworth still rankling.

"Imagine my delight at seeing you after all these years, Lucia, my dear girl! And at a fancy London ball of all places!"

Lucia shuddered at the horrifyingly familiar voice as long, bony fingers jabbed into her shoulders and spun her around. "G- Gaston!" Her eyes bulged as she stared into Sir Winston Rochedale's sneering face. Fear crawled into the pit of her stomach and began to gnaw.

"And I understand that I am to call you 'Your Grace'! Congratulations are in order, dear girl!" Sir Winston ran his fingers along the silky neckline of her ballgown appraisingly. "You've done well for yourself."

She slapped his hand down angrily and started to walk away. "Come back, Lucia, my dear!" he called after her. "We have business to discuss." She took another step. "I wonder what your highborn husband would say if I told him your maidenhead was offered for sale in the streets of Copenhagen." Lucia halted, whirling on her heel to stare at him in the moonlit shadows. "Of course, I am very adept at keeping secrets," Sir Winston studied his fingernails and smiled, "for a price."

"It's to be blackmail, Gaston? When you know I was but your victim?"

"It's your word against mine, dear girl. Is your blue-blooded old goat bedazzled enough to accept your word over that of a concerned good Samaritan?" He sauntered over to her and stroked her cheek with the back of his hand. "If he should turn you out, dear girl, I'll gladly take you in harness. You've grown into a damned fine piece. Men will bury me in gold for a chance to lift your skirts."

Fury burning in Lucia's eyes, she raised her hand to strike him. He grabbed her wrist, twisting her arm behind her. The sleeve of her gown ripped loudly as her body followed in a natural movement so that her back rested against his chest. His other arm banded her waist with the strength of steel. She struggled, gasped at the resulting pain, and was still. "You're hurting me, Gaston!" she whimpered.

"Just a reminder, dear girl, of the good times we shared in our little love-nest in Copenhagen." Rochedale's voice, close to her ear, had lost its casual drawl to become vital and vicious. "I still possess my passion for pain, Lucia, and I'd love to find out how much it takes to break that spirit of yours." He jerked upward on her arm until her shoulder was in agony.

With a sob, she cried, "How much do you want?"

"How kind of you to offer, dear girl." He twisted her arm again, laughing when she screamed. "How much do you suppose you can get from your besotted old fool of a husband without making him suspicious?"

"He-he doesn't give me any money, Gaston! It's the truth! I swear it!" Lucia flailed at him with her free hand. "Please, Gaston! Please let me go!"

"I, too, must demand that you unhand the lady, Tarney." Robin's crisp, cold voice interrupted their struggles. He stood before them, leaning on his cane.

"This is none of your affair, Gus," Sir Winston sneered. "The 'lady' and I have business."

"Any business you have with her, you have with me!" Robin limped toward the pair.

"Be gone with you, Gus. This little gold mine belongs to me. You have no call to interfere. Who the devil do you think you are?" Rochedale's face had reddened with anger.

"Why, Tarney! I am Her Grace's besotted old fool of a husband," Robin grinned, "and I don't pay blackmail."

Sir Winston released Lucia to stare, dumbfounded, at Robin. "You! Well, if this ain't an unholy alliance! Golden Gus and Lucia Lightfingers!" Rochedale threw his head back and laughed.

Robin offered his arm to Lucia. "May I escort you inside, ma chérie? There is a malodorous stench in the air." Rubbing her aching shoulder, Lucia smiled gratefully and placed a cold, trembling hand on his arm. They strolled back to the ballroom, Robin's cane rapping rhythmically on the flagstones.

After they entered the ballroom, Lucia excused herself to find the ladies' retiring room and a maid to repair her gown. While the girl sewed, Lucia endeavored to throw off the terror her unexpected meeting with Gaston La Belette had spawned. His presence in London, in England, even, sickened her. She had no place to run; no place to hide. She would have to trust Robin to protect her from Gaston and that was rather like trusting the wolf to save the chickens from the fox.

When she returned to the ballroom, she went into supper on Robin's arm, then stood up for a few more dances beneath his wintry scrutiny, but all her pleasure in Ryl's party had fled. She could feel Gaston's eyes following her. She searched the crowd as she danced, afraid that he was stalking her. What if he grabbed her? Tortured her? Enslaved her? She would kill herself rather than repeat the nightmare of Copenhagen. She would never ever be Gaston's victim again!

Time dragged. As the guests of honor, their graces felt bound to remain at Blayne House until the last revelers had departed. They finally took leave of the Blaynes in the early hours of the morning.

On the ride home, Lady Easterbury dozed off in one corner of the carriage. His injured leg propped on her seat, Robin sat across from Lucia, glaring at her. Shrugging, she stared out her window without surprise, wishing she knew what grievous offense she had committed this time.

Fury had been Robin's natural state all evening. Although her behavior could not have been more circumspect, he had glowered at her whenever she left his side. Was he so afraid she would betray him?

When they entered Lynkellyn House, Laddock took their wraps and Lady Easterbury announced that she was for her bed. Dismissing the butler for what was left of the night, Lucia lit Robin's path upstairs to their bedchambers with a burning candle. When they reached his door, he said abruptly, "Knock on the communicating door, s'il vous plaît, when you have dismissed your maid. We have a great deal to discuss."

"Tonight? But I'm exhausted, Robin! Can't it wait until morning?"

"Tonight!" he insisted, anger flashing in his eyes.

Twenty minutes later, Robin's gaze met Lucia's in her mirror as she brushed out her ebony tresses. He took the brush from her and ran it through her curls, his hands caressing their softness. At last he laid down the brush, saying, "I trust you enjoyed Ryl's party?"

"Oh, yes! Very much! And it was not nearly as awful as you feared it would be, was it?" She searched his face. "Did you enjoy yourself? You always seemed to be surrounded by people."

Robin shrugged. How could he explain the rage, uncertainty, and trepidation that had gripped him all evening? He didn't understand it himself.

His mouth tightened as he thought of the danger Lucia had been in with that cur, Tarney. He had warned her about that bastard. Why hadn't she listened?

"What in the devil's name possessed you to go strolling about with Tarney, Lucia? Tarney, of all people!"

Lucia swiveled around in her chair to fix him with an owlish stare. "Who?"

"Tarney! I mean Rochedale! Bah! I lose track of all the fellow's names!"

Confused for a minute, Lucia suddenly said, "Oh, you are speaking of Gaston! I am not stupid enough to 'stroll' with Gaston. He found me alone in the garden."

Robin's brows drew together. "Gaston?"

"Gaston La Belette. He was a friend of my father's in Copenhagen, although Papa never saw his darker side. The man is evil incarnate!" She shuddered, her troubled eyes searching Robin's.

He looked exhausted and the color had drained from his face. She jumped to her feet. "You are in pain,

Robin! You've been standing too long! Let me help you to a seat."

He protested weakly, then allowed her to support him to a divan in front of a cold fireplace. "So Rochedale, Tarney, LaBelette -- for the sake of simplification, let us call the blackguard Rochedale. So Rochedale knew you in Copenhagen?"

Lucia paced to a window to gaze at the bright full moon. "After my parents died, he offered to let me stay in his rooms until I found other lodgings. Gaston -- Rochedale had hardly seemed to notice me when he visited my father. The few times he had spoken to me, he had treated me like a child with never a hint of -- of warmth so I thought I would be safe with him."

She closed the curtains and sat next to Robin on the divan. "He-he tried to sell me -- sell my virtue," she confessed in an agonized whisper. Ashamed to look at Robin, she stared into the darkened hearth instead. "When I arrived at his home, he offered me a glass of claret. It was to keep my spirits up, he said. Naive, trusting young fool that I was, I drank. The wine was drugged and I fell almost instantly into a kind of twilight, aware of my surroundings, aware of what was happening to me, but too weak to do anything about it and too groggy to care. He locked me in a room for days, maybe weeks. For me, time stood still and I am uncertain how many days actually passed. He -- he hurt me, tortured me, taking perverse pleasure in my pain while he searched for a buyer for my virginity." Lucia blushed deeply. "He likes to -- cut -- people and -- and he has a particular fondness for whips." Trembling, she lowered her face into her hands and sobbed.

"You're safe now, ma chérie!" Robin whispered, folding her into his arms. "He shall never hurt you again!" Rocking her gently, he tilted her face up to wipe away the tears that trailed down her cheeks. "Obviously you bested the bastard, a commendable feat, as I have very good reason to know. May I ask how you did it, ma chérie?"

A slight smile broke through her tears. "One day, he was very excited when he came into the room where he kept me. I was lying on a day-bed in a drugged fog, just beginning to rise out of my stupor.

"He told me he had found a buyer; a man who wanted both my virtue and my person and was willing to pay generously for them. Slavery! The small part of me that could still feel was terrified.

"When he left to 'make arrangements', as he said, he was so eager for his blood money that he forgot to force the drug down me. He was gone all day and, by evening, my senses had returned. I felt weak, but able to move around. When I heard him fumbling at the door, humming that filthy song he is so fond of, I grabbed a fireplace poker and positioned myself by the door. I hit him on the head when he came in and he collapsed, unconscious.

"I searched his pockets and found a heavy bag of kroner; almost a thousand, I discovered later. The price of my honor, no doubt! Taking the money, I sailed on the first ship that would sell me passage out of Denmark. I never saw Gaston again, until this evening."

Silence. Lucia nestled in Robin's embrace, enjoying the warmth, savoring the security, however illusory, and listening to his heart beat comfortingly against her ear.

"And how do you come to know Rochedale?" she inquired at last.

"When I met him, I was Augustus O'Rourke, a native of Ireland. In a hurry to leave the American colonies, I signed aboard a privateer, no questions asked. They needed a navigator and I had the necessary skills. Aboard ship, my hair quickly bleached blond in the Caribbean sun and my fellow pirates dubbed me 'Golden Gus'.

"Tarney... Rochedale was first mate aboard that ship and we clashed over one thing or another from the moment we met. When we put in at Kingston, I think Rochedale saw a chance to be rid of me and turn a profit at the same time. Unbeknownst to me, he wagered five guineas with an officer from another vessel that they'd see a blond Irishman hanged during the week they were in port. He laid information against me with the authorities and I was arrested. After a swift mockery of a trial, I was sentenced to hang.

"The noose was around my neck; the hangman was ready to pull the fatal lever; and Rochedale was in the mob, counting his winnings and hooting the loudest. Suddenly cannon fire roared in the harbor. While the crowd raced to the shore, I managed to free my wrists and pull the noose from around my neck, then leaped from the gallows and ran. Within an hour, the Spanish swarmed over the town. Hiding until nightfall, I escaped to another island in a stolen fishing boat." He stroked Lucia's arms, nuzzling the soft curve of her throat. "You must promise me you'll stay out of Rochedale's way, ma chérie."

Lucia sat up, meeting Robin's warning with a grave nod. "Just hearing his name sickens me, Robin. Please let us speak of something more pleasant!"

"I've a better idea, ma chérie! Let's not talk at all," he murmured, gathering her in his arms for a thorough kiss.

Chapter 19:

In Which Her Grace Keeps an Assignment and His Grace Suspects a Rival

Early morning birdsong serenaded Hyde Park as Lucia and her groom trotted along a sun-dappled bridle path. The promenades were dotted with small clumps of laughing children, a nurse or governess shepherding them through the woods.

Lucia scanned the schoolroom parties, searching for Honor's golden tresses and listening for Derrick's whoops as he played at being a Red Indian, his favorite pretense. It was not long until she heard the boy's wild, unnerving war cry. Following the sound, she urged her horse forward, her groom in tow, and soon discovered her former charges, picking dandelions by a large tree.

Honor was the first to see her, the child's eyes widening in amazement. Pale and pinched, the child's face was much thinner than Lucia remembered. Dark circles ringed her eyes and a melancholy, haunted look suggested an abiding and deeply harrowing grief.

'Lady Saddewythe was right,' Lucia thought, dismounting. Honor did need reassurance that her governess was well.

As Lucia's foot touched the ground, Honor flew toward her, shouting, "Cothy! Cothy! Cothy!" so loudly that people turned to stare. Lucia opened her arms and the little girl flung herself into them, sobbing, "Cothy! Oh, Cothy, I thought you w-were d- dead!"

"I am not that easily got rid of, my dear!" Lucia laughed as she hugged Honor close.

The other children gathered around her, all chattering at once. "...Hate this London, Cothy! There are no frogs! Can't go fishing..." "...Mama says I may attend Lady Alworth's musicale..." "...Can I ride your horse, Cothy, please? I won't fall off, I promise..." "...Why are leaves green, Cothy? Miss Twyll doesn't know! She doesn't know half the things you do..." "Did that Monster Man hurt you, Cothy? How did you get away? Did you kill him with a pistol? Oh, Cothy, I thought you were dead!" Honor's wail of remembered agony soared above her siblings' babble.

Over their heads, Lucia smiled at Miss Twyll, and held out her hand. The governess, a tired-looking lady some twenty years older than the duchess, sank into a deep curtsy. "Your Grace."

"We need not be so formal, Miss Twyll. I'm sure we must have a great deal in common. Recollect that we've both had to try to control Master Derrick's penchant for wild escapades and Miss Honor's bent for wandering away, after all. It is a wonder these children ever learn anything with their high spirits!" Lucia held out her hand again. This time Miss Twyll took it with a shy smile.

Lucia spent the next half-hour visiting with the children and talking to Miss Twyll. Then Honor insisted that they all play 'Hide and Seek' as they were used to do at Saddewythe Manor. The happy little group whiled away another half-hour. At last, Lucia collapsed in a laughing heap on the ground. Honor climbed onto her lap and the other children clustered around, bursting once more into a confused babble of conversation.

Lucia's groom, Andrew, had been standing a short distance away with the horses. He approached the duchess, bowing awkwardly. "Beg pardon, Your Grace, but you did say as 'ow you wanted to leave at nine o'clock. It is a little past that."

Hugging each of the Saddewythe children, Lucia said, "I have had a delightful time, my dears, but I must be going!"

"Oh, but, Cothy, aren't you coming back home with us? We want you for our governess again!" Honor pleaded.

Lucia knelt so that she and the child were face to face. "My dear, I cannot. I am married now and I must stay with my husband."

"Is your husband that Monster Man who made you ride his horse on your tummy?" Honor's finger stole into her mouth, her eyes round.

Lucia carefully considered her answer. "Yes, he is, but he is not a monster. I am perfectly safe with him."

"He stole you and now he's going to kill you! I know it!" the child challenged, crying almost hysterically. "Why did he have to take you away? He's bad! I hate him! He's a-a Monster Man!"

She turned as if to flee. Lucia grabbed her shoulders and spun her around. "Miss Honor! Listen to me, my dear. No one is going to kill me. You must believe that! My husband is not going to hurt me."

"Then why did he make you cry and tie you to his horse and- and steal you?" the little girl sobbed. "He is a Monster Man!"

"Sometimes grown-ups do things...bad things...because they believe they have a good reason..." Lucia paused. Lust, greed, and revenge were not good reasons for anything.

"What was the Monster Man's reason, Cothy? Did he want you for his governess?" Honor was trying earnestly to understand.

"He wanted me for his wife, Honor. He...he had fallen in love with me, you see, and asked me to marry him. I refused him because I wanted to stay with you, but...he loved me so much that he insisted we should be wed and he took me to Reverend Stanfield who married us."

Lucia watched as the child considered her words. How she hated lying to Honor! "Someone who loves you wouldn't hurt you, would he?" the child asked anxiously at last.

"No, Miss Honor. He would not." Her confident eyes met the girl's troubled ones steadily.

"Do you love that Monster Man?" The little girl's tone was incredulous. "Like Cinderella loved the prince?"

Lucia glanced away, searching for a way to avoid another lie. Finally she turned back to Honor. "I am very happy with my new husband, my dear, and I must go home to him now or he will worry about me and be sad."

"Oh, but you will come back tomorrow, won't you? We walk in the park every morning," Honor begged, apparently reconciled to her former governess's new status. Her brothers and sister added their pleas to hers.

"Well, I..." she laughed and her eyes met Miss Twyll's. The older lady gave a slight nod. "Yes! I would be delighted to meet you again tomorrow. We shall play another game!"

"And you can tell me more about that Monster Man! I want to know why you love him more than us!"

"Miss Honor!" Shocked, Miss Twyll reproached her pupil.

"Well, I do!"

Lucia paled at the thought of answering such a question. Rising, she said, "I must take my leave, children. I shall see you tomorrow."

After another round of hugs and vociferous farewells, Lucia mounted her white stallion and trotted out of the park with her groom in attendance. Miss Twyll and her chattering charges strolled away in the opposite direction.

As the crowd dispersed, two horsemen separated from the trees. "It's just as I told you, dear boy!" Sir Winston Rochedale said. "And she's coming back tomorrow! She'll be alone save for an old hag and a pack of helpless brats. You can do whatever you like with her. My information must be worth fifty, at least."

"You'll have your money soon enough!" Giles said, irritated. He rode beside Sir Winston mounted on a flashy black stallion with a white mane and tail. "We'll still have the groom to deal with."

"Small matter, dear boy. While you set upon Her Grace, I shall take care of the servant and leave the pair of you to...er...whatever follows." Rochedale grinned evilly. "What is to follow? Any special plans for the duke's little strumpet?"

Mountheathe shrugged. "I don't know. A swift dagger to the belly, I suppose. That should be enough to kill the doxy or at least to trigger the loss of the Rogue's whelp." Giles gave a bark of laughter. "Robin's pretensions and his heir shall die aborning. That should take the wind out of his sails...or perhaps it will fill them as he scurries back into hiding on the Continent." A gloating gleam still in his eyes, Giles turned his horse around. "Come on, Roche! We need to find something suitably disgusting to wear if we are to disguise ourselves as footpads."

Oblivious to the morning sunshine tumbling into his breakfast room through the garden window, Robin gloomily sipped his coffee and discovered that it had grown cold. 'As cold as my bed this morning,' he thought bitterly. He had awakened an hour before to find Lucia gone. Careful, casual questioning of his staff revealed that she had risen early, donned her riding habit, and gone to the park with a groom, one Andrew, in tow.

Robin had pretended unconcern, but inside, the old familiar panic drummed through him. Had he lost her? Had she bolted? Was she with a lover? With Norworth, perhaps?

Norworth! His fingers tightened around the handle of his delicate china cup until it snapped. In his mind's eye, he saw the Blaynes' ball again; saw Lucia surrounded by eager young bucks; Lucia dancing with one man after another; Lucia exchanging sultry glances with Norworth, laughing at his sallies and hanging on his arm as if she belonged there, as if she had always been there. Robin slammed the broken porcelain against the table. Norworth was a damned rakehell! Any fool could see that! If he dared to seduce Lucia --

Robin's fists clenched in impotent fury. Rising, cane in hand, he limped over to the sideboard. Lifting the lid of a full crystal decanter, he sniffed its contents. "Cider!" he muttered with a satisfied smile. God help Norworth if he did elope with Lucia. The bastard would never taste another drop of strong spirits as long as he lived!

Robin rang for the butler. "Brandy, Laddock!" he ordered when the servant appeared.

"Very good, Your Grace." Laddock bowed and turned to go.

"No! Wait! Let it be more coffee. You know how Her Grace feels about brandy for breakfast!"

Laddock bowed once more and left. Robin hobbled back to the table, sank into a chair, and stared out the window. 'Mon Dieu! I am sitting here like a damned fool trying to please Lucia while she's off à Dieu sait quoi with another man!' he thought, disgusted with himself. Bitter anger knotted his stomach, but he savagely denied any jealousy. He simply could not afford to let Lucia get too friendly with anyone. His future and his fortune were at stake!

Laddock entered with a tray bearing a silver coffeepot and a china cup that matched the shards on the table. Robin looked up. "I've changed my mind, Laddock. I will have the brandy after all."

As Laddock left, the ormolu clock on the mantle chimed once to celebrate a quarter past nine. Robin decided that if Lucia did not return within the next quarter hour, he would comb London until he found her, then cart her home tossed over his shoulder.

When Laddock brought the brandy, Robin poured himself a glass and drank with defiant satisfaction, then glanced at the clock again. Five minutes had passed.

'Where is she?' he fumed as he poured the rest of his brandy back into the decanter. 'Where the devil is she?'

Lucia breezed into Lynkellyn House, determined to be cheerful despite the melancholy that had settled upon her after her last conversation with Honor. As Laddock took her hat and riding crop, she asked the time and discovered that Norworth was due in twenty minutes. "When Lord Norworth arrives, show him to the Blue Salon, Laddock." she said, rushing up the stairs to her chambers.

Alerted by the noise, Robin stuck his head out of the library, having closeted himself there after breakfast. "Was that Her Grace coming in, Laddock?"

"Yes, Your Grace. She went upstairs to await Viscount Norworth."

"Norworth!" Robin's loathing slashed through the name like a broadsword. "Thank you, Laddock. That will be all," he said, limping purposefully across the foyer to the staircase.

Lucia had changed into a lavender frock trimmed in a darker purple and Anne was tidying her hair when Robin flung open the door. Mistress and maid jumped at the noise, gazing in amazement at Lynkellyn. Noting his set jaw and smoldering eyes, Lucia hastily dismissed Anne and Robin firmly closed the door behind her. "I understand that Viscount Norworth is expected to call. I don't see the necessity for his visit since you have already spent the entire morning in his company," he said, hobbling toward a chair.

Lucia crossed the room to collect her violet-plumed bonnet from the bed. She donned it with maddening composure, looking in her dressing table mirror to tie the ribbons. "I don't know where you are getting your information these days, Your Grace, but I spent the morning with the Saddewythe children and their governess in the park."

"The Saddewythe children!" Robin frowned, easing into the chair.

"Yes! It seems that in your enthusiastic pursuit of the married state, you terrified Miss Honor into a decline. At the ball last night, Lady Saddewythe asked me to meet the children this morning to reassure them that you had not murdered me and left my body lying in some thicket."

Ignoring the rest of Lucia's reply, Robin pounced upon the crux of his displeasure with her. "Mais oui! The ball! Quite the belle, weren't you! Men circling you like birds of prey. Perhaps you regarded them as so many lap dogs. You certainly had Norworth's tail wagging all evening!"

"I spoke civilly to him at dinner and I danced with him twice! The most exacting moralist could not condemn my conduct."

"And what of your 'stroll'?" Robin grasped his cane and rose angrily. "Were your morals as angelic in the dark?"

"Yes, they were! I wanted to admire the flowers near Lady Blayne's veranda. Dear Lord Peter was kind enough to escort me into the garden."

"Dear Lord Peter', is it?" Robin's eyes narrowed. "And among those flowers, ma douce, was it your violet eyes or your rose-bud mouth that 'dear Lord Peter' found the most enticing? Perhaps he's looking to plant some seed of his own!"

Fury blazed in Lucia's eyes. She raised her hand to slap him, but, dropping his cane and shifting his weight to his good leg, he caught her wrist. "You'll not strike me, my sweet," he growled, capturing her other hand as she brought it to the aid of its fellow.

"Let me...go..., damn you!" She tried to wrench away from him with all her strength.

"The language of the gutter does not suit you, Your Grace, now that I've made you a lady!" Amberley mocked as he held her fast. In a quicksilver move, he released her wrists and his arms encircled her waist, pulling her so forcefully against him that they both staggered a little.

"Robin," she gasped, struggling in his arms, "you long ago proved that you are stronger than I am! Let me go! The viscount is here!"

Sounds of Norworth's arrival floated up to them, but still he did not release her. "I'll not have you encouraging every Town buck you meet to court you, Lucia! If you are planning to beguile some poor fool into helping you escape me, c'est une cause perdu. I shall come after you and when I catch you, it will not be pleasant for you or your paramour. If it is une affaire de coeur you seek, you will have to become a great deal more discreet than you have been, héin? I'll not have your infidelities paraded through the streets of London while the beau monde jeers!" He glared down at her, his eyes an angry, wintery grey.

"Please, Robin, I can hardly breathe! I'm not seeking a lover. I'm just going to visit some London landmarks...with Lord Norworth!"

"Devil take Lord Norworth!" Robin bent his head with swift grace and his mouth covered hers, moving hungrily over the pink coral of her lips. She offered no resistance to his kiss, melting against him as her mouth parted to welcome the caresses of his tongue. Her arms crept up to encircle his neck and her fingers ran through his hair. With a groan, he tightened his embrace without a murmur of complaint from Lucia.

Passion washed over them like sunshine over shadow. They lost themselves in the ecstasy of desire, all

their fear and distrust momentarily crumbling in an elusive, swirling, phantom happiness. They clung together desperately, each treasuring this fragile joy, afraid lest the world outside their private Eden should intrude and shatter their enchantment.

At last, their lips parted. Breathless and trembling with the force of his ardor, Robin smiled down at Lucia's dreamy countenance, cradling her in his arms, unwilling to release her and break the spell.

"The viscount is waiting," Lucia murmured, gazing raptly up at him.

"The viscount may go to the devil!" Robin said in an equally dazed voice as his eyes devoured her sweet face.

"I must go," she said distractedly. Robin reluctantly loosened his embrace, reaching for a nearby table to support himself as his leg throbbed dully. Lucia's arms, however, remained around his neck and she made no move to depart.

He lifted a brow, laughter in his eyes. "The viscount, ma chérie!"

"The viscount." She smiled blissfully.

"He's waiting for you, ma chérie," Robin whispered, caressing the beguiling pink bow of her mouth with his finger, "but you don't have to go."

A sharp rap on the door slammed Lucia back into reality and she pulled away from Robin as if his touch burned her. He stumbled a little upon the unexpected loss of his lady's support, but, clutching the table, he regained his balance and bent down to retrieve his cane, suddenly aware of his aching leg. All at once he was weary of standing and, leaning heavily on his crutch, he limped to the chair.

"Your Grace!" Anne's muffled voice floated through the door. "Viscount Norworth awaits you in the Blue Salon."

Turning her back to Robin, Lucia visibly composed herself. "Yes! Very well! I'll be down soon." Anne's footsteps retreated.

Lucia whirled to glare at Robin, accusation in her eyes. "You, sir, are a wizard. You have woven such a spell around me that I..." She shivered, her hand fluttering to her cheek. Robin started to rise, reaching out to her. "No!" she cried. "No, don't touch me! I can't...don't touch me!" She shied across the room like a frightened colt.

With the entire expanse of the room between them for safety, Lucia drew a deep breath and lifted her chin. "I have conceived your child for you, Your Grace. You no longer have any reason to touch me and since I find your advances distasteful, I demand that you leave me alone."

"Distasteful?!" Robin sank back in his chair, shocked. Pain shadowed his eyes. "Lucia, I cannot believe that you found what just passed between us..."

"Distasteful, sir!" she insisted in icily granite tones. "You are forever forcing your attentions upon me -- at the Saddewythes'; at Brackenwell Hall; at the Blaynes' ball. Do you realize how embarrassing -- how -- how humiliating that public kiss was, Robin?"

Amberley's eyes burned with sudden fury. He pressed his cane against the floor and rose. "You are my wife, Lucia. I shall kiss you whenever and wherever I please. It is a right Norworth does not possess. Kindly remind him of that fact while you are together today."

"Why should you care what occurs between the viscount and me? You've got what you want! Just -- just enjoy your damned money and leave me alone now!"

"What of our marriage vows? You cannot deny me my conjugal rights!"

"To the devil with your rights, Your Grace!" Sparks of blue fire danced in her eyes as she pushed past him. She opened her bedroom door and forced herself to walk calmly down the stairs. A second later, Robin appeared at the head of the staircase, calling her name, but she daredn't turn around, daredn't let herself react to the angry desperation in his voice.

He had stolen away the last shreds of her reserve and self- control with a simple kiss. For those few minutes, she had been willing, even eager, to throw herself totally into his power, to do anything he asked, surrendering all for a brief moment of passion, a fleeting illusion of happiness. She was terrified to discover that he could have such an effect upon her, even temporarily. She hurried down the stairs in what she knew to be cowardly retreat. Sometimes it was wisest to run.

As Lucia reached the foyer, she heard Robin's step on the stair. Walking briskly toward the Blue Salon, she paused only to straighten her bonnet and plaster a confident smile upon her face before entering the room. Plying his cane, Robin was still thump- clumping down the stairs as she crossed the threshold.

Robin had only reached midpoint on the staircase when Lucia and Norworth left the drawing room. His granite eyes glittering with hostility, he halted to watch Norworth swagger out of Lynkellyn House with Lucia on his arm. As they opened the door, bright sunshine flooded the foyer, then vanished when it closed, the door's slam echoing like a gunshot through the dark, vaulted room.

For a moment, Robin stood stone-still in the shadows, his fists clenched, then he started down the stairs once more, his tapping cane ringing hollowly as he crossed the silent hall. He entered the Blue Salon, reaching the window which looked out onto the square before Lucia and the viscount had gotten quite away.

He stood back from the open window, letting the room's shadows hide him as he watched Norworth help Lucia into a carriage. The couple looked at each other and laughed as the coach drove away.

His lips compressed into a grim line, Robin turned away from the window. Encountering his reflection in a large, gilt-framed mirror on the opposite wall, he limped a little closer to the glass. A tall, powerfully built man gazed back at him, the face all angles and planes save for a full and sensuous mouth. Grey eyes fringed with dark lashes and capped with dark brows contrasted sharply with the bright mop of undeniably copper hair that topped it all. His brows furrowed and he stared harder at his reflection, wondering if Lucia found him pleasing to look upon.

Or did she find Lord Norworth more to her taste? The viscount, with his raven hair, dark eyes, and devil-may-care charm, could easily pass for a fairy tale hero. What female with an ounce of romance in her soul could fail to fall in love with Prince Charming, especially when her alternative was a battered and battle-scarred old tom cat who had roamed the world's alleys and gutters too long?

With a grimace of self-contempt, Robin hobbled to an overstuffed chair and lowered himself into it. He had forsaken all consideration of the world's opinion long ago so why should he care what Lucia thought of him?

But he did care! He needed her; her smiles and fury, her compassion and wit, her beauty, her touch, her spirit. The opiate that was Lucia gripped him, body and soul, and he could not banish his overwhelming hunger. How had she gained so much power over him? Why had he surrendered it? How had he come to depend upon her so much?

Lucia had accused him of wizardry, but she must be the one casting spells to make him feel so angry and confused. He ran his hands shakily through his hair, tangling the carefully curled tresses and leaving the black bow at the nape of his neck crooked at an odd angle.

Since the child Lucia was carrying was undoubtedly an Amberley, Robin's inheritance was secure and that, as she had so obligingly reminded him, meant that he need never touch her again. *très bien!* The world was full of women eager to welcome his attentions. He had been unable to kill his hunger for Lucia in a surfeit of her charms, but perhaps he could drown it in an orgy of pleasure with London's demimonde. He had weaned himself from opium. He could overcome his addiction to Lucia as well. He would show her that he was not a man to sit quietly at home while his wife cuckolded him with a bevy of lovers.

But he would miss her kisses and her kindness! His mind flooded with memories of her tender caress, her playful teasing, her laughter... And now she was sharing all that with her 'dear Lord Peter'!

They had looked so comfortable and easy together as they drove away this morning. How eagerly Norworth's hands had caressed her waist as he helped her into the coach! How intimately his knee had pressed against hers as they sat close together on the box! How lovingly his fingers had brushed an

errant curl from her face!

Uninvited, an ugly vision slithered into Robin's mind. Lucia in Norworth's arms, his hands touching, exploring, caressing her; their sweating bodies undulating in unison; her gentle kisses and innocent, beguiling eyes pleading with her 'dear Lord Peter' to take her away from her cruel husband.

Robin's fists clenched, his blood running hot and cold with fury. His fingers itched for a sword or a pistol; for a sporting chance at Peter Tallant! 'Dear Lord Peter' had little more in mind for Lucia than a rapid conquest and a leisurely seduction. When her belly started to swell with the Lynkellyn heir, he would abandon her, penniless, heartbroken, and alone.

As much as she was hurting him, Robin did not want Lucia left in such straits. If it became necessary, he would whisk her off to Lynkellyn Castle to keep her safe from Mountheathe's brigands and Norworth's blandishments. Robert Amberley knew how to guard his own!

Laddock entered the Blue Salon. "The Earl of Malkent awaits your pleasure, Your Grace."

Robin stood and limped to the window. After staring hard at the cobblestones for a moment, he said, "I'll see the earl. Send word to Giovanni and Dr. Lindley that I want an audience with them tomorrow at their earliest convenience."

"Very good, Your Grace."

Tracy strolled into the Blue Salon. "Rogue! Well met! I've brought you your winnings from last night! Damn me, if I ever saw such a streak of luck as you had!"

Robin smiled slightly, recalling all the grim, hungry years he'd spent in Europe's gaming hells perfecting his 'streak of luck'. He hobbled to the overstuffed chair and lowered himself into it. "Won't you sit down, Tracy?"

Sinking into an identical chair, Malkent dropped a fat purse in Robin's lap. "Fifty-five guineas, wasn't it?"

Robin was staring out the window, willing Norworth's coach to roll up to the door, although it had not been gone above half an hour. When Tracy called his name, he looked at the earl distractedly.

"Fifty-five guineas?" Malkent repeated with a lifted brow. Robin nodded, his eyes darting back to the window. "You seem troubled today, Rogue. Is something wrong?"

"What do you know of Norworth, Tracy?" Anger glinted in Robin's eyes. "He has a rakehelly reputation, héin?"

"Why, yes! He's rather notorious!"

"Naturellement! How could he be anything else?" Robin ran his hand through his disheveled hair. "With his handsome face and polished charm, he doesn't even have to work at seduction. Women fall into his lap like over-ripe peaches. Mon Dieu!" Robin exploded in a sudden angry tirade, speaking French so rapidly and colloquially that Tracy could only understand one word in ten.

"Calm down, Rogue! What is all this about Norworth?"

"He's gone off with my wife!" Robin flung at him between French curses.

Tracy's eyes grew wide. "Eloped?"

"They've gone to see the bloody Tower of London," Robin said. "But it will not be long before she convinces him to bolt. They are already like that!" He crossed his fingers and scowled. "With his charm and her beauty, they make the perfect couple! Nom de nom! Even their hair matches! Two beautiful raven-haired conspirators whose sole purpose is to -- " Robin halted in the midst of his diatribe to glower at the laughing earl. "I fail to see the humor in any of this, mon ami!"

"Norworth's good, Rogue," Malkent said between gasps and chortles, "but not even he can seduce a woman within the space of one ball and a carriage ride! Besides, Her Grace is devilish loyal to you. Faithful to a fault! It's a wonder to see, considering..."

"She'd never been given the chance to be unfaithful until last night! I knew that damned ball was a mistake!" Robin's eyes strayed back to the window.

"Do you really think she is that eager to cuckold you, Robin?"

"Cuckold me? No! Although I'm certain she would not hesitate if the necessity...or the fancy...were to strike her. Her greatest wish is to escape me."

"But hasn't Lady Easterbury offered her a haven if she wanted to leave you? And I know Lady Blayne and Val have hinted that they would help her. And after the duel, she could have slipped away while you were unconscious. She didn't accept anyone's aid and she didn't run. She has chosen to stay with you, Rogue. Most commendable...and encouraging, I should think!"

"Lucia is aware that as long as I know where she is and can drag her back to my side, she will not be free of me. That is why she wants to escape...really escape...so that I shall have no idea where she has gone," Robin answered with the forbearance of a teacher explaining a lesson to an especially slow child. "She didn't have enough money to bolt while I was in the sickroom or, je vous assure, she would be far away by now."

Tracy was confused. He had always seen the Rogue's pretty bride as patient and loyal, working diligently toward all her husband's goals, despite the ill treatment she had received at his hands and the scandal that surrounded them both. Robin apparently saw a caged, restless creature, desperate to escape her prison. Tracy scowled at the image, raising one disbelieving brow.

Robin shoved his hands through his hair again. "Lucia's terrified of me, Tracy. She only stays with me because she fears life as an adventuress even more. At least, that's what I once believed. I think she may be more reconciled to a gypsy existence now that her broadened circle of acquaintance has given her the option of fleeing with a wealthy protector. I'm certain she wants to escape and she'll try to cozen Norworth into helping her!"

"Even if they eloped, they couldn't marry, Rogue!"

"She doesn't want to marry him any more than he wants to marry her. She only wants to run from me. If she decides to trade her virtue for freedom -- well, I'll wager the presence of my ring won't stop the bedding!" Robin's fingers tightened on his cane and he banged it angrily against the carpeted floor, turning away from Malkent.

Tracy was silent for a moment, unable to believe that this bitter, suspicious, venomous man had only a decade ago been his supremely romantic, ever laughing Rogue. He cursed the vicious world that had swallowed an adventurous, hay-go-mad young buck and spit out this scowling, sardonic scoundrel. "You seem to have found a new enemy and a new cause, Robin," he said at last. "I've not heard a single word about Mountheathe or your quarrel with him. Your marriage would appear to take precedence."

"Mountheathe...Norworth...Lucia...my legacy... They are all interlocked and she is the key. If the viscount flies with her, then Giles wins! I'll have Tallant's head on a platter next to Mountheathe's if he tries to steal my bride."

"Most women cannot be 'stolen' unless they wish to be. Imprison her and, of course, she will want to escape. No one with any spirit gladly suffers gaol. Surround her with affection and happiness at home and she'll stay of her own accord."

Robin lifted himself out of his chair and hobbled over to the window, surreptitiously searching for Norworth's coach. "I would do that, Tracy," he said over his shoulder, "if I my marriage was based on love like yours, but my union with Lucia is founded on fear, coercion, and distrust. Damnably shaky ground it is, mon ami!" His hand tightened on his cane. "Mon Dieu! I should have stayed in Paris where I never had to feel anything." His bitterness hung in the air like something solid and ugly.

"When you kissed Her Grace at Ryl's ball last night, it hardly seemed...war-like."

"That!" Robin laughed. "That was in the nature of marking territory, mon ami, so that all those eager tonnish bucks, especially Norworth, will know that Lucia is mine and I'm prepared to fight for her. It

was an act prompted by my profound suspicion of Lucia's loyalties. Yet another facet of living happily ever after." His mouth twisted into a sneer.

"If you are both so miserable, why don't you live apart? Separate maintenances are practically de rigueur these days. Val and I are beginning to feel gauche, staying together so contentedly for so long."

"She'd find it even easier to disappear if we lived apart." Robin said. "I'd lose all control over her. I've worked too hard for vindication to lose my chance because that wretched girl decides to be difficult, but as long as she's under my palm, she will play my game. I want Giles Bridland's head, Malkent, and I'll not rest until I have it...and Norworth's as well if he gets in my way!"

Chapter 20:

In Which Lord Mountheathe Endeavors Once Again to End the Game

Tracy stared at his furious friend. "I say, Robin! A little diversion will make you forget all this nonsense about Norworth and your wife and you'll see things in a calmer, clearer light. Come out with me!" Robin seemed not to have heard him at first, but then nodded.

They visited a horse fair at Smithfield and ate lunch at a nearby tavern. Malkent took Robin to his club, insisting upon sponsoring him for membership. Robin's lip curled at the idea that any self-respecting gentlemen's club would accept him into its ranks, but Tracy was ever an optimist.

They supped at the club and went on to Randall's, a gaming hell which, Tracy assured Robin, was all the crack amongst the sporting *ton*.

Standing on the threshold, Robin leaned on his cane and closed his eyes against the sight of desperate players hunched over dimly lit tables, but still the frantic hum of gaming dinned into his brain. He had seen a thousand hells like this one; dark, smoky temples dedicated to desperation and despair. His mind flooded with memories of dreary nights sitting at a green baize table, pretending to vast estates and grand incomes while shifting candlelight hid the tired spots in his fine velvet coat; of hungry nights staring at bad cards, half starved, yet waving away food lest his ravenous appetite betray his empty pockets; of bitter nights when a roll of the dice decided whether his bed was a feather mattress or a filthy alley.

"Let's get out of here, Tracy," he said, turning away. "A hand of piquet at my house, perhaps?"

Malkent stared at him. "Is something amiss, Rogue? If Randall's is not to your liking, I know of another."

"I abhor gaming hells, Tracy!" Robin muttered, his eyes darting wistfully toward the door. "I thought that perhaps I would not feel so...uncomfortable...after almost two years, but I find that I detest these

places as much as ever."

Tracy's jaw dropped. "You used to game 'til dawn, Rogue! Some nights I practically had to drag you away from the tables! You were always looking for a new house!"

"In those days, losing at cards didn't mean sleeping in a gutter, Tracy! Let's go, s'il vous plaît." A pleading panic colored his tone.

Tracy sighed. "Very well! I suppose we could-"

Staring over Tracy's head, Robin stilled and Malkent followed his gaze. Lord Norworth swaggered toward them, Lady Chalfont on his arm. He bowed while the lady favored the gentlemen with a small curtsy and a vivacious smile. Tracy and Robin bowed stiffly.

"I am surprised to see you here, Your Grace! What of your new bride?" Peter inquired with affected concern, his eyes glinting a challenge.

"She is weary from being dragged all over Town today!"

"Perhaps it is the endless strife of her life with you that tires her so." Peter took a snuffbox from his coat pocket, flicking the jeweled lid open with his thumb. "Care to try my sort?" he offered with deceptive mildness.

"Strife, is it?" Robin's eyes flashed like sunlit granite. "Lucia and I were doing very well until we were besieged by outsiders." His glance encompassed Tracy as well as the viscount.

"Were you? Apparently, she does not agree with you. Only this morning she told me that-"

"She's been confiding in you, has she?" Robin leaped upon Norworth's intimation. "You've begun your seduction already! You've gained her trust with your lies and pretty words!"

"My lies!" Peter's lip curled. "Examine your own conduct toward her, Your Grace! Perhaps you should have courted your lady with flowers and candy instead of tossing her over your shoulder and carrying her off like some Viking out of the history books. After that experience, I daresay she'd trust a rabid dog before she'd trust you!"

Eyes blazing, Robin swayed menacingly toward Peter, who retreated a step. "I've a mind to see your blood staining a field of honor, sir! Name your-"

"Rogue! You can't meet anybody in your condition!" Tracy stared pointedly at Lynkellyn's cane. "Besides, I thought you wanted to leave. Didn't like the look of the place!"

"Or the clientele, mon ami!" Robin's eyes raked Peter contemptuously. "But I've a deal to settle with this...this voleur des épousees!"

"Look you, Rogue! Norworth's done nothing to warrant an encounter with you. Let it be, man! You can't kill everyone who displeases you!"

Ignoring Tracy, Robin glared at Peter. "I do know how to guard my own, my lord. Have a care when you are in Lucia's company, for I shall know of the slightest impropriety."

"You are a fine one to talk of impropriety, Your Grace!" Peter sneered. "Her Grace is a good deal safer with me than with you, I'll warrant. I don't abduct ladies on the King's highways!"

His injury forgotten, Robin lunged furiously at Peter. His recklessness sent him stumbling and Tracy grabbed his arm to keep him from falling. "That's enough, Rogue! This is neither the time nor the place! Besides, you are not in a position to issue challenges at the moment!"

With a tap of his cane, Robin pushed past Tracy and took another step toward Norworth. Suddenly Clarissa flung herself between the angry men, throwing her arms around the viscount's neck. "I'm bored with all this, Peter! I want to dance. You promised to take me to Vauxhall! I don't know why we ever came here in the first place." She folded her arms, her pouting pink lips atremble.

"You will recall, my dear, that you insisted on seeing what a hell was like. I did tell you that ladies..." Peter stressed the word "...do not frequent such places and that you would not find Randall's amusing." His face was a mask of anger and annoyance.

She stamped her foot. "I liked it very well until you began to quarrel with His Grace over that dreary governess! But now I want to go to Vauxhall!"

"As you please," Norworth capitulated with more resignation than enthusiasm. "I'll get your wrap." Excusing himself, he strode away.

Clarissa turned to Robin. "You must come, too, Your Grace!" she exclaimed in a breathless, throaty voice. Striving for calm, he raised an irritated brow. "To Vauxhall, I mean. I have been looking forward to furthering our acquaintance!" Then she turned belatedly to Tracy. "And you are invited as well, Lord Malkent."

"Actually, I think I'll retire. Val is expecting me. Is Lucia waiting for you, Rogue?" Malkent put a special emphasis on the duchess's name.

"I sincerely doubt it," Robin said, his eyes never leaving Clarissa's as he speculated upon the blatant invitation he read in those honey-brown pools. "Yes," he said after a moment. "Yes, I think I will join

you at Vauxhall, my lady." He gave her a predatory smile, his teeth sharp and white in his tanned face.

Peter was not pleased to discover that Robin was joining his party. He grew more and more dissatisfied as the evening progressed and Clarissa made her preferences painfully obvious. Laughing at Lynkellyn's every sally, she hung on his arm, slapping his hand with her fan when he was too free with her, teasing him with glimpses of ivory bosom when he was not.

Robin found Clarissa's antics familiar and unamusing. Her 'petulant child' act irritated him. He was not feeling particularly avuncular tonight, he reflected with brooding contempt as he broached his second bottle of brandy.

His thoughts strayed constantly to Lucia. Every move, every smile, every word Clarissa uttered triggered some bittersweet memory of his bride, but since he couldn't have Lucia, he would settle for La Chalfont and brandy. Lots of brandy.

Growling his farewell, Norworth finally surrendered his claim to Clarissa...for the night, at least...and departed. Robin offered to escort her home, knowing full well what would follow.

Their lovemaking was not satisfying in the least. Although he was touching Clarissa, his mind was full of Lucia; of her silken ebony tresses carpeting the pillow; of her eyes deepening to the purple-blue of the stormy Caribbean as he caressed and kissed her; of her hot, writhing body melting with his in thrashing, throbbing, unbridled pleasure.

After a struggle, Robin surrendered to his heart, closed his eyes, and pretended that Clarissa was Lucia. That fantasy, though it possessed an exquisite pain all its own, brought him the physical release he needed. When it was over, he quickly turned his back to Clarissa. He could not bear to gaze into hazel eyes when he was dreaming of sweet, sultry amethysts. A few minutes later, brandy and natural exhaustion took their toll. He slept.

Waking before first light, Lucia lay silent in her cold, empty bed, missing the cozy shelter of Robin's arms. After all the times he had ignored her wishes in favor of his own, why, she wondered wretchedly, had he chosen this occasion to be a gentleman? She stared at the communicating door between their quarters, longing for him to force his way into her chamber and demand his pleasure. She shivered deliciously as she imagined him stroking her... kissing her...wanting her. Then she blushed at her own wantonness.

Throwing off the covers, she got out of bed. The chill morning air seeped through her thin nightgown and she grabbed a blanket, wrapping it snugly around her shoulders. Padding, barefoot, to the window,

she pushed back the curtains to watch the sun rise, its' soft red-gold streaks flashing like Robin's tawny tresses.

Yesterday when she had left Lynkellyn House on Viscount Norworth's arm, Robin had been furious at her defiance, but beneath all his bluster and rage, he had also seemed to be suffering. The confusion and pain in his eyes tore at her heart and, desperate to prove to him that he could not rule her, she had rushed out the door before her resolve wavered.

It would seem that she was not proof against his unhappiness just as she had never been proof against his caresses, always yielding when he touched her, melting when his lips found hers despite every effort to remain indifferent. Yesterday's kiss had transcended all else. At that besotted moment, she had forgotten all her animosities and resentments and all the ugly little details of her captive life with him. She had been willing...nay; eager...to give him her body, and her soul, to trust him completely and implicitly. To trust him! Her mind reeled away from that idea as if it had touched fire.

She was dangerously close to falling in love with this undeserving villain and she had no idea how to curb her wayward heart, but if she surrendered to its demands, she would be forever lost. Her only recourse, then, would be to flee as fast as she could before Robin discovered her weakness and used it against her. Yesterday when his kiss had touched her so deeply she had almost given herself away, she had used Lord Norworth as a shield and he had proven a willing accomplice. Perhaps if she cultivated the viscount's friendship and distanced herself from Robin, her heart would take a safer course.

She prayed fervently that Viscount Norworth truly was a friend, for she had told him much more than she ever should have. During their outing, she had eventually poured into his willing ear all her sadness at her battered dreams, all her fury and unhappiness at her humiliating position, and all the wonder, joy, and fear in her treacherous, unruly heart. A kind and sympathetic soul, he had listened without appearing to judge her by the world's harsh standards. Although he could offer only compassion and commiseration, she had felt a great deal better at the end of her ride.

Sighing, she stared at the rosy morning sky, a promising orange sun floating just above the trees, then let the curtain drop and turned away, wondering how she had become so naively trusting as to pour all her secret confidences and longings into a virtual stranger's ear and so foolishly vulnerable as to allow herself stirrings of sympathy...never love!...for a brigand like Amberley.

The chamber door opened suddenly and Anne stood on the threshold, a tray in her hand. "Oh! You're awake, Your Grace! I've brought your chocolate."

Masking her melancholy, Lucia smiled and accepted the chocolate. Sitting on the side of her bed, she sipped from the steaming cup as the maid threw open the curtains. "I daresay His Grace will not rise before noon," Lucia said. "I didn't hear him come in last night. He must have been out very late."

Standing in front of an open wardrobe, Anne paused in the act of choosing a dress for her mistress. "Mr.

Hercules says that His Grace hasn't returned home yet, Your Grace," was her carefully casual reply.

"Oh." Lucia gazed dejectedly at the little brown bubbles swirling in her chocolate. When she looked up, Anne was holding a morning gown of blue poplin. "Oh, no! I'm sorry! I meant to tell you I'm going riding again this morning. I'll need my habit."

Anne curtsied, suppressing an irritated sigh. "Very good, Your Grace."

Constant, throbbing pain drummed through Robin's skull, relentlessly dragging him to wakefulness. He turned on his side and put a pillow over his head, shifting a little closer to the soft, warm body beside him in the bed.

Gaining no benefit from his pillow, he shoved it away without opening his eyes, yearning for the caressing massages Lucia gave him when his head ached. Her gentle hands had never failed to soothe his suffering.

"Lucia!" he murmured groggily. "Lucia, would you rub my temples, s'il vous plaît? My head feels like an exploding cannon."

A muffled snore was his only answer. "Lucia!" he said a little louder, forcing his eyes open. Clarissa Chalfont's exquisite features, blanked in sleep, met his suddenly alert gaze.

He sat up too quickly, wincing as another lance of pain split through his head. When he ran his hand through his hair, he discovered that it was sticky with brandy and grimly remembered that Clarissa had spilled half a bottle of the stuff all over him when she'd brought it to him in bed. Grimacing in distaste at this legacy of a misspent night, he fumbled beside the bed for his clothes.

He donned them slowly, hampered by a crippled leg, a pounding head, an uneasy stomach, and fingers that refused to work. Lucia would not be pleased when he arrived at home in such a disreputable condition, but at the moment he could think of nowhere he would rather be.

Dressed at last, he tried to rise. Pain stabbed through his injured leg. With a curse, he groped on the floor for his cane, found it, and pulled himself up to hobble over to a window.

As he shoved a curtain back to let in the light, Clarissa rolled over in the bed. She smiled lazily at him, her seductive brown eyes heavy-lidded with the remnants of sleep. "Where are you going, love? It's early!" she purred.

Robin glanced at the sun's position. "It's midday and I should have left hours ago."

"Nonsense! Come back to bed. I promise to make it worth your while." She sat up in the bed, letting the covers fall from her pink and white breasts as she patted the spot beside her. Her eyes, suddenly wide and beckoning, looked startlingly like Mountheathe's.

He limped to the mirror, her blatant invitation reminding him all too disgustingly of his years in Vienna. He thought of Lucia, bereft of harlot's tricks, and his heart ached for her. Clarissa Chalfont was a damned poor substitute for his lady wife, he concluded as he picked up a comb from a dressing table and ran it savagely through his matted hair, muttering an oath as it snagged.

"What's the matter, Rogue? Come back to bed and let me..."

"I must leave," Robin said curtly. Perhaps another high flyer would cure him of his addiction. He fervently hoped so because he had no idea how he could live with Lucia without touching her. Aware that he looked every bit the drunken, degenerate roue he was fabled to be, he smoothed down his tangled, brandy-soaked curls as best he could and started toward the door.

Clarissa tumbled out of bed, struggling into a sheer wrapper that hid little as she ran toward him. "Wait! Why don't you stay for breakfast? You must be starved after last night. I'll just ring for food and after we have eaten." Glancing significantly at the bed, she purred, "Let me satisfy all your hungers, Robin."

Robin glared at her and she quailed at the icy contempt in his eyes. He pulled a heavy pouch from his pocket, counted out ten guineas, and laid them with deliberate finality on her dressing table. "I believe that should compensate you for your time and...er...efforts. I will not require your services again." His mouth curling into an ugly sneer, he bowed, ignoring the murderous fury that shot from her eyes. As he slammed the door behind him, a crystal decanter shattered resoundingly against the woodwork.

Arriving at Lynkellyn House, Robin limped tiredly into utter chaos. Laddock had apparently vanished, no footman greeted him in the entry-hall to take his hat and cloak, and a raucous cacophony permeated the house. Childish laughter and hysterical wailing mingled uneasily with male voices raised to be heard over the uproar. A dog's excited bark and the crash of falling porcelain added a clamoring descant to the commotion.

"Lucia!" Robin shouted, tracking the noise to the Blue Salon. "Lucia, what the devil's going on?" he said, pausing on the threshold. A large, rambunctious sheepdog barked furiously at the colorful shards of a Dresden shepherdess on the floor. Four of the Saddewythe children giggled at some tale Giovanni was spinning for them, while Honor sat apart in a large chair, crying as if her heart would break. "I want my C-Cothy!" the child sobbed. "And I want Miss Twyll! And I want my Mama!"

Viscount Norworth knelt beside her, endeavoring ineffectually to calm the tempest. Holding her hand, he patted it gingerly. "Your governess will be fine, little girl, I promise you. She won't like to see you

crying." He dabbed at her eyes with a scrap of ivory linen. Looking up when he heard a thunderous voice from the doorway, the desperation in his eyes faded a bit. "Your Grace!"

Robin's brows snapped together as he hobbled toward Norworth. "What the devil are you...are all these people...doing here? Where is my wife?"

"You have no cause for alarm, Your Grace. The doctor is examining Her Grace now. Thank God he was here when-"

"Doctor? What doctor? Has something happened to Lucia? Is it the babe? Where is she?" Robin's questions tumbled out without a trace of his usual drawl.

"Calm yourself, Your Grace! Her Grace was injured-"

Honor's horrified scream shook the room. She clung to Peter's leg, pointing accusingly at the duke, her eyes filled with terror. "It's the Monster Man!" She ran behind Peter and peeped around his coat-skirts. "Bella! Bella! It's the Monster Man! He's come to steal us away to the Bad Place! Just like he stole poor Cothy!" Sobbing and wailing, she buried her face in Peter's coat.

Save for Honor's weeping and the dog's barking as he bounced enthusiastically around the duke, the room was absolutely silent. Everyone stared at Robin.

Although Honor's distress at seeing him made him cringe inside, his face remained an impassive mask as he turned back to Peter, raising his voice to be heard over her sobs. "My wife?" he asked.

"Upstairs!" Norworth said distractedly as he lifted Honor onto his lap to quiet her.

Robin limped up the stairs, traversing the endless corridor to Lucia's bedchamber with frustrating slowness. Opening her door, he paused to survey yet another chaotic scene. Laddock was shouting orders to frantic maids who rushed about with towels, blankets, and basins of water. Dr. Lindley and Anne hovered over the bed where Lucia, still dressed in her riding habit, lay on her side, her features twisted with pain.

"What the devil's happened here?" Robin asked, hobbling over to the bed.

Lindley glanced up. "Another attack in the park, Your Grace! Her Grace was lucky to escape with her life."

Robin pushed Anne aside to take Lucia's cold, damp hand.

"Robin?" she asked uncertainly, unable to turn her head toward him.

"Je suis ici, ma chérie," he gently assured her. "Lay very still and it will not hurt so much."

Rivulets of sweat coursed down her white face and she whimpered a little as Lindley cut through the bodice of her gown with scissors. When he pulled the cloth, saturated with drying blood, away from her skin, her hand crushed the duke's and she drew an agonized breath. Lindley carefully cleansed the wound to reveal a long, jagged scratch, bloody, but not very deep, down her side. "The wound is milder than I expected, Your Grace," he said.

"The baby-" she muttered fitfully.

"Will be perfectly fine if you follow my instructions where the baby is concerned. Your fall from the horse worries me more than this wound." Lindley searched the room with his eyes. "Where did I put the laudanum?"

"Fall from the horse?!" Robin looked up, frowning as his eyes met Lindley's, but then his mind leaped upon the word 'laudanum'. "No! No opiates!"

"But, Your Grace, I need to suture the wound. There is pain involved. With a dose of laudanum, Her Grace will be asleep and feel nothing."

"I will not allow you to give her an opiate!"

"It will ease the pain, Your Grace. I do know my profession!"

"And I know opium! I've seen people 'ease' their lives away with it. I' faith, I almost lost my own and I know from experience that it becomes damnably hard to leave it alone once you've started! No laudanum! No opiate of any sort for Lucia!"

"How, then, Your Grace, am I to-" Lindley bristled.

"Perhaps some strong spirits will help her through it, doctor. Better good brandy than that poison of yours."

Lindley arched a brow at Lucia and she nodded. "Very well, Your Grace," he capitulated, his mouth tight with disapproval, "but I don't like it."

Robin sent Anne to fetch brandy. As the maid left the room, Lucia asked, "The children? Miss Twyll? Are they well?"

Anne returned with a full decanter of brandy and a glass. Robin filled the glass, knelt beside Lucia, and cradled her shoulders to help her drink. When she emptied the goblet, he quickly refilled it.

"Miss Twyll is in the Gold Salon, resting. I shall attend to her after I've seen to you," Lindley said, laying out his medical tools.

"The Saddewythe children and their dog are in the Blue Salon with His Grace's fencing master and Lord Norworth, Your Grace," Anne volunteered.

"And Andrew?" Lucia inquired between gulps of brandy.

"Andrew took a blow on the head, Your Grace," Anne said. "Mr. Laddock and the housekeeper are tending him in the kitchen until Dr. Lindley can see him."

Her fears for the others allayed, Lucia accepted draught after draught from the cup Robin pressed to her lips. An hour later, the doctor had finished his work and Robin carried her to her bed, leaving her to doze fitfully beneath warm covers while Anne mounted vigil.

Then he followed Lindley to the Gold Salon where he was treating Miss Twyll. While the doctor dabbed at cuts around the governess's bruised and swollen eye, Robin pulled the story of the morning's events from the surprisingly calm and lucid lady. "Her Grace had agreed to meet us in the park again this morning, Your Grace, but just as we caught sight of her, a...a masked man with a dagger came hurtling out of the woods on a big, black horse."

"Can you remember anything special about the horse, Miss Twyll? Any unusual markings?" Robin asked.

"Well, it had a white tail." Miss Twyll flinched a little as Lindley touched a particularly tender spot. "I noticed it when the man galloped up behind Her Grace. Miss Honor screamed and Her Grace looked over her shoulder. When she saw this madman barreling down upon her, she tried to spur her horse forward, but the frightened animal reared just as the...the outlaw..." Becoming more agitated, Miss Twyll punctuated her words with harrowing sobs. "There was nothing I could do, Your Grace!" She shook her head mournfully. "Nothing at all!"

Robin took her hands in his. "Miss Twyll, calm yourself, s'il vous plaît. It was not your place to protect Her Grace. That was her groom's job. Where was her groom?"

"I don't know, Your Grace. I didn't see him anywhere until after it was all over."

"très bien! What happened when Her Grace's horse reared?"

"The brigand stabbed her with his dagger, then pulled away. She fell off her horse and-" the governess drew a deep breath "- and she lay deathly still. The villain dismounted and ran toward her. Certain he was going to murder her, I grabbed Her Grace's fallen riding whip and lashed the man with all my

strength. That was when...when..." She shuddered.

"Yes?" Robin urged.

"When he hit me in the eye! Then he ran toward Her Grace again. I caught up with him as he knelt beside her and raised his dagger. I brought the whip down across his face as sharply as I could. He screamed and turned toward me. I shall never forget his eyes! Such venom! He had lifted his dagger to stab me when Lord Norworth drove up in his carriage, shouting at us. When he saw Lord Norworth, the attacker mounted his horse and rode away. Lord Norworth arranged for our transport and led us all here. I don't know how I would have contrived without him," Miss Twyll concluded as Lindley finished and put his supplies into a bag.

"I believe you would have managed very well, Miss Twyll," Robin said, impressed by the governess's courage. "I am grateful to you for saving Her Grace's life."

A new commotion erupted downstairs. Grabbing his cane, Robin hobbled into the corridor and down the stairs, Miss Twyll following close behind. The doctor went down the backstairs to tend the groom.

Lord and Lady Saddewythe stood in the foyer, Lord Nigel arguing hotly with Laddock, who had resumed his customary duties. "Look you, my good man! I want my children, my dog, and my governess and if I don't get them immediately, I will personally collar that cur you call a master and horsewhip him in the street!"

"That will be all, Laddock," Robin said calmly from the staircase. "I will speak to his lordship."

"Where are my children -- Miss Twyll!" Taking one look at the governess's face, Saddewythe turned to snarl at Lynkellyn. "So you've taken to assaulting governesses as well as abducting them!"

Robin ignored the insult. "Your family is in the Blue Salon, my lord. I will be happy to guide you there."

"But what happened here?" Saddewythe spluttered. "Miss Twyll, your eye...?"

She pushed past Robin to greet the Saddewythes. "We were attacked in the park, my lord. The brigand hit me in the eye and that is how I come to be so bruised. He almost killed Her Grace!"

"What the devil was 'Her Grace' doing there?" Nigel thundered.

"She was visiting with the children. They were so thrilled to see her yesterday and Honor's spirits were so much improved last night that Lady Saddewythe and I thought another outing with Her Grace would be beneficial," the governess said in a nervous tumult. Her eyes met Lady Saddewythe's and she suddenly realized that she had given away a secret.

"You had an assignation with the Duchess of Lynkellyn!" Saddewythe glared at Miss Twyll, then rounded on his wife. "Wini, this was your idea! And after I particularly told you-"

"But, Nigel, Honor is eating again and sleeping without nightmares! Yesterday afternoon, she laughed!"

"And today she was almost murdered! And you-" He whirled back to Miss Twyll. "You are discharged, miss, as of this moment. Do not trouble to ask for a reference, for you shan't get one."

Miss Twyll paled. "I was only following her ladyship's orders!"

Ignoring her, Saddewythe turned to Lynkellyn. "Take me to my children, sirrah!"

Robin led him into the Blue Salon where the Saddewythe children sat, still enthralled by Giovanni's tales. Honor was asleep in Norworth's arms and he looked distinctly uncomfortable in the role of nursery maid. Following his young mistress's example, the sheepdog was curled up on the viscount's feet, emitting gentle snores. Surveying this domestic tableau, Robin leaned on his cane and grinned at Peter's discomfiture.

"It isn't enough that you leave my children in the care of a...a damned foreigner!" Saddewythe growled, staring at Giovanni. "You must needs appoint the most notorious rake in Town, excepting your august self, of course, to guard them!" Glaring at Norworth, Saddewythe snatched Honor from the viscount's arms. "If you've dared to harm my precious-"

Peter rose with offended dignity. "Acquit me, my lord," he drawled, his gaze cold. "I am not a fiend. Your children are safe with me."

Roused by Peter's movement, the dog barked and circled Saddewythe as he shepherded his family toward the door. Cradled in her father's arms, Honor slept on as the other children passed into the foyer, staring at Robin in silent, frightened awe.

Awaiting Saddewythe in the hall, Miss Twyll begged him to reconsider his dismissal. Lady Saddewythe added her own pleas, but his lordship was adamant. "I gave instructions to the effect that my household was not to fraternize with any member of the Amberley family. You disobeyed my command, Miss Twyll, and I have no choice but to sack you." He handed Honor over to her mother, then pulled his purse from his coat pocket and opened it. Pouring a few guineas into his hand, he gave them to her. "I believe you will find this amount more than sufficient to cover your time with us."

"But, Nigel..." Lady Saddewythe pleaded.

"We like Miss Twyll, Papa! Almost as much as Cothy! We want her to stay!" Arabella begged tearfully, speaking for all the children.

"Where shall I go, my lord, without a reference or..."

"I neither know nor care, miss, but I want you to collect your things and leave Saddewythe House immediately."

"You shall stay here, Miss Twyll," Robin announced from the doorway of the Blue Salon. "Her Grace needs a companion. Would you be interested in the post?"

"But I have no reference, Your Grace!"

"You saved Her Grace's life. That is all the reference I require." Robin smiled at her and she found herself trusting him, despite all the wicked tales she had heard.

"Very well," she said, spurred by her sudden, desperate need to find a new situation quickly as well as Lynkellyn's charm and generosity.

"Laddock!" Robin called to the butler, who hovered nearby. "Show Miss Twyll to a bedchamber."

"I'll send your things over," Saddewythe growled at Miss Twyll's back as she followed Laddock up the stairs.

Returning to the foyer, Dr. Lindley paused to survey the still chaotic scene as Saddewythe glared at the duke. "You have a positive penchant for poaching my governesses, sirrah, but you'll have to raid someone else's schoolroom for your next trophy. As of today, I'm sending my children away to school!" Saddewythe shooed his family before him out of Lynkellyn House. Forgotten, the dog barked at the closing door, then yelped when Saddewythe reached back in and pulled him out by one ear.

As the door slammed, Robin loosed a pent up howl of mirth. "Poaching governesses! That's rich, n'est ce pas?" he asked the doctor.

"I don't understand how you can laugh, Your Grace. It is a miracle Her Grace wasn't killed today. Now, her bandages must be changed at least three times a day and I recommend a sennight's bedrest so that we can be certain the baby suffered no ill effects from her fall."

"It shall be done, Doctor."

"A few days in bed will suffice for your groom, I think. Miss Twyll will be fine, but her head will hurt for awhile and the bruising around her eye will take a long time to fade. Now then! What was it you wanted of me this morning?"

"-wanted of you-?"

"I received a request from you yesterday to call this morning," Lindley said, irritated.

Robin looked down at the walking stick clutched in his hand and remembered his determination to be rid of it. "I wanted to talk to you and Giovanni about my recovery. I am weary of this devilish cane. I want to walk without assistance again, doctor, and I want to start working toward that goal immediately."

"In a fortnight, you could, perhaps, take one or two steps, but it's too early to be thinking of giving up your cane, Your Grace. Your leg may not be properly healed."

"We'll start today, Lindley! I want to dance with Lucia at Lady Malkent's ball, assuming, naturellement, that she has regained her health."

"She will probably be able to dance, but I can't guarantee that you'll be healed," Lindley said. "These things take time, Your Grace!"

"I've given natural healing all the time I can spare. Between you and Giovanni, I intend to be rid of this hideous crutch..." Amberley thumped his cane disgustedly against the floor "...as soon as possible."

"Giovanni, Your Grace?"

"My fencing master. With your knowledge, my own experience, and his strength, I intend to practice walking; to force my damaged leg to work again. 'Tis a healing trick I stumbled upon some years ago, when, injured and alone, I was faced with the necessity of caring for myself. Let us go into the library and I'll explain it to you. Un moment, s'il vous plaît?" Robin sent Laddock to summon Giovanni.

The men were closeted in the library for an hour. Dr. Lindley came out of this audience unconvinced, but resigned. Behind him, Giovanni and Robin enthusiastically discussed the idea. "Nine o'clock tomorrow morning, then, gentlemen," Robin reminded his guests as he escorted them to the door.

When they were gone, Robin climbed the stairs to the rhythm of his despised cane, his worried mind upon Lucia. Guilt washed over him as he contemplated how close she had come to death while he was sleeping cozily in Clarissa Chalfont's rose-scented bed. He should have been home to protect her instead of seeking a liaison which had ultimately filled him with disgust. Shoulders sagging, he headed to his lady's chambers.

Overlooked in all the excitement, Norworth left the Blue Salon when he heard Lynkellyn climbing the stairs. Wanting to speak to the duke, Peter followed him, reaching the second floor just as Robin entered a room at the end of the hall. The viscount strode toward the open door, stopping on the threshold to peer into the room.

Sitting beside Lucia's bed, Robin tenderly cradled the sleeping woman's hand, his eyes glistening with

tears. He brought her palm to his lips and gently brushed a dusky lock of hair from her face.

Feeling infinitely de trop, Norworth would have departed quietly, but Robin sensed his presence and looked up. "Are you still here?"

"I need to talk to you, Your Grace," Peter said in a hushed voice. "'Tis of great importance."

Robin turned Lucia's limp hand over in his, entwining his fingers with hers. "I thank you for rescuing Lucia and bringing her home. For that, I am in your debt, but we have nothing else to discuss."

"This-" Peter nodded at the sleeping duchess "-is another score to settle with Mountheathe, is it not? Another nail in his coffin, as it were?" Robin stared at him. "You will not regret granting me an audience, Your Grace."

Tucking the blankets around Lucia, Robin grabbed his cane and rose. "très bien," he sighed. "Shall we go to the library?"

As Robin handed him a glass of claret, Norworth said, "I am aware that you have taken me in dislike, Your Grace, but I believe we have a common interest."

"Besides my wife?"

"Ain't saying I didn't attempt to pursue her Your Grace... Diamond of the first water, after all! But she'd have none of me. You're a devilish lucky man, especially considering the way you were cavorting with La Chalfont last night."

"Ah!" Robin smiled. "We come to the heart of our 'discussion'. You may have Clarissa with my blessing, my lord. A more irritating woman I have yet to meet."

"She seems to have taken a definite liking to you, though!" Peter grinned.

"Ah, well," Robin shrugged. "Whores will bend to money, héin?"

"La Chalfont is no ladybird of mine," Norworth confessed. "I only pursued her to provoke Mountheathe!"

Robin laughed. "I only pursued her to provoke Mountheathe...and you!"

Peter leaned forward. "You and I have a common enemy in Giles Bridland, Your Grace! I want to see

him crushed as much as you do!"

Robin arched a brow. "Crushed? What can he have done to provoke such savagery?"

Peter ran his hands through his unpowdered ebony locks, loosening strands of hair from the satin riband at the nape of his neck. "The story I am about to tell you is extremely private, Your Grace. I trust that the tale will go no further than this room?" His eyes met Robin's with earnest intensity. "Normally, I wouldn't confide in a man who...well, we do seem to have been at daggers drawn from the moment we met, Your Grace!...but when you corner Mountheathe, I want...indeed, I deserve...to be in at the kill."

"You may rely on my absolute discretion, my lord. I am puzzled, however, at your conclusions concerning my plans, if any, for Mountheathe's future."

"Don't gammon me, Your Grace! You're hunting him. I can see it in your eyes. You're watching for a chance to revenge yourself upon him if it can be done with honor. And he's most certainly hunting you... and Her Grace...in the most literal sense, hiring cutthroats and attacking women like the damned coward he is!"

Robin's icy gaze met the younger man's. "Are you suggesting, in the midst of all this impassioned babble, that Mountheathe orchestrated this attempt on Lucia's life?" His lazy drawl belied the fury and malice that danced in his eyes.

"Orchestrated!" Norworth laughed grimly. "The man tried to do the filthy deed himself! Recognized his horse, a black stallion with a white mane and tail, as he galloped away. There's only one like it in Town. Mountheathe fancies it makes him stand out amongst the Tulips." He snorted. "Angel's wings couldn't improve that scum."

"If you despise Mountheathe so much, my lord, why don't you call him out on some pretext, best him, and have done?"

"I can't call him out because it would cause my family, particularly my sister, too much distress," Peter said. Robin poured him more wine and he took a healthy swallow. "I became friends with Giles about six years ago and invited him to spend the summer at Sandhaven Abbey. Eustacia, my sister, had just turned thirteen."

"One afternoon, perhaps a week after Mountheathe's arrival, I sought him out to propose a fishing expedition. I discovered him in the boathouse with my sister. He...he was holding her down on a bench with his knee on her chest. One hand was at her throat while the other fumbled at his breeches. Though she'd fought him with all her might, her face and body were bloody, her clothes were practically ripped to shreds, and she was about to lose the struggle when I walked in and pulled him off her."

"Eustacia was hysterical. Seems 'kind Lord Giles' had offered to take her rowing on the lake, but had

assaulted her instead. I showed him the door immediately and have been barely civil to him since. I'd relish handing him the cut-direct with all my heart, but I daren't do even that, let alone issue him the challenge he deserves, because an explanation would be required. Poor Eustacia's reputation would be ruined, innocent though she is, and she would never be able to make a good marriage."

Norworth gulped his claret, set it down, and ran his hands through his ebony locks a second time. "Since that fiend's attack, fear haunts Eustacia's eyes. She hides when gentlemen visit at Sandhaven. She even cringes when I reach out to her."

"We had planned to bring her out last year, but Eustacia begged and pleaded so tearfully that Mama postponed it." His eyes darkened angrily. "At nineteen, she should be enjoying her first London Season, dashing the hopes of a long line of beaus, and anticipating a brilliant marriage. Instead, she is terrified of her come-out; painfully shy and tongue-tied in company; and repulsed by what little she knows of men and the intimacies of marriage."

Peter downed the last of his claret. "All that my sister's suffering if this ugly story ever comes to light is owing to that unprincipled beast, Mountheathe. I can't punish him myself as I would like, but I still want to be there to applaud when you bring him to his knees."

Robin gazed into the sparkle of his wine. "You are trusting me a with great deal, Norworth. Aren't you afraid I'll betray you? Blackmail you, perhaps?"

Peter shook his head. "Believe it or not, Your Grace, I think that a man of honor is hiding behind that wall of fury and defiance you show the world. You have promised that you will keep my secret. I'll accept your word."

Robin snorted. "Obviously, Lucia hasn't told you enough or you would know that I am not a great one for keeping promises."

"Are you referring to your insistence that she remain with you to help raise your child?" Peter ignored Robin's glare. "Can't set her free, can you? Your head is telling you to let her go, but your heart is demanding that she stay...and your heart is winning!" he grinned. "I have been in love, old man! Not terminally, thank God, but I know how it is."

Robin's eyes were granite, his voice sharp as a rapier. "Mon Dieu! Don't prattle to me of love! I merely believe that a child needs its mother and 'tis Lucia's duty to assume her maternal responsibilities."

"Proper sentiments, indeed, in a marriage of convenience...if that's what you have, Your Grace!" Peter rose and extended his hand. Robin accepted it hesitantly, uncertain whether he was facing friend or foe. "If I may be of any assistance in your cousin's ruin, you will let me know, won't you? Good day, Your Grace."

Peter left Lynkellyn House, his mind still upon the Amberleys. If ever two people belonged together, he mused, the Duke and Duchess of Lynkellyn were that couple. Her grace's budding love for her husband crept into every word she uttered, in spite of her vehement insistence that she despised him.

His grace was no better with his constant and patently false denial of all save his own selfish interests. Peter had never seen a man fight so desperately to keep his heart intact and fail so dismally, all the while refusing to admit defeat.

Perhaps it would ease the tedium of yet another Season to play cupid for the newlyweds when he could. Between that and cutting out Mountheathe with Miss Lannington, he should be able to keep himself tolerably entertained.

Chapter 21:

In Which His Grace Seeks Pleasure and Her Grace Seeks Solace

When Lucia came out of the sickroom a week later, a large stack of gilt-edged invitations awaited her. "There are so many of them!" she said to Valeria and Amaryllis over tea. "Robin and I never expected..."

Amaryllis laughed. "The *ton* can be very forgiving of those who are titled, my dear, but the war is not yet won. A great many influential people are still reluctant to acknowledge either of you. That is why you and Robin must go about and be seen in Town as much as you can...and return those calls!" Ryl tapped her dainty finger on a pile of calling cards next to the invitations. "You will not win anyone to your side if you hide at home."

Robin appeared in the doorway, leaning on his cane. Bowing to the ladies, he said to Lucia, "Are you ready for our drive in the park, ma chérie,"

Roses tinged Lucia's cheeks and pleasure lit her eyes. She glanced at the mantle clock, saying, "Is it that late already?"

Valeria rose. "We must take our leave, Lucia. Did you receive your invitations to Concordia's ball next week? May we expect you?"

Lucia glanced at Robin and he nodded. "Yes, indeed!" she beamed. "I will send our formal acceptance to you this afternoon."

Robin bowed as the ladies left, then limped into the room. "Ryl is correct for once. We shall have to accept a great many of these. The only way to overcome scandal is to brazen it out. I wish I'd known that when I was twenty," he said, flipping casually through the cards and invitations. "Lucia! Half of these cards are from men and the house is overflowing with flowers. I hope that, in the midst of all this

adulation, you will not forget your marriage vows."

Lucia lowered her eyes to hide her anger. Would he ever trust her? 'Will you ever trust him?' asked a small voice in her heart. She could not possibly imagine doing that.

A playful breeze whipped the hood of Lucia's driving cloak off her dark tresses as Robin coaxed his carriage into the slow stream of traffic circling the park. Almost immediately, elegant people surrounded them, suddenly eager to strengthen their social standing with the new Duke of Lynkellyn. Men gravitated to Lucia's side of the carriage, their conversation flirtatious and suggestive. Innuendo and double entendre soared about her like grapeshot on a battlefield.

Seeing the leering grins, speculative glances, and knowing smirks, Robin's jaw hardened. These 'gentlemen' were treating Lucia as if she were no better than a Drury Lane tart. Mountheathe's work, that!

Robin wanted to call every one of the filthy jackanapes to account, but he suppressed that desire, ruthlessly quelling his temper as Norworth's carriage drew up beside him. The others took their leave as Lucia smiled at Peter and his passenger, Concordia. Norworth leaned across the coach doors to pat Lucia's hand. "I'm glad to see you're out, Lucia! The fresh air will do you a world of good!"

"I want to thank you, my lord, for coming to my rescue. If it were not for you and Miss Twyll, I...I might not be here."

"Happy to be of service, Your Grace. Do we look for you at Miss Lannington's ball?" Peter looked down at Concordia with unmistakable warmth.

Robin watched Lucia's face glow with pleasure as she spoke to Norworth. Peter touched her hand and a familiar fury burned in the duke's heart. Forcing a polite smile, he quirked an eyebrow when Lucia addressed him. "Peter has made a dreadful faux pas, Robin!"

"Dreadful, indeed!" Concordia said, her eyes laughing. "I have almost decided to cut his acquaintance."

"You appear to have put yourself beyond the Pale, my lord!" Robin said. "What dastardly deed have you committed to merit such ignominy?"

Norworth smiled a little sheepishly. "When I called on Miss Lannington to take her for a drive this afternoon, I asked her to save the first dance at her ball for me and she graciously agreed."

"You seem to have acquitted yourself honorably thus far," Robin allowed.

"Yes, but just now I asked Her Grace for the same favor and within Miss Lannington's hearing. Alas! I have proven myself at best a fool and at worst a villain!"

"And now neither of us shall dance with him," Concordia said.

"I could not, in any case, for I am already pledged to Robin for the first set." Lucia touched Robin's arm lightly, her eyes begging him to corroborate her extemporaneous lie. "However, my lord, I will save the second dance for you and you have an entire sennight in which to restore yourself to your former place in Miss Lannington's esteem."

"I shall toil without rest, Miss Lannington, to thaw your heart and secure my dance with you," Norworth swore, one hand on his heart, as he tried without total success to banish the laughter from his eyes.

Concordia tapped his hand with a glove she had doffed earlier. "See that you do!"

"And you, Your Grace!" Peter grinned at Lucia once more. "I offended you as well, did I not? Shall you have His Grace call me to account for my insolence?"

Lucia's lips tightened. "Dueling is not a joking matter, my lord!" she said in icy tones that caused Peter to stare at her in surprise.

He quickly recovered himself. "Of course, you are right, Your Grace. Perhaps a sacrifice of my time to your whim would be more appropriate."

"Much," Lucia dimpled. "I have several small errands and a visit to a circulating library planned for tomorrow. I would welcome some company."

"Done!" Norworth glanced at Lynkellyn, encountering the familiar glare of hostility, swiftly veiled, in the older man's eyes. He abruptly returned his attention to Concordia. "Shall we drive on, Miss Lannington? Good day to you both." Nodding, Peter carefully pulled his coach out into the press of traffic. Robin followed him.

Robin maintained a stony, silence for the rest of the outing. When the carriage rolled up to Lynkellyn House, he debarked with the aid of a footman and hobbled into the house without a backward glance.

Following the thump-clump of Robin's footsteps, Lucia passed Laddock without pausing to give him her cloak. She burst into the library as the duke sank into the chair behind his desk and opened a ledger.

"Don't think you are going to hide behind your estate business, Robin! You've been spoiling for war ever since we left the park and I want to know why! Have I done something to anger you?"

"No more than usual! I am merely your husband, n'est-ce pas? I can hardly expect you to refrain from encouraging every Tulip or blood who leers at you, can I? And, naturellement, if it amuses you, why should I cavil at an assignation between you and the most notorious, most hardened rakehell in Town?" Robin's voice grew louder with every word.

"Peter is not 'hardened'! And it is not an assignation! We will be going to the shops and to a circulating library Valeria recommended to me. All perfectly respectable! And Anne will be with me. My time with Peter tomorrow will be open and above board, not the slightest bit clandestine or mysterious."

"So, because you are not meeting him in secret, I am to smile benignly while that damned lecherous puppy drives you all over London!"

Lucia rolled her eyes. "Friendship is all that exists between Peter and me! In my opinion, it's Concordia the man wants."

Robin picked up his quill, running the feathered end through his fingers. "Did it never occur to you, my sweet, that I might have had some plans for us tomorrow?"

"What plans?"

"C'est rien!" He waved her away, unwilling to elaborate upon this sudden bit of fiction. "You shall go driving with your viscount. I shall find someone else..." he gestured vaguely, "...to accompany me."

"Someone else?" Lucia's mind flew back to the night he had not come home.

"Bellefield...and a couple of his acquaintances." Robin shrugged. Infidelity was a game easily played by two. If Lucia insisted upon keeping company with Norworth against his expressed wishes, he would find some 'company' of his own. After all, he was still searching for that talented Cyprian whose charms could blast Lucia out of his heart.

Giovanni stood on Robin's left side and Dr. Lindley on his right. Each held an arm as he slowly, painfully crossed the now gleaming ballroom. When the trio reached the far wall, the doctor and the fencing master helped Robin to turn around. "I shall walk back to the other side without assistance," he announced.

"I do not think you are ready for that, Your Grace," Lindley said.

"I hardly feel the pain when you and Giovanni support me, doctor. I have been putting most of my weight on my injured leg for days now. I will walk alone today. If you are unduly concerned, you may march beside me, in case I fall."

Lindley sighed. "Very well! It will be your own fault if you are hurt."

"And my own triumph if I succeed. Let us begin."

The two men trailed Robin through the ballroom as he laboriously crossed it, grunting and grimacing with every step. When he reached his objective, he smiled in spite of his pain. "Again!" he cried, gingerly turning around while clutching the back of a chair.

"Don't you think you should rest a little, Your Grace?" Lindley suggested. "It won't do to overtax yourself."

"Again!" Robin took an uncertain step. The others fell in behind him.

He was halfway across the room when Laddock announced Lord Bellefield. Tony sauntered in, watching with admiration as Robin reached the far wall and turned to pace the area once more. When he had finished his snail's trek for the third time, he reluctantly sank into a chair, admitting fatigue. Bidding Giovanni and Lindley farewell for the day, he exacted a promise that they would return the next morning for another practice session.

"Bravo, old man!" Tony applauded as they left. "Pluck to the backbone! Just like the old days!"

"Not entirely!" Robin grinned. "In the old days, I'd have overcome this injury long ago. I'm getting too old for these adventures!" Amberley picked up his coat, struggling to don it as Bellefield hastened to his aid. "Let's go out tonight, Tony!" Robin said. "I am bored with ledgers and with household upheaval and with..." he hesitated for a moment.

"And with connubial bliss?"

"Mon Dieu, yes!" Robin groaned, tying back his hair and reaching for his cane "I've dressed Lucia as befits a duchess, but beneath all the trappings, she is still a drab little governess. I'm bored with her. I want gaiety and laughter. Perhaps you could suggest...something?"

Bellefield stared hard at his friend. Only a few months ago, Robin had claimed that his wife was all he could handle. Less than a fortnight ago, at Lady Blayne's ball, he had spent the entire evening glowering at every man in Lucia's vicinity. He had hardly been bored then!

Tony concluded that something else must have occurred -- a lovers' tiff, perhaps. With a worldly shrug, he said, "I have rented a box at Vauxhall tonight. I'll be entertaining a little charmer named Mariette. Perhaps she can bring a friend."

Over the course of the next week, Robin completely threw off his cane, dragging a not unwilling Tony into some of the lowest gaming dens and bordellos in London.. Their nights always seemed to follow the same pattern. In the evening, they escorted several ladybirds to some public place like Vauxhall's, then, in the early morning hours, after Robin had had a great deal to drink, they visited the wilder hells and brothels, favoring, in particular, Angel's with its' salacious whores, deep play, and mixed clientele.

Robin insisted upon parading his strumpets around the haunts of Society every night as if he were issuing a defiant challenge to the world. The worst moment, Tony thought with a vague sense of guilt, was when he and Robin, each with a Cyprian on his arm, had almost come face to face with her grace at Vauxhall.

Lucia, the Malkents, Viscount Norworth and Miss Lannington were part of a crowd gathered to watch the fireworks display. If the two parties had actually met, no one would have had to look up to see an explosion.

Tony had endeavored to steer his group in another direction, but Robin had proven uncooperative. "I don't give a damn if she sees us, Tony!" he said, watching the viscount hurriedly escorted Lucia in the opposite direction. "Ah, Norworth's with her, naturellement!"

"That was close!" Bellefield muttered, mopping his brow with a linen handkerchief. "Hate that sort of contre-temps! Perhaps we should go elsewhere, old fellow."

"I'll take my pleasures where I choose," Robin scowled, his words slurred by a surfeit of claret. He smiled down at the simpering little blonde on his arm. "Come, ma petite, there must be champagne hiding somewhere in this wretched establishment!"

They strolled away, but Tony and his redhead did not follow. Arrested by the anguish in Lucia's eyes when she saw the duke, Tony watched unhappily as Norworth led her to a quiet corner. Shielding her from vulgar curiosity behind his broad back, Peter held her hand and wiped tears from her eyes with a wispy lace handkerchief.

Robin returned to Tony's side in time to see Lucia lay her head on Norworth's shoulder. As Peter stroked her hair and kissed her forehead, Robin glared at the spectacle of his wife locked in a public embrace with another man. His mouth tightened and his eyes danced with fury. "Are you coming, Bellefield?" he snapped.

"Lord, yes!" Tony led his lady away, shaking his head as he followed Lynkellyn through the crowds...

"More than a tiff," Tony muttered, still shaking his head as that night's memory faded. "More than a tiff!"

Bellefield was not the only person haunted by that upsetting evening. Remembering Lucia's drawn face and wracking sobs, Peter's fists clenched with a violent desire to knock some sense into that half-witted husband of hers.

He could recall every word of their unhappy conversation, could even feel her trembling hand in his as he asked, "You saw him, didn't you?"

She nodded, looking up at him, and the anguish in her eyes tore at his heart. His strongest impulse at that moment was to call Amberley to account and carve out his black heart.

"I suppose you've heard about his...er...recent escapades?"

"Yes! Lady Laddon called yesterday, only too eager to enlighten me! It is all my fault, Peter! If I hadn't... If I could only..." Her tears flowed, sudden, fast, and furious.

"Have you spoken to him lately? There must be some explanation for his wild behavior!"

"I haven't seen him since the day we talked to you in the park," she sobbed, "but I know why he is acting this way. It is my f-fault!"

Unaccustomed to receiving the intimate confidences of young brides, Peter dabbed at her streaming eyes, uncertain of his role as she poured out the most tangled and unlikely conglomeration of marital problems he had ever heard. The most nightmarish part of it all was that he, innocent for once, appeared to be an integral ingredient in the Amberleys' witch's brew of misery. Powerless to help her, he comforted her as best he could, cradling her in his arms and kissing her forehead as she wept against his shoulder.

Chapter 22:

In Which Her Grace Becomes a Thief

"Damn your luck, Roche! That's another hundred I owe you!" Scowling, Giles threw down his cards.

Sir Winston Rochedale gathered his coins and shuffled the cards in the evening's candlelight. "No doubt your luck will change in the next hand, dear boy!"

Giles snorted. "Have you been asleep these last three months? My luck ran out the day Amberley returned to England!"

"Nonsense, my lord! A trifling setback! You'll come about soon enough and His Grace will be left in a sorry state when you do."

Giles drummed his fingers on the card table and glowered. "There has to be a way to best him!"

"Let's see, dear boy. You've tried vilification, bribery, and murder, the latter more than once. All unsuccessful!" Sir Winston pocketed his winnings and poured himself another claret.

Giles lapsed into thoughtful silence. "I could abduct the Rogue's doxy," he said suddenly.

Rochedale grimaced. "It's been done, dear boy."

"I could take her to Heathe Manor and arrange a...a 'tragic accident'. Fatally shot by poachers in the woods. What a pity! Terrible aim, poachers! Shoot at anything that moves! I was in London at the time. You could corroborate that, Roche! Had no idea Her Grace intended to visit the manor. Yes, that will do nicely! And I'll enjoy killing the little bitch, too, after all the trouble she's caused me! I'll do it slowly...and with finesse."

Sir Winston shook his head. "It won't work! Too many circumstances would tie the incident to you. Her Grace's body is found on your estate; you have an excellent motive for killing her; and what possible reason would she have to visit you? She's made it abundantly clear that she's loyal to Amberley and despises you. No, it would be obvious that you murdered her."

Giles stared glumly into his wine. "So you think the magistrates would take me up?"

"Instantly, dear boy, and even if they did not, Amberley would not rest until he had your head on a platter if he believed you had killed his duchess. Begging your pardon, dear fellow, but you ain't up to His Grace's weight in the art of duello."

"How the devil do you know? I've not yet had a chance to cross swords with him!"

"I've heard a great deal..." Sir Winston muttered, his memories vivid of Golden Gus in the midst of battle, his lightning blade flashing crimson and silver as it darted into opponent after opponent.

"You've heard...!" Giles snorted. "I skewered that sanctimonious hothead for his impudence once and I can do it again!"

"Sanctimonious! Not a word I'd have chosen to describe the duke!"

"You did not have to grow up with him! Always carping on honor and fair play whenever I was up for a lark! Thank God Grandpapa never tumbled to the truth or I'd have spent my entire childhood 'neath the

rod with nothing to eat, save bread and water. But since I was the old fool's favorite -- son of his precious only daughter, do you see -- he always accepted my word over Amberley's. I made quite a game of seeing how much mischief I could lay at Robin's door. His backside must be turned to leather, considering all the tannings he took on my behalf."

Sir Winston splashed more claret into his glass. "That letter you mentioned when you told me about Lady Malkent's abduction -- you actually sent it to Amberley?"

"Yes."

"Superb bit of folly, that!" Sir Winston said. "Never put anything into writing, dear boy."

"I've learned a great deal since I was twenty, Roche! What has the letter to say to anything?"

"Ever see it again?" Rochedale's brows arched.

"No."

"If Lynkellyn had wanted to clear himself quickly, he only needed to produce that letter. It would have been the perfect evidence to damn you. Why didn't he use it?"

Mountheathe's eyes met his in dawning wonder. "Yes, by Jove! Why didn't he? I hadn't thought of it in all these years, but that letter would have cleared him immediately!" Giles began to pace. "It never even occurred to me to search for it. Indeed, I had forgotten the letter's very existence until after the Rogue was long gone." He turned to stare at his guest and candlelight played on an angry red slash across his cheek.

"He didn't use the letter, dear boy, because he didn't have it," Sir Winston drawled. "He lost it, perhaps, or... But I'll wager he doesn't have it now, either. He'd have published it, else."

"So how does that help us?" Plopping into his chair, Giles ran his hands over his forehead, wincing as his fingers brushed a second scarlet slash across the bridge of his nose. "Damn that bitch of a governess!" he muttered.

"Well..." Sir Winston grinned slyly, "you do realize that the duchess is in love with her husband?"

"God, yes! Any fool with eyes in his head can see that! It's the reason the doxy couldn't be bought. Curse the Rogue's luck!"

"It is her greatest strength, but I think we could turn it into a weakness. Because she loves him, she will go to great lengths and take foolish risks to clear him. Suppose I tell her I have the letter that

incriminates you and I'm willing to sell it?"

"And?"

"And I'll name some remote and lonely place where we can make the exchange. When she comes to get the letter, we'll kill her."

"Suppose she doesn't come? Perhaps the Rogue won't let her go or she won't be able to raise the blunt."

"She won't. His Grace keeps her penniless and on a short leash. However, I'm betting she'll find a way to meet us, nonetheless, with the idea that she can persuade us to give her the letter, gratis."

"What about Robin? Won't he be suspicious?"

"Perhaps, but the talk is that he's not at home much these days. Too busy laying wagers and chasing whores. She can't tell him if she don't see him, dear boy."

Giles pondered the idea. "It sounds like a workable plan, but...well, she'd never trust either of us."

"True, but she'll believe me if I say I stole the letter from you. It's exactly what she'd expect of me. She'll want to see it, of course. That's when we arrange our secret meeting at that remote and lonely spot and..." He drew his finger across his throat with a satisfied grin.

Mountheathe sat up and dealt the cards. "If she finds me waiting for her at your 'remote and lonely spot', she's likely to bolt!"

"Leave it all to me, dear boy. I know the Duchess of Lynkellyn. Her kindness has always been her downfall. She'll come to save her husband, only to damn him with her death."

Giles's hand paused in the midst of flipping a card to Sir Winston. "You'd do that? You'd actually...kill...for me?"

"For a small monetary consideration, of course." Rochedale's snaky eyes met Mountheathe's over the cards.

"How small?" Giles's mouth tightened as he resumed the deal.

"Say...five thousand guineas?" Rochedale gathered his cards, pursing his lips at a queen as he placed her beside her sister in his hand.

"Five thou -- ! You'd beggar me!"

"You'll have a hundred thousand a year when it's done. Not a bad return for your investment, is it?" Sir Winston grinned.

"No, I suppose not, but..."

"You do want your legacy, don't you? And imagine the Rogue's rage when you best him! Lord! I'd give a monkey to see his face!"

"Oh..., very well," Giles grumbled, " I shall give you a draft on my bank before you leave. Half now and the rest when it's done. But don't dally! I want this business finished!"

Rochedale sipped his wine. "I'd much prefer the brass to a possibly worthless scrap of paper,"

"Look at my face, man!" Giles brought up a candle to illuminate the swollen weals that crisscrossed his countenance. "If I step outside my door or receive any callers other than you, everyone will know I attacked the duchess! I'm hardly in a position to go to my bank or to receive my bankers here and I don't keep that kind of blunt in the house. What's more, I wouldn't trust my servants to carry such an amount from the bank!"

"I suppose you are right," Sir Winston sighed. "Very well. I'll take the draft, but I'll be cashing it tomorrow."

Fuming over his unanticipated incarceration, Giles slammed his cards face down on the table, rising to pace his drawing room again. "Hell and damnation! I'm virtually a prisoner in my own house, thanks to that prune-faced old gargoyle of Saddewythe's. Any sensible woman would have had hysterics upon seeing a marauding brigand, but not her! Oh, no! She was a demon with that whip, let me tell you!"

"Calm down, dear boy!" Rochedale said. "Once you've healed a little, you can resort to your paint box. Hide the weals beneath a fashionably pale complexion and no one will suspect a thing!"

"My God, I hope you're right, Roche! I don't relish the thought of incarceration, whether it be in Newgate or in Heathe House."

When Laddock presented the innocuous white calling card to Lucia on a silver tray, Sir Winston Rochedale's name leaped up at her like a rabid, snarling dog. She flicked a nervous tongue over dry lips. "In the Blue Salon, you say? He asked for me?"

"He did request an audience with His Grace, but..." Laddock's voice trailed away.

"I see." Lucia fingered Sir Winston's card with disgust and gingerly turned it over as it lay on the tray. 'This concerns Your Grace's innocence,' was written on the back in a flowery hand.

How lovely it would be to surprise Robin with the gift of vindication! She stared hard at the card, willing it to yield up any information about the duke its owner might possess. If Sir Winston really did have some proof of Amberley's innocence, perhaps she could buy it from him. She knew the man too well to believe he would give away such a prize.

But if she received Rochedale, she would have to be alone with him. Robin was out as usual. Lady Easterbury was making her customary morning calls and Miss Twyll was lying down with another of the frequent headaches she'd suffered since the attack in the park.

Although Lucia knew how vicious the villain who presently styled himself 'Sir Winston Rochedale' could be, the words, 'Your Grace's innocence' blazed up at her from the card. She desperately wanted to prove that innocence. "I will see Sir Winston, Laddock," she said, "but you must linger in the foyer as long as he is here. Interrupt us in ten minutes' time to say that a crisis in the kitchen requires my immediate attention."

"A crisis, Your Grace?"

"Make something up, Laddock! I will not spend more than ten minutes in that snake's company."

Laddock followed Lucia downstairs, making a great show of inspecting the foyer for dust as she entered the Blue Salon, her heart pounding. Although panic threatened to choke her, she pasted an insincere smile onto a deceptively calm countenance..

"You've come a long way from thieving in the streets or palming cards in some gaming hell, dear girl!" Sir Winston said, his oily grin reminding her of a crocodile she had once seen at a zoological exhibit.

"I understand that you have some information regarding His Grace's innocence..." she said.

"That I have! But it's more than information! It's vindication! I have a letter! And it shall be yours for a mere five thousand guineas."

"A letter...?" Lucia's mind leaped to Giles's exonerating letter, supposedly lost during Robin's mad dash across England.

"From Lord Mountheathe to Lord Robert Amberley," Rochedale obligingly confirmed. "It proves beyond any doubt that Bridland abducted Lady Malkent and that Amberley rode to save her."

"I have heard of such a letter, but I was told it had vanished. How did you acquire it?"

"Let us merely say that I...er...'found' it during a visit to Heathe House."

Lucia stared so long and hard at him that he began to squirm. "How did Lord Mountheathe get the letter and why would he preserve such damning evidence of his guilt?" she asked. "Were I in his position, I would have burned a document of this nature the instant it was in my hands."

"How should I know? Giles Bridland is not always a rational man! Perhaps he wanted a souvenir of his famous adventure! Do you want the letter or don't you? My price is five thousand guineas!"

"Five thousand!"

"Surely the wealthy Duchess of Lynkellyn does not find a paltry five thousand daunting? I daresay you spend that much a quarter just on clothes."

'Daunting!' Lucia frowned. 'Impossible', belike!' Robin chose not to share his magnificent fortune with her in the form of pocket money and he would never agree to give her five thousand guineas, even if he were home long enough for her to ask him for it. Nevertheless, she felt she had to have that letter...if it existed. "It will take me a few days to get the money and, of course, I'll want to see the letter before I give you a penny."

"Very well. Lady Malkent's ball is three days hence. We can meet there. If you have the blunt, we can discuss the exchange."

"We will talk in the ballroom, sir. No more gardens!" Lucia tried to ignore the twisting pain that knotted her stomach. Was she walking into a trap?

"As you like. Until then, dear girl." Sir Winston gave her a predatory smile. Bowing, he captured her hand and brought it to his lips.

When he was gone, Lucia pulled a handkerchief out of her sleeve cuff and rubbed at her hand, desperate to scrub away Rochedale's filthy kiss. Her stomach still roiling, she sank into a chair, her mind full of questions. Why had Mountheathe kept such a damning letter? How had it fallen into Rochedale's hands? Why hadn't he blackmailed Mountheathe with it? The letter was surely worth more as an instrument of blackmail than as an item for sale.

Lucia rang for Laddock and ordered tea, sitting back with a steaming cup in hand to consider how she might raise five thousand guineas to buy Rochedale's letter...if it existed. As she sipped her tea, she staunchly ignored the queasy twisting in her stomach that dealing with a man like Gaston... Rochedale... invariably induced.

Hailing a chair to leave Berkeley Square, Sir Winston smiled. The duchess was falling neatly into his trap; he had Mountheathe's twenty-five hundred tucked safely away; and his future promised even greater profit.

Sir Winston had decided that Giles's plot was a bit shortsighted. Instead of killing the wench, a damned sorry waste of prime flesh in Rochedale's opinion, he intended to spirit her out of England, forcibly induce a miscarriage and sell her into a brothel or perhaps an Arabian harem.

Arabia! The very thing! he thought. With her blue eyes, ivory skin, and voluptuous figure, Lucia Lightfingers would fetch a pretty penny amongst the sheiks, assuming he could keep childbearing from thickening her waist. Then, of course, one had to mourn the loss of her maidenhead. "Damn that Gus!" Sir Winston muttered disgustedly. Amberley had lessened her value by at least a thousand guineas.

After a moment, Rochedale smiled again. With the wealth Lucia brought him and the money he had milked from Mountheathe, he could live like a nabob in Arabia, a land full of enjoyable memories for him. Life was good!

Riding in Hyde Park, Norworth reined in his horse on a bridle path that intersected the main thoroughfare and glared at what he considered the passing circus. Sir William Blayne stopped beside him, following his gaze. "What's amiss?"

"Damnation! Hasn't the man got the least consideration for his wife?" Peter growled as he watched the Duke of Lynkellyn flirt outrageously in an open carriage with three under-dressed, over-painted ladybirds. Their raucous guffaws were attracting stares from the promenading gentry.

Laughter crinkled the corners of Sir William's eyes. "Since when do you censure faithless husbands, sir?"

"Since Her Grace acquainted me with the anguish of faithful wives!" the viscount snapped, then relaxed a bit. "I'm sorry, Will. It's just that Her Grace has managed to adopt me as some sort of older brother and confides in me as though...as though I could actually lend her assistance. The devil of it is, I do want to help her, but I can't light upon a way."

"Help her?" Blayne's brows knit with suspicion as he studied the viscount.

"Although she won't admit it, she wants to win the heart of that unrepentant reprobate!" His mouth tightening, Peter nodded at Amberley's carriage as it trundled away. "Odd as it seems, she holds him in affection."

"Not planning to seduce Her Grace yourself, are you? Wouldn't do at all, Peter!"

Norworth smiled. "She's a devilish beauty, I'll grant, and when I first met her, I was tempted, but now... It would be like seducing my sister. The duchess has made me care about her, though, and I'd like to see her happy. Why she must needs waste her love on such an unworthy...'rogue' for lack of a better word... as Amberley..." He shook his head, frowning.

Lord Mountheathe and Miss Lannington bowed past in an open coach and Peter's frown deepened. Giles tipped his hat to Norworth, a smug smirk upon his face. Peter itched to knock it off.

As Peter scowled at Mountheathe, Sir William said, "You've developed a tendre for Malkent's niece? Taking little thing, I'll admit, but she's hardly in your usual style, is she?"

"If, by that, you mean that she isn't some over-painted, under- dressed Cyprian to flash on my arm at Vauxhall or the theater, you're quite right." Fury rumbled in Peter's voice. "Miss Lannington told me she couldn't drive out with me today because she had a prior engagement. I should have known it was with that snake."

"Snake! Mountheathe? I say! Giles is a most worthy gentleman!"

"He'll be worthy of my steel if he insults Miss Lannington!"

"Now you sound just like the Rogue. Too hot-headed by half!"

"His Grace and I are in happy accord regarding Giles Bridland. The man is vermin!" Peter turned his horse toward the park's exit. "I am for home, Will, before I am driven to issue a challenge to both the duke and his cousin!"

As Giles's carriage flashed past Viscount Norworth, Concordia swiveled her head around to catch a glimpse of him. Norworth's attentions were more marked of late, she thought with measured optimism, and the time they spent together seemed magical, but despite his reputation as a rake, he had never pushed beyond the mildest flirtation with her. Perhaps his frequent calls were merely intended to irritate Lord Mountheathe. She knew that the gentlemen were not on the best of terms and Peter was constantly warning her that Mountheathe could not be trusted.

Giles, however, was not a suitor to toss cavalierly away. He was rich, titled, handsome, charming...and her heart sank at the prospect of a lifetime spent with him. During the last few weeks, she'd caught frightening glimpses of an ugly, savage man beneath his polished veneer and if she married him, she was certain she'd see a great deal more of that lurking beast. Nevertheless, she squared her shoulders, determined to accept if he offered. Any husband was better than no husband!

Having searched Lynkellyn House, to no avail, for any money Robin might have stashed away, Lucia decided to lay the entire matter of Rochedale's letter before him. The night after Sir Winston's visit, when the house was quiet and the servants sleeping, she crept down in her nightgown to sit on the stairs and wait in the cool darkness for him to come home.

As the clock chimed three in the morning, she stood on the upstairs landing, watching him stagger into the house and cross the foyer to the library. Wrinkling her nose at the stench of stale brandy wafting through the air, she silently followed him, pausing uncertainly on the library's threshold.

Having thrown his coat across one overstuffed leather chair, Robin sprawled in its companion. His head rested against the back and side wing, one of his legs dangling carelessly over the arm. His eyes were closed and his stertorous breathing filled the room.

Lucia edged forward, her gold robe de chambre glinting in the faint light of the banked hearth fire. Tiptoeing across the room, she bent over him, distressed at the dark circles under his eyes and the deep lines of unhappiness etched around his mouth.

With a sighing breath, she steeled herself to wake him. Reaching out to touch him, her hand brushed against his coat pocket and she heard a distinct clink. She whirled to see if the noise had roused him, but he only shifted in his chair without opening his eyes.

Lucia touched the outside of the coat pocket again, feeling the unmistakable outline of coins within. Withdrawing a heavy purse, she opened it to see dozens of guineas gleaming in the firelight. She found another bulging purse in his other pocket and smiled, imagining his joy when she handed him Mountheathe's letter.

Then she frowned. Not only was she stealing from Robin, she thought dismally, but she would have to lie to him if he ever thought to tax her with the missing money. Although she knew she had the best of motives, she was still thieving.

With a sad little shrug, she scooped up both purses and hurried to the door. She had just crossed the threshold when a slurred voice drawled, "Where away, lovely Jezebel? No, don't tell me! 'Dear Lord Peter' waits impatiently in your bed, n'est-ce pas?"

Lucia tossed the purses into the hall, slamming the library doors shut to cover the sound of their fall, and whirled to face her husband, endeavoring to hide a guilty conscience with a bright smile. "I...I heard you come in, Robin, and I wanted to be sure you were...comfortable."

"I'm content to while away my time in the library until you've escorted your lover from the premises, if that's what worries you." Robin straightened in his chair and gazed at her from beneath sleepy lids.

"I don't have any lover!"

"Tiens! Well, I daresay Norworth isn't much, but I wouldn't dismiss him entirely!" Robin laughed as he staggered out of his chair and lurched toward her.

She took an involuntary step back. "I am exhausted, Your Grace. I'm going to sleep. We'll discuss this in the morning."

"I won't be here when you waken, my sweet. Previous engagement."

"Where are you going?" she asked, backing a little further.

He gripped her arms, holding her fast. His breath was hot and rancid on her face and the menace in his eyes made her cringe. "Do you really care, ma petite Jezebel? After all, while I am out chasing whores, you are free to share your favors with your 'dear Lord Peter'. I only hope he isn't diseased! After raising eyebrows with my fastidious tastes, 'twould be ironic, would it not, to catch the pox from my pretty Jezebel at home. That is, naturellement, if Your Grace ever deigns to let me touch you again!"

A thunderous fury had replaced the drunken lethargy in his eyes. Lucia's heart drummed with terror, but anger stiffened her spine. "You're touching me now, Your Grace, and it is most painful!"

He laughed and his fingers dug deeper into her flesh. "Bon! You deserve a little of the pain! Shall I tell you how I spend my nights while you dally with Norworth, Lucia? I begin with wenches and wine, as much of both as I can stomach, then when I've drunk enough to deaden the agonies of my past and my marriage, I frequent London's finest gaming hells...or its lowest ones. I'm not particular, you see, because I detest them all. I may have lost you, but I've won steadily at the tables for the past week. Your endeavors at reforming me have failed! Perhaps I should reform you! Teach you that a dutiful wife doesn't take up with every rakehell she meets and, most important of all, she never lies to her husband! About anything!"

The steely fury in his eyes panicked Lucia and she struggled against his hold. "I am telling you the truth, Robin. I have no lover. I have never been unfaithful to you and you know it!"

"I can smell Tallant's cologne in your hair, Lucia! You have been with him recently!" he accused her.

She paled. "H-he escorted Aunt Corrina and me to Lady Chantwell's musicale, but I assure you he spent the whole evening at Concordia's side." Glaring a defiant challenge at Robin, Lucia surreptitiously tried to gauge the effect of this reluctant confession upon him.

The anger in his eyes slowly disappeared, chased away by a much warmer look, and his grip on her arms became a massaging caress. He stroked her cheek with one trembling hand and lowered his head to find

her mouth. His lips brushed hers, gently beguiling, and her mouth opened invitingly. He plunged his questing tongue deep inside, his groin tightening with desire as her body arched against his.

Straightening to stare into the endless blue depths of her eyes, he let his soul drown in the tantalizing illusions of love that swirled there, beckoning him, welcoming him so sweetly... so serenely... so falsely...

Suddenly the tender light in his eyes died and he pushed her away. "Mon Dieu! What a maudlin fool I've become! You've bewitched me enough for one night, I think! Get you gone! Get out of my sight!"

"Robin!" Lucia's stricken tones were hardly above a whisper. She started toward him, moved by the bitter hurt in his eyes.

He flung himself back into his chair and reached for a decanter of brandy on a nearby table. He shakily splashed some of the golden liquid into an accompanying glass, downed it, and refilled the goblet.

"Robin... Why don't you come to bed? I am certain you must be exhausted..." The words died on her lips as he turned a face overflowing with loathing upon her.

"Get out!" he snarled.

With a sob, she fled. Outside the library door, she grabbed her stolen guineas and ran up the stairs, promising herself that once Robin's innocence was proven, she would indeed get out. Forever!

Chapter 23:

In Which His Grace Quarrels While Mountheathe Plots

"I can't believe the Rogue would do this!" Shaking his head, Tracy watched his guests circle to the strains of a small orchestra. "A fortnight ago, Robin was raging on about ridding himself of his cane so he could lead Her Grace into the dance and now he hasn't even the decency to make an appearance at our ball!"

Sir William gazed past the dancers at the duchess, who sat beside Lady Easterbury. "Her Grace seems to be doing quite well without him, Tracy."

"Too well!" the earl snapped. "If that boy doesn't attend to his wife, he's going to lose her and, devil take it, it will be his own damned fault!"

Malkent and Blayne watched as a gentleman approached her grace, bowed, and led her into the set just forming. Sir William said, "Thing is, the Rogue believes Lucia has taken up with Norworth or someone

like him and..."

"Norworth!" Tracy snorted. "That's a hum! Peter's dangling after our Connie! Practically haunts my drawing room!"

"That doesn't worry you? After all,... rakehell, you know."

"Amazing as it sounds, Will, I believe Tallant is in earnest. He asked my permission to pay his addresses to Concordia this morning." Tracy's eyes followed Peter and Concordia through the intricate weavings of a contre dance. "He had better mean marriage! I'll not have Connie in a decline over that wild, young pup."

"That bad, is it?"

"Thank God he's so eminently eligible! I'd be at my wits' end and frantically writing to her father else." Tracy gave Sir William a long-suffering smile, then glanced at his niece. She curtsied to the bowing viscount as the music ended, then straightened to take his arm, her cheeks flushed a becoming pink, her eyes sparkling dreamily, and a large, lovely smile curving her lips.

"Love seems to agree with her," Will said, "and with him."

"Much more so than with our sweet little duchess." Malkent grimly watched Lucia's dance partner return her to Lady Easterbury's side. Sauntering over to the duchess, Sir Winston Rochedale bowed and offered his arm. Smiling nervously, she allowed him to lead her to some empty chairs in a quiet corner of the ballroom. "Damn!" Tracy's features tightened with anger. "Damn!"

"Rather a rum customer to be so cozy with Her Grace!" Will muttered.

"Where the devil is the Rogue? He should be here to protect Lucia from the likes of that bounder."

"Why did you invite such an undesirable?" Blayne asked, shaking his head.

"We didn't! He came as Mountheathe's guest. Val sent Giles an invitation before I realized..." Malkent stopped in mid-sentence, staring as Lucia bestowed upon Rochedale a broad, bright smile. Tracy swore again, threatening to hunt the Rogue down and drag him to the ball before Lucia fell under the spell of... he cast a darkling glare at Rochedale...some out-and-outer.

"I don't think you'll have to go far, Tracy. Look!"

Magnificent in midnight blue and silver, Robin sauntered into the room, greeted his hostess, then scanned the crowd. His jaw hardened when he saw Lucia in earnest conversation with Sir Winston

Rochedale.

Lucia slid into a chair next to Rochedale with a swirl of blue satin skirts. "Do you have the letter?"

"Undoubtedly, dear girl. Do you have the brass?" His raking glance caused her to blush.

"Well, I -- that is, I have some of it." Her hands shook as she smoothed her skirts across her lap. "Would you not consider lowering your price a little...for old times' sake?"

Rochedale's watery eyes hardened. "I would not!"

Lucia met his gaze steadily. "I have three thousand, seven hundred and sixty pounds. It shall be yours when you give me the letter."

"Perhaps I should speak to Lord Mountheathe. I'm certain he will not hesitate to buy and he will pay the entire five thousand. That was my first inclination and I obviously should have heeded it." He started to rise and Lucia reached out to him almost, he fancied, in supplication.

"Wait! Perhaps I can get more from...somewhere."

He sat down again. "Bridland will pay, you know. He can't afford to ignore me. I only offered you this opportunity because I live to help old friends. I am too soft-hearted, I suppose," he sighed, shaking his head, "but, of course, if you cannot meet my price..."

"I will have it for you," Lucia promised with husky intensity, though she hadn't a clue where to find the necessary funds. "Just tell me when and where we are to meet."

"Tomorrow at dawn in front of Newgate. If you are not there with the money when the sun rises, I shall assume you are not interested and take the letter to Mountheathe."

"I shall be there!" She smiled at him, masking her misgivings.

"See that you are. I will not wait for you, dear girl, if you are late." He offered her his arm as the dance ended and escorted her back to Lady Easterbury.

Eyes smoldering, fists clenched, Robin started toward Lucia and Rochedale. He had not traversed half the ballroom when Sir Winston returned Lucia to her aunt. As Robin halted uncertainly, Malkent

appeared beside him. "I'd like a word in private with you, Rogue, if you please."

In his library, Tracy poured claret and settled comfortably behind his desk, his feet propped on its polished surface. As Robin took a chair and accepted a glass of wine, his smoky eyes met Malkent's with deceptive mildness. "Well?"

"I trust, Rogue, that you will not disrupt Valeria's ball with a public continuation of your private quarrels?"

"If I see that vulture, Rochedale, hovering over Lucia anymore tonight, I cannot answer for my actions," Robin said.

"Yes, well, I don't care for the man above half myself. Mountheathe brought him and Val is too polite to refuse him our hospitality."

Robin's lips tightened, but he said nothing, sipping his wine with deliberate calm.

Tracy drummed his fingers on his desk and glared at Amberley for a few moments, then suddenly exploded. "Damn it, Rogue! What the devil are you about, flaunting half the Cyprians in London under the ton's nose? That is no way to gain acceptance, sir! Devil take it! You're a married man!"

Mocking laughter glinted in Robin's eyes. "We can't all be paragons of fidelity like you, Tracy. Surely you remember how quickly I tire of women? I was mad for Lucia when we married, but it has been almost four months now. My lady wife fills me with ennui. I crave excitement and variety and I find it in a simple evening of pleasure in the haunts of gentlemen."

"Pleasure!" Malkent snorted. "Over the past fortnight, I've watched you cut a glittering swath through the demimonde, pursuing dissipation as if the devil owned your soul. You drink deeply. You play deeply. You win...and win...and win! You even bed a ladybird upon occasion, but I'd wager Malkent Chase you've not had a minute's joy from any of it. Your eyes are glassy. You never laugh or even smile. You look like death, man! What's going on? Did you quarrel with Her Grace?"

Robin stared into the swirling ruby of his claret. "What is it you want of me, Tracy?"

"I've told you already that I only want to help you. Let me be your friend, damn it all!" the earl almost shouted.

"Nobody helps anybody without expecting something in return, my lord, and the price is usually too high!"

"If every good deed has a price, Robin, what's yours?" Tracy asked. "I made some inquiries and discovered that you've assumed financial responsibility for all of Mountheathe's abandoned charities."

What are you getting out of that?"

"Giles's profound irritation! It's most gratifying, je vous assure, and I'll thank you to stay out of my affairs in future."

Tracy sipped his claret, giving Robin a long, measuring look. "You could at least be a little more discreet in your raking, Rogue. You have severely upset Her Grace with your scandalous escapades."

"She appears to have found ample solace in the company of her 'dear Lord Peter'!"

"You're off the mark there, Robin. Norworth asked my permission to pay his addresses to Concordia just this morning. I expect to announce their betrothal any day."

"I am certain he shall be a model husband! I understand that his affairs, unlike mine, are exceptionally discreet."

"Devil take it, Rogue! What happened to you? You never used to be so cynical!"

"People stopped trusting my word, Tracy, and I grew rather less naïve about the world." Bitterness and rigid anger rested upon Robin's countenance like a tangible mask. "Norworth means to have Lucia and I've seen the way she looks at him! A thousand wedding bands or betrothal announcements won't keep them apart! She's already begun to plan for the elopement. She has stolen some thirty-seven hundred pounds from me. Lucia Lightfingers, enfin!"

"She has stolen from you?" Tracy was stunned. "Are you certain? Perhaps it was a servant or..."

Robin's laugh was cold and harsh. "I'm in no doubt as to the identity of ma petite voleuse. Assuming I was asleep, she stole the brass in my presence."

"And you didn't stop her?"

"No!"

"Why not?"

"Because... Because... Je ne sais pas! If she bolts with Norworth and he later abandons her, she will need money, especially if she is burdened with a babe. I would not have her cast herself, penniless, upon the world." The tenor of Robin's voice had changed and when his eyes met Tracy's, agony writhed in their grey depths. "Once she escapes, she'll never willingly come to me for assistance and God only knows how long it will take me to find her." Robin finished his wine, set down the glass and rose, obviously chafing to be away.

Tracy was silent for a moment, staring down into the dregs of his wine. "Love hurts like the very devil, doesn't it, Rogue?"

"I won't even pretend to understand your meaning, mon cher Tracy." Robin's drawl was cold and sardonic. Tracy raised his head to discover that Robin had himself once more in hand. He lounged against the back of his chair in easy, insolent familiarity, his lips curved in a derisive smile and the pain in his smoky eyes hidden beneath drooping lids.

"Nonsense! Anyone with eyes can see that you and Her Grace have..."

"Une mariage de convenance and nothing more," Robin said, rising. "If you will excuse me, my lord, I am pledged to Bellefield for cards." He bowed and departed.

In the midst of the bustling ball, Lady Malkent's garden was an inviting retreat of quiet walks and romantic alcoves fitted with stone benches. In one of these alcoves, Mountheathe, his face slathered with the white paint of the fashionably pale, offered matrimony to Concordia.

"M-Marry you, my lord!" The lady echoed his proposal as if it were a totally alien idea. She searched his face, seeking a warm response within herself to his smile. Dismay washed over her at her heart's apathy.

"We shall have the grandest wedding of the Season!" Giles said, not waiting to hear her answer. "Oh, Concordia, you have made me the happiest of men!" He pulled her into his arms, trapping her in an iron embrace.

"My lord! I have not said..." she protested, struggling. Giles's lips smothered her words as he kissed her with the possessive passion of a man triumphant in conquest. His mouth bruised hers, his teeth gnawing at her lips until she fancied she tasted blood. She tried to push him away, but his arms imprisoned her. An aversion amounting to panic possessed her.

A polite clearing of the throat caused Mountheathe to raise his head. Taking advantage of this distraction, a gasping Concordia broke free of his embrace.

Lord Norworth stood just inside the alcove, his eyelids drooping in sleepy boredom, his mouth set in a grim, hard line. "I am sorry to disturb you, my lord, Miss Lannington, but I believe this is my dance?" He looked expectantly at the lady.

"Wish us happy, Norworth! Concordia has just agreed to be my wife!" Giles crowed.

Peter froze, his eyes shifting first to Mountheathe and his triumphant gloat, then to Concordia, pale and

decidedly subdued considering the grand news. "Indeed!" he drawled. "In that case, I will not press my claim for a dance upon you, Miss Lannington. I'm certain you and your...fiancé...will want to be alone. May I tender my wishes for your greatest happiness?" Peter bowed, whirled on his heel, and strolled away.

Concordia's world collapsed as she watched him go. She took a step toward the retreating viscount, but Giles pulled her back into his arms. "And now, my love, let us plan our future."

Furious, Concordia slapped him and he released her, rubbing his stinging cheek. "I am not your love and I have not accepted your offer!" she said. "I will never wed you, my lord! I don't care for your high-handed ways and I won't be dragged, willy-nilly, to the altar by a man who hasn't the decency to wait for an answer to his proposal. I would appreciate it if, in the future, your lordship would refrain from mauling me. Good evening, my lord!"

Eyes snapping, cheeks red and back stiff, Concordia stalked out of the alcove. Stunned, Giles watched her leave. She was definitely not his meek and demure Val, he thought, shaking his head.

Determined not to forfeit the Lannington dowry without a struggle, he strolled back to the ballroom, contemplating ways to get Concordia to the altar. After dismissing several ideas out of hand, he decided to opt for a familiar method. He would abduct Concordia and carry her off to Gretna Green. She would have but two options, then; marriage or ruin; and he doubted she'd choose the latter.

Giles smiled, certain of his success, for he'd have no interfering cousin rushing in to save the maiden this time. He had had a brief private word with Rochedale and knew that Sir Winston was set to murder the Rogue's doxy at dawn tomorrow. Robin would be far too busy making funeral arrangements to rescue anybody.

Concordia rushed into the ballroom from the garden, then stopped, smoothed her skirts, and pasted a bright smile upon a distinctly gloomy face. Endeavoring to appear calm, she scanned the room frantically. Spying Lucia sitting beside Lady Easterbury, she hurried over to her as quickly as proper decorum would allow. "Your Grace! Would you care to take a turn about the room with me?" she said.

Concordia's suggestion was couched in casual tones, but the intense plea in her eyes hastened Lucia's already willing consent. The women linked arms and set off at an ambling pace.

They found chairs in a secluded corner of the ballroom and sat down. "Oh, Your Grace! The most terrible thing has happened!" Concordia's words tumbled out in a low breathless rush. "Lord Mountheathe has offered for me!"

"Am I to wish you happy, then?" Lucia clasped the other girl's hands, striving to keep her own opinion

of her cousin-in-law from coloring her response.

"No! I did not accept! He...he is not the person I believed him to be!"

"Oh, my dear! I am so sorry if he has hurt you."

"It isn't that! I -- there is another gentleman whom I had hoped would..." Concordia turned her face away from the crowded room as tears spilled from her eyes. "He-he knows about Lord Mountheathe's proposal and saw him kiss me...quite against my will, I do assure you," she confessed between sobs. "And he looked so... so... I have lost him forever! I know it!"

Lucia turned her body a little, trying to shield Concordia from curious stares. "I'm sure that can't be true if...if this other gentleman really loves you."

"I don't know whether he loves me...loved me, for he'll nev- never come near me again!" Concordia sniffed.

Lucia gave her a handkerchief from her reticule. "Who could ever stay away from you, as pretty and witty and sweet as you are?"

"L-Lord Norworth could. He can have any woman he wants! I love him so much, but how could he ever care for me after... after..." Concordia shook with incoherent sobs.

Feeling stupid and helpless, Lucia stared down at Concordia's gleaming chestnut tresses as the younger woman wept into the handkerchief. She wondered that Miss Lannington did not go to her aunt with her romantic problems and was just about to suggest it when Concordia lifted her tear-stained face, a small, hopeful smile shadowing her mouth. "You are a close friend of Lord Norworth, aren't you, Your Grace?"

Lucia did not answer and Concordia plunged on. "Maybe you c-could find him and tell him that I-I am not to marry Lord Mountheathe after all. Tell him it was all a hum and that I-I-"

"That you love him?"

"Heavens, no! Don't tell him that! He...he is sure to laugh at such girlish sentiment!" Concordia twisted Lucia's handkerchief until the tortured wisp of silk and lace ripped, then stared, dismayed, at the shredded cloth between her fingers. Lucia assured her that she would speak to the viscount and the ladies rose, strolling into the garden, where Concordia dried her tears and composed herself before returning to the ballroom.

Lucia found Peter muttering curses as he paced a quiet, dimly lit garden alcove. "Is anything amiss, my lord?" she said, stepping into the circle of light cast by a single lantern. "I was passing by when I heard your voice."

He hesitated. "No, nothing is amiss," he said after a moment. "Won't you sit down, Lucia?" He bowed her toward a marble bench at the back of the alcove.

"I can tell that something has upset you, Peter!" Lucia said as they sat. "We are friends, are we not? If you need help or a sympathetic ear, I am here."

Chirping crickets filled the silence as Peter stared into large, blue eyes that beckoned confidences freely given, yet promised a welcome even if they were not. Had he ever had any resolve to keep his distress at Concordia's betrothal a secret, it disappeared beneath the spell of Lucia's compassionate gaze.

"I have the devil's own luck... begging your pardon, Lucia!... when it comes to love," he bitterly confessed as he stared into the darkness. "I have searched for love, for the right woman for years; for a lifetime, it seems; and now, when I finally find her, she betrothes herself to someone else before I have a chance to offer for her. It doesn't bear thinking on, especially when the bas... the man is little more than a barbarian, in point of fact. How can she place herself, her future, her life in the hands of that...that...!" Peter sprang up to pace the alcove once more, fury in his stride. "I'll have his rotten, lily-livered heart out for the buzzards! Dam- dashed if I won't!"

Lucia rose and laid a hand upon his arm. Feigning ignorance of his rival, she asked, "Whose heart would you sacrifice, my lord?"

"Giles Bridland's! Bad 'cess to him!"

"Did the lady actually say she was going to marry Mountheathe?"

"'Twas Mountheathe did all the crowing! The way that beast pawed her...! I tell you it is past bearing! I shall ask Bellefield to be my second! If you will excuse me, Your Grace..." He started to walk away.

"Before you do anything rash, my lord," Lucia said, raising her voice a little, "would it not be wise to speak to the young lady in question?" Peter turned to stare at her in the half-light. "Miss Lannington confessed to me that Mountheathe had offered for her this evening...and that she had refused him."

"But I saw... They were embracing and...and kissing!"

"Mountheathe, it seems, did not wait for an answer to his proposal, electing to force his attentions upon Concordia in the assumption that she would accept him. It was at that moment that you happened upon them."

Peter searched her face. "Truly?"

Lucia stiffened. "I would not lie to you, my lord!"

Norworth took her hands in his. "No, I didn't mean... I know that you are all that is good and honorable, Lucia, but such news is almost beyond believing! She refused the filthy beast!" With a boyish laugh, he swung Lucia's arms out a bit and danced her around in an exultant jig.

"My lord, please!" She laughed breathlessly. "I am not fit for country dances at the moment."

Peter abruptly halted his celebration. "Forgive me, Lucia. I had forgotten your...your delicate condition. Here! Let me help you to the bench." He put one arm around her waist, preparing to lead her to the back of the alcove.

"No. I'm fine. I just need to catch my breath." She smiled up into his concerned face.

"I can't begin to tell you how much you've done for me tonight, Lucia." Peter returned her smile, his other hand coming to rest on her waist as well. "I shall be the happiest man in the world if...that is... Do you think she'll have me for a husband? I'm not exactly a saint."

"Confidentially, my lord," Lucia whispered, leaning forward a little, "I don't think she'll settle for anyone else,... but that is for her to say."

"Truly? She told you as much?" Peter stared intently down at her, yearning to believe.

"Why don't you ask Concordia?"

"By God, I will!" he grinned. "Thank you, Lucia! I don't know how I shall ever repay you for mending my heart!" He hugged her in gratitude and joy.

"I'm so glad I could help!" Lucia returned his embrace, sister to brother.

"Clandestine embraces! What an odd sort of assistance, ma douce!" Robin's cold drawl slashed through the couple's rapport. They jumped apart guiltily.

Her eyes wide, Lucia stared at her husband's tall, muscular figure silhouetted against the darkness at the alcove's entrance. Although his face was in shadow, she could sense the raw fury in his steely voice and taut stance. She licked her suddenly dry lips. "We were just... that is, Lord Norworth is going to offer for Miss Lannington. I was just counseling and... and... encouraging him." Even in her own ears, the explanation rang false.

"Most commendable," Robin sneered, entering the alcove. "But then, you are quite adept at 'encouraging' men, aren't you, my sweet?"

"I'll not have you address the lady in such an insolent tone, Your Grace!" Peter stepped in front of Lucia. "She was merely advising me upon the best way to approach Miss Lannington."

"If you do not know how to take a woman in your arms and propose marriage to her, my lord, I hardly think my wife is the proper person to enlighten you!" Robin growled the last words through gritted teeth as his fury broke its leash. "I'll speak to Lucia in any manner I please and you will grant me the courtesy of keeping your lecherous claws off her."

"If you don't want another man touching your wife, Your Grace, stay at home and protect her instead of shamelessly jaunting about with every Cyprian in London!" Peter's temper was rapidly rising to meet the duke's.

"My marriage concerns no one save Lucia and myself and I'll thank you to stay out of it!" Robin snarled.

"It becomes my concern when Lucia is reduced to tears in public. You should be ashamed! No! More than that, by God! If I had my way, you'd be horse-whipped!"

Lucia had been looking from one man to the other in growing dismay. They had obviously forgotten her presence as they circled each other, preparing to attack. "Gentlemen, please!" she pleaded. "Let us forget the whole incident." They seemed not to hear her as they glared at each other. She grabbed Robin's arm. "For God's sake, nothing happened!"

He set her aside gently, but firmly. "This is no longer your affair, madame, if you'll pardon the pun," he sneered, not glancing in her direction. "You had better leave before you are hurt."

She rushed up to Peter and touched his arm. "Please, my lord, let it go! It doesn't matter!"

"He has insulted you for the last time, Lucia!" Norworth's dark eyes burned with avenging zeal.

"Robin, it was all quite innocent, really! If you would only listen...!"

"Partez!" Amberley commanded in a short, angry burst.

Lucia stamped her foot in fury and frustration, saying, "Oh! I hope you massacre each other!" She fled the alcove to find help. Behind her, the men hurled vicious insults at each other and the sounds of a scuffle followed.

Lucia raced back to the ballroom, forcing herself to enter at a decorous pace. Searching discreetly, but

urgently for Lord Malkent, she found him within a few minutes in the card room and requested a private word. When she swiftly outlined the disaster unfolding in his garden, he said, "I shall put a stop to their brawling soon enough, Your Grace! Do you wish to come with me? Not a place for a lady, of course."

"No!" Lucia's voice was choked with pain. "I-I don't want to go back. I just...just want to go home. If he asks, tell him I returned to Lynkellyn House, my lord." Tracy nodded, having no need to inquire which 'him' she meant.

Fighting to hide the hurt, angry tears which threatened to engulf her, Lucia hurried away to find Lady Easterbury while Tracy, his mouth set in mulish lines, collected Sir William Blayne and stalked into the garden to confront the combatants.

Concordia intercepted Lucia as she and her aunt said their farewells to Lady Malkent. While Lady Corinna was speaking to Valeria, Concordia pulled Lucia aside. "What did Lord Norworth say?"

Lucia's eyes, brimming with misery, met hers. "He doesn't want me!" Concordia cried in dismay, staring at her grace's woeful face. "He told you he doesn't love me!" Tears sprang into Concordia's eyes and Lucia, having safely masked her own emotions, smiled a little as she reached out to her friend.

"No, my dear. He loves you very much and he wants to marry you. He was ready to call Lord Mountheathe out when I found him, but I persuaded him against it."

"Too bad! How exciting to have a duel fought over one!"

"Exciting isn't the word I would have chosen!" Lucia said, her eyes glinting as she thought of the men she had left in the garden to tear each other apart.

"You told him, didn't you, that I refused Lord Mountheathe?"

"Yes, but not that you were in love with him. I leave that to you."

"Oh, thank you, Your Grace! Thank you!" Concordia threw her arms around Lucia.

"May God bless both of you, my dear Concordia."

Valeria claimed Lucia's attention and Concordia strolled away, a dreamy smile on her lips. A few minutes later, Lady Easterbury and the duchess left Malkent House, sweeping, unaware, past Giles and a footman in deep conversation.

"You will take this message to Miss Concordia Lannington and wait for an answer, then bring her reply to me." Giles pressed a coin into the servant's hand. "I shall await you here in the foyer. When you return with Miss Lannington's answer, you shall have another crown."

The footman plainly found the entire proceeding highly irregular and his narrowing eyes caused Giles to add, "You shall have a third when you have fulfilled all my requirements."

The prospect of such riches acquired with so little effort deadened the servant's suspicions. He bowed to Mountheathe, placed the folded letter along with quill and ink on a silver tray, and entered the ballroom.

The footman presented the tray to Concordia, informing her that a reply was requested. She smiled as she took the note and bade the footman wait. She took her letter to a quiet corner and unfolded it with trembling fingers. The words leaped joyfully up at her.

My dearest love,

Meet me at the garden's rear gate at

midnight. We have a great deal to discuss.

Although the letter was unsigned, she was certain it must be from Peter. She beckoned the footman to her and wrote 'yes' in a firm hand at the bottom of the page.

When the footman returned to Mountheathe, Giles opened the note and tossed the servant a coin. "One last thing and you shall have the rest of your reward. I need more paper and a messenger to take a note to Heathe House in Grosvenor Square."

The servant brought the paper and Giles wrote a note directing his staff to pack his traveling carriage with a week's change of dress, some food and wine, his locked strongbox, and his medicine case containing vials of a strong drug he used, so he claimed, for headaches. The coach was to arrive at the mews behind Malkent House at midnight, harnessed with his bays and devoid of lights and attendants except for Madden, Giles's most trusted minion, to act as coachman.

Finding Lynkellyn and Norworth locked in furious combat, Malkent and Blayne grabbed their arms from behind and pulled them apart. Struggling against the earl's firm grip, Robin snarled, "Damn you, Tracy, let me go! I'll not be cuckolded!"

"If you'd treat your wife with honor, you'd have no cause to worry, sirrah!" Peter twisted against Sir William's hold.

"You know nothing whatsoever about it, Norworth!" Robin snapped.

Blood trickled from Amberley's lip and a large bruise darkened Norworth's jaw. Their fine clothing ripped and soiled, their intricate, silvered coiffures reduced to loose, drooping tresses with ribands askew and patches of powder rubbed away, the combatants waved bloody knuckles at each other, ready for the second round.

"I know that you have made Her Grace miserable with your outrageous conduct and I find that unforgivable, sirrah!" Peter said.

"Stay away from my wife, Norworth, or I vow I will run you through!" With a grunt, Robin threw off Tracy's restraining hold.

"Your threats don't frighten me, Amberley. I consider Lucia a very dear friend and I shall not abandon her... especially to a fiend like you!" Peter tore himself out of Blayne's grasp and took a step toward Robin, his fists clenched at his sides

"A dear friend'? You were embracing her, you cur! You were a heartbeat from kissing her!" Robin lunged at Peter, his long, strong fingers curling around the viscount's neck and tightening inexorably.

The force of Robin's attack knocked Peter onto his back and Amberley fell on top of him, still squeezing his throat. Tracy and Sir William charged forward to pull Robin off his victim, each grabbing an arm.

"This isn't the way to settle anything, Robin!" Sir William grunted as he tugged at Robin's shoulder, struggling against a demon strength born of fury and jealousy.

Malkent pulled hard on the arm and shoulder he held. "Let go of him, Rogue! If you kill him, you'll have to flee the country to avoid trial and Lucia will be left alone to endure the advances of every Town buck who takes a fancy to her. What's more, you'll miss the birth of your child."

Tracy's words were a splash of cold water on Robin's blazing anger. He jerked his hands away from Peter's neck and rocked back on his knees, amazed at how swiftly the sight of Lucia in another man's arms had driven him into mindless, murderous, overwhelming fury. As sanity battled through the fog of rage in his brain, he gulped air into his heaving lungs and forced his shaking hands to be still.

Scrabbling away from Robin, Norworth gasped for air as dark purple bruises emerged to garland his white throat. "Good God, man!" he croaked. "Have you gone completely mad? We are not animals to tear each other apart with our bare hands!"

Tracy and Sir William, satisfied that the combatants were, at present, too spent to battle, walked a little away to decide what to do with them.

Robin glowered at Peter, his chest still heaving. "Lucia is mine, my lord! I apologize if my prior claim inconveniences the pair of you, but no matter how much she despises me, she is still my wife, do you hear? Forever!"

"She doesn't despise you...yet," Peter said, rubbing his bruised neck, "but she will if you don't do something about this massive misunderstanding between you. You obviously love her very much. You'd not have tried to rend me limb from limb for a trifling embrace, else. For God's sake, man, tell her how you feel and once you've told her, give up your raking and go home. Show her your love before you lose her!"

Before Robin could reply, Tracy approached them. "Let me call your carriages to take you home, gentlemen. There is a gate at the back of the garden that opens onto a mews. You may both leave that way and we can keep this whole unhappy incident a secret amongst ourselves. What say you?"

The combatants nodded and were once again left alone to face each other as Tracy and Sir William disappeared to order the carriages.

Peter regarded Amberley with narrowed eyes. "You're afraid, aren't you? You're terrified that Lucia will leave you!"

Robin looked away from him. "My marriage and its attendant woes can hardly be of interest to you, my lord," he said, hanging his head wearily as his anger finally ebbed. "No doubt you will want satisfaction after what has occurred here tonight."

As he massaged his swollen jaw, Peter stared at his companion, aware that not a word of his advice had penetrated Amberley's thick skull. With a resigned shake of his head, he said, "I'll not duel with you over this, Your Grace. You were in the right to be angry and I ask that you accept my apologies. I was holding Lucia in my arms, although I assure you our embrace was only intended in the spirit of platonic friendship. I think that, were she my wife, I would have reacted in much the same way upon such a discovery. Nevertheless, she deserves better at your hands than she's been receiving, sirrah, and if she doesn't start getting it, we will fight that duel yet."

Malkent and Blayne returned to escort the belligerent guests to their coaches. As the carriages rolled away, Tracy pulled a handkerchief out of his sleeve and mopped his brow. "Thank God they're gone! Now we can all be comfortable again. Could I tempt you into a hand of piquet, Will?" The gentlemen strolled toward the house, inadvertently leaving the rear gate unlocked behind them.

Giles smiled as he surveyed Malkent's open garden gate. His luck must be changing, he thought, for he had had no plan to circumvent a locked gate.

He gazed with satisfaction at the bright, full moon which unwinkingly lit his endeavor, at the heavily laden carriage which waited in the alley outside the gate, and at the flask of drugged wine in his hand. He needed only the lady of his choice to begin his adventure.

Soon he saw Concordia coming down the path, her pale green gown glowing in the moonlight. She looked so like Val that Giles's heart stirred with adoration. Then she grew nearer, her emerald eyes lit with happy expectation, and his fantasies vanished. He stepped out of the shadows with a welcoming smile. "Miss Lannington! What a surprise!"

"Lord Mountheathe! What are you doing here?" she said, embarrassed to see him so soon after their last disastrous encounter.

He stared at her pointedly. "I needed to seek some solitude to mend my devastated heart. And you?"

She twirled her sapphire bracelet around and around on her wrist, staring at its' moonlit sparkle. "I am come to meet..." She halted, aware that it was highly improper to meet any man clandestinely and extremely stupid to admit one's intention of doing so. "...Miss Saddewythe," she ended lamely.

"I'm certain she will be along presently." Giles pulled out his flask of drugged brandy. "I'm a bit thirsty. Do you mind?"

She shook her head, her powdered curls dancing, ghost-like, in the moonlight. He brought the flask to his lips, then hesitated and lowered it. "You seem agitated, Miss Lannington. Is anything wrong?"

Concordia smiled uncertainly, wishing he would leave, wishing Peter would appear, wishing... She gave a slight, sad shrug. Perhaps she had misread the viscount's intentions.

"Would you care for a some brandy? I know it isn't the usual thing for young ladies, but it is quite warming. It will put heart into you!" Giles waved the flask at her invitingly.

Concordia peered back along the path she had traveled, straining for a glimpse of Peter. She'd not brought her cloak for fear it would arouse suspicion and she was chilly. Perhaps a sip of brandy just to fortify her wouldn't be amiss. She accepted Giles's flask and drank deeply of its fiery contents. Coughing and spluttering, she returned it to him, thanking him brokenly for his kindness.

A moment later, much to Concordia's suddenly bleary-eyed amazement, Giles's head appeared to swell and contract. Then it swirled around until his countenance split into six distinct faces, spinning as if they were part of a carousel. Her legs went limp of their own accord and she collapsed into his arms.

He carried her through the gate to the coach, assuring her all the while that she was perfectly safe, that they were going to Gretna Green to be married, and that he was the only man in the world for her.

Concordia swooned, overwhelmed, no doubt, by her good fortune.

Chapter 24:

In Which Her Grace Disappears

When Robin arrived at Lynkellyn House, he found Lucia in the Rose Salon, pacing restlessly. Her back to the door, she did not see him enter. Despite his anger, he paused to drink in her beauty; to revel in the shimmering softness of her hair, the alabaster column of her throat, the enticing swell of her breasts. He yearned to take her in his arms and kiss her until she forgot Norworth's very existence. As she turned toward him, he steeled his heart and glared.

Her eyes widening, she stared at his bloody lip, torn, soiled clothes, and general disarray. "Wh-what happened to you?"

"I had a dust-up with your lover! I suggest that you refrain from publicly embracing your 'dear Lord Peter', Lucia, if you don't want him spitted on my blade!"

"He is not my lover!" She stamped her foot in frustration.

"Tiens, then he damned soon will be, judging from what I witnessed tonight!"

"You are a fine one to accuse me of infidelity, Your Grace, especially since I am innocent while you..." a sob of hurt and anger made her words tremble "you have been flouting our marriage vows with every bit o' muslin that strikes your unholy fancy!"

"Marriage vows? Marriage vows! Mon Dieu, but that's rich! I am amazed that you dare to denounce me, madame, since you effectively dismissed our vows a fortnight ago when you banished me from your bed. You'd welcome me quick enough, I'll wager, if I were your precious Lord Peter!"

Lucia threw her hands up, confounded. "Peter is a friend; nothing more! Why won't you believe me? What reason have I to lie?"

"What reason have you to tell me the truth?"

Their eyes locked in fury. Lucia tore her gaze away at last, saying, "Good night, Your Grace."

She tried to push past him, but he captured her wrist and stared into her indignant eyes. "Are you in love with Norworth, Lucia? Is that why you have denied me my conjugal rights?"

"No, I am not! And you stole those rights when you forced me to the altar. I have conceived your child. My duty is done and I have rescinded your alleged rights."

"I don't need your consent, you know. I can bed you any time I wish...by force, if necessary, and no one will condemn me, dearly beloved wife." His grip on her wrist tightened.

"But you won't."

"Why not?" He lifted a brow. "Have you forgotten our past?"

"You are more of a gentleman than you are willing to admit, Robin. Have you not left my bed, left me in peace just as I asked? I am under your protection and honor dictates that you abide by my wishes." Her quiet assurance belied the murmurs of doubt and fear that rumbled through her mind. Ignoring the pressure of his fingers on her wrist, her eyes met his confidently. After a moment, he looked away.

"I am certain you enjoyed conceiving our child as much as I enjoyed siring it." He changed his tack roughly.

Lucia blushed, staring at his hand curled around her wrist. "You are mistaken, sir."

"Am I, Lucia?" Robin tilted her face up to his with his free hand. His smoky eyes held hers and delved deeply into her soul, endeavoring to unlock secrets she dared not reveal to him.

Her heart pounded as she tried to quell the wild excitement his touch occasioned. She felt herself weakening, surrendering to his silent demands and her own unfulfilled yearnings. Again, she was slipping beneath his spell, that glorious illusion of love he knew how to weave so artfully. It was so easy, so blissful to be with him, to please him, to love him...

"Let me go!" She spoke sharply, forcing herself to remember who and what her husband was, to recall every barbaric moment she'd spent in his thrall.

"I will never let you go, Lucia!" Robin swore with muted fury. "You are my wife and I'll no longer accept the muslin set as a substitute!" He pulled her roughly into his arms. "I told you I'd kiss you whenever I pleased and I meant it."

Her hands pushing ineffectually against his chest, she steeled herself to withstand the devastating effect of his caress. She dared not surrender or even let him suspect that she was not indifferent to him. If he discovered how weak her resolve against him really was, he would gleefully crush her beneath his heel and take every opportunity to use her love for his own ends.

His mouth gliding over hers, his tongue teased her lips with feathery touches until they opened. Then it darted inside to dance and frolic with hers, inviting her ardor to rise and unite with his own.

All her determination to stand fast, to resist the impetus of his embrace, vanished. Hating herself, she melted into his arms as intoxicating passion flowed through her like a sweet, heady wine. She allowed herself to dream, for a brief eternity, that the man who made her feel this way was her fairy tale knight and not a ruthless villain seeking to subjugate and humiliate her. His burning lips and questing tongue demanded ever more of her and she gave it willingly, responding to his urgent caresses with wild, sensuous kisses of her own.

Robin's arms tightened around her, his blood blazing hotter as he savored her sweetness. He brought one hand up to cup her breast as he deepened his kiss, exploring the velvet heat of her mouth with his tongue. Mon Dieu, but he needed her so much!

He'd never grown accustomed to his empty, aching desire for her and now that she was in his arms again and that pain so sweetly assuaged, he knew he could not bear to lose her a second time. He allowed his love for her ...the love he had been fighting for so long... to engulf him, to consume him with its overwhelming strength.

He, too, let himself dream... that Lucia had forgiven him the past... that she would never want to leave him... that she loved him as much as he loved her... that their lives together held no hatred or anger or distrust, only warmth, laughter, and extraordinary happiness...

"No!" Lucia struggled against his embrace. "No, I-I can't! It isn't... You aren't..."

His arms opened and she stepped back, peering up into his face. Love and desire warred with loneliness and despair in his eyes. The desperate need in his voice tore at her heart as he whispered, "Lucia, please...!" He reached out to her and she backed further.

"Keep your hands off me, sirrah!" she spat, forcing anger to crush an almost overwhelming urge to throw herself into his arms again.

Robin stiffened.

"You inflict some sort of witchery on me with your kisses, Robin! Almost I believed that you... that we... But it's all an illusion, isn't it? A trick you use to break women... to break me! ...to your will. You befuddle me and beguile me until I will do anything... until I will be anything you desire! And when I cease to be useful, or to amuse you, you'll crush me and cast me aside like a bit of rubbish!" Her chin lifted and she squared her shoulders. "But I am strong, Robert Amberley, and I won't let you hurt me anymore! I'm certain you have plenty of women awaiting your amorous whim. Go find one of your ladybirds and let me be!"

As Lucia watched, Robin's silver eyes, vibrant with passion, hardened and faded to icy granite. His heavy lids drooped to half- mast and his habitual expression of insolent disdain slid like a comfortable

mask across his features.

"You credit me with far too much guile, ma douce," he drawled, carefully lightening his tone, "but I shall not 'inflict my witchery' upon you any longer. Vraiment, I shall undertake to force my unwelcome presence on you as little as humanly possible in the future. Bonne nuit, madame." He bowed with impersonal precision, turned on his heel, and left the room. A few minutes later, Lucia heard the front door slam and knew he was gone.

Silence settled upon the house. Lucia curled up in a chair before the dying fire, tears flooding down her cheeks. Robin was a heartless scoundrel! A black knight! She should never love such a man, but she could not explain to her tormented and confused mind how, in spite of his wicked ways and against all logic, he had still managed to capture her, body and soul. She only knew that, as foolish as it was to do so, she loved him passionately.

After awhile, unable to solve her heart's dilemma, she dried her tears and forced her mind onto more immediate problems. She was still determined to get that letter and clear Robin's name. She had promised Rochedale the full five thousand at dawn and she must consider how to acquire the rest of it.

Obviously, she could not ask Robin for a loan and she dare not turn to anyone else, lest he get word of it. She would have to fall back upon her past and use her gaming skills to raise the funds she needed.

She had once overheard Lord Bellefield mention a place called 'Randall's' to Robin. Tony had described the quiet hell in Clarges Street as extremely popular and Lucia was certain that she could find a few innocents ripe for fleecing there.

Going up to her bedchamber, she allowed Anne to help her into a nightgown, then dismissed the maid. After Anne retired, Lucia opened her old valise and took out the case that held her father's dueling pistols. She opened the case and stared at the weapons, wondering if it would be wise to go armed to her meeting with Rochedale. She made a sudden decision and, snapping the case shut, set the pistols aside.

Tossing everything else out of the valise, she took her gentleman's clothes from the secret compartment and carried them to the bed. She threw off her nightgown and cut a strip of linen from a petticoat. Winding the cloth tightly around her breasts, already tender, she flinched at the exquisite pain such cavalier treatment caused. She donned her masculine attire, grimacing in frustration as she buttoned her knee breeches. The material strained against the gentle swell of her belly as it had never done before.

When she was dressed save for her coat, she went over to her vanity and, picking up a pair of scissors, grabbed one lock of ebony hair. She hesitated, mindful of Robin's displeasure at what he would undoubtedly consider a sacrilege. She met her own gaze in the mirror and shrugged.

The silver blades sliced through her curls, leaving a relatively straight, shoulder-length line of hair. When she was finished, she brushed out her dark mane, swept the loose hair off her clothes and donned

her coat. She caught up her shorn tresses in a black riband tied in a bow at the nape of her neck and pocketed the money she had stolen from her husband.

As she turned to go, her hand brushed the pistol case and she stared down at it for a long, tense moment. Memories of the nightmarish months she had spent as Rochedale's captive flooded her mind. With sudden alacrity, she opened the case, loaded the pistols, and slipped one into her empty pocket. She secreted the other one in a hidden pocket beneath her coat skirts. Finding the weapon bulky and difficult to conceal, she longed for the small pistol she had been accustomed to carrying there in the old days. Knowing that Rochedale would expect her to carry some sort of protection, she hoped that he would be satisfied with the obvious and readily accessible gun in her pocket and search no further.

She threw the voluminous black driving cloak Robin had given her around her shoulders and stepped back to survey herself in the mirror. Satisfied with her appearance, she collected her hat and strode out of the room, adopting a masculine swagger.

The house was dark and silent as she descended the stairs and slipped out into the cool night air. She hailed a hackney a few blocks from Lynkellyn House and gave the driver a discreet address in Clarges Street.

Furious pounding upon the front door of Lynkellyn House awakened Laddock in the early morning hours and he was not entirely able to hide his disapproval as he greeted Viscount Norworth and Lord Malkent, both extremely agitated.

"We need to see Her Grace immediately. It is an emergency!" Tracy demanded.

Laddock sent the dark sky a martyred look. In his opinion, four o'clock in the morning was a most improper time to call on a lady, no matter what the reason might be. Deciding not to disturb the entire household, he said resentfully, "Their Graces are not at home."

When he started to close the door, Norworth placed his foot firmly in its path. "Perhaps you could tell us where we may find them?" he suggested with subtle menace.

Laddock drew himself up to his full height and stared down his nose at the importunate callers. "Their Graces are not accustomed to..."

"Qu'est-ce que c'est?" A rotund man with a thick, bushy black moustache emerged from the back of the house, wearing a long, white cotton nightshirt and carrying a wooden tray piled high with food.

Laddock looked over his shoulder in irritation. "Are you eating again?"

"I am 'ungry, no?" the other man said indignantly, his accent heavily French. "To starve...c'est très tragique!"

"Who is that?" Tracy peered into the shadows behind Laddock.

"That is His Grace's valet. He's like to eat us out of house and home," Laddock said as the Frenchman came to stand beside him, beaming good-naturedly at the gentlemen. "Go to bed, Hercules! This does not concern you."

Hercules's eyebrows snapped together angrily, then his open smile dawned once more. He shrugged and turned away.

"No! Wait!" Malkent said, pushing past the butler. Hercules returned to the small group as Tracy said, "Look you, Hercules, do you know where Her Grace is?"

The valet tore off a bite of bread and chewed with maddening deliberation. "Non! Me, I 'ave nothing to do with 'er Grace."

"The duke, then," Norworth insisted. "Surely you must know where His Grace has gone?"

"Ah! As to that, 'is Grace 'as never been-'ow you say?-a talking man, héin? 'e tells me nothing. I dress 'im for the ball tonight and il est magnifique, n'est-ce pas? Une pièce de résistance! But I do not see 'im after this."

Laddock cleared his throat, blushing. "Have you tried the clubs and the local...er...sporting houses, my lord?"

"We have already tried those places," Tracy said. "Can you think of anywhere else he might go?"

Laddock shook his head, but Hercules said, "The docks, messieurs."

The gentlemen stared at him blankly.

"When 'is Grace 'as a...'ow you say?...a blue devil, he goes to the docks and looks at the boats. They make 'im 'appy again for a time. Always when we live near the water, 'e goes to the docks when 'e is thinking of leaving and 'e 'as seemed restless of late...ready to start anew in another place. Me, I cannot wait to see my so beloved Paris again. The English do not know 'ow to cook."

To the unenlightened, the soberly dressed young gentleman lounging outside Newgate Prison just at

dawn appeared nonchalant, even jaunty, but beneath this casual exterior, Lucia seethed with a combination of soaring hope and writhing fear. The nausea of pregnancy only added to her inner turmoil and she maintained her appearance of unruffled calm through sheer strength of will.

The night just ending had left her exhausted physically and spiritually. She tried not to think of Robin and his last tormenting kiss. Even if she did love him, he cared nothing for her. To him, she was, as he had once phrased it, 'a means to an end'.

At least she hadn't lost her ability to make her own way in the world. Her evening at Randall's had been an unqualified success. Gaining entry to the place was easier than she had expected. The mere mention of Bellefield's and Malkent's names opened the door for her. After circulating for perhaps a quarter of an hour, she was convinced that no one, not even those who had met the Duchess of Lynkellyn, recognized her and she relaxed in the role of Brandon Killian, Esq., newly come to London from Ireland. Choosing her marks carefully, she quietly bested one opponent after another, winning a small amount from each man until she had enough to make up the five thousand guineas that Rochedale required with some thirty pounds to spare.

When Norworth and Malkent strolled into the club and scanned the crowd, it took every ounce of her control to play at cards as if she were unaware of their scrutiny. Their eyes rested on her for a few eternal seconds, leaving her slightly ill, then swept on. How, she wondered, had she ever pursued such an existence as a matter of course for twenty years?

When Lucia heard rumbling carriage wheels, she straightened abruptly, all illness and fatigue vanishing. She slipped one hand into her pocket, touching first the money, then the pistol.

A dilapidated coach halted before her and Rochedale jumped out. Lucia hurried toward him. "Do you have the letter?" she asked, staring uneasily at the coachman who was dismounting from his perch to stand behind her as she faced Rochedale. Her eyes darkened with anger and her stomach tied itself into a hundred knots. Instinct told her she had walked into a trap.

Sir Winston's eyes raked her with a predatory gleam. "You always did make a charming young man, dear girl, but I fear you have become too...er...well-endowed to pass close scrutiny."

"I have brought the money, Gaston. I want the letter."

"Yes, well, I do have something for you." Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a pistol, cocked it, and pointed it at her. "I am sorry to disappoint you, but there is no letter."

Lucia heard the telltale click of a second pistol cocking and glanced over her shoulder at the coachman who also had a weapon trained on her. She edged her hand toward her pocket and her own weapon, saying, "You can have whatever you want, Gaston! His Grace will pay you any ransom you desire!"

"Perhaps he might, but too often I've come away the loser in my dealings with Golden Gus. You are much easier to manage." He noticed her hand slipping into her pocket and leveled his pistol at her heart, saying, "Hands up, dear girl!" Feeling the mouth of the coachman's weapon against the side of her head, she jerked her hands into the air. "Brought some protection, did you?" Sir Winston surmised with an ugly grin. "Empty her pockets, Bertie."

Lucia stood very still as the coachman pushed away the drapery of her cloak and rifled her pockets, passing the contents to Rochedale. "A single pistol is all you brought to defend yourself against me?" Sir Winston laughed, pocketing the gun. "You're slipping, my dear girl!"

Lowering his weapon, he opened one of the heavy purses Bertie had handed him and stared at the golden guineas gleaming dully in the early morning light, then grinned at her. "I salute you, Lucia. I never thought you would come up with the entire five thousand! But you have always been resourceful, haven't you?"

As Rochedale pocketed her money, Lucia said, "If it isn't ransom you want, Gaston, what is it?"

"Why, only your sweet company on a voyage to Araby, dear girl. Unlike the repressive laws of Europe where one must lurk in the shadows to sell a woman, in Araby they have huge market places where slave girls are routinely auctioned off. Golden Gus could tell you all about them. He certainly did his share of the selling...as well as a little buying!" Sir Winston cackled. "Get into the coach!"

"I'm not going anywhere with you, Gaston!"

"Don't be difficult, dear girl! You really have no choice in the matter after all." When she did not move, he said, "I had not planned to end your pregnancy until we were at sea and I had hoped to use a little more finesse, but...a blow to the stomach might not be amiss if you continue to defy me."

"I would rather die and take my babe with me to heaven than become your prisoner, Gaston! I have not forgotten Copenhagen!"

"Copenhagen! A delightful interlude, wasn't it? Get her into the coach, Bertie!" While Sir Winston held his pistol on her, the huge coachman scooped her into his arms. Her hands flew to his face, scratching and gouging until he dropped her to clutch at his torn and bleeding countenance. She scrambled to her feet and ran, ignoring the threat of Sir Winston's weapon.

"Damn it! She's getting away!" Rochedale screamed. "If you want to be paid, you'd better catch her, Bertie!"

Bertie charged down the road after her. Coming upon her from behind, he locked his tree trunk arms around her and half- dragged, half-carried her, kicking and screaming, back to the carriage.

"Up you go!" Rochedale urged as Bertie tried to lift her into the coach. Bracing her feet against the bottom of the doorframe and her hands against the upper part of the carriage, she locked her knees and elbows as her abductors pushed and shoved and struggled to force her into the coach

"She's a real fighter!" Bertie grunted with grudging admiration as he rammed his shoulder against her back.

"This is one battle she will lose," Rochedale said, cracking Lucia over the head with the butt of his pistol. Her body arched, then wilted. Catching her as she fell, her abductors shoved her into the coach. Sir Winston climbed in after her while Bertie mounted the box. The carriage rolled and in a few minutes the area was deserted.

Chapter 25:

In Which His Grace Scours London

At sunrise, Peter and Tracy found Robin sitting on a wharf, watching soft grey fog blanket the Thames. Still in his ravaged ball clothes, his unbound hair splaying like a coppery mantle across his back, he had removed his shoes and stockings to trail his toes in the river's cold, dirty water.

"Here you are, Rogue! We've been looking everywhere for you." Malkent's hearty voice shattered the quiet calm.

Robin scowled as they approached. "How did you find me?"

"Your valet told us you might be here," Peter said. "We need to speak to your wife, Your Grace, but when we called at your house a few hours ago, the butler said she was not at home."

Robin's eyes narrowed. "Why do you want see Lucia?"

"'Tis Concordia, Rogue!" Tracy said. "She's disappeared. The last time anyone remembers seeing her was when she was speaking with Lucia last night. We were hoping Lucia could shed some light on the mystery."

Robin stared out over the water. "Have you spoken to your own servants?"

"Yes. They don't know anything. Anyway, Val hired about a dozen extra footmen just for the evening and they left right after supper...before we knew Concordia was missing."

"And you're sure Lucia was the last person to talk to her?" Robin asked.

"Yes!" Peter said impatiently. "Where is she, Your Grace? We have to discover what she knows!" He peered up and down the docks as if he expected to see Lucia lurking in the shadows.

"Return to Lynkellyn House with me, then, gentlemen, and we'll awaken her." Robin said, reaching for his shoes.

A little after dawn, the gentlemen rushed past an amazed and affronted Laddock into Lynkellyn House. Robin led the others to Lucia's bedchamber door and knocked softly. Receiving no response, he bade his companions wait and entered. A moment later, Malkent and Norworth heard an agonized cry and hurried into the room.

Robin was kneeling beside a dilapidated old trunk, tossing its contents, willy-nilly, over his shoulder. When the trunk was empty, he rose and his hand brushed the empty pistol case on Lucia's vanity. His frown deepened as he fingered the velvet interior. "She's bolted!" he said. "Taken all her money, her breeches, her dueling pistols..."

"She'll be back, Rogue!" Tracy leaped to reassure him.

Robin sank onto the neatly turned down bed and stroked a silken nightgown that had been carelessly thrown across the covers. "No!" He shook his head with conviction. "No, she won't be coming back, Tracy. Not after the way I..."

"Well, then, you should go after her even if it's just to be certain that she is safely settled somewhere. Could you ever forgive yourself if you assumed she had bolted only to discover later that she was in some sort of danger and you were not there to save her?" Tracy said.

Robin's eyes met Tracy's. Suddenly he sprang from the bed and sped to the door, shouting, "Hercules!"

When the valet presented himself, Robin barraged him with commands in French. As Hercules bustled away, Robin turned to Tracy. "Although Lucia can be of no assistance in your search for Miss Lannington, my lord, perhaps if we go over last evening's events together, we might discover a clue to her whereabouts."

"Aren't you even going to search for Her Grace, Rogue?" Tracy asked. "She's out there all alone! Who knows what...!"

Robin held up one white hand. "I have already begun to look for her, Tracy. Hercules is questioning the staff, both in the household and in the stables. He may not seem impressive, but he is excellent at this sort of thing, je vous assure, and the grooms will soon have my black saddled and waiting." He turned to Peter. "Now, my lord, tell me about the events last night that led up to our...altercation."

Peter told him with painstaking detail of Mountheathe's proposal to Concordia, his own misreading of

the situation, and his subsequent conversation with Lucia. "But I don't see what any of this has to do with anything."

Pacing the room in thought, Robin waved him to silence. "So Mountheathe offered for her," he said. "Not hard to understand! She's an heiress and she's the spitting image of Lady Malkent."

"What the devil do either of those things have to do with Concordia's disappearance?" Tracy asked.

"It's obvious Giles still wants Valeria, Tracy. Lady Chalfont resembles Valeria. Miss Lannington resembles Valeria. I'll wager any female who has seriously engaged Giles's interest in the last ten years has looked like Valeria. "

Tracy stiffened, his attention arrested. "God's truth! You're right, Rogue! Never seen him with any women except willowy brunettes."

"And he's badly dipped!" Robin said.

"Badly dipped! Nonsense! Why, his father left him forty thousand a year!"

Robin stared at Tracy from beneath auburn brows. "Whether you choose to believe it or not, my lord, Giles is addicted to women and gaming. To preserve his pristine reputation, he hides these predilections, frequenting places where he is unlikely to meet friends and acquaintances. His is a familiar face in some of the most dangerous and unsavory hells and brothels in Town. My sources tell me that Giles has almost completely dissipated his fortune. He's spent not only the interest, but the principal as well. All he has left is Heathe House and Heathe Manor with its attendant lands, both heavily mortgaged, but, fortunately, entailed."

"What the devil does all this have to do with Concordia's disappearance?" Peter said, fretting. "We should be out looking for her and Lucia, instead of concerning ourselves with that snake, Bridland's affairs. Personally, I'll be elated if he ends up in the Fleet for debt."

"Don't you see?" Robin said. "Giles is desperate for money and Miss Lannington denied him her dowry when she refused his offer; he hasn't been able to rid himself of Lucia and me; and his creditors are undoubtedly nipping at his heels. When Mountheathe feels cornered, as I'm certain he does at this point, gentlemen, he is likely to do almost anything to save himself. Since Miss Lannington will not willingly wed him, he may well have decided to force her to Gretna."

"Are you suggesting that Giles abducted her from the ball? From beneath our noses?" Tracy said.

"Abduction must be your family's vocation, Your Grace!" Peter growled.

Robin cast Peter a darkling glance and addressed Tracy. "It's only a theory, naturellement, but I'll wager

that if you make inquiries to the north, you'll discover that Giles and Miss Lannington are headed toward Scotland."

Tracy's eyes met Peter's. "He may be right. It's worth investigating, anyway."

"While I would like nothing more than to aid you in your search for Miss Lannington, mes amis," Robin said, "I fear I shall require my entire staff and all my time to find my wife."

"Yes, well, we wish you luck, Your Grace." Peter was already moving toward the door. "Come, Tracy. My house is not far from here. I will send my footmen to inquire along the main roads out of London." He sketched a swift bow and left.

Following more slowly, Tracy turned in the doorway. "Thank you for helping us, Rogue. After last night's scene, many men would not have been so benevolent."

Robin stood transfixed, staring at the floor. He bent down to pick up a glossy, black curl, cradling it gingerly in his hand. "She's cut her hair, Tracy! All those soft, gleaming tresses...like a balmy Caribbean night. How I loved to stroke her hair!"

Robin's voice held an odd mixture of pain, longing, and anger. When he lifted his eyes to the earl's, Tracy felt as if he were looking upon the devastation of a soul. "Rogue? Are you going to be alright?"

Suddenly heavy lids veiled the agony in Robin's eyes and his mouth curled into its habitual mocking smile. "I am desolated, naturellement, that my lady wife has found more amusing diversion elsewhere, my lord," he drawled, "but I will survive. I always do. Your niece requires your assistance a great deal more than I, héin?"

"If you need help, Robin, you have but to ask." Tracy bowed and was gone.

As soon as Robin was alone, his smile disappeared. He sank to his knees amongst Lucia's scattered tresses, silent tears coursing down his cheeks as he carefully collected the dusky locks. He placed the curls in a silver casket on the vanity, lifting one ebony coil to his lips.

The truth twisted inside him like a knife as he rose, still cradling the curl. His heart beat in ironbound thrall to a woman who hated him...was entitled to hate him!...with all the righteous fury she could muster.

Lucia had endured only scandal, humiliation, and brutality at his hands, he thought, staring down at the ebony curl he had unconsciously crushed in his fist. Little wonder she had fled from him, preferring peril and poverty unfettered to luxury and security as his prisoner. He had, en effet, driven her away!

He was no longer willing to be the cause of her misery. If he could find her, he would free her from their

disastrous union and give her the happiness and freedom she deserved. He heard a slight clearing of the throat at the door. "Well?" His heart brimming with despair, his eyes never left the gleaming, ebony curl in his hand.

"Your horse is ready, Your Grace," said Laddock.

"Bon! I shall be down directly. Send Hercules to me, s'il vous plaît."

While Hercules helped Robin dress, he reported that the house and stable staff knew nothing and that no one at any of the city's gates had seen a young man answering the duchess's description leaving London.

As Robin descended the stairs in buff coat and riding boots some twenty minutes later, Lady Easterbury hurried toward him, her flushed face veiled in tears. "I just spoke to Laddock, Your Grace! You have to find Lucia! Only to think of her...alone...out there..." Trailing Lady Corinna, Miss Twyll, her own eyes wet, patted the older woman's shoulder.

"I will find her, my lady, I promise you!" Robin clasped her hands reassuringly. With an eye to the presence of an interested footman, he suggested, "Perhaps we should step into the Blue Salon?"

Following the women into the room, Robin firmly closed the door as Miss Twyll retired to a chair in the corner to indulge in a quiet bout of tears and Lady Easterbury rounded on her nephew- in-law, twisting her handkerchief in agitated fingers. "My pretty child...all alone...and in a delicate way! It doesn't bear thinking on! Why did she leave? Why?"

"Because she has very wisely decided that I am not a fit husband for her! And who could blame her?" Robin said.

"I thought you two were getting along very well...that is, until you..." Her ladyship's mouth tightened.

"...Until I leaped to the wrong conclusion, would hear nothing to contradict my own unsound judgment, and, consequently, made a damned, bloody fool of myself!" Robin paced angrily to the mantle and stared into the empty fireplace. "And now both Lucia and I are paying for my stupidity." He straightened to meet Corinna's troubled gaze. "I shall find your niece, my lady, and then I shall free her from this ill-starred marriage."

"A divorce?" Lady Easterbury almost squealed. "But think of the scandal, the shame, the humiliation! Lucia would be well and truly ruined then! You could not be so cruel!"

"Certainly not a divorce!" Robin said indignantly. "What sort of unfeeling monster do you take me for? I shall arrange a separate maintenance, my lady. Lucia shall never lack for anything or the babe either. I will take myself off to parts unknown so that she need never see me again and she can be comfortable. She may even take a lover if she chooses." Robin's voice trembled a little upon his final words, but when

Corinna peered up at him, his face was an unreadable mask.

"Maybe if...when you find her, you should give your marriage another chance, Your Grace. You've both made mistakes, I grant, but many couples have achieved great happiness by wiping the slate clean and beginning again."

Robin stared at the countess. "I never thought to hear such advice from your lips, my lady. I imagined that you would be delighted to see me go!"

"When I first heard all the misdeeds Lucia laid at your door, I had quite made up my mind to despise you, but since I've been living here, I've seen how happy she is when you are together..." Her eyes darkened. "At least, she was happy until a few weeks ago... You must find her and...and make a new start!"

"I will find her, my lady. You have my word on it. As for a new start, I can make no promises. I fear events may have gone beyond reconciliation. If you will excuse me, I must go." He bowed and strode from the room.

Lady Easterbury and Miss Twill trailed him out of the house. Standing on the stairs, they watched him mount his huge black stallion. As he swung into the saddle, Corinna said, "You will let me know if...?"

"When I find her, my lady, I shall send word as soon as I can." With a lift of his hat, he urged his horse into the street.

Robin spent the next several hours calling on any of Lucia's acquaintances who might have had even the remotest urge to help her flee him. He stopped at the Malkents' and the Blaynes', questioning both Val and Amaryllis intensively. He received a frosty and fruitless reception at the Saddewythes' and was physically threatened at both the Cothcourts' and the Laddons'.

In desperation, he called upon Mountheathe, discovering without surprise that Giles had left Town for an extended period. The servant could not or would not tell him where Giles had gone.

Since Sir Winston Rochedale's lodging was not far from Heathe House, Robin impulsively elected to visit him as well. In answer to Robin's inquiry, the landlord, a certain Mr. Rumby, told him that Sir Winston had settled his accounts and apparently left the country.

"Left the country!" Robin's brows snapped together as foreboding stirred within him like a waking man.

"E didn't tell me nuffin', do ye see, Your Grace," Rumby said, "but I 'eard 'im mention summat to 'is manservant while they was packin' the coach." Rumby stretched out his hand and Robin pressed a sovereign into it. "'E was talkin' about going to Scotland, sir, and meetin' some uvver cove who owed 'im money. Not that I was eavesdroppin', mind. I just 'appened to over'ear."

Robin urged his horse through the morning's traffic, fear and suspicion whirling in his brain as he sifted through Rumby's information and its possible implications. The fact that both Giles and Rochedale should be absent from London at the same time and that Scotland should be touted as a possible destination for each of them could not, in Robin's estimation, be viewed with equanimity. Indeed, the back of his neck prickled as he contemplated this sinister coincidence.

Could it be that Rochedale was somehow involved with Mountheathe in Concordia's abduction...that was, assuming it was true that Giles had carried the young lady off? Fear gripped his heart as he considered the danger to Concordia and to Lucia, too, if the ladies were somehow embroiled together in that pair's unsavory affairs.

Walking along the banks of the Thames, Robin asked after a dark-haired young man who might have bought a passage to America or the Continent or perhaps had signed on as a crewmember aboard some ship headed for foreign shores.

Despite his bribery and persistence, the only information he garnered was that no one had seen a person answering Lucia's description around the docks and that a large ship, carrying both a heavy complement of crew and numerous passengers, had set sail for America with the morning tide. If Lucia had been aboard that ship, he truly had lost her, for he knew from personal experience how easy it was to disappear in the uncharted American wilderness.

He returned to Lynkellyn House at last, weary and confused, a knot of panicky fear tightening his stomach as he envisioned all the evils that might beset Lucia. As he entered the house, shoulders slumped and eyes lowered, a cacophony of voices pleading for news barraged him. The Blaynes and the Malkents had joined Lady Easterbury and Miss Twyll to await his return and they all demanded details of his search.

He straightened to confront this frantic little band, lifting his hand for silence. "Enough!" he shouted above the noise. They fell silent as he said, "I've scoured London... been everywhere I can think of that Lucia might have gone. No one has seen her. I didn't find out a da-" with a glance at the ladies, he amended his speech, "dashed thing, save that both Rochedale and Giles have left Town." Their voices swelled once more and Robin raised his voice to be heard over the din. "Why don't we go into the Blue Salon, ladies and gentlemen? We may talk privately there."

The others followed him into the room. Before he closed the door, he asked Laddock to bring in a tea tray as he had not eaten since the evening before.

His companions began to babble again with renewed fervor and he called for silence, saying, "Tracy, since you are here instead of following Miss Lannington's trail, you must have something of importance

to tell us."

"Yes, indeed, Rogue! Norworth and I made some inquiries to the north as you suggested. A man fitting Giles's description pulled into the Red Lion Inn not far from London along the Great North Road and bespoke rooms some two hours after midnight; claimed his valet was sick. The innkeeper didn't actually see the valet because he was completely enveloped in a large travelling cloak. He insisted upon nursing the servant himself."

"Didn't you and Norworth pursue him?" Robin asked.

"The landlord said he left just after dawn and we followed his trail through the next three posting inns, but when we reached the fourth, they had not seen him. Somehow he escaped us. I left Peter to the hunt and hurried back here because the innkeeper also told us something of possible significance to you."

Laddock entered with a heavily laden tea tray. While Lady Easterbury poured tea and the butler served it, Robin tore into a buttered scone.

"According to the Red Lion's proprietor, Giles placed his sick valet in his coach and left around half-past seven this morning," Tracy said. "The landlord remembers it clearly because just before Mountheathe left, another coach drove into the innyard and one of the passengers inside alighted to speak to him. Robin, the second man's description fit Sir Winston Rochedale like a glove."

Silence, interrupted only by the tense rattle of china, permeated the room as Robin's worried grey eyes searched Tracy's. "And?"

"And while checking Mountheathe's harness, one of the hostlers overheard his conversation with Rochedale. The man told me that Giles asked Rochedale if some unnamed deed had been done. Rochedale answered that it had and demanded money. Mountheathe told him he would be paid in a more private place nearer Scotland. Then they named a rendezvous point...the Crown and Thistle Inn, outside Carlisle."

Robin stiffened, his eyes widening. "Not..."

"The very same!" Tracy nodded with a grim smile. "And that's not the whole of it. The hostler also said that he saw a young man, mostly hidden under a black cloak, sleeping in Rochedale's coach. At least, he assumes the young man was asleep. The passenger did not stir or seem even to breathe during the period Rochedale spent at the inn. The hostler's description of the youth's face tallied very closely to Lucia's features." As Robin's eyes met Malkent's, his countenance drained of all color and his teacup shook.

Laddock cleared his throat self-consciously, having never before dared to break in on an employer's conversation. "Begging Your Grace's pardon... No desire to interrupt, but..." Amberley shifted his worried gaze to the butler and lifted a brow. "Sir Winston Rochedale called on Her Grace several days

ago," Laddock said. "She insisted upon receiving him, but she seemed extremely anxious, terrified, one might even venture to say. Before I announced him, she gave orders for me to wait in the foyer near the door until he left."

"How long did he stay, Laddock?" Robin asked.

"Five minutes, perhaps, Your Grace. Certainly not long enough for me to become alarmed or I would have found some pretext to enter the room and see that things were as they should be."

"Do you know what they discussed?"

"No, Your Grace. Their voices were low and calm so I didn't think it proper to actively eavesdrop."

"Does this mean... Do you think that Sir Winston Rochedale is involved in all this, Your Grace?" Valeria asked, astonished.

"Oh, surely not!" Amaryllis cried. "Such a polished gentleman! So charming and witty! Why, only the other day..."

"Can't abide the man myself!" Lady Easterbury interrupted. "He's so polished, he's too slippery by half! Shocking bad ton!"

"Stay away from him, Ryl." Robin frowned. "He's not what he appears to be and he's devilish dangerous. He'd as soon kill you for ha'penny as a hundred pounds."

Amaryllis set her cup down, a sulky pout puckering her lips. Sir William squeezed her hand in his and took up the conversation. "What shall we do now, Rogue?"

"I'm going after them. If Lucia went willingly with Rochedale, I'll not interfere, but I'll lay you a monkey she did not. She's more terrified of that scoundrel than she's ever been of...of anyone." Robin lowered his eyes guiltily to his empty cup.

"But what about Mountheathe and Concordia, Rogue?" Tracy asked.

"I leave their fates to you and Norworth. I must find my wife before that demon destroys her...if he hasn't already."

Setting down his cup, Amberley bowed to the assembled company and left the room, Laddock in his wake. His packing orders echoed through the house as servants scurried to obey. A quarter of an hour later, his stallion's hooves rang urgently against the cobblestones as he entered London's noon traffic.

After Robin departed, Tracy turned to Valeria. "As soon as I've packed a few things, I'll be leaving to help Norworth find Concordia, Val." He looked into her worried eyes. "We'll find Concordia, my dear. We'll find them both!"

Sir William cleared his throat. "If you need an extra hand, Tracy, I'd be glad to accompany you."

"I need someone here to look after Val, Will. I was hoping you would..."

"My pleasure." Blayne clapped Tracy on the back. "Hadn't you better be going?"

"Yes, you must hurry, Tracy!" Valeria cried, grasping Malkent's hands. "My poor, little Concordia! How dreadful it must be for her!"

"Don't fret, my love!" Malkent brushed a tear from her cheek. "I will get Connie back. If I cannot catch up to Giles and his captive, I shall await them at the Crown and Thistle since I know they intend to go there."

"Oh, do be careful, Tracy. After all, the Crown and Thistle is the inn where..." She paled as hazy memories flashed through her mind of rapiers, sharp and shiny silver; of a floor splattered with blood; of young Lord Robin laying on a couch, ashen and deathly still, an ominous red blot staining his snowy white shirt...

As Tracy started out of the room, Valeria grabbed his hand and brought it to her cheek. "Do not do anything foolish, Tracy," she begged, her love and fear naked in her eyes. "I could not bear to lose you, too."

Chapter 26:

In Which Her Grace Fights Her Way Out of the Frying Pan and Into the Fire

Outside a little village a few hours from London, Giles's leader cast a shoe and he had no choice but to stop at the blacksmith's yard for repairs. Discovering that the blacksmith had gone off to attend a local fair, he sent the boy who tended the forge after him.

Another hour passed before the blacksmith finally arrived. Then the forge had to heat. "The blasted fool had actually been working on the horse's shoe for only a few minutes!" Giles fumed, kicking savagely at a chicken unwise enough to cross his path.

Concordia, still drugged, slept peacefully in the coach parked in a corner of the yard, , but Giles knew her serenity was deceptive. She had already proven a severe trial to him, clawing, scratching, and biting him every time she awoke. The last time he had dosed her, she had savaged him, her fingernails leaving

bloody gashes down the right side of his face. Those scratches, coupled with Miss Twyll's scarlet weals across his nose, gave him such a demonic aspect that the few people he encountered in the village leaped to do his bidding.

Giles crossed the yard to check on Concordia. Peering into his coach, he saw only her black cloak draped over the seat, part of it hanging out of the open, offside door. On the other side of the carriage, he glimpsed shimmering green as she disappeared behind the blacksmith's shed.

With a muttered oath, he ran after her, overtaking her as she crouched, gasping for air, in the tall grass behind the shed. Grabbing her wrist before she realized he was there, he hauled her to her feet. Eyes wide with fury and fear, she jerked against his grip and broke free, fleeing through the overgrown weeds.

Giles chased her, tackling her just as she rounded the far corner of the shed. "You can't escape me, my dear! You might as well resign yourself to the prospect of becoming Lady Mountheathe." He grinned as he pulled her once more to her feet.

Angry tears streamed down her face. "Let me go, sirrah! I despise you! I'll never marry..."

"Enough of your impudence, my girl! You'll do as I say or I'll knock your teeth in!" His crushing grip bruised her wrists. The eyes she had once thought soft as a doe's were brutally hard. Deep scratches and hideous red welts stood out against his pale skin. An ugly, contemptuous sneer played about his mouth.

She squared her shoulders and leveled her gaze chillingly at him. "I will not marry you, my lord,...ever!"

Dragging her back to the carriage as she screeched her protests, he flung her through the open door, then slammed it shut. The blacksmith and the urchin, attracted by the commotion, rushed into the yard.

Giles faced the pair with his back pressed against the coach door while, inside, Concordia screamed and kicked at it. Giles smiled a little self-consciously at his audience. "My sister! She's a bit queer in the attic and her medication has worn off. She's having one of her spells." He turned his head to address the shaking coach in falsely soothing tones. "Everything will be alright, Concordia, my dear. You're safe now and we'll soon have you home. Nanny will bring you a nice cup of warm milk and...Ow! Damnation!" He cursed as one of her kicks juttet the door open just enough to catch his finger. Sucking the tip of his injured finger, he smiled apologetically at the blacksmith who stared at him in round-eyed amazement. "As I was saying... rather unstable in her mind, do you see? Thinks I'm abducting her! Under some delusion that I'm trying to force her to Gretna! Have you ever heard anything so ridiculous?" The blacksmith and the boy laughed uneasily. "The only thing that will calm her is this medicine I have in my pocket, but it's hard to give it to her without her cooperation. I was hoping that perhaps one of you could hold her down, gently, of course, while I administer the dosage."

The screaming and kicking inside the coach had abated during Giles's speech and suddenly he saw a flash of green satin hurtle from the other side of the carriage. At the same moment, the urchin jumped up

and down, shouting, "Milor"! Milor'!" and pointed frantically at Concordia as she fled.

"Oh, no, you don't!" Giles rushed after her, the others trailing him. He and the blacksmith leaped upon her, throwing her bodily to the ground while the boy stared into the wild-eyed face of the first mad lady he had ever seen. Concordia kicked and thrashed about, trying to buck off the men who were pinning her to the ground. "Hold her!" Giles grunted to the blacksmith as he pulled the vial from his pocket. Firmly grasping Concordia's chestnut tresses, he poured the foul-tasting stuff down her throat, watching with satisfaction as, despite her struggles to remain awake, the drug dragged her into unwelcome oblivion.

By the time Giles and his hostage were once more on their way, it was late afternoon. Sir Winston Rochedale, with nothing to delay him, had long since passed the narrow lane that led to the blacksmith's village and was several miles ahead of Mountheathe.

At approximately the time Giles left the blacksmith's yard, Robin was inquiring for Sir Winston Rochedale at an inn...the eighth he had visited...some ten miles away.

"A man in his forties... A gentleman... Straw colored, thinning hair or perhaps a wig... Not too tall..." At the landlord's blank look, Robin mentally cursed the nondescript appearance that had always enabled Rochedale to slither through the most nefarious schemes undetected. "Perhaps he had a younger man with him? His companion would be little more than a youth, really. Black hair, blue eyes, as tall as my shoulder, slim, effeminate?"

The innkeeper's eyes lit up. "Yes, I recalls a young gen'leman such as you describe, Your Grace, an' think on, 'e was wiv an older cove! 'E stayed in the coach 'til the older man went into the taproom, then 'e got out. 'E tried to walk, but 'e were that groggy... Drunk-like! 'E staggered across the yard and collapsed. The older cove come a-runnin' out, scoldin' 'is sick nephew, as 'e said 'e was, an' carried 'im back to the carriage. One o' the grooms said as 'ow the young cove were out cold the next time 'e looked through the coach window!"

"Collapsed, do you say?" Icy fear clutched at Robin's heart.

Seeing the stricken look in Amberley's eyes, the innkeeper hastened to add, "The older gent said as 'ow 'is nephew 'ad a touch o' the influenza, Your Grace."

"How long ago were they here?"

"Their coach left about three hours ago, Your Grace."

"Do you know which direction they went?"

"As to that, I couldn't tell you, Your Grace. It gets kin' o' busy 'round 'ere often an' often."

Robin thanked the innkeeper and slid a coin into his hand before trudging into the taproom. He would have liked to travel on, but bitter experience had taught him not to ignore the necessities of life. Both he and his horse needed food and rest. He had no desire to repeat that disastrous episode of a decade ago.

He was rapidly devouring a humble meal and a pint of good brown ale when Tracy and Peter strode into the taproom. They fell immediately to questioning the landlord and a few minutes later, Lynkellyn, having finished his repast, joined the group. "Any luck, gentlemen?"

"Well met, Rogue!" Tracy greeted him in an earnest aside while Norworth pursued his intense conversation with the innkeeper. "We got lost and had to double-back, but we've finally picked up Mountheathe's trail again. I fear he has greatly outdistanced us, though. And you?"

"I've had word of Lucia and Rochedale. They, too, seem far ahead and I'm worried lest he's hurt her. They...the landlord says he saw her collapse in the innyard." Robin's eyes were shadowed. "My stomach churns when I think of what she must be suffering at his hands!"

Ending his interrogation of the proprietor, Peter acknowledged Robin with a distracted nod. "The innkeeper says Mountheathe's carriage left some four hours ago. If we ride now, we might catch up with him tonight," he said to Tracy.

"The horses are spent, my lord, and the landlord says there is nothing to rent in his stables. We must feed the animals and ourselves before we resume the chase. We are all famished," Tracy said.

His face etched with worry, Peter was about to suggest that he go on without Tracy when Robin said, "Bridland will stop to eat, my lord. He was never one to ignore his own comforts."

Unable to deny Robin's logic, Peter followed Tracy to a table. Robin joined them, ordering another pint of ale. While Tracy and Peter made short work of their meal, all the talk was of the road to Scotland and any possible stops along the way.

"Gentlemen, since it seems we are traveling in the same direction," Robin said, "I would like to ride with you, if you have no objection. Three men will be a most persuasive force against our villains when we find them and I would not have either of them escape because of a lack of strength on our part." Malkent and Norworth agreed.

Lucia battled upward through the blackest depths of oblivion, the darkness in her mind fading... fading... fading... until she struck pulsing, blinding pain. It flooded her head and heart and soul, dragging her into full agonized awareness. She lay quiet and still, willing the torment to recede, endeavoring to pull

herself away from her physical anguish so that she could think clearly.

Eventually the throbbing pain curled itself tightly into one corner of her skull, no longer overwhelming her. She dared to open her eyes onto what she at first thought was the blackness of night, then she realized that Robin's ebony cloak, still fastened at her neck, was covering her face and creating the illusion of darkness. She heard the jingle of a harness, felt the rumble and sway of a moving coach, and knew she was traveling. She continued to lie still, apparently unconscious, as she quelled her rising terror and forced herself to wait calmly for a chance to escape.

Earlier, she had tried to slip away at a posting inn, but all she had received for her trouble was a crack on the head twice as agonizing as Sir Winston's first blow. Yet she was determined to escape or die trying, for she could not abide the thought of being Rochedale's slave.

When she heard a series of rumbles and snorts from the opposite side of the coach, she stiffened a moment, then relaxed. It was a snoring sound. Rochedale must be asleep!

A plan suddenly presented itself to her and she stealthily pulled the cloak from her eyes to peer at her captor. The silver- grey of late twilight danced across Sir Winston's sleeping form, propped against the wall of the carriage. His chest rose with every rumble and fell with every snort.

Lowering the cape, Lucia straightened slowly, wincing as pain streaked through her head. She reached into her secret pocket, pulled out the loaded pistol she had hidden there, cocked it, and aimed it at Rochedale's head. Then she stared at him, this monster, this man that she hated more than death.

Every torture he had ever inflicted upon her crawled into her mind as her finger caressed the trigger. She had never before shot a man, point-blank, while he slept and a part of her flinched, revolted at the cowardice of such an act. Killing a man without giving him so much as a chance to defend himself or make his peace with God seemed unfair, somehow. 'But Gaston is not a man', she reminded herself. 'He is a malevolent, murdering monster who would kill me whether I was a threat to him or not for the pure pleasure of watching me die. My only chance is to kill him first.' Resolved, she took a deep breath and sighted along the barrel of the gun.

The coach lurched and Sir Winston's arm jerked as he slid sideways. He sat up, gasping as he stared into the muzzle of Lucia's pistol. Evening was deepening into night as the adversaries faced each other above the weapon. Sir Winston searched Lucia's eyes in the failing light, looking for weakness, for the slightest waver in her resolve. "It would seem I am check- mated, dear girl," he drawled at last, giving her a pained smile.

Lucia pointed her weapon steadily at his head. "Order the coach to stop, Gaston. I'm getting out."

"Here? In the middle of Epping Forest?"

"I can't imagine any brigand or wild beast more treacherous than you, Gaston! Halt the coach!"

"And if I don't?"

"My pistol is loaded and cocked. I assure you I haven't the slightest qualm about blowing your filthy carcass off the face of the earth."

"Very well. You win this hand, Lucia, but we shall undoubtedly play again." He reached up as if to knock on the roof of the carriage, but his fingers closed on a pistol hidden in a slash in the upholstery above the doorframe.

Lucia saw the dull gleam of his gun barrel as he brought the weapon down to aim and her pistol jerked with a loud blast. His face froze in pain and surprise as an ever-widening circle of crimson spread across his cambric shirt. Clapsed in his convulsive grip, his gun exploded a second later as he slumped back against the seat. A ball ripped through Lucia's right shoulder.

The coach lurched to a stop. While Bertie was climbing down, Lucia flung her door open and tumbled out, plunging, willy-nilly, into the concealing shadows of nightfall in Epping Forest.

"Ere, you! Stop!" Bertie screamed after her as he frantically wrenched open the carriage door on the other side. When he saw Sir Winston bathed in blood, he paled. "She's escapin', sor! Should I go arter 'er, then?"

"Forget the bitch!" Rochedale gasped. "Just get me to a village! Get me to a physician before...!" But he knew it was already too late. His agony unbearable, he could feel the life pumping out of him with each spurt of blood. He labored over one last tormented breath, then exhaled with an alarming gurgle and was still.

Bertie stared at the corpse of his master, promptly deciding against alerting the constabulary to his situation. Somehow he could not see himself telling a magistrate that he and Sir Winston had abducted a peeress of the realm... a bloody duchess, no less! ...and that she had killed Rochedale in the course of her escape. No! That would earn him the gallows for certain!

Suddenly the solution flashed into his mind. He would reset the scene to make it look as if Sir Winston had been robbed and killed by a highwayman. That would account for almost every circumstance except his own disappearance and, as the authorities could have no idea what he looked like, he should be safe enough. He would take the money Rochedale had been carrying and disappear. As long as he kept silent, no one would ever be the wiser. As for the duchess, assuming she survived Epping Forest, which was unlikely in his opinion, he doubted that she'd be eager to admit to murder, even in self-defense.

Bertie pulled Sir Winston's body out of the coach. Searching the vehicle and the corpse, he took everything that looked even remotely valuable, stuffing his booty into his capacious greatcoat pockets.

Then he draped Rochedale's body artfully across the floorboards so that he lay on his back, half in, half out of the carriage.

Unhitching the horses, he brought his whip down hard on the flank of one terrified animal. With a screaming whinny, it galloped away into the forest. He walked the other horse around the carriage several times to disguise his footprints, then mounted and rode away, leaving behind him the tragic, grisly scene of an apparent robbery gone wrong.

As night set in, Lucia staggered through the forest just out of sight of the road, terrified that she would somehow stumble back into Sir Winston's path. Hunger and pain stunned her mind and raged like wild fire through her body. Unaware that she was leaving a trail of blood, she was weak and cold and dizzy from the loss of that precious fluid. Her energy and strength almost spent, she knew she needed help as soon as possible.

She recognized her surroundings, at least. She was in Essex and the private drive to Brackenwell Hall was only four miles down the road from where she had left Rochedale's carriage. Three miles beyond that lay Saddewythe Manor. Perhaps, in the unlikely event that a coach passed by at this time of night, she could flag it down and prevail upon the occupants to take her to Brackenwell Hall. Otherwise, she would be forced to walk the whole distance. She was not sure she could do it.

Her vision blurred. She stumbled over a tree's root and clung to its trunk, her dirt-streaked cheek pressed against the rough bark, until her dizziness passed. Exhaustion overwhelmed her and she leaned heavily against the tree to keep from fainting. Sinking to her knees, she prayed that God would send someone to rescue her.

Black oblivion was invading the edges of her mind when she suddenly heard the steady squeak of wheels moving toward her in the dark stillness. Picking its way slowly and carefully through the night, a carriage drove into view, its burning lanterns swaying orange stars against the ebony trees.

Resolutely, Lucia let go of her tree and stumbled out into the middle of the road. She stood her ground as the coach lumbered toward her, hoping that the driver would see her in the darkness.

At the last possible moment, so it seemed to her, the carriage halted. She staggered up to the coachman, raising her hands in supplication. "Please help me! I've...I've been injured and my...my home is not far from here. Take me to Brackenwell Hall! You will be well re...reward...ed." A blackness darker than the night engulfed her. She staggered forward, grabbing at the carriage in an attempt to steady herself, then sank, unconscious, to the ground.

The vehicle's passenger was pounding on the roof, demanding to know the cause of the delay. The coachman took the carriage lantern and descended the box to lean curiously over the fallen figure. "'Tis a

man, milord! 'E were askin' fer 'elp, then 'e jus' fainted dead away!"

Giles's head popped half way out of the carriage window. "Drive on, Madden! I want to get to an inn before the moon rises and highway robbers are out in force."

Madden walked to the window. "'E were askin' me to take 'im to Brackenwell 'All, milord!"

"Brackenwell Hall?" Mountheathe's eyes widened. "Is it in this vicinity?"

"Aye, milord. A few miles ahead. I grew up near there."

"I'll have a look at this mystery man of yours, Madden." Giles descended from the carriage and crouched beside the dark shape in front of the coach. He rolled the body over, motioning for Madden to shine his lantern on the stranger's face.

As the golden light spilled onto Lucia's delicate features, covered with blood and dirt, Mountheathe gave a low whistle. "If it ain't the Rogue's doxy! Shot, I'll be bound, but not dead! It would appear that Rochedale has muffed it, Madden! Well, he'll not chisel another penny out of me after this debacle! I suppose getting rid of my cousin's whore is a chore I'll have to do myself. Into the coach with her, then."

"'Er, milord?" Madden raised a brow.

"No time to explain now. Just grab her feet." The two men stowed the unconscious duchess in the carriage and Mountheathe ordered Madden to proceed to Brackenwell Hall.

As Madden urged the horses into a canter, Giles exulted. In the darkness of the carriage, Concordia sat propped up on the seat beside him, drugged into oblivion. On the opposite seat lay Lucia, pale and unmoving, a dark red stain across the torn shoulder of her coat.

Giles stared at her speculatively, trying to decide what he could do to her that would bring the Rogue the most torment. His gaze lingered lewdly upon the curve of her breast as it strained against her bloody shirt. 'Robin would run completely mad if he thought I had raped his strumpet,' Giles mused with an ugly smile. Alas, but he hadn't time for such sweet mischief, as exciting as the ducal doxy's screaming would be. Every delay in getting Concordia to Gretna provided Tracy more time to catch up with them. Still, he would thoroughly enjoy killing Amberley's bitch and, imagining the Rogue's devastation at her death, he laughed aloud.

The moon had just risen as Mountheathe's coach rolled into the deserted courtyard at Brackenwell Hall. Wrapping Lucia in her cloak to hide her masculine attire, Giles alighted and carried her to the door, nodding to Madden to ring the bell.

After a few minutes, footsteps sounded inside and the men stepped back as the heavy door swung open.

A grey-haired old man in Amberley livery held a burning candle aloft and glared at Giles suspiciously. "May I help you, sir?"

"I am Lord Mountheathe, the Duke of Lynkellyn's cousin. I was accompanying Her Grace to Brackenwell Hall when we had a most terrifying encounter with a highwayman! The brigand shot Her Grace when she refused him her wedding ring and I fear she is gravely injured. May I carry her in?"

Carter, the butler, stared at Lucia's white face with consternation. "Yes! Yes, of course!" He stepped aside. "Her Grace! Injured! And we never even got word that she was coming! Oh, dear! Oh, dear!"

Mountheathe pushed past him and started up the staircase. Halfway up, he turned to the clucking butler. "Go fetch a doctor! Quick, man! 'Tis a matter of life and death!"

Spurred by Giles's frantic command, Carter hurried out the door. Under normal circumstances, he would have sent a footman after the doctor, but the staff was abed, except for him, and his sense of urgency compelled him to waste no time waking and dressing another person. He rushed to the stable, inexpertly saddled a horse, and galloped out of the courtyard.

With a mocking smile, Giles climbed the remaining stairs, the limp woman heavy in his arms, and turned into the first lighted room that he encountered. The room boasted heavy green velvet curtains and gleaming cherry furniture upholstered in emerald and white striped satin.

He laid his burden on a sofa and took a brandy flask from his pocket, carefully avoiding the drugged flask he had offered to Concordia at the ball. Tilting Lucia's head back, he splashed some brandy on her face. As she began to come around, he forced a little of it into her mouth. The fiery stuff coursed down her throat and she rushed, gasping and coughing, to full, agonized awareness. Gazing around groggily, she whispered with relief, "The Green Salon!"

"I'm so pleased you're awake, Your Grace!" Lucia's eyes swung around to lock onto Giles's pale face, striped with scratches and welts.

"Lord Mountheathe!" Panicked, she struggled to rise.

"I wanted you to be awake, doxy, so you could enjoy a nice, warm fire after your ordeal in the woods." Standing, he picked up a burning candlestick and caressed the curtains and some upholstered chairs with the flame. Several blazes leaped to life in his wake.

While Giles was setting his fires, Lucia staggered to her feet. She attempted to take a step toward the door, but her knees buckled and she collapsed.

Smirking, Mountheathe loomed over her, candle in hand. "How considerate of you to come to me bloodied, doxy. It will keep you from outrunning your fate this time." He bent down and tilted her face

up to his. "Perhaps I should set your clothing alight and be absolutely certain of the work." His laughter was a cock's crow as he watched horror darken her eyes. "But no. Then your death would come too quickly. I want you to suffer and I want that lovestruck husband of yours to know it. Enjoy your trip to Hell, little slattern." He strode toward the door, turning on the threshold. "You should have been content with lifting your skirts for tuppence. Instead, you grabbed for the sun, my pretty jade, and now you're going to burn!" On a laugh, he was gone, slamming the door behind him.

Lucia crawled to the sofa, using all her strength to pull herself onto it. She watched, dazed and exhausted, as the flames cavorted around her, reaching out to devour the entire room.

After resting a few moments, she gathered her courage and stood. A wave of dizzying pain engulfed her and she almost collapsed again, but, grabbing the back of the couch, she steadied herself.

Smoke stung her eyes and scorched her lungs. The heat intensified, sapping the small reserve of strength she had left. Sweat flowed in little rivers down her body, soaking her clothes. Her cloak hung heavily on her shoulders, its hem threatening to drag through the flames that surrounded her. She fumbled with the clasp until it opened and the cape fell in a heap behind her.

Trying to breathe the searing, smoke-laden air as little as possible, she let go of the sofa. Standing uncertainly for a second, she took a small, trembling step toward the door, then another and another, forcing her shaky legs to carry her. As she struggled toward it, the door seemed farther and farther away.

The smoke swirled around her, burning her lungs. Her strength gone, her will fading, she took a last wavering step and wilted,. Her head slammed hard against the blistering floor and she lay there, whimpering, unable to move. Her skin crawled in the heat, writhing like a dying snake as she panted and sobbed, desperate to breathe, her scorched lungs baking in the hot air. Blackness washed over her, taking her mercifully away from the smoke; away from the heat; away from the living.

Night had settled on the courtyard of the Swan and Trumpet Inn when Robin and his companions arrived. The gentlemen dismounted, looking about impatiently for an hostler. Although the inn itself was jammed with people, the courtyard was deserted.

With a shrug, Robin tethered his horse to a hitching post and went inside, Tracy and Peter following. They pushed through the crowd of hostlers and stableboys blocking the doorway and joined a throng of tenant farmers and townspeople. Penetrating the crowd a little further, they finally discovered the source of so much interest. A gruesome corpse, its face covered with a handkerchief, was lying on a blanket on the floor. A farmer stood over the dead man, holding his audience enthralled.

"It were 'orrible! I was walkin' down the road, goin' 'ome from the market like I always do on Wednesday nights an' I saw the coach asittin' there, all quiet an' 'aunted-like! Then I saw 'im!" The

farmer gestured toward the dead man. "'E were covered wi' blood and 'is feet were 'anging out o' 'is coach! Ghastly, it was! And when I knelt down to see to 'im, I swear I 'eard 'is ghost, demandin' vengeance 'gainst those wha' done 'im in for 'is worldly goods." He shuddered eloquently while his listeners stared in wide-eyed silence.

"My good man!" Robin called. "Do you say this fellow was the victim of a robbery?"

"'E's a gentleman an' they never goes nowhere wi'out a lot o' jewels an' gold. This one 'ere didn't 'ave so much as tuppence when I found 'im! What else could it be but a robbery, sir? O' course, the innkeeper has sent a groom for the magistrate."

"Could I have a look at the body, please?" Robin asked. The crowd parted to let Robin and his two companions approach the blanket. They crouched beside the corpse while Robin uncovered the dead man's face. "Rochedale!" he muttered in an undertone that only his friends could hear. He let the handkerchief drop back into place, saying, "Was there no one with him? A coachman or a groom? A traveling companion, perhaps?"

"'E was all alone, sir! And that is passin' strange, think on! Mebbe it was the servants what done 'is business for 'im!" The crowd gasped and murmured. The farmer's eyes grew even rounder. "Did you know 'im, sir?" he said.

"His name was Sir Winston Rochedale. He was...an acquaintance. You're certain you saw no one else near the coach?"

"Oh, no, sir! If somebody else 'ad been there, I would 'ave seen 'im. I wouldn't want to slight no dead people. They might take it the wrong way and come a-'auntin' o' me!"

The innkeeper and the magistrate bustled into the taproom and sent all the locals and stableboys about their business. The gentlemen introduced themselves to the magistrate, identified the body, and lied a little to protect the duchess from scandal, saying that Rochedale, a slight acquaintance, had told them he planned to go hunting in Scotland. The magistrate accepted their story without question, especially after he learned that Robin was the master of Brackenwell Hall.

The gentlemen silently devoured a meal in the Swan and Trumpet's private parlor, then Norworth made some discreet inquiries about Mountheathe and Concordia. He rejoined his companions, shaking his head. "They haven't stopped here."

"We had best move on to the next hostelry, then." Malkent heaved out of his chair. He and Peter gathered their belongings, but Robin remained seated as if he hadn't heard. He stared out the window into the night's blackness, his mouth arched into a grim, pensive frown.

"Don't look so worried, Rogue! We'll find her!" Tracy said.

"In what condition, Tracy? Injured? Dying? Dead?" Robin gazed at the earl with hopeless eyes. "My wife is missing and the man who was thought to be with her has met a bloody end. Suppose whoever killed Rochedale has Lucia! Suppose that same madman is torturing her; raping her; murdering her! What if she is dying alone in agony in some ditch or thicket? Don't you think I have cause to worry?" Robin rose to pace the room.

"You may be jumping to conclusions, Your Grace." Peter said. "Perhaps it was Lucia who killed Sir Winston. If she went with him unwillingly, she may have been trying to escape when the unthinkable happened..."

"Nonsense!" Tracy snorted. "That pretty little lady couldn't hurt a fly, Norworth! I daresay she's never even touched a firearm, much less killed someone! She'd most likely faint at the very idea!"

"No, Tracy! What Norworth says could be true! Lucia's will to live is strong, make no mistake! And she told me once that she's a crack shot." Robin grasped at the hope Peter offered, the worried lines on his countenance smoothing a little as his eyes, suddenly bright again, met the viscount's.

The younger man smiled. "We'll find her, Your Grace, and Concordia as well. Let us be off!"

The gentlemen had called for their mounts and were settling their shot when a boy hurtled through the door, shouting the innkeeper's name as he scudded to a halt before the group. "Brackenwell Hall's afire!" the lad gasped.

"Brackenwell!" Robin shouted. He rushed out the door, the others following. The horses stood saddled in the yard. Leaping into their saddles, the gentlemen thundered toward Brackenwell Hall.

Chapter 27:

In Which Brackenwell Burns

The gentlemen arrived at the Hall to find the house engulfed in flames as queues of people slung water buckets back and forth. Pushing past the firefighters, Lynkellyn rushed toward Carter. "Did everyone get out safely?" he yelled over the roar of the flames.

"Oh, Your Grace! How come you here? It's the most terrible thing! I..." At the fierce intensity of Robin's gaze, the servant collected his wits and answered, "All the staff is accounted for and the stables are empty, Your Grace. The horses have been moved to the west pasture."

Robin led the older man a little away from the house where they could converse at more normal levels. "You've done well, Carter. Do you have any idea how it started?"

"No, Your Grace. When I returned from fetching Dr. Halcombe...or trying to fetch him, at any rate,... the Hall was afire. Most of the servants were out and we soon roused the rest."

"Dr. Halcombe!" Robin pounced on the word. "Why did you need a doctor?"

"For Her Grace! She'd been hurt, do you see, and..."

"Her Grace is here?" Robin almost shouted, his eyes searching the crowd.

"Well, she was here, Your Grace. Your cousin, Lord Mountheathe, carried her in. She was unconscious and he said she'd been injured during an encounter with a highwayman. I rode for the doctor, but when I returned, Lord Mountheathe's coach had disappeared and the house was ablaze. I assumed they had left..."

Robin clutched Carter's arms, his grip bruising. "Think carefully, Carter. Did you see them leave? Did you see Her Grace get into my cousin's coach and ride away?"

"Well... No, Your Grace," Carter admitted. "But, then, why...?"

"So you're telling me that Her Grace could very well be in that house!" Robin shook the older man roughly. Intuition told him that Lucia was, indeed, trapped within those hellish flames and nauseating horror slammed into him like a battering ram.

Turning to stare at the blazing building, he scanned it desperately, seeking a safe passage into the house. Though fire danced at every opening, he wrapped his cloak around his face and body, leaving only his eyes uncovered, and raced toward the Hall.

Dimly aware that Peter and Tracy were chasing him, shouting his name and demanding he halt, he leaped onto the porch. With his hands twisted in his cloak, he wrenched open the door, swinging it wide. A blast of heat and flame thrust him backward into the arms of his friends. Seizing him, they struggled to hold him back.

"Let me go!" Robin screamed above the roar of the fire, trying to jerk away from them. "She's in there, Tracy! She's in there all alone and I'm responsible! I have to go in and get her! I can't let her die in that hell! Surely you understand that!" he sobbed. "I can't let her die hating me, never knowing... I have to save her! I have to, Tracy! I can't live without her!"

Tracy's hold on Robin tightened as he fought once more to plunge into the flames. "You don't know for certain that she's in there, Rogue, and if she is, it's too late!" the earl shouted over the thundering blaze. "It's too late! Only a miracle could save anyone trapped in that!"

With a gasp and a shudder, Lucia climbed to consciousness. Her aching body weak and leaden, she lay on the blistered floor, roasting in the heat of the blaze. While the flames cavorted around her, all green and blue, yellow and orange, she felt her baby move inside her for the first time. The wonder of that small miracle rose above her body's agonies and her soul's despair. In the midst of all this ashen devastation, she was, for a shimmering moment, ecstatically happy. Wishing the child could somehow be saved, she closed her eyes and made her peace with God, tears of surrender trickling from beneath her lashes.

"Surely you are not this easily defeated, Lucia, ma fille?" Her mother's soft, lilting voice suddenly wafted to her out of the fire's roar.

"It is not time for you to go." Her father's voice caressed her like violin music. "You have a great deal to live for... a great deal to do! Do not give up, dearest child. You must leave this place."

Opening her eyes, Lucia saw her parents' beloved faces in the flickering flames and accepted their presence in this smoky, surreal world without question. "I have no escape, Papa! I am too weak to walk and the door is engulfed in flames."

"Let your heart guide you, ma fille. Let your love strengthen you." Elise's voice floated around her, embracing her sweetly. "Love will always see you through, ma fille."

"I fear my love is not returned, Maman," she whispered despairingly.

"Is it not, ma fille? If you do not leave this place, you will never know, héin? Be absolutely certain before you silence your heart...forever!"

"I would like to know, Maman!"

"You will not discover the answer in the flames, my dear," Albert said. "You must be strong! You must fight for your life! Think! Do not waste your strength walking. Crawl to the window, break the glass, and climb onto the porch roof."

"There is fire in front of the window, Papa." Lucia's mind was sinking deeper into this wonderful reverie. She had missed her parents so desperately for so very long. She would be content to spend her last few minutes in their company. "I want to stay with you."

"You cannot stay with us, ma fille. It is not your time. You have much to do. Use your cloak as a shield! Save yourself!" Elise said.

Lucia stared at the flames leaping higher and higher in front of the window, then turned her face away.

"I am afraid."

"You must be strong. We are always with you," said her father.

Lucia remained still for another moment, gathering her courage, then patted the area around her until her hand brushed her cape. Wrapping herself in it, she sat up, staring toward the impossibly distant window. Determined, she cocooned her body in the cloak and crawled toward salvation. Her head throbbing, her torn, twisted muscles screamed in agony with every inch of floor she covered.

The window grew slowly, steadily nearer until at last all that separated her from it was a thin wall of fire. Her skin cracking in the heat, she crouched before the soaring flames, watching them lick the ceiling. The window beckoned to her from the other side of the blaze, but she froze as she looked back into the inferno; back into the past. Suddenly those same orange flames were dancing in and out of the windows of her Copenhagen boarding house and she could hear her mother's shrieks; could hear her own frantic, futile weeping as the fire murdered everyone she loved...

"Papa? Maman?" she called, tears mixing with the sweat that streamed down her face. "I cannot..."

"You must go on, ma fille. You must help yourself." Her mother's voice was no more than a sigh in the thunder of the flames.

"Be brave, my little ewe lamb, and you will be happy!" Her father's words were but a faint, fading echo.

Her body ached for sleep and she struggled to breathe. Dizziness and searing pain weakened her resolve. Morpheus beckoned to her from his dream world, offering to drown her agonies in the cool, oblivious waters of the Lethe. She had only to cradle her head upon her arms, close her eyes and...

"Lucia!" A voice, Robin's voice, urgent and compelling, thundered above the roar of the flames, dragging her back to consciousness. "Lucia, where are you?" Her eyes fluttered open and she forced herself to her feet, staggering upon shaky, uncooperative legs. Covering herself completely with her cloak, she hurtled through the blaze and struck the hot, blackened, crumbling wall on the other side. She pulled the cape off her head and looked back, astonished, at the crackling fire behind her, then turned to the window looming ahead.

With a sob of joy and relief, she pulled the cloak close about her, wrapping her hands securely in the garment's folds. She slammed her fists against the charred and brittle windowpanes, splintering the woodwork and shattering the glass. Widening the hole, she gulped the fresh air that rushed in. Glancing back at the inferno that was to have been her death chamber, she whispered, "Thank you, Maman and Papa!" She climbed through the broken window onto the roof, eagerly, gratefully sucking in the chill night air, ecstatic and amazed to be alive.

Robin's face was streaked with sooty sweat and white ashes dotted his limp, loose curls as he passed another bucket of water down the line of exhausted firefighters. The hard work kept him from dwelling overlong on Lucia's ghastly death and the bleak, black void that was his future without her. His mind had, however, clamped onto the fact that Giles was somehow the author of this nightmare and with each drop of water that hit the fire, his lust for vengeance grew hotter.

Suddenly the fire thundered, timbers crashing to the ground in its midst, and the roof collapsed into the flames, leaving only the side walls and the front portico standing, its white stone roof supported by blackened marble columns. With horror in his eyes, Robin whirled to stare at the inferno. Tracy rushed to him. "It's over, Rogue! Brackenwell Hall is gone. There's nothing more anyone can do."

The crowd apparently agreed. The buckets stopped moving as people stared at the swirling, crackling blaze, shaking their heads.

"With just a little more water, Tracy, we can douse this fire! We can save Lucia! She's alive in there! I know she is!"

"No, Rogue! If she was ever in there, she's with God now. No one could survive that!" Tracy flung his hand toward the blackened timbers crumbling in the glowing flames.

"Lucia's alive and I've got to save her!" Robin lunged toward the burning heap that was Brackenwell Hall.

Tracy grabbed his arm. "You're not thinking rationally, Robin! You'll die in there...and it will all have been for nothing!"

Amberley's eyes burned with desperate resolve. "I'll not abandon her, Tracy! If there is the slightest chance to save her..."

Tracy turned his friend bodily toward the Hall. "Look long and hard, Rogue! Do you honestly and reasonably believe that anyone could live in such a hell?"

Robin stared at the blaze, endeavoring with all his being to deny his friend's logic. Suddenly he stiffened and a smile broke through the dampness and grime that covered his face. He pointed eagerly toward the Hall. "There she is!"

At that moment, a startled cry broke from the watching firefighters. "Look! There's a man on the porch roof!" someone shouted. A shocked murmur ran through the crowd. All eyes turned to stare in stunned amazement at the white stone roof over the front portico.

As the building collapsed behind her, Lucia climbed through the shattered window onto the stone roof and crouched there, gulping breath after breath of cool air into her scorched lungs. The stone upon which she sat was chilly compared to the blistered floor of the Green Salon and she laid her burned, stinging hands thankfully against it.

Exhausted, she closed her eyes, wondering if she'd ever find the energy to move again. A strong breeze caressed her face and her eyes fluttered open. She became aware, then, of a crowd of people staring at her from the ground and distinctly heard Robin's voice.

"Get a ladder!" he shouted and Lucia watched with detached interest as two men hurried away to do his bidding.

She smiled wistfully at the people below, suddenly yearning to be with them. Marshaling her last reserves of strength, she eased her body down the slanting roof toward the waiting throng. The men returned with the ladder and propped it against the closest column to Lucia's position, steadying it while Robin climbed toward her.

Gazing into his worried eyes as he stood atop the ladder, Lucia could imagine nothing more beautiful than his face. He reached for her and, warm and safe in his embrace, she wrapped her arms around his neck. Lifting her off the roof, he started down the ladder.

To the surprise and consternation of the onlookers, he hugged her in joy and relief as soon as they touched ground. "Ma chérie! My little love! My own!" he murmured, stroking and kissing her hair. "Mon Dieu, but I thought I had lost you forever!" In the refuge of his embrace, Lucia no longer needed to be strong. Overwhelmed by pain and exhaustion, she fainted away. Robin cradled her in his arms, lowering her slowly to the ground.

A stricken look on his face, Carter rushed toward them. "I had no idea Her Grace was still inside! I beg Your Grace to forgive my error."

"Her Grace has fainted, Carter! Where's this doctor of yours?"

"He...I didn't bring him, Your Grace. He's attending a lying-in ten miles away. I congratulate myself on just being able to get the gypsies here to help us fight the fire, considering the evening's turmoil."

"Gypsies?" Robin's brows rose.

"Half the people here are gypsies, Your Grace. You-you did say, in one of your letters from France, that they might camp on your land."

"So I did. Where are they camped?"

"About two miles west of here, Your Grace."

A figure loomed between Robin's little group and the burning house, throwing a long shadow across Lucia's face. "You are the duke who is so kind to let my people live on your property, are you not?"

As Robin and Carter looked up, a swarthy man with ebony hair and a luxuriant moustache crouched beside them. "I am Ilya, leader of the Romany. I want to thank you..." Lucia moaned and the gypsy looked down at her. "Your friend... He is not so good, I think. Your doctor is coming?"

"The doctor had to attend a lying-in a great distance away..." Carter began again, twisting a sooty handkerchief with nervous fingers.

When Robin suddenly questioned Ilya in the Romany tongue, the gypsy stared at him, stunned. "How do you know the speech of my people?"

"We will talk of that later." Robin said. "Have you the healer I require in your camp?"

"Yes! My grandmother is such a one, but she is very old."

"All I ask is that she knows her art and is willing to use it on our behalf. Will she treat outsiders?"

"She will minister to your friend, but she is too frail to come to you. You must go to her...and the price will be high."

"No price is too high if it saves my lady's life." Robin's eyes softened as they rested upon the still figure in his arms.

"Your wife...is this boy?" Ilya was rather taken aback.

"She has dressed herself in male garb as a...a disguise of sorts. It is a long, involved story, which I promise you shall hear while your grandmother sees to Her Grace."

"It seems to me, Your Grace, that for a proper English milord, you have a great deal too many stories to tell!" Ilya's black eyes were sharp and suspicious as they searched Amberley's countenance. "You will come with me now. Your lady shall travel in our caravan and we shall ride. I will send the cart back for my people later." Bowing, Ilya strode toward a wagon parked well away from the burning building.

"Your Grace, do you think it wise to trust those...those black-eyed heathens with Her Grace's life?" Carter whispered.

"Rest easy, Carter. I know what I'm about. Would you fetch my cloak, s'il vous plaît, and spread it out beside me on the ground?"

When the servant brought the cape, Robin gently laid Lucia on it. Smoothing her hair away from her face, he tucked the cloak she was wearing tightly about her to shut out the cold. "Stay with her, Carter, and shout if there's any change." Robin left to find his friends.

When Robin told Norworth and Malkent that he was taking Lucia to a gypsy healer, they were shocked. Unable to dissuade him from his course, however, they mounted their horses and followed Lucia's caravan to Ilya's encampment.

The Duke of Lynkellyn, the Earl of Malkent, Viscount Norworth, and Ilya, King of the Gypsies, sat around a large campfire, waiting for news of Lucia. Once in camp, Robin slipped easily into the Romany tongue, astonishing Tracy and Peter as much as he had Ilya.

He explained that he had lived among the Romany in Italy for nearly a year, dyeing his hair black and staining his skin a darker shade to blend in with his adopted people. Hailing him as a brother, Ilya assured him that his grandmother knew much of the healing arts and would spare no effort on her grace's behalf.

Robin requested a place to wash away the soot and ash still clinging to him and was directed to a nearby stream. The gentlemen bathed, then dressed in homespun shirts belted with wide knotted sashes and loose, woolen breeches of Ilya's providing, their own clothing having been ruined during their firefighting efforts. Returning to the communal fire, they feasted heartily on rabbit stew and coarse brown bread.

After the meal, more and more gypsies entered the circle around the fire. One brought a violin, another a guitar, and another a tambourine. Music, song, and laughter soon drowned out the crackle of the fire.

When a young girl entered the circle, the music and laughter died away. She curtsied nervously to the duke. "You may see your wife now, Your Grace."

A frail, old woman met Robin at the caravan where Lucia had been taken. "Your lady needs her rest, Duke! Do not fret her with questions or scolds and do not stay too long," she said, in no awe of his exalted rank.

"She...she hasn't lost the baby, has she?"

"No, Your Grace, and she will not, if she is not vexed or overtaxed. Go now and speak with her. She is

asking for you."

Robin entered the wagon. Against a far wall, a single candle burned on a trunk that doubled as a table. Beside it, Lucia lay propped up on pillows on a cot, surrounded by flickering shadows. Instead of her waistcoat and breeches, she wore a white cotton chemise, gathered at the neck with a black ribbon tied in a bow just above the rise of her breasts. With her gleaming ebony curls tumbling about her shoulders, she looked absurdly young and virginal, even with the gentle swell of belly that was his child.

Love and desire rose together in a sudden tumult within him. He could barely control the urge to rush to her and rain ardent kisses upon those sweet, pink lips. Seeing the heat in his gaze, she dropped her eyes self-consciously.

He knelt on the floor beside her cot, glancing first at the white cloth that bound her head, then her swathed shoulder and bandaged hands. "Ma chérie! How are you feeling?"

"The old mother spread some sort of balm on my burns so that they do not pain me as they might," she said. I'm alright"

Looking at her pale, drawn face, Robin disagreed. After a tense moment, he asked, "What demon could possibly have possessed you to go tearing off with Rochedale, of all people, without a word to anyone?"

She lifted her head and flinched at the agony the sudden movement caused. "I didn't go with him voluntarily, Robin! He abducted me."

Robin lifted one disbelieving brow. "He came to Lynkellyn House, dragged you from your bed, cut your hair, dressed you in man's garb, and forced you into his coach without your making a sound or a single servant discovering the deed until it was too late? Doing it much too brown, my sweet."

"No! I dressed as a man because I needed a disguise. It is highly improper, after all, for the Duchess of Lynkellyn to keep a secret assignation in front of Newgate Prison at dawn!" Her icy blue eyes challenged his.

"Newgate Prison? Dawn? Lucia, you had a clandestine meeting with Rochedale? Did I not tell you to stay away from that man?" he almost shouted.

Lucia's eyes fell and she nervously brushed a stray lock of hair away from her face with one bandaged hand. "Yes, you did, Robin, and...and under normal circumstances I would have gladly obeyed you, but... but he told me he had something to sell and I wanted it very, very badly."

"Something to sell?" Robin forced his temper into calmer channels. "What was it? Some trinket or other? I daresay it wasn't worth risking your life."

"Oh, but it was!"

"Ma chérie, perhaps you had better start from the beginning and tell me the whole of it."

"It was the letter!"

"The letter?" Robin stared blankly.

"The letter that you told me you had lost while you were trying to rescue Lady Malkent from your cousin." She searched his eyes for comprehension, thought she saw a glimmer of it, and plunged on. "Gaston came to me several days ago and said that he had stolen the letter from Mountheathe and would sell it to me for five thousand guineas. I met him at Newgate Prison at dawn this morning to purchase the letter. This morning! It seems an eternity ago! There was no letter, of course."

"He and his coachman tried to force me into his carriage, but I fought them and they...they hit me on the head. When I woke up, I was at an inn miles from London. Gaston said he was going to sell me into slavery in Araby. If it had been anyone but Gaston, I would have laughed at such a preposterous idea!"

"Why didn't you come to me with this, Lucia?" Robin almost pleaded.

"You were always...out. I had no idea where to find you and Gaston was threatening to sell the letter back to Giles. I did not want to lose this one chance to...to... I thought that if I gave you the letter that would clear your name, you might..." she met his eyes and saw the flash of anger in them, "...let me go," she finished lamely, choking back her feelings. How could she tell him, after so brutally pushing him away the night before, that she loved him and had hoped, with this dangerous escapade, to win back a little of his affection. The truth sounded ludicrous, even to her ears. She didn't understand all the conflicting feelings that twisted her heart. How could she explain them to him?

The anger Lucia had seen in Robin's eyes was directed at himself. Had he not been chasing about Town with a bevy of unsavory women, futilely attempting to deny the promptings of his heart, this entire nightmare could have been avoided.

"There is something else." Lucia broke the tense silence, sounding small, anxious, and forlorn. She lowered her head again, unable to look at her husband. "I needed some money to pay for the letter. I...I stole it from you. "

"Yes, I know."

Her eyes flew to his face. "You know? Then why...why did you not say anything?" Shock and dismay rang in her voice. He turned his face away, his eyes hooded to hide the pain that leaped into them. "I thought you were planning to bolt with Norworth and if I couldn't stop you, I wanted to be certain that you were not cast adrift, penniless, upon the world."

"I promised I would not run away, Your Grace. It is a point of honor with me to keep my promises," Lucia said.

Silence again. At last, Robin bent a penetrating gaze upon her. "You said Rochedale demanded five thousand for the letter. You didn't take that much from me. How were you able to raise the rest?"

"Gaming! At a place called Randall's that I had heard you and Bellefield mention. None of our acquaintance saw me there, save for Lord Malkent and Lord Norworth, and I don't think they recognized me. I was dressed as a man, then, too, and people see what they expect to see, as my father used to say."

Robin sat very still, fighting the panicky, sick horror that threatened to engulf him. Terrible images flashed into his mind of Lucia pummeled by robbers in the streets or forced into a duel with some drunken rake and dying in a pool of blood. He closed his eyes, willing those awful visions away.

When he opened them again, Lucia looked pale and weary. He decided to end the audience, mindful of the old gypsy's warning. "You must promise me, Lucia, that you will not go off on your own like this again. I know -- " his voice rose as she uttered a protest. "I know that you have spent most of your life in such pursuits, but now you are under my protection. You no longer need to steal or gamble to live...and certainly not to prove my innocence. I would have you safe at all costs, ma chérie."

"I am sorry if I worried you, Robin. I know how much you want your legacy and I apologize for jeopardizing it," she said.

Robin stiffened, his eyes darkening. "Devil take my legacy, Lucia. I feared for you and the child, not some damned bank balance! How mercenary and unfeeling do you think I am?" She lowered her eyes and said nothing. "You have not yet promised, Lucia," he reminded her sternly. "You must never put yourself in such danger again."

She nodded compliance, staring at her blanket. "Rest now," he said, rising.

Suddenly her head sprung up and, with sheer terror in her eyes, she tried to clasp his hands in her bandaged ones. "Don't leave me, Robin! If Gaston should find me...!"

He covered her white-swathed hands with his. "You need no longer fear that devil. He is dead."

"Dead!"

"His mortal remains lie at an inn a few miles from here. I saw them. A robbery, it seems."

"A robbery! Oh, but..."

"Do you know otherwise, Lucia?" he said, sinking to his knees beside her.

"I shot him, Robin! We struggled and...I shot him!" The tale of her nightmare journey as Rochedale's captive tumbled from her trembling lips. "The last thing I remember before waking up at Brackenwell Hall in Mountheathe's company is fleeing into the forest with Gaston's coachman shouting after me."

Robin's mind reeled at the horrendous dangers through which Lucia had passed. He could have lost her a hundred times over, he thought with a shudder. "They found no trace of a coachman," he said, getting his shock under control. "Perhaps the man got scared and ran away. The incident has been declared a robbery and I think we would be wisest to leave it at that. Now, what is this about Giles?"

"After I escaped from Gaston, I...I must have fainted. When I woke up, Giles was standing over me in the Green Salon at Brackenwell Hall." She told him of Mountheathe's arson and her struggle to escape, but elected not to mention her parents' presence in the fire. They had come to her when she had needed them most and she would always treasure that memory in her heart, holding it there, safe from the jeers of a contemptuous world.

"You must rest now, ma chérie," Robin said, his eyes dark with concern. "I shall visit you in the morning."

"Good night, Robin," she said, ignoring an absurd desire to beg him to stay.

He smiled down at her, reaching out to caress one pale cheek. Then suddenly remembering last night's quarrel, he dropped his hand. With a formal bow, he left of the caravan.

Chapter 28:

In Which Both Mountheathe and Lynkellyn Are Delayed

The next morning, at an inn some miles from Brackenwell, a smug, satisfied Giles attacked a hearty breakfast, exulting as he bit into a scone. At this moment, he gloated, Amberley's strumpet was no more than a charred bit of meat lying in the rubble of Brackenwell Hall and Concordia lay upstairs in a drugged sleep, her finger ripe for his wedding band. How he loved to win!

After breakfast, Giles loaded his 'sick sister' into his carriage and headed north. An hour into the journey, the sun disappeared behind dark clouds and the heavens opened up without warning to deluge the earth. Giles ordered Madden to ignore the storm and press on. Filled with misgivings and already soaked, the coachman turned up his collar against the driving rain and urged the team to greater speed.

The horses picked their way gingerly over the muddy road while Mountheathe shouted at Madden every few minutes to use the whip. The rain pelted harder and their progress slowed to inches. A sudden streak

of lightning slashed an angry scar across the sky and a ringing clash of thunder followed. The sidling horses, nervous and miserable, tossed their heads and neighed. Their eyes rolling, their nostrils snorting, they broke into a wild gallop.

Madden frantically pulled at the reins as the horses tore down the road, dragging the carriage like a misused toy. Ignoring a curve, they charged straight on, narrowly missing rocks and trees as they plunged through the tall, slippery grass. Screaming, Madden dropped the reins and clung to the box.

Giles cowered inside the coach, kneeling on the floor with his arms thrown over his head. Oblivious to her impending doom, Concordia lay soundly asleep on the opposite seat.

The horses sped toward a pair of trees that stood just far enough apart for the animals to pass through together. Madden crossed his arms over his face, screeching, as the horses ran between the trees. Giles's coach, a little wider than the animals, followed, willy-nilly.

A horrendous cracking of wood and crashing of metal rent the air. Mountheathe shrieked and threw himself flat on the floor of the coach. Concordia, inanimate, rolled off her seat, landing, bodily, on top of him.

As suddenly as disaster struck, it ended. Steady rain battered the roof of the wrecked carriage as wind and water blew in through the jagged openings where the side panels had once been.

Giles tried to move, but found himself hampered by the dead weight of Concordia's body on top of his. He struggled out from under her, pondering, as he cast her slim, white hand out of his face, how such a small woman could be so heavy.

He clambered out of the carriage to assess the damage. The horses were gone. The coach's side panels and the front wheels had been sheared away. The back wheels had buckled.

Having been thrown from the box, Madden was climbing out of a shrub. "Damn you, Madden!" Giles shouted, rain streaming down his face. "Can't you drive anything more sophisticated than a pony cart? You could have killed us all!"

His feet at last on firm, if sodden, ground, the coachman quite forgot his place. "It was you what wanted me to spring 'em in the midst o' a deluge, my fine lord! I was all for layin' low 'til the sun came out!"

"I merely wanted you to travel at a decent rate of speed, Madden, instead of that snail's pace you had adopted. I didn't expect you to start allowing the horses to make all your decisions for you! It's a wonder I don't sack you right here and now!" Giles suddenly halted in the midst of his diatribe to scan his surroundings. "Where the devil are the horses, anyway?"

"Broke 'arness an' run!" Madden spat disgustedly as rain dripped from his nose.

"Well, there's nothing for it, but you'll have to go find them."

"Me-? You want me to go out there all alone in the pourin' rain to find a team o' 'orses what could be miles away by now?!"

"We shall need to ride those horses to the nearest inn for help. While you search, I will stay with the lady."

"It'd be easier to walk to the inn!" Madden muttered, trudging off in the direction he had seen the horses take just before his fall.

Mountheathe climbed back into the relative warmth of the carriage and doffed his soaked traveling cloak. Turning Concordia, still unconscious, onto her back, he removed her comparatively dry cloak and put it around his shoulders, covering her with his wet one. Contorting his face against the intruding elements, he clutched the cloak tight around him and settled down to wait.

After slogging several miles through the mud and rain, Madden, chilled to the bone, chanced upon a tidy little farm. When he knocked on the cottage door, intending to inquire after the horses, a pretty young woman invited him in for a cup of tea. He told her his tale of woe and she confided that her husband had gone away for a week to buy livestock. She hinted provocatively at her loneliness without her spouse and then, somehow, he found her on his lap, kissing him. Being a proper gentleman and not one to refuse a lady's wishes, he happily gratified her whim.

The next morning the sun smiled as Madden, pleasantly sated, kissed his newfound love farewell and walked back to the wrecked coach. Discovering his master, cold, wet and in a miserable temper, huddled inside the derelict vehicle, he blithely informed Giles that the horses had vanished.

Giles leaped out of the carriage to stomp about and kick at clumps of wet grass, roundly cursing the rain, the coach, the horses, and his driver. His anger finally spent, he glowered at Madden, observing that he looked remarkably clean and dry for a man who had been out in the rain all night.

"My clothes, do ye mean, my lord? Why, the sun must've dried 'em!" He squinted at the half-hidden sun as a chilly breeze ruffled Mountheathe's damp curls.

With a derisive snort, Giles gestured toward the highway. "You, Madden, are going to follow this road to the nearest inn and bring back some horses. Furthermore, you are going to be damned quick about it! Here is some money!" Mountheathe handed him a guinea. "Be gone with you and hurry back. As it is, the day will be half gone before you return. Oh! And bring me some food. Bread or cheese or something!"

It was well past noon when Madden returned with three horses and an hostler from the 'Blue Bull'. In the meantime, Giles had been forced to dose Concordia again. He grimaced as he pocketed the last few vials of his drug. He had not expected so many delays and he was running out of the elixir.

Giles told the hostler the handy lie about his sick, deluded sister and the men packed everything of value that would fit into three sets of saddlebags. Giles mounted a tired roan and the unconscious girl was hoisted into the saddle in front of him.

As they rode toward the inn, Giles fumed inwardly. He had already lost two days and would lose yet another, securing a new coach. He consoled himself with the fact that Concordia had spent three solid days alone in his company. No other man could possibly want her under such scandalous circumstances. Her fortune was his for the taking.

The Brackenwell blaze and Lucia's narrow escape from death heightened Peter's fears for Concordia. When Robin told him that Mountheathe had intentionally set the Hall afire in an attempt to murder the duchess, something akin to terror invaded his soul.

He stared impatiently at the sheeting rain from the doorway of a gypsy wagon, aching to be away, aching to find Connie. This affair had become much more than an ugly scandal to be hushed up with a hasty marriage and a bald-faced lie to the world. The very real possibility existed that Bridland might kill Concordia if she did not comply with his wishes and Concordia was just stubborn enough to fight the bastard. Peter wished for the thousandth time that Lucia could remember whether Concordia had been in Giles's coach.

"No one could possibly travel in this deluge, Peter, not even Giles," Tracy called from the dim recesses of the wagon. "Why don't you sit down and have some of this spiced wine? It's remarkably good. I'll have to ask Ilya how to make it."

"Spiced wine, Tracy?" Peter turned on him like a wounded animal. "That beast is out there, dragging your niece through the countryside like a bag of turnips...or perhaps 'guineas' would be a more appropriate analogy...while you sit here, prattling of wine! Don't you give a damn, sirrah?" Peter's eyes glittered with fury and frustration.

"Of course, I do, Norworth! You've no call to snarl at me! I can't stop the damned rain! I'm merely trying to keep my mind off all the horrors that you allow to traipse so merrily through yours. I shall surely go mad with worry, else! And if a pleasant triviality like spiced wine will help to keep my fears at bay, by God, I will use it!" Malkent sulkily pulled a deck of cards from his pocket and untied the ribbon that bound it. "Sit down, will you?" His request was a command, but his temper was calmer. "Perhaps a hand of piquet will provide you with some diversion."

Peter grudgingly joined him at the table and they concentrated with dogged determination on their game until Robin entered the wagon, his wet hair plastered to his head. He was soaked and bedraggled, but his mouth curved in a wide smile and his eyes glowed. "Lucia walked around the camp with me during that break in the rain awhile ago," he said, "and the bandages come off her hands tomorrow." Then his face darkened. "It will be a long while before she's completely whole, naturellement, but, still, considering all she's been through and her delicate condition, she's doing very well."

A stony silence hovered over the card table. Norworth glowered at Amberley, his envy almost akin to loathing, and Robin flushed, remembering that Concordia was still in danger.

Robin removed his dripping tunic and hung it on a wall peg to dry. His back to his audience, he said idly, "You should visit Lucia, Norworth. She has been asking for you."

The gentlemen's heads jerked up in simultaneous amazement at Robin's casual speech. "Were you addressing me, Your Grace?" Peter asked.

Amberley lifted a mocking brow. "Is there another Norworth in residence?"

"You will allow me to be alone with your wife after we came to blows over her?" Peter's jaw sagged.

"Perhaps I overreacted the other night, mon ami. I can be a fire-breathing fool sometimes. I pray you, go see Her Grace with my blessing. If a visit from you will make Lucia happy and speed her recovery, who am I to refuse her?" Glad of a chance to personally question the duchess about Concordia, Peter thanked Robin and left the wagon.

"That was prettily done," Tracy said. He gathered up the cards with a detached air as Robin donned dry clothes. "Aren't you afraid Peter and Lucia might..."

"Don't say it, Tracy! Lucia swears they are nothing more than friends and she needs all her friends right now. If being with Norworth will help to make her well, she shall have Norworth. And I...I will trust them...today."

"And tomorrow?"

"I'll deal with tomorrow when it comes, my lord." Robin took Peter's seat, picked up the cards, and shuffled them with practiced fingers, listening impatiently for the slightest break in the deluge.

An apologetic sun greeted the gentlemen the next morning, as they prepared to resume the chase. Norworth and Malkent were standing by their horses when Robin joined them, leading his own mount.

"Do you ride with us after Mountheathe or do you stay with Her Grace?" Tracy inquired. Robin opened his mouth to reply, but was forestalled.

"He's going with you and so am I," Lucia said, walking toward them, the gypsy healer trailing after her, urging her back to her sickbed. The duchess wore a white cotton chemise and a colorful skirt pieced together from many different fabrics. With her ebony tresses tumbling about her shoulders, only her bandages and her pale, weary countenance belied the image of a proud gypsy wench.

"Ma chérie..." Objection pervaded Robin's voice as he approached her.

"I want to go with you, Robin! I am going with you."

"Lucia, you are injured, you are with child, and you need time to heal. You should be in bed, not standing here arguing with me. Besides, this business is likely to be dangerous. Mountheathe plainly intends to stop at nothing in his quest to line his pockets with someone's fortune. I want you to remain here where you'll be safe; where our baby will be safe."

"I can take care of myself, Robin!" she said. "And when you find Concordia, she will need a female chaperone."

"We will be riding hard and you will not have the stamina to keep up with us, Lucia. Perhaps, if you were whole, it would be different, but, as it is,..."

"I want to go with you, Robin!" She looked up at him, her blue eyes pleading.

"Lucia," he said resolutely, "it is your well-being and that of the child which concerns me. It would be much better if..."

Lucia tossed her head. "After all Mountheathe has done to me, Robin, seeing him punished would do a great deal for my well-being, I assure you."

"Now, look you, Lucia! Mountheathe has tried to kill you twice and he'll do it again if given the chance! You are not going!" Ignoring the mutiny in her eyes, he strode away, unwilling to hear further argument.

Lynkellyn, Malkent, and Norworth thundered out of camp on fresh horses an hour later. Lucia watched them go, a mulish tilt to her chin, her half-healed hands gingerly clenched at her sides. As the riders vanished over the horizon, she stalked back to her wagon, the old woman trailing her anxiously.

The pair entered the wagon and Lucia collected the few items of clothing the gypsies had given her to replace her ruined clothes. Placing the garments on her bed, she rolled them into a bundle. "Do you have some rope, Mother?"

"What are you doing, Your Grace?"

"I'm going after them. Concordia will need my help even if...if nobody else does."

"But, Your Grace, the duke gave specific instructions..."

"Hang the duke! I'll do what I like! I really need that rope, Mother."

The gypsy brought her a length of rope and she tied it around her bundle in such a manner that she could carry the whole on her back. "You're going to wear a pack with your injured shoulder?" The old woman stared, incredulous. "You'll never make it, Your Grace. You already look exhausted from the small effort you've expended today."

Lucia swung the pack onto her back, flinching at the pain that shot through her shoulder and burned in her still blistered hands. She gritted her teeth, smoothed her face into unconcerned lines and straightened to meet the old woman's eyes.

"If I am a little tired, it will pass. Where is Ilya? I need to speak to him," Lucia said. Loudly protesting, the old woman followed her out of the wagon.

When Ilya saw the women approaching, an indulgent smile curved his lips. "What is all this?"

"I am leaving," Lucia said. "I know that my husband gave you money to recompense you for our stay here and for the food and clothing you have provided us. I would like to borrow some of it for my journey. It will be refunded, I assure you."

"And just where had you in mind to go, Your Grace?"

"I'm going after the men, will you or no, so you might as well give me the money." Her chin lifted stubbornly and her eyes challenged his.

The gypsy's smile broadened. "I'm sorry, Your Grace. I cannot do that. I promised His Grace that you would wait for him here. Just as you say, I have been well paid to protect you and since you would be in all sorts of danger wandering about on your own, I cannot let you leave."

She turned on her heel and strode defiantly toward the wooded path that led to the highway. Ilya gave a Romany command to one of his men and suddenly she was scooped into a pair of burly arms from behind. Cradling her like a baby, the gypsy carried her back to her wagon while Ilya walked beside them, grinning at her furious protests and lecturing her upon wifely obedience. With an exaggerated bow, he left her seething at her caravan, ordering his grandmother and the hulking man, Anton by name, to guard her.

Lucia fumed and fretted as she lay on her cot, watching her gaolers drink wine and play at cards. The pair had tried to tempt her with the wine and the game, but, dejected and exhausted from the morning's futile exercises, she had refused them. No plan of escape immediately presented itself to her and she drifted into sleep, concocting unlikely ways to deceive the gypsies into freeing her.

Chapter 29:

In Which Thieves Abound

After an unpleasant night in a drafty inn, Mountheathe was not pleased the next morning to discover that the only conveyance the Blue Bull possessed had already been let for the summer. The nearest inn with an available carriage was three miles away.

Giles sent Madden off immediately after breakfast to procure this fabled coach, then returned to his private parlor where Concordia lay on a couch, just rousing out of her drug-induced stupor. He dosed his captive with his last vial, rang for claret, and settled back to wait for his servant's return.

It was well after noon when Madden arrived with the hired carriage; a dilapidated relict with peeling paint and rusty springs pulled by a thin, spiritless team. Muttering an oath at his first sight of this rattletrap, he, nevertheless, proceeded to supervise the loading of it.

Once his belongings were packed, he dragged Concordia, kicking and screaming, out of the inn and forced her into the carriage. The last of the drug having worn off almost an hour before Madden's return, Giles had had to resort to the tale of his dangerously mad sister to explain Concordia's hysteria to the suspicious innkeeper and to procure some rope to tie her up. Fortunately, Concordia's wild behavior bore out his story and everyone at the inn accepted it.

When Giles entered the coach, Concordia pleaded with him to untie her, complaining that the ropes were cutting her wrists and ankles. As Madden whipped up the horses and headed out of the courtyard, Giles, in a rare moment of weakness, freed his captive from her bonds. Rubbing her reddened arms, Concordia thanked him, promising, with treachery in her heart, to be quiet and cooperative.

Madden drove them back to the wrecked carriage to collect the heavy baggage. The remains of the coach were still wedged between the two trees like some animal dead in a trap, but Mountheathe's personal property had disappeared.

"Gone! All of it!" Giles wailed as he ran to the wreck. "I've been robbed, Madden!"

The coachman surveyed the scene from atop the box. "So it would appear, my lord."

"Damn! Damn! Damn! Is my life destined to be one continual blight?" While Giles lamented, Concordia

crept out of the other side of the coach. Before she had taken three steps, she heard a pistol cock.

"Another inch, Missy, and I empties this barker into ye," Madden said.

Mountheathe's brows snapped together as he rushed toward Concordia. "We've no time for these games, my girl. We have our wedding to attend. Into the coach with you."

"No, I won't get in! And furthermore, I'll never..." Giles clapped a hand over her mouth to muffle the flow of words which continued in spite of this obstruction and swung Concordia, bell-like, into the coach. He slammed the door on her and glanced back at the ruins of his elegant equipage with a sigh, congratulating himself on having the foresight to take all his money and jewelry with him to the Blue Bull. He climbed into the coach, saying wearily, "On to Scotland, Madden, and don't spare those pitiful nags. We've a great deal of time to recover."

Having left the wooded path from the gypsies' camp for the king's highway, Robin, Peter, and Tracy stopped at every inn along the road to inquire after Mountheathe and Concordia. Early in their quest, they found the hostelry in which Giles had stayed with his sick sister on the night of the fire. They heard nothing of him at subsequent inns.

When the gentlemen happened upon a derelict coach wedged between two trees, they dismounted to examine the ominous ruin. Peter's eyes darkened with worry and anger after Malkent discovered a splintered piece of the carriage door with the Bridland crest painted upon it.

"They must have escaped alive, my lord." Robin tried to reassure Peter. "Otherwise, we'd have found some evidence of..."

As if he hadn't heard the duke, Peter strode determinedly over to the coach and began to rummage inside it, poking his hands behind the seats and looking under them.

"Whatever are you searching for, Peter?" Tracy asked. "You'll find nothing in there but squirrels."

"Aha!" Almost tumbling out of the wreck, Peter rushed back to his companions, holding up a delicately wrought band of silver and sapphires. "Concordia's bracelet! I know it's hers because I remember admiring it at the ball when I bowed over her hand. This is positive proof that that bastard's got her!" Anxious black eyes met worried grey. "That murdering bastard's got her, Your Grace! And there doesn't seem to be a damned thing I can do about it!"

"We shall find them, my lord! They can't have gone far without a carriage," Robin said.

They rode on, discovering Mountheathe's trail once again at the Blue Bull and learning that he and his

'mad sister' had left only three hours before. "If we spur the horses, perhaps we can come up with them before nightfall," Peter said as the gentlemen urged their horses to a gallop.

The sun had almost set as they entered a heavily wooded part of the road. They had not traveled far into the shadows before two mounted men, their faces covered with scarves, separated from the dark trees. "'Ands up!" one of the strangers shouted. The second one cocked a horse pistol and pointed it at the gentlemen. Leaves rustled behind them and Robin, in the midst of raising his hands, glanced over his shoulder to glimpse a third brigand, also brandishing a firearm.

The highwaymen took the gentlemen's jewelry, money and horses, but charitably left them their clothes, disdaining gypsy garb as unworthy of serious consideration. Their business finished, the robbers galloped away, trailing the stolen mounts behind them.

Robin, Peter, and Tracy trudged down the road toward the next inn, planning to lay information against the robbers. They also hoped to persuade the innkeeper to lend them some horses on the strength of their word that they were peers of the realm.

"But what if the landlord won't believe us?" Tracy asked.

"Then we'll just have to steal some mounts," Robin said with exaggerated patience. "Really, Tracy! What could be more obvious?"

Wincing as pain shot through her shoulder, Lucia awoke and sat up in her cot. The wagon was dark, save for the desultory glow of the candle lantern on the table between her guards. Cards littered the table, the old gypsy woman still clutching a few in her hand. Her head rested against the back of her chair as she snored. Across from her, Anton slept as well, his head cradled in his arms on the table. A small pile of coins rested under his right hand while his left was curled around an earthenware wine jug. A brace of horse pistols, primed and ready, lay beside him on the table.

Motionless, Lucia listened. Silence reigned in the camp, although she was certain sentries had been posted. Standing, she leaned against the wall of the caravan, suddenly dizzy with pain. After her head cleared, she took a few steps, halting when her toe struck something that clattered like unearthly thunder. Her eyes flew to her guards, but other than a loud snort from the old woman, they remained oblivious.

At her feet, a plate lay on the floor beside Anton, holding the remains of his supper. Staring at the chicken bones and the uneaten loaf of bread, Lucia's stomach growled. Grabbing the bread, she stuffed it in her skirt pocket and tiptoed over to the table. She carefully removed the coins from Anton's limp grasp and dropped them into her pocket to join the bread.

Taking a long, black hooded cloak from a peg, she slipped it on, tying the strings at her throat.

Discovering that it had a capacious pocket sewn to the inside of it, she took out several mandrake roots and replaced them with Anton's pistols. Glancing one last time around the shadowy wagon, she pulled her hood up over her head and opened the door, easing herself down the ladder. When her feet touched the ground, she clasped her cape close around her and froze, listening.

Hearing only chirping crickets, she crept around the caravan until she reached the opposite side. Her wagon was situated at the edge of the encampment and she found herself, effectively, outside the boundaries of the gypsies' domain.

Sudden footsteps rustled through the grass. She flattened herself against the wagon, hiding in the shadows as a sentry passed. She watched him disappear behind another wagon, then scurried through the woods, setting her feet at last on the moonlit path that Robin and his companions had taken that morning. When she reached the intersection of the footpath with the highway, she turned north and began her hike, using the full moon's light to find her way. Taking the bread she had stolen from her pocket, she bit into it as she walked. She had only traveled a few miles down the king's road when she heard a murmur of voices in the undergrowth ahead. Her cloak swirled in the moonlight as she ducked behind a tree and listened.

"Quite a 'aul for one day's work," the first voice gloated.

"Prime bit o' luck, findin' that wrecked coach full o' loot," the second voice agreed.

"And them coves what we waylaid! I bain't sure whether they was flash or gypsies, but they was remarkable well-'eeled!"

"One thing's for certain! They're gypsies now!" Guffaws met this sally, then the voices discussed plans to visit a nearby inn to meet a third companion.

Lucia pulled her pistols from her cape pocket, cocked them, and inched forward, praying that the owners of those voices were too busy to notice a solitary foot-traveler passing through the night.

Before she had taken a dozen steps, two large men on horseback detached themselves from the shadows to block her path. One of them trained a gun on her. "Well! Well!" he grinned. "What 'ave we 'ere? One o' them gypsy morts! You're out a bit late, ain't you, love? I'll wager you're lookin' for them coves what we met earlier today! They was a reg'lar gold mine. What about you?"

"Don't look like she's got any brass to me, John, but I'll bet she 'as sommat we'd like!" the second brigand leered, swinging his leg over his saddle.

"Aye!" With a lecherous sneer, John climbed off his horse.

As the men dismounted, they looked away from Lucia for a moment. She raised her pistol, aimed at

John, and fired. He collapsed, his blood pooling on the muddy ground. Screaming, the second robber lunged at her. She brought up her other pistol, not bothering to aim at such close range, and pulled the trigger. The attacking highwayman dropped dead at her feet.

The horses reared and plunged at the sound of the blasts, but she managed to catch the reins of the nearest one, immediately recognizing it as Robin's prized black stallion. "It's alright, Diablo; it's alright!" she said, stroking his satiny neck as he sidled nervously. Worry gnawed at her mind. Why had a cutthroat been sitting on Robin's favorite mount? What had happened to him and his companions? She offered the horse the morsel of bread still left in her pocket, asking as he nibbled at it, "Where's your master, lad? Where's Robin?"

By the time Diablo was calm enough to mount, the other horse had long since galloped away. Scowling as pain ripped through her shoulder, Lucia pulled herself into the saddle, waited for a sudden bout of dizziness to pass, and urged the stallion to a gallop, determined to find Robin.

The sun had set, but the moon had not yet risen when the gentlemen, having walked for more than an hour without finding accommodation, decided to camp for the night. In spite of the recent rain, they found some dry kindling amidst the undergrowth of the forest and built a fire. Taking turns at sentry duty, they ignored their growling stomachs and tried to sleep.

Tracy and Peter awoke the next morning to the appetizing aroma of frying fish and found Robin kneeling over the fire while six large trout sizzled on a grill of interwoven green branches laid across the hot embers. "I hope you're hungry, mes amis," he called cheerfully. "I must confess I'm ravenous."

Peter crouched to inspect Robin's contraption. "Where did you learn how to do this?"

"Needs must when the devil drives, Norworth! This method of cooking is called 'barbecue'. I learned how to do it in the Caribbean during my privateering days. It's crude, but it works well enough. The fish will be done soon."

"But where did you catch the fish?" Tracy asked, sniffing the air appreciatively.

Robin carefully turned over one of the fish with his fingers before answering. "While on watch this morning, I heard a stream not far away and sought it out at first light. I cut and wove some branches into a grill and tickled some trout, a skill my father taught me. Et voilà! Breakfast!" Robin waved his hand as if he were performing magic.

"And how did you manage the cleaning of this fine catch? I thought those thieving scoundrels took everything!" Tracy said.

"In spurning our foot gear, our High Toby friends also overlooked the knife I always carry in my boot sheath." Robin lifted a steaming fish by its tail and laid it on a flat stone, one of three stacked nearby. A second fish joined the first and he handed the makeshift plate to Malkent, grinning. "Served on our finest china, my lord, washed by God, himself, in the streambed."

When the gentlemen had finished their meal, they traveled on, arriving about midmorning at a dilapidated establishment set back from the road, its weathered shield proclaiming it the 'Wild Rose Inn'. Peter and Tracy trailed Robin into the taproom, almost colliding with him when he halted on the threshold, his head tilted slightly as if he smelled danger in the air.

The shadowy room seemed crowded for late morning. Openly flaunting weaponry of every imaginable sort from crude clubs to pearl-handled pistols with gold inlay, ragged, sinister men sat at the tables and leaned against the walls, drinking rum and talking in low, muffled tones. Cant phrases filtered to Robin's ears and he stiffened like a deer sensing the hunter.

He turned to his companions, noting with relief that they looked disreputable enough to blend in, although their gypsy garb definitely invited comment. "Don't say anything," he cautioned under his breath.

"What?" Malkent blinked at him, nonplussed.

"You and Norworth stay quiet. Your educated speech will give you away, else, and we could all end up dead. Just let me do the talking." Robin looked from Tracy's face to Peter's, seeking understanding.

"But why?" Malkent said.

"Because this place caters to brigands, Tracy!" Norworth hissed. "You've been domesticated too long, old man!"

While they spoke, heads turned and ears strained to hear their whispered conversation. Feigning indifference to all the eyes upon him, Robin swaggered into the taproom, uncomfortably aware that the only empty table was, as might be expected considering the tavern's clientele, in the middle of the room. He would have felt infinitely safer and more confident with his back to the wall and his feet near the door. He took a seat at the free table, glaring a challenge at the other patrons. Tracy and Peter joined him, aping his mannerisms as best they could.

In thick Cockney, Robin hailed a barmaid and ordered ale for all of them. Norworth cocked a brow, remembering the state of their finances, but said nothing. Tracy gaped at his surroundings, amazed to find himself in a den of thieves.

The barmaid set three tankards on the table with a coquettish wink at the duke. Amberley pulled her into his lap, cupping her breast and nuzzling her ear. They launched into a bawdy conversation so heavily

laced with thieves' cant that his companions could not understand one word in ten.

Robin pressed a kiss against the giggling barmaid's throat and she scrambled out of his arms. As she turned to pick up her tray, he pinched her bottom with a cheeky grin and men at nearby tables laughed at her indignant shriek. "No horses for hire," Robin muttered under the noise. "We'll have to steal them. Drink up! It's time we were gone."

Tracy and Peter nodded, the earl swallowing hard upon the contemplation of his first foray into crime. As they drank their ale, Malkent stared at a rascally gallant sporting a curiously wrought wooden leg at the next table. After a few seconds, this worthy took exception to Tracy's gawking.

"'Ere now! You got a problem wi' me peg?" he growled, rising to confront Malkent. Tracy's eyes traveled from the wooden leg and the naked siren carved upon it to its owner's sallow, snarling face, twisted with anger and distrust. He stumbled to his feet, his heart pounding.

Suddenly Robin leaped up, thrusting Tracy back into his chair with one hand. "Me mate's a wee bi' barmy! Dicked in the nob, do ye see? 'E stares at fings! 'E don' mean nuffin' by it. Leave 'im be or ye'll answer to me, mate!" Menace glittered in Robin's eyes. He was a head taller than the peg-legged man and, thinking better of the quarrel, the brigand backed down.

The squabble had, however, caught the attention of the entire taproom. A large, bearded man stepped forward to confront Lynkellyn. "Wha' do ye mean bringin' a bloody mad 'un in 'ere? 'E might 'ave a sudden queer spell and off us all!" Muttering their agreement, the other patrons shoved back their chairs or pushed away from the walls to surround Amberley's small band.

"'E's not mad! 'E's simple, 'at's all!" Robin glared.

"'Ow do we know you're tellin' the trufe?"

"'Arsk 'im!" A voice from the crowd demanded. "Arsk the mad 'un if 'e's a mad 'un! Lunatics never lie! They don' know 'ow!"

"Good idea!" The bearded man turned to Tracy. "Are ye mad, mate?"

"Certainly not!" Tracy replied, affronted, before recalling that he was not supposed to speak.

A stunned silence filled the room. Robin scrambled onto the table to address the crowd before it became a bloodthirsty mob. "Tole ye 'e was dicked in the nob, didn' I? Finks 'e's a bleedin' earl, 'e does! Even gabs like one!"

His audience, however, had already reached its' own conclusions. "'E's a bloody flash cove!" someone shouted. "If one of 'em's flash, I'll wager they all are!"

"I say we show 'em a little 'Igh Toby 'orspitality!" suggested a second voice, crackling with menace. The suddenly savage mob tightened its circle around them. A dagger rasped against its sheath. A sword cut the air. A pistol barrel gleamed in the half- light. A club slapped purposefully against a hand. "Now we'll see some sport!" predicted yet another gleeful voice.

Robin drew his boot knife and prepared for battle, glaring at the sheepish earl from his perch on the table. "Tracy, you bloody halfwit!" he said.

Searching desperately for Robin and his companions, Lucia rode all night, her injuries growing more agonizing with each passing hour in the saddle. Her shoulder throbbed, her head pounded, and her hands, not really healed enough to handle a horse's reins, stung and bled. She was beginning to regret her decision to follow the duke.

If she did find Robin, he would most likely send her back to Ilya and she could not allow that. Concordia would need her company at the end of this ordeal and, in any case, she wanted to satisfy herself that Mountheathe had received just retribution for his attempts on her life. An admittedly ugly part of her wanted to watch him suffer as he had made her suffer. Turning her mind away from this raw, open sore, she decided that, even if she should see Robin, she would not join him unless he needed help. Otherwise, she would ride on alone to the Crown and Thistle Inn at Carlisle which, according to Robin, was Giles's suspected destination.

At noon, she saw a dilapidated inn set back from the road and turned her horse toward the melancholy establishment, too hungry to go on. She hoped that its general air of decay would mean that the food was cheap and the innkeeper lacking in curiosity. Her unusual garb and her magnificent mount were likely to create difficulties for her, else.

She halted at the inn's stables, wrinkling her nose in disgust at the stench of the filthy stalls. No hostler appeared to take her horse so she wrapped the reins around a hitching post and slipped quietly through a back door into the taproom.

A mob of people surrounded a single table, yelling threats and curses at the copper haired gypsy who stood atop it, flashing a dagger and trying to reason with them. Recognizing Robin, Lucia backed out of the room before anyone knew she was there.

In the stableyard, she untied Diablo's tether and his ears twitched as she talked to him. "Robin's in trouble, Diablo. I've got to do something to help him, but I don't..." Her eyes suddenly brightened when she saw a burning lantern hanging from one of the neglected stable's support beams.

She opened the stalls and chased out all the horses, then smashed the lantern against a pile of hay, still

damp from the recent rain. The hay burned slowly, raising a lot of smoke, while Lucia thrust her head into the taproom, shouting, "Fire! Fire in the stables!" in tones of high panic. She sped back to Diablo, mounted, and galloped toward the highway, leaving Robin to extract whatever advantages he could from her little diversion.

At the cry of 'fire', the unsavory patrons of the 'Wild Rose' forgot their aristocratic quarry in a homicidal stampede to the taproom's backdoor. By the time they reached the stalls, fire was beginning to consume the hay in earnest and loose horses roamed everywhere, some placidly ignoring the blaze, others shying nervously away from the burning stables and their masters' attempts to recapture them.

Inside the 'Wild Rose', Robin jumped off the table and the gentlemen rushed out the front door. Half a dozen horses meandered about the courtyard. "Gentlemen! Our transportation!" Amberley said, running toward one of them. Minutes later, each man having caught a mount, they galloped, bareback, out of the courtyard, resembling gypsies more than ever.

Chapter 30:

In Which My Lord Confesses THE TRUTH

Relieved to see Robin alive and in good health, Lucia rode steadily on without rest, choosing not to court disaster at another the roadside inn. By sunset, she was so exhausted, starved, and - wracked with pain that she could no longer stay in the saddle. Spying a farmhouse not far from the highway, she ate a meal and spent the night there, quieting the residents' questions and misgivings with a handful of shillings.

She was mounted and away before dawn, leaving early to avoid further explanations. Ignoring her aching body, she galloped on through the morning and afternoon, determined to reach Carlisle by sunset.

Giles's coach rolled into the courtyard of the Crown and Thistle an hour before sunset. He would have liked to proceed on across the Scottish border, but he was hungry, the horses were spent, Concordia had practically scratched his eyes out twice while attempting to escape, and he did not relish traveling in the dark. He would pass the night at the Crown and Thistle and journey on to Gretna Green in the morning.

Giles did not expect to meet that double-dealing snake, Rochedale, at the inn after his fiasco with the Rogue's doxy nor did he foresee the likelihood of pursuit on Concordia's behalf. Considering all the unanticipated delays that had befallen him, Giles reasoned that if Malkent were chasing him, he would have already been caught. The absence of avenging relatives told him that he could compel his lady across the border and into the bonds of matrimony without fear of reprisals.

Concordia struggled against his hold as he carried her into the inn and demanded a private parlor. The landlord bustled forward, then halted, his usually florid face drained of color. "Lord Giles! I ain't seen you since..."

"Tulley," Mountheathe nodded distractedly. Setting Concordia on her feet, he clamped her wrist in an iron grip.

She stomped her foot and tried to twist out of his grasp. "I am not going to marry you, my lord!"

"No, my dear. You're married to Sir William, remember?" Giles patted her hand and smiled at the innkeeper. "This is my cousin, Lady Amaryllis Blayne, Tulley. She was recently delivered of a stillborn babe. It was her first child and when she discovered it was dead," Giles's voice fell confidentially, "the poor lady's mind snapped. Her husband has been so overset by the whole tragic affair that he has taken to his bed. I've heard of a doctor in Edinburgh who might be able to help Lady Blayne so I am escorting her, in Sir William's stead, to consult him."

"No, he isn't! He's lying! My name is Concordia Lannington and he's trying to force me into a Gretna Green marriage! Please! You have to believe me! You have to help me!"

Tulley's eyes shifted uncertainly from Concordia to Giles. "You see how it is!" Giles shook his head sadly. "Poor woman's deluded. Has no idea who she is or what is happening to her. I only pray that this Dr. MacMillan can cure her. Ow!" Mountheathe screamed as Concordia's perfect white teeth sank savagely into his hand. His grip weakened convulsively and she twisted free, hurtling toward the door.

"Stop her!" Giles shrieked, darting after her. "I need that parlor immediately, Tulley!" he panted over his shoulder.

The innkeeper bowed to his back. "It shall be done, my lord."

Giles tackled Concordia and hauled her to her feet. "Another trick like that and I'll strip you nude and carry you around in a blanket. Then we'll see how eager you are to run about the taproom, won't we, my girl?"

"You wouldn't!" Concordia's eyes widened.

"Try me!"

Scurrying up to them, Tulley bowed to Mountheathe and cast Concordia a wary glance. "Your parlor is ready, my lord. Will there be anything else?"

"Yes. I shall also require supper for two and a bedchamber for the night."

"A...single bedchamber, my lord?" Tulley's jaw dropped.

"Certainly a single bedchamber! I must keep Lady Blayne safe. She might do herself an injury!" Suddenly Giles's mouth fell open as if the landlord's shocking speculations upon his motives had just occurred to him. "Do you honestly think that she...! That I would...! The woman bit me, Tulley!" Pale and apologetic, Tulley led the pair to a private room, promising to return with their meal.

As soon as Tulley was gone, Giles dropped Concordia's wrist and slammed the door. Removing his gloves and cloak, he said, "I cannot approve of your conduct during our journey, my love, but once I'm your husband, I daresay I can school you into proper decorum."

"You'll not have the chance, my lord, for you'll never be my husband!"

"On the contrary! I'm the only man for you. Your reputation is quite ruined after so much time alone in my company. No other man will want you now, my soiled angel! Not even your gallant Lord Peter!"

"I'd rather live out my life as a spinster under a cloud of scandal than wed with a... with a... with you! How can you desire such an unwilling bride?"

"It isn't you I want, my love. Just your dowry. If I must promise to love, honor, and cherish a shrew to get it, I will." Drawing a snuffbox from his pocket, Giles flicked it open with a deft hand and took a pinch, meeting Concordia's anguished eyes with a mocking smile.

Tulley knocked on the door and entered, his wife following with a tray of food. Mountheathe asked that Mrs. Tulley to stay with his 'infirm cousin' while he went to instruct his man about the baggage. "And don't let Lady Blayne leave this room," Giles cautioned. "My dear mad cousin might hurt herself...or somebody else."

Dusk was dimming the sky as Lucia cantered into the courtyard of the Crown and Thistle. Standing on the porch, Tulley eyed her suspiciously, seeing only a gypsy girl upon an obviously stolen mount. "Take yourself off, woman!" he shouted as she dismounted. "We don't want your kind here. The Green Goose is the place for the likes of you!"

Lucia tethered her horse to a porch railing while Tulley was speaking. "I am looking for a gentleman traveling with a lady whom he claims is his sister. I know he is here and I'm not leaving until I've seen him," she said.

Tulley glared at her. "If it's Lord Mountheathe you're wanting, he's traveling with his cousin, not his sister, and men of his stamp don't have truck with gypsies. Now be gone with ye."

"So he is here! I have a great deal to discuss with his lordship. Where is he?"

"You ain't going in there! I don't allow gypsies in my establishment!" Tulley's voice rose.

"Out of my way!" Lucia shoved past him onto the porch.

Here, you!" He chased after her, grabbing her injured arm as she stepped through the door.

Gasping in pain, she scowled. "Where is Lord Mountheathe?"

Entering the taproom in search of Madden, Giles halted, paling, as he heard his name on Lucia's lips. Shocked, he turned toward the open door and recognized the haughty gypsy arguing with Tulley as the Duchess of Lynkellyn, alive and healthy despite all his efforts to kill her. Swallowing his stunned disappointment at this setback, he resolved to try again.

Striding over to the squabbling pair, he leveled a finger at Lucia with ominous significance. "You!" he thundered.

Tulley and the duchess ceased their quarreling to stare at him in amazement. Lucia recovered first and grinned. "You didn't expect to see me again, did you, my lord?"

"I should say not! After your last escapade, I wouldn't think you'd have the brass to face Lady Blayne! Where are my lady's jewels, may I ask? No! Don't tell me! They've all been sold and now that you and your paramour have squandered the proceeds, you've returned to steal something else."

"Whatever are you raving about, my lord? You left me to die in a blazing house!"

"You have a marvelous imagination, girl, but it won't save you from the magistrate!"

"Do you know this young person, my lord?" Tulley broke in hesitantly.

"Know her? She was Lady Blayne's maid! She stole her ladyship's jewels and ran off with my groom a day into our journey!" Giles leveled an accusing stare at Lucia as he spoke.

"You are lying, sirrah!" Lucia's eyes smoldered. "Lady Blayne is in London. It is Miss Lannington who accompanies you and I insist that-"

"I insist that you come with me, girl, and leave off your ridiculous falsehoods. No one has the time or the inclination to listen to them. You can face your mistress and confess the unhappy truth to her!" Grabbing her wrist and ignoring her wailing protests, Giles dragged her toward the private parlor.

Dubious, Tulley watched Giles force a second struggling, shrieking young woman into the bowels of the inn. "Shall I send word to the magistrate, my lord?"

"No! Certainly not!" Mountheathe shouted over Lucia's furious din. "Lady Blayne could never handle the scandal! I will deal with this..." he cast Lucia a glance of genuine loathing "...this creature myself."

"I am not a maid!" Lucia screamed over his shoulder to the innkeeper. "If you don't stop him, he's going to kill me!"

"Enough of your wild allegations, my girl. In you go!" He shoved her into the parlor and she stumbled, falling to her knees and groaning with pain as her damaged body punished her for Giles's rough handling.

Hastily repeating his lies to Tulley's astonished wife, Giles dismissed her with a coin and closed the door. Lucia scrambled to her feet, fire in her eyes. "Robin will have something to say to all this when he arrives, my lord!"

"How does the Rogue abide your waspish tongue, you little slut?" he said, pushing her toward the window seat. "Sit down beside Concordia and shut your mouth."

Lucia settled on the loveseat and doffed her cloak, surveying Concordia critically. Having long ago escaped its fashionable coiffure, Connie's hair tumbled in a tangle about her shoulders and her once elegant satin ballgown was ragged and streaked with mud, but otherwise the lady seemed unharmed. "Your Grace!" she said, giving Lucia a quick hug. "Are you alright? How come you here? What are we to do?"

"No talking!" Giles said, emptying a crystal decanter of claret into a glass. Sipping his wine, he contemplated the women, then sauntered over to Lucia, his eyes gleaming with contempt. His fingers danced over her injured shoulder and she winced. "You are remarkably hard to kill, little slattern! You've been stabbed, shot, and torched and still you live! I'm beginning to think you're more witch than bitch!"

Giles's attention shifted to Concordia. "Now you, Concordia, are most definitely a bitch!" he sneered. "I have the scratches, bites, and claw marks to prove it. Once we're married, though, I'll tame you the only way a wild dog can be tamed." With a low, cruel laugh, he lifted her chin to gaze into her defiant eyes. "With the whip, my dear!"

Concordia jumped to her feet, fists clenched. "You are a dastard, my lord, and I'll never, ever marry you, no matter how many whips you take to me. I cringe at the very thought of becoming Lady Mountheathe!"

Giles laughed again. Crushing Concordia to him, he pinned her arms beneath his and assaulted her mouth with a brutal kiss that left her lips bruised and swollen. Twisting and shoving futilely against his hold, she kicked at his shin with her slippered foot, wincing as pain shot through her leg. Cursing her

roundly, Giles clamped her wrist in one hand, raising his other to strike her across the face.

Leaping up, Lucia grabbed the empty decanter. Rushing Giles as his hand swung toward Concordia's head, she raised the bottle, murder in her eyes. As the decanter arced downward, Giles shoved Concordia away and caught Lucia's wrists in his hands. His fingers bruised her skin as they struggled and he slowly forced the decanter upward. Hooking her leg around his, Lucia jerked his foot out from under him and he tumbled down, dragging her with him. The decanter smashed on the floor beside his head, glass shards scattering across the room. One of them sliced a gash above his eye.

As the combatants twisted and writhed on the floor, Concordia circled around them, searching for some way to aid the duchess. She thought of going for help, but the innkeeper was more likely to help Giles than Lucia. She watched, dismayed, as, with brute strength, Mountheathe pinned Lucia to the floor.

Lucia was in agony. Her injured shoulder and blistered hands already torturing her, she nearly fainted when Giles threw himself on top of her, knocking the breath out of her. Giles was going to kill her; that was plain; but at least she could give Concordia a chance to live.

"Run,...Concordia!" she panted, straining with every muscle to throw Mountheathe off her. "Never mind...me! Run! But 'ware...the innkeep!"

Nodding understanding, Concordia took one last anxious look at the combatants and raced from the room. She passed no one until she entered the taproom, then out of the corner of her eye, she saw Tulley rushing at her. She dashed for the door and her fingers clasped the knob just as Tulley reached her side. He gently removed her hand, saying, "I'm sorry, Lady Blayne, but I don't think his lordship wants you to go outside."

Concordia stamped her foot in frustration, a tear rolling down her cheek. "I'm not Lady Blayne!"

Suddenly the door opened and a raven-haired gypsy strode in, wearing a tattered tunic and muddied boots. Tulley rolled his eyes at the ceiling with a groan. "Not another one! That's all I need today."

Concordia flung herself into the gypsy's arms. "Lord Norworth! I am so glad to see you!"

Malkent and Amberley followed Peter, Robin looking thunderous. His smoldering eyes sought the innkeeper. "Tulley! What the devil is my horse doing tethered to your porch? I want the bastard that stole him brought to me at once!"

Tulley fell backward a step, terror shadowing his shocked face as he stared at this wild gypsy blade, once a regular customer in his taproom. "Lord Robin! I-I mean Your Grace, I...!" He sketched a frantic bow. "My l-Your Grace, it was the gypsy girl... the gypsy girl in his lordship's parlor!"

"The gypsy girl?" Robin's brows snapped together as a dreadful suspicion uncoiled within him.

Beside them, Concordia grabbed Tracy's arm. "Uncle, Her Grace is struggling with Mountheathe in the back parlor! He's trying to kill her!"

Robin whirled upon Concordia. "Lucia's here?" he almost shouted, his shocked countenance paling.

A scream of agonized terror filled the taproom. Robin raced to the back of the inn, the others following, and wrenched open the door to the private room.

Facing the door, Giles stood amidst broken glass, clutching Lucia before him like a shield, his arm curled around her waist. Blood dripped from the gash above his left eye as he pressed a dagger, its silvery blade glinting in the candlelight, against her white throat. He grinned at Amberley, who froze on the threshold, transfixed with horror. "Ah! So you've finally arrived, Rogue. So glad you could be here to enjoy my little entertainment!"

Robin's heart pounded in his ears as he stepped charily into the room. Tracy, Peter, and Concordia rushed in behind him. Tulley halted in the doorway, stunned.

"So you've stooped to hiding behind a lady's skirts, have you, Giles?" Robin said.

"I must question whether these particular skirts belong to a lady, Rogue, but they are fetching, aren't they?" Giles fisted the fabric of Lucia's skirt in the hand which encircled her waist. "Your doxy's not in my usual style, Cousin, but I've a fancy to lift the little siren's petticoats and sample those charms which glue you so tightly to her side."

Never taking his eyes off Robin's face, Giles bunched the skirt's cloth beneath his palm until he held the hem in his fingers, revealing Lucia's slim, ivory leg from her ankle to the top of her thigh. With the edge of his dagger, he forced her face upward and to one side, his mouth swooping down brutally on hers. She shuddered with revulsion.

Norworth and Malkent respectfully turned their backs on Lucia's sudden indecent state of undress. Tulley stared at Giles, astounded to see any member of the gentry behave in such a manner.

Furious, Robin took a belligerent step toward the tense couple and Giles suddenly lifted his head. "I wouldn't try it, Coz!" His eyes taunting Robin, he forced his blade harder against Lucia's throat. A trickle of blood stained her white skin and Robin halted.

"Look at her, Rogue!" Giles shoved his hand beneath Lucia's skirt to stroke the satiny softness of her thigh. "Look at your strumpet in her natural state!" His dagger wandered down to cut the ribbon at the neck of her chemise. The garment slid a few inches down her shoulders, revealing the snowy swell of her breasts.

His hand still curled around his dagger's hilt, Giles straightened two fingers and pushed away the ivory material to caress a coral nipple. "How wantonly she hardens at my touch, Rogue! Such sweet kisses! Such silky skin! Shall I take her for you...here and now? Or perhaps I already have! Perhaps when we were together in the darkness of my coach, I kissed her, stroked her, pleased her...or perhaps I only pleased myself to the music of her screams!" Giles scraped his blade across the tip of Lucia's breast. Her eyes widening at the pain, she whimpered and he laughed. "Such exquisite screams, Rogue!"

"Damn your black heart, Giles!" Robin spat, hatred and fury choking him. "Take your filthy talons off my wife, you coward, and face me, man to man!"

"You're eaten up with jealousy, aren't you, Coz? Has she lain with me or hasn't she? Perhaps Norworth's had her or even Tracy!" he grinned, then glanced at Malkent's rigid back. "I suppose Tracy's an unlikely candidate. Too husbandly by half. But aren't you dying to know how many lovers she's taken, Rogue?" He pressed the dagger hard against Lucia's throat. "You must tell us, Your Grace! How many men besides the Rogue have you bedded?"

Giles was obviously waiting for an answer and Lucia rasped out, "None! None, I swear!"

"She's lying, of course. They all do!" Giles leered. "It hurts, don't it, Rogue, to discover what an adulterous slut you've wed. Well, now you shall know the pain I feel whenever I think of that sanctimonious, self-righteous prig," he nodded at Tracy, "with my Val!"

The affronted earl whirled around, momentarily forgetting Lucia's unseemly predicament. "My Val!" he echoed in amazement.

Giles glared at Malkent, then pointedly turned his shoulder. "But my quarrel is with you today, Coz, and I'm ready to end it! Shall I slit your doxy's throat? Rather messy, but then all my options are. Perhaps a dagger through the heart? Very dramatic, that, and damned poetic as well!"

He idly dragged his sharp blade across the top of Lucia's breast, his tongue caressing his upper lip as he watched blood trickle from the cut. "Crimson and ivory. Such a delightful combination," he sighed. "It must be the heart! Definitely a dagger through the heart! So romantic, don't you think? Someone will write a play or an opera about this. At the very least, there'll be a ballad!" He raised his blade with an unholy laugh and prepared to plunge it into Lucia's body.

"Giles, no! This is between us! Lucia is an innocent. Let her go!" Fear infused Robin's appeal. "Let her go and I'll give you anything you want! I shall confess to abducting Val! I shall leave England forever! You shall have Grandpapa's fortune...all of it!...and my own as well if if you will only spare Lucia's life." He sank to his knees in supplication. "I'm begging you, Giles!"

As Robin knelt before him, Giles savored the pleading desperation in Amberley's eyes, thrilled at the knowledge that with a single stroke he could devastate this bitterest of rivals! Drunk with his triumph

and thirsting for the final victory, he thrust his dagger downward.

The clash and clatter of smashing china slashed through the tense air. When Giles glanced up to see Tulley's gaping wife in the doorway, broken crockery littering the floor at her feet, Lucia grabbed his weapon hand and sank her teeth deep into it. Screaming, he dropped his dagger, cursing and cradling his injury as she scrambled out of his embrace.

At the same moment, Robin lunged at him, the momentum slamming both men to the floor. They battled viciously amidst the broken glass, trading blow for blow with all the fury and resentment that had simmered in their hearts for a decade.

In a corner of the room, Lucia clasped her loose chemise to her bleeding breasts with one trembling hand, her chest heaving as she leaned against the wall. Nausea overwhelmed her and if her stomach had not been empty, she would have been sick.

Concordia darted past the writhing combatants to collect Lucia's forgotten cloak and place it around her shoulders. As the duchess pulled the cape closed to hide her nakedness, Concordia helped her to a chair. Lucia gave her a tremulous smile.

After a brief consultation with Tulley, Tracy and Peter pulled Bridland and Amberley apart. "Have done, gentlemen!" Malkent said. "There are ladies present!"

Giles snorted derisively at that, using his sleeve to wipe away the blood that still dripped into his eyes from the cut above his brow. Robin stood silently, his eyes hooded as he focused inward, trying to rip away the shrouds of fury that were clouding his judgment. He glanced at Lucia, wrapped in a cloak and sitting with Concordia. His lady was safe, he reminded himself, and relief rushed through him, bringing with it cool sanity.

"If the pair of you are determined to murder each other, let it be as gentlemen," Tracy said as he and Peter kicked shards of glass to the sides of the room. "Tulley has some rapiers that were abandoned at the inn and he has agreed to let you use them."

"This time I'll skewer your heart rather than content myself with a shoulder, Rogue," Giles boasted, a mocking glint in his eyes.

"I am at your service, my lord." Robin bowed stiffly, then walked over to Lucia. He stopped in front of her chair and glared down at her. "I paid Ilya well to keep you in camp. Never say he let you go?"

"No, I escaped! You cannot keep me prisoner, Robin."

"Ma chérie..."

"I had to come! I could not bear to think of...of Concordia all alone..."

Tulley entered the room and handed the rapiers to Tracy, who looked at them in surprise. "Why, these are the weapons Robin and Giles used the last time we were here! You've kept them all these years, Tulley?"

"Yes, milord. Didn't know what else to do with 'em." Tulley bowed and hastened out of the room, shoohing his wife before him through the doorway.

"Gentlemen!" the earl called. "Take your places, please."

Lucia's anguished eyes slid from the gleaming rapiers to her husband's beloved face. "Robin..." she pleaded.

"This war must be waged and won, ma chérie, or else Giles's treacheries will plague us for the rest of our lives!" He brought one of her fluttering hands to his lips, then bent and kissed her pink, trembling mouth. "There is no other way, Lucia."

Banishing all emotion and bending his mind wholly to technique and tactics, Robin accepted a weapon and positioned himself to challenge his cousin. Malkent cried, "En garde!" and the duelists circled, exploring each other's defenses. Suddenly Giles lunged. Amberley parried him easily, countering with a series of rapid attacks which Giles narrowly deflected.

As he summoned all his skills and swordsman's tricks, Robin's blade was a silver streak, seeming to strike in every quarter at once. Giles began to pant, his blocks growing clumsy. The tense, silent spectators watched as Robin beat Giles back without apparent effort, thrusting here, feinting there, parrying Mountheathe's blade again and again.

A sudden vision of Mountheathe plunging a knife into Lucia's heart flashed into Robin's mind. His mental discipline vanished. Raw emotion flooded him and he hungered for vengeance, his fury blazing higher as his thrusts and lunges grew careless and his parries slowed.

Giles's blade darted within an inch of Robin's chest and he thwarted it at the last possible moment. 'Reckless fool!' he chided himself. Forcing down all the bile he felt for his opponent, Robin substituted cool detachment for anger and his blade regained its deadly precision. Giles retreated step by reluctant step beneath his relentless onslaught.

With a sudden flick of his wrist, Robin sent Giles's rapier clattering across the floor and Giles stumbled backward into the wall, real terror filling his eyes. Robin's smile was predatory as the point of his blade found Giles's throat. "Now, my lord! These good people are waiting to hear the truth about Lady Val's abduction."

Giles's eyes darted back and forth. He pressed his hands against the wall, stammering, "I-I-I don't know what you're talking about, Rogue!"

"Tell them, mon cher cousin, about our chase across England and our meeting in this very room ten years ago. Tell them of your deceit, your treachery, and your cowardice."

Giles remained silent, hatred and fear choking him as he stared into Robin's merciless eyes. Growing impatient, Robin forced the tip of his sword into Giles's throat. Giles swallowed hard as he felt the blade's stinging bite and a warm drop of blood trickled down his neck.

"Tell them, Giles!" Robin insisted.

Giles stared wildly around the room, searching for an ally amidst the circle of accusatory faces, but his erstwhile friends were all waiting to hear from his lips the truth they already knew. His pleading eyes shifted back to Robin's grim countenance and he fancied he read murder in Amberley's granite gaze. Robin leaned into his weapon a little, dispassionately watching a second drop of Giles's blood follow the first.

"Very well, yes!" Giles's frantic eyes focused solely on the length of the long silver blade at his throat. "Yes! I abducted Val, but only because she was mine! It wasn't fair for Tracy to have her! She was mine! I loved her. I still love her...more than Tracy or you or anybody else ever could! What was I supposed to do when you tried to take her away from me, Rogue? Just bow politely and step aside? She was my heart and soul and life! So I fought you and bested you! And a sweet, satisfying victory it was! Then suddenly the others appeared and I knew it was impossible to hold onto my prize. I couldn't lose everything else too! If Grandpapa found out the truth...or Clayton...or Tracy...or anyone, I would be ruined. Why should I be dishonored when I didn't do anything wrong? When I was just trying to get what I needed to live? So I hit upon a plan to blame you, Rogue. The old duke wanted to believe I was the hero and you the villain, anyway. And you, Tracy!" Giles glanced contemptuously at Malkent before turning his attention back to Amberley's rapier. "You've never looked at anything deeper than the surface! Knowing the Rogue was a rake, you were ready enough to believe the worst of him. Poor, noble Robin went like a lamb to the slaughter! For my crimes, you cut him dead and Grandpapa banished him. And you both commended me for my courage! Remember?" Giles laughed, a harsh, hollow, mirthless sound. "But never fear, Rogue! I didn't escape punishment entirely. Instead of kissing my Val's lips in the ecstatic warmth of the marriage bed, I've been doomed to a decade of kissing her hand in a cold, formal drawing room." His mouth twisted bitterly. "And now I've no fortune, no reputation, no Valeria! I have nothing, Rogue! Why don't you kill me? You've taken all else from me!"

Tormenting memories whipped Robin into a sudden rage; visions of Lucia tortured and terrified beneath Giles's wicked blade, of Lucia crawling, half-dead, from the Brackenwell blaze, of Lucia stabbed and bleeding after her disastrous ride in the park... Then images from all his bleak years of wandering and starvation and shame flooded his mind. Those were shoved aside by earlier, more agonizing memories of the love in his grandfather eyes fading away as, in a voice ragged with anger, contempt, and pain, he

cast Robin out of his family. Across the bridge of his blade, he stared at his cringing cousin. His fingers tightened around the hilt of the sword, his muscles tensing to thrust it into his confessed tormentor.

As his fist clenched on his weapon, Lucia hurried to his side, placing a restraining hand on his arm. "You've cleared your name. It's over. Let it go, Robin!" she said. "If you kill him, you might be forced to flee England again. All you've been through, all you've achieved, will be for naught. Mountheathe will win, after all."

He looked into her eyes, losing himself in their swirling violet depths. Suddenly, as upon the front steps of Brackenwell Hall all those long months ago, his soul was at peace. His gaze shifted back to Giles and his eyes hardened to granite, but he tossed his sword aside. "très bien! I'll not kill him if it is your wish, ma chérie, but I'll be damned if I can stand the sight of him one more second! Mon Dieu, but I need a drink."

Robin pointedly turned his back on his kinsman and strode to the door. He wrenched it open, yelling, "Tulley! We need some brandy here!" The others in the room began to move around with a collective sigh of relief.

Norworth stared at Amberley, feeling somehow cheated of his own vengeance. More than ever, Peter wanted to see Giles Bridland dead. He noticed Mountheathe's rapier lying on the floor and picked it up without any real idea of his own intentions.

No one looked at Giles. Indeed, his isolation in the crowded room was palpable. Suddenly Lucia's stomach churned its' familiar warning signal and she whirled to discover Mountheathe aiming a pistol at the duke. "Robin! Watch out! He has a gun!" she screamed, flinging herself between Amberley and his cousin. Norworth and Lynkellyn turned as Giles fired.

Peter lunged at Giles with the rapier, ignoring the ball that whistled past his head. Lucia crumpled to the floor as Peter's blade slid deftly into Giles's chest. "Die, you filthy bastard!" Peter whispered with grim satisfaction as he withdrew. His eyes growing round with shock and surprise, Mountheathe touched the wound and drew his hand away to stare at the blood on his fingers before pitching forward onto the floor.

Robin was the first to reach Lucia. Slipping off his sash, he rolled it into a pad and knelt beside her, pressing the makeshift bandage against the wound in her chest while her warm blood bathed his hands and bitter tears scalded his cheeks. "Ma chérie! Ma chérie!" he murmured as her face grew ashen, "My wretched hide was never worth such a sacrifice!"

Chapter 31:

In Which Lord Norworth Kills a Dragon

As Dr. Marne entered the private parlor, Robin halted his pacing. "Well, Doctor?"

"I've finished cutting the ball out, Your Grace. Fortunately, the heavy folds of Her Grace's cloak slowed its' impact and distorted its' path, else it might have lodged in her lung instead of entering above her collarbone. Her other injuries appear to be healing as well as can be expected, considering what you've told me of her history."

"And the babe?"

"I felt several strong kicks when I examined Her Grace. If she rests and remains quiet for the next few months, I believe her delivery will be successful. It will be several days, however, before she can be moved."

"I am in no hurry, doctor. My only desire is for Lucia to be safe and well. When she can travel, she shall go to Lynkellyn Castle where she will get plenty of rest," Robin said.

"Good!" Dr. Marne nodded. "Now, as to your cousin..."

"I have no interest in the state of his health."

"Nevertheless, Your Grace, with a great deal of rest and recuperation, his lordship will survive, although I doubt he will ever be quite whole again."

Amberley's brows rose. "He will live?"

"He came within an inch of death, but the blade miraculously missed his vital organs." the doctor said, amazed. "God must have been on his side!"

"Or mayhap 'twas the devil!"

"Yes, well, if any charges are to be leveled against Lord Norworth, Your Grace, you will have to press them. Lord Mountheathe will not be able to pursue his case for a long time."

"This matter will not be food for the courts, sir. Mountheathe should consider himself lucky to be alive and at liberty. He will find himself the accused if he tries to bring Norworth to trial. I daresay nothing more will be said."

Concordia rose self-consciously as Peter entered Lucia's sickroom. "How is she? Has she come around yet?" he asked.

"No, and it has been a long time! The doctor cut the ball out last night! His Grace said it was a blessing that she did not awaken during the surgery, but now... Well, I'm worried."

"It shouldn't be much longer. May I join you, Miss Lannington?"

"Oh, yes, of course!" Concordia smiled, waving him to a chair before seating herself. "I would be grateful for some company. I have been thinking the most dreadfully lowering things..."

"You may safely confide in me if you wish, Miss Lannington," he said as he settled into his chair.

"It is all very silly, really," she said. "I've been wondering if Her Grace would even be lying in this bed, injured and unconscious, if I hadn't been so foolish and improper as to pursue an assignation."

"Assignation?" Peter leaned toward Concordia and green eyes met black.

"At the ball, I received a message from someone... The note was unsigned and I thought it was from you. I went out to meet you and found Mountheathe instead. That is how this nightmare started. It has ended with my reputation in tatters and a sweet, brave woman hovering between life and death."

"Miss Lannington... Concordia! None of this is your fault. Mountheathe and his crony, Rochedale, are the villains here." Peter stretched his hand across the chair arms to cover hers. "As for your reputation, this scandal makes no difference to me. I know that you are innocent of wrong-doing and I...I... Dash it all! I want you to be my wife, Concordia! Will you have me as a husband?"

He had never intended to tumble into his proposal like a schoolboy rolling down a hill. He had wanted to plan this moment; to fill it with moonlight and tenderness and romance,... but there! It was done!

He watched her face anxiously. Her lips pursed and he was certain they were framing a refusal. Falling on one knee beside her, he recaptured her fluttering white hand. "You have undoubtedly heard some shocking tales of my personal conduct, Concordia, and they are mostly true, I fear, but that will change when...if you become my bride." Gazing into Concordia's sweet countenance, his heart swelled. "I love you, Concordia!"

She stared down into those sparkling ebony eyes. "You would still marry me after I've spent four days solely in Lord Mountheathe's company?"

"I love you, Concordia, and I want to wed you, regardless of Bridland's machinations." Peter hesitated as a sudden dreadful possibility occurred to him. "I say! That blackguard didn't ...er... force himself on you or...or..., did he? I'll tear him limb from limb!"

"No!" She blushed. "I struggled and fought him too much for that."

"That's my girl!" he grinned, sobering as he searched her eyes. "You do love me, don't you, Concordia?"

"Oh, yes!" she blurted, beguiled by the earnest tenderness in his gaze, but then she tried to regain safer ground. "That is,... love is such a...a subjective word."

Standing, Peter pulled her to her feet and clasped both her hands in his. "Marry me, Connie! Your uncle has given me his permission. It only awaits your decision."

"Oh, but this is so sudden and...and unexpected," she murmured, her face pink. Glancing at Peter's lifted brow and laughing eyes, she abandoned her reticence. "Yes! Oh, yes! Of course, I shall marry you. I've been waiting and praying for you to speak for a fortnight, but you were so distant that I had almost given you up."

"I thought... That is... You seemed to prefer Bridland's company."

"Oh, my love, when I thought I couldn't have you, I decided that Lord Mountheathe was better than... than having no husband at all."

Peter scooped her into his arms. "I would argue, my dear, that having no husband at all would be far better than wedding Lord Mountheathe!"

"I realized that, too, after he offered for me. When you found us together in Aunt Valeria's garden, and then stalked off, thinking the worst, I was sure that I had lost you." Snuggling into his embrace, she laid her head on his shoulder.

"I don't surrender the woman I love that easily!" he murmured as his mouth caressed hers. He raised his head suddenly and stared down at her, frowning. "I don't recall 'stalking off'!"

A moan from the bed brought the lovers back to a sense of their surroundings. Concordia hastened to Lucia's side. "Your Grace! Wake up!" she called, patting the duchess's hand. Lucia's black lashes fluttered and her eyes opened. She smiled uncertainly at Concordia as Peter said, "I'll summon Amberley."

"You speak as if you believe Lucia and I have a future, Tracy." Robin's voice echoed bitterly through the private parlor.

"Well, I do believe it. You said yourself that you love her. I think you and she have a very good chance for happiness if you'll stop circling each other like a pair of prize-fighters!"

Robin crossed to a table laden with decanters and filled a glass with brandy. "Every time I've loved, my lord, I've lost. Any gamester worth his salt will tell you that when your luck is out, you walk away from the game. I'm not green enough or brave enough to dare Dame Fortune again."

"But Robin..."

"You can have no idea how much love has cost me, Tracy! I spent ten miserable years grieving the loss of my family! And for what? A misguided attempt to rescue a woman who had spurned me; a woman who didn't even have the courage to speak up and clear my name!" Robin gulped his brandy. "Thank God Lucia has some backbone. I can't abide a helpless female!"

"Valeria was drugged!" Tracy said, his eyes snapping. "And what the devil has all that to do with you and the duchess?"

Robin continued as if he hadn't heard Tracy's outburst. "Then treacherous Cupid led me to ma chère Angelina. My angel from hell! Loving her almost killed me. Literally!" With a derisive laugh, Robin downed the rest of his brandy and refilled his glass. Ambling over to a padded chair, he slumped into it. "And now, in spite of all my precautions, it's happening again. I don't want to fall in love anymore, Tracy!" Robin stared into his swirling brandy as if he saw a haven beneath its tiny waves. "I can't put myself through that torture again!"

"But Rogue! Love is wonderful with the right woman. For instance, Val and I..."

"Lucia is just as miserable as I am in this marriage. While I am yearning for her, she's pining for Norworth. If I leave, at least one of us will be happy."

"Do you honestly think that packing Her Grace off to Lynkellyn Castle with a potential lover while you run away to France with your tail between your legs is going to solve your problems? Damned cowardly, I call it."

Robin reddened. His eyes flashed with anger as they met Tracy's, but he answered levelly. "I am giving Lucia her freedom. She's pleaded for it from the moment I placed my ring on her finger."

"You haven't told her what's in your heart, Rogue!"

"And I never will." Robin drained his glass with finality.

"If she's so eager to be free of you, why did she risk her life to save yours? With you dead, she would have had both wealth and freedom. Instead, she threw herself in the path of death for you, Rogue, without a second thought. That was a spontaneous and selfless act of love, I'd stake my reputation on it! It's not every day a man finds a woman who...who loves him like that! If you think she still wants her freedom, you're a fool and if you give it to her, you're...well, you're fucked in the nob! That's all I have to

say!"

Robin rose and wandered to a window to stare out at the rainy, grey sky. "She deserves a good and worthy man, Tracy; a 'parfit gentell knight'; someone better, kinder... someone more honorable than I shall ever be."

Tracy stared at Amberley, confused. "What?"

"She'll need a man with the strength and patience to curb her more headstrong starts; someone who will cherish and protect her. Norworth has a will to match hers and he'll never intimidate or terrify her the way I have. He will do until she can find a more suitable...lover." Robin's voice cracked as he uttered the last word.

"Haven't you been listening to me, Rogue? She loves you! She was willing to lay her life down for yours!"

"She'd still be safe in Saddewythe's schoolroom if I hadn't taken her! My wretched quarrels have placed her in danger too many times, Tracy! She has suffered a thousand indignities at my hands and now it is time to make amends."

"I don't believe most people would consider abandonment a way of making amends, Robin. She needs you!"

Amberley gave a wild, bitter laugh. "Nom de nom, Tracy! I'm the last thing she needs! At Saddewythe Manor, she had found a peaceful haven, free of hunger and strife, and, with one wanton, selfish act, I destroyed it! Destroyed her life! Mon Dieu, for all I've cleared my name, I'm no better than Bridland where Lucia is concerned."

"There is one major difference, my friend. You are eaten up with remorse over your actions. Giles has never shown the slightest shame about any of his. Indeed, he's been gloating over the fact that Lucia hasn't awakened yet."

Robin shrugged and shook his head. "People will remember my wicked deeds, Tracy, not the fact that I regretted them. Lucia recalls every miserable moment she's spent in my company, je vous assure. How could she possibly forgive the atrocities I've committed against her? How could she love the man who had perpetrated such crimes?"

"Women have a great capacity for forgiveness, Rogue. You and I may find it impossible to pardon certain acts... Mountheathe, for instance, will always have my undying loathing and contempt! ...but I think that, against all logic, Lucia has found it in her heart to forgive you." Tracy glanced slyly at his friend. "Of course, you will never know for certain unless you ask her."

Peter suddenly burst into the room, breathless and beaming. "Lucia is awake!"

Tracy and Robin rushed past him through the door, Robin pushing ahead of the others and taking the stairs two at a time. Grinning, he entered Lucia's chamber to discover Concordia holding a glass of water to her lips. Lucia looked up, smiling.

Concordia moved aside and Robin knelt by the bed, cradling one of Lucia's bandaged hands in his. "Ma chérie, how are you feeling?"

"A little weak, Robin, but I am so glad we are all together and safe. Is my baby...? Oh! I felt a kick!" She touched her belly, beaming.

"The doctor says that both you and the babe will prosper if you rest and don't go gallivanting off on any more adventures!" Robin's gentle tones belied the severity of his scold. "I've sent for Lady Easterbury to attend you and she should arrive in a few days. Until then, the rest of us will try to make you comfortable as best we can."

"Concordia tells me I have been asleep for two days, Robin. What happened after you disarmed Lord Mountheathe? I can't seem to remember..."

"He tried to shoot me, ma chérie. You stepped into the path of the ball and saved my life." Robin's face grew stern. "I am extremely grateful, naturellement, but if you ever do such an addle-pated thing again, I really will have to lock you in the North Tower! What could Ilya have been thinking to let you leave after I specifically..."

Peter and Tracy had entered the room while Robin was talking. They stood by the door, watching the exchange between the couple interestedly.

Lucia held up a gauze-wrapped hand. "Don't blame Ilya! I deceived him and ran away."

"You have been wandering the countryside alone, dressed as a gypsy?!" Robin vacillated between fury and shock. "How am I to protect you if you persist in..."

"I told you I can take care of myself, Your Grace!" Lucia flung back with asperity. "I've been doing so my entire life. I was not the one about to be lynched by an angry mob at the 'Wild Rose', after all."

Robin blinked in surprise. "How do you know about that?"

"Because, dear heart, I set the fire in the stables, stampeded the horses, and raised the cry. It was a diversion to give you a chance to escape."

"You should have waited for us."

"And have you send me straight back to Ilya?"

"You would have been safe with him. You would have avoided...all this." Robin waved his hand toward her bandages.

"I would much rather be here. I had to help you bring Mountheathe to justice, don't you see? After all he's done to us, I deserved to..." She suddenly halted in mid-sentence. "Where is your cousin, Robin? You have not killed him?"

"Norworth wounded him when he shot you, but he will live. When he is stronger, I shall send him home to Heathe Manor to recover." Robin brushed a dusky curl out of Lucia's eyes. "I've had all the revenge I can stomach, *ma chérie*. I do not intend to pursue this business any further. It has proven disastrous for everyone."

"Giles is unmasked, Lucia," Tracy said from the back of the room. "When we return to London, Peter and I shall make certain the world knows the injustice he has done Robin and the sort of man he really is. He shall not hurt you again."

"Is there anything I can do for you, *ma chérie*?" Robin said, rising. "Perhaps you would like to sleep?"

Lucia struggled to sit up, her face twisting with pain. "Actually, I'm famished!" she said after pausing a moment to recover. "I'd love something to eat!"

The Countess of Easterbury arrived five days later, trailing in her wake Lady Malkent, Lady Blayne and Sir William, who had been dragooned into escorting the ladies as protection from bandits.

"As if I could do anything to a man who was waving a loaded pistol in my face!" Sir William leaned his elbows on a table in the taproom of the Crown and Thistle, grimacing at Malkent and Lynkellyn who sat with him.

"Did you meet with trouble on the road?" Robin asked as Tulley placed a tankard of ale before him.

"No, thank heaven! The closest thing to a brigand we met was the gossip at some roadside inn about two highwaymen shot to death. The speculation was that one of their thieving companions killed them for their ill-gotten booty," Blayne said.

"Hear! Hear!" Malkent lifted his tankard. Robin met it with his own and a satisfied grin. Blayne stared at

them, confused.

"A secret within the family," Amberley said. "Lucia has been confessing to a large number of...er... escapades of late. It seems she left several dead bodies strewn behind her in her eagerness to clear my name."

His curiosity whetted, Sir William demanded and got a full account of the entire adventure. The men talked until the two countesses and Lady Blayne returned from the sickroom to exclaim at how wonderfully Lucia was progressing. The weary travelers then took themselves off to their rooms to recuperate from their journey.

"Well?" Tracy asked after the taproom emptied of all save himself and the duke. Robin lifted an inquiring brow, but said nothing.

"It has been a sennight. Lucia is well into recovery. The doctor says she may go up to the Castle anytime. You spend hours with her everyday, yet you never say anything to the purpose. Don't you think you should talk to her soon? Even if you're set on this asinine flight to France, she needs to know your plans. But I still think you should tell her how you feel." Seeing Valeria at the foot of the stairs, Tracy rose. "Pardon me, Robin. I think Val needs assistance."

As Tracy left the taproom, Robin glowered into the darkness of his tankard, cringing at his own cowardice. He would rather face the entire British Army single-handedly than walk upstairs and pour his heart out to the woman who had unwittingly captured it; who had the power to crush it if she chose.

He looked up to see Lord and Lady Malkent in earnest conversation on the stairs. The softness and warmth in their voices suggested a fine and comfortable friendship layered over quiet depths of passion. As Tracy escorted Valeria upstairs, Robin watched them enviously, wishing, yearning, hungering for that kind of happiness with Lucia. That, however, would involve opening his heart to the pain again. He clasped both hands around his tankard to lessen their trembling and took a long, soothing draught of ale.

Tracy's words echoed in Robin's mind. '...Threw herself in the path of death for you... A spontaneous and selfless act of love!...' Perhaps Tracy was right, he thought. Perhaps Lucia had come to care for him a little. Sometimes she looked at him, smiled at him in such a way...

Draining his tankard, Robin contemplated those enchanted moments when he had held Lucia in his arms and she had welcomed his caresses, meeting them with wild, hungry kisses of her own. Passion and love had flamed in those kisses and she had yielded to him totally, body, mind, and soul, unwittingly slashing through the last shreds of his resistance and conquering his reluctant heart.

Those memories propelled him to his feet. Even the intruding nightmare of their last vicious argument the night before her disappearance could not diminish his sudden conviction that she loved him. He gathered his courage, took a deep breath, and headed for Lucia's room.

As he stepped on the first stair, Angelina's tormenting laughter swirled through his mind, bringing back all the pain of her betrayal, and his feet lagged. His love for Angelina had been a boy's passing fancy. His love for Lucia was a man's eternal devotion. How much more agonizing, then, if Lucia rejected him, crushing his fragile heart beneath her heel as she had every reason to do. With one foolish question that he had no right to ask in the first place, he might lose her. The terror of that prospect intensified with every step until he clung to the rail, struggling just to breathe. Finally he halted half way up the stairs. 'Perhaps if I don't ask the question,' he thought, 'I won't have to hear the devastating answer.'

He almost turned around, but then, disgusted at his cowardice, he banished his demons and forced his feet to take the remaining steps. He had almost reached her open door, when an anguished cry halted him just out of sight of those in the room.

"I cannot bear it, Peter! You must kill him for me!" Robin heard Lucia beg.

"Patience, my dear. It will all be over soon and he shall never plague you again," Norworth's deeper voice answered.

Robin heard a few thumps in the room, then Lucia said, "He terrifies me, my lord! I know that I shall have nightmares that he's coming after me."

"I will dispose of him, Lucia, never fear. When I've finished with the blackguard, the fact of his very existence will be in doubt!"

"You are so brave, Peter! So gallant! If only I had your courage..."

Standing outside the door, Robin had heard enough. He swallowed hard on his disappointment as the heartbreak he had dreaded and feared writhed inside him. Far from loving him, Lucia was plotting his murder with her paramour. How stupid he had been to dream of love like some starry-eyed fool when he deserved only hatred and contempt from his bride. With his cruelty and selfishness, he had driven her to the point of desiring his death. His shoulders sagging, he trudged away, determined to give Lucia her freedom before she and Norworth got the chance to ease him into the next world.

In Lucia's room, Peter was on his hands and knees, searching under a chair. "What makes you think it's a 'he', Your Grace?" he grunted as he stood, then bent to look beneath the washstand.

"Because one female would not terrorize another in such a despicable manner!"

Norworth straightened, barely holding back a curse as he banged his head against a cabinet door on the way up. "We obviously have not met the same females!" he muttered, massaging his bruises.

Sitting in her bed, Lucia suddenly jumped up onto her knees. One hand at her rounded lips, the other

pointing to a corner of the room, she bounced frenziedly, shouting, "There he is! Over there! No, wait! He's coming out! He's coming after me!" With a little shriek, she grabbed a pillow and thrust it in front of her as a shield.

His foot raised, Peter watched with a predator's smile as a small speck crawled erratically across the floor. With skill and precision, he slammed his foot down on the speck, the room resounding with his victory.

He lifted his foot, grimacing in disgust at the messy blotch of dead arachnid on the sole of his boot, and grinned at Lucia as she peeked over the top of the pillow. "There! I have killed your dragon for you, my dear, but I cannot fathom how a lady who has defended herself...to the death, mind you!...against bloodthirsty blackguards and murderous brigands can possibly be so terrified of one insignificant, little spider!"

After dinner that evening, Robin forced himself to visit Lucia for what he expected would be the last time. He had rehearsed his parting speech a dozen times in his mind, telling himself he was ready to cut all ties with her. Still, his heart was leaden and his palms were moist as he entered Lucia's room.

When she saw him, she smiled a bright, apparently unfeigned welcome and her falseness was a dagger thrust through his aching heart. "Good evening, Lucia. How are you feeling?" he said.

"Wonderful, Robin, aside from a few nagging aches and pains. The baby has been kicking like a mule."

She was a siren drawing him in with every look, smile, and word. Steeling himself against her charm, he turned away from her, struggling to remain detached. "Bon! Now that you are recovering, I have decided to return to Paris."

"Paris! It seems an age since I've been there."

"You are going to Lynkellyn Castle to await the birth of the child," he said dampingly.

She sensed a disturbing undercurrent in his tone. "When are you to return? You will want to be present when the babe is born, after all."

"Will I? No, I don't believe so."

Silence smothered the room. "Are you leaving me, Robin?"

Amberley focused his gaze on a bouquet of flowers in a vase by her bed. "Giles has confessed his

duplicity and my good name has been restored. My legacy is secure, regardless of the outcome of our marriage so we need not continue this sham. Besides, you have become a devilish bore with your growing belly. I've an urge to bed a blonde; someone with Pamela Saddewythe's looks, I think, but with no pretense to virtue." He forced an unconvincing smile. "Be grateful that I shall no longer trouble you with my baser desires, ma chérie, and wish me bonne chance in my hunt for a golden trophy." Turning away from her, Robin missed the sudden despair in her eyes as she sank back into her pillows.

The happy, romantic dreams she had been weaving around him faded and she faced brutal reality as unflinchingly as always. He did not love her. Indeed, he had never claimed to love her. He had told her from the outset that he was using her; that she was... how had he put it? ...a means to an end. Now that he had achieved that end, he no longer wanted her.

"You needn't worry about how you and the babe will live, Lucia," he said, avoiding her eyes, lest his resolve soften. "You are still the Duchess of Lynkellyn, after all. Though we shall lead separate lives, you will not find me ungenerous. Gleason will dispense any moneys you desire and all my properties are at your disposal, naturellement. You will undoubtedly want to take lovers. I do not object as long as you are discreet and do not bring scandal down on the Amberley family. Giles and I have done enough of that to last for generations."

Robin's lashes lowered to hide the devastation in his heart. He wanted to take her into his arms and beg her to call off her assassin. He wanted to demand that she give him a second chance to prove his love. Instead, he stared out the window.

"I don't want any lovers, Robin!" Lucia fought to hold back bitter, disappointed tears. "Don't you even want to see your child?"

"Not particularly," he lied. "I've better things to do than stare at squalling infants."

They fell silent. Ostensibly watching the busy innyard, Robin cast furtive glances at Lucia's woebegone face, trying to freeze her loveliness forever in his memory. "Smile, ma chérie!" he said "I'm releasing you. You may go where you like, do what you wish, and see whom you please. Isn't that what you want?"

"You are abandoning me to face childbed alone in a house full of strangers. How fortunate you are to escape your responsibilities so easily, Your Grace!"

Spots of angry, embarrassed color splashed across Robin's cheeks at so contrary an interpretation of his magnanimity. "You need not be lonely, Lucia," he said. I'm certain there are any number of men who..."

"I don't want any lovers!" she repeated with an angry toss of her head. "I...I only want you...to go away! Your ladybirds are waiting for you in Paris! I daresay you are champing at the bit to be gone!" Turning her back to him, she curled up on her side, watching her dreams die in the flickering, candlelit shadows

as she waited for him to leave.

When Robin finally spoke, his tones were clipped and formal. "Lady Easterbury and Lord Norworth have agreed to accompany you to Lynkellyn Castle in the morning.. Farewell, Your Grace." He bowed to her back with crisp precision and strode out of the room.

Fleeing to the private parlor, he lingered over his brandy long into the night, endeavoring to drown the devastation of his evening's work in the golden drug. Once, he had believed that Angelina had shattered his heart, but that pain paled beside the hollow, ever-present agony that coiled within him now, striking like a snake each time he thought of Lucia.

The devil of it was, she was all he could think of and his wretched soul grieved hard for the loss of her, throbbing with a physical torment. He drained the last of his brandy and refilled the glass, telling himself again that he had done the right thing by setting Lucia free. She was better off with Norworth.

Tracy took a chair across from him at the table. "Well, Rogue, did you speak to Lucia? Shall I wish you happy?"

"It's not love if she wants me dead, Tracy."

"What is all this nonsense, Rogue?"

"She wants Norworth to murder me so that they can be together. I overheard them plotting." Robin swirled the brandy in his glass, avoiding Tracy's eyes.

"Norworth's going to murder you? Preposterous! Never heard such a faradiddle in all my life!"

"I know what I heard, Tracy!"

Malkent shook his head in disbelief and left Robin to his brandy until Lady Easterbury stormed into the room. "You!" she said awfully. "You are a worthless, unprincipled rascal, sirrah! You have fulfilled all my worst expectations. If I could force you to stay here and attend to your obligations, you'd forget about Paris soon enough!"

He stared at her drunkenly and she changed her tack. "How can you hurt my poor lamb like this? She is devastated inside, though she will not weep. She loves you!" Silent, Robin nursed his drink and tried not to hear. "Please! You must go to her!" Lady Corinna said. "She won't eat! She can't sleep..." In spite of himself, Robin's damaged heart softened at her petition. He was about to say that he would speak to Lucia when the dowager fatally added, "Not even Lord Norworth can make her smile."

Robin swigged his brandy and slammed the goblet down. "I'm certain her 'dear Lord Peter' will comfort her far better than I ever could," he snarled, an odd mixture of despair and venom in his voice.

"Won't you at least talk to her, Your Grace?"

"Not I!" He refilled the goblet, his hands unsteady as he aligned the lip of the decanter with the rim of the glass. Sipping his drink, he propped his feet on the table, leaned back and closed his eyes.

Lady Easterbury bade him a frosty good night and left. He kept his eyes closed, wishing that she hadn't come. He did not want to know that Lucia was unhappy. He did not want to know that Norworth was consoling her. He did not want to feel his heart cracking again. He only wanted to feel numb in mind, body, and soul. He called for more brandy.

Giles's dilapidated coach lurched out of the innyard the next morning, its squeaking wheels shattering the dawn stillness. The sudden jerk jolted his wound and he winced with pain, swearing beneath his breath.

Staring out the window, he brooded over his situation. He was destitute; his reputation was blackened beyond repair and his health was broken. Worst of all, he would never see his beloved Valeria again. All these disasters could be laid at the Rogue's door and someday, somehow he would make Robert Amberley pay!

Chapter 32:

In Which Cupid Rides to the Rescue

Mid-morning sunshine slanted across the stable yard of the Crown and Thistle as a large old carriage bearing the Amberley crest arrived from Lynkellyn Castle to convey the duchess to her new home. Lucia and her aunt were at breakfast while Tracy and Peter supervised preparations for the journey.

As Malkent watched a groom load a small trunk atop the coach, he cast a sidelong glance at his future nephew-in-law. "The Rogue said something dashed odd to me last night, Peter. He seems to be under the impression that you intend to murder him and elope with Lucia."

Peter's eyes riveted on Malkent's face and widened. "Where the devil did he get such a hare-brained notion?"

"He said he overheard you talking with her," Tracy said.

Peter shook his head. "He's mad! I'm happily betrothed to Concordia and even if I weren't, I don't go about killing men and stealing their wives! I do have some honor!"

Tracy grinned at that, reassured. "Told him it was poppycock!"

Some time later, Robin watched from his bedchamber window as Lucia's drooping figure entered the yard. She said her farewells to the others and followed Lady Corinna into the coach, suddenly glancing up at his window as if she sensed his presence. He drew back behind the curtains, but not before glimpsing a pale, pinched little face framing eyes brimming with sadness and pain.

He shook his head, confused. He had given Lucia her freedom. He had provided the means for her to live in luxury and pursue the promptings of her heart. He had done everything he could to secure her happiness, yet she seemed to grow more miserable each time he saw her. Knowing he could never banish that misery, he deemed it best for her if he disappeared from her life completely.

The coach was loaded and its' passengers comfortably settled. Mrs. Tulley placed a hamper of food aboard while the Blaynes and the Malkents called more farewells amidst tears and hugs through the windows. Peter mounted his horse and the coach lumbered out onto the road.

Lucia slumped into the worn velvet seat, aware of nothing but the dull, endless ache in her heart. Robin hadn't even come down to say goodbye, she mourned.

As the miles passed, Norworth trotted beside the coach, searching his mind without success for a topic that might bring a smile to Lucia's shadowed eyes. When he saw her surreptitiously wipe a tear from her cheek, it tore at his heart. 'What a ridiculous situation!' he thought as they passed a small hostelry. 'It's time somebody ended it!' With sudden decision, he called the entourage to a halt in the innyard and dismounted. Walking up to the coach window, he peered in at the perplexed women and asked, "Your Grace, would you like to return to the Crown and Thistle and talk to your husband?"

"There is nothing to say, Peter. He doesn't want me!" She glanced ruefully down at her full, round belly. "I cannot compete with Parisian Cyprians."

Peter grimaced. In his experience, men did not leave their wives for demi-mondaines when it was easy enough to enjoy the advantages of both arrangements. Robin must have some other reason for abandoning his marriage and Peter was determined to discover it.

"I believe I can win His Grace back for you," he said with more confidence than he felt. "Would you be willing to wait here while I try my hand at it?"

Lucia agreed and, as Peter rode away, Corinna escorted her into the inn, calling for a private room and a pot of tea.

Norworth arrived at the Crown and Thistle just as Amberley swung into the saddle. Halting his mount, Peter slid off and rushed over to the duke. Robin's eyes flew to Peter's face and he dismounted. "What is it? Has something happened to Lucia?"

"No. She is safe enough at an inn down the road. I've come back for a private word with you, Your Grace." Anger glinted in Peter's dark eyes.

Robin had the unhealthy pallor of a man who had spent an evening courting the brandy decanter. Weariness and unhappiness clouded the intelligent gleam in his usually animated gaze, but at the belligerent challenge in Peter's voice, fire flashed anew beneath his lashes. "Whatever you have to say..." he began.

"Will best be said in private. The stables, perhaps?"

"Do you honestly think I'd be foolish enough to go off alone with a man who is plotting my death? I know all about your little scheme to murder me for Lucia's sake."

Peter blinked. "Murder you? What the devil are you talking about?"

"You know very well what I'm talking about and if you wish to speak to me, my lord, you'll have to do it right here," Robin said.

"Very well, then, if the prospect of an audience doesn't daunt you. I have returned, Your Grace, to inform you that you are three kinds of a fool!"

"I beg your pardon?" Robin lifted a brow.

"First of all, any man who cavalierly crushes a lady's heart, especially when the lady has given that heart wholly into his keeping, is a blind, cruel, and despicable fool. Many a man would kill to have a woman love him as much as Lucia loves you!"

"And you're one of them, no doubt!"

"Aye, so I might be, if I hadn't lost my heart to Concordia, but we are discussing you."

"I've heard enough!" Robin turned to walk away, but Peter grabbed his arm and whirled him around.

"I'm not finished with you yet, my friend!"

"Nom de nom, but I am finished with you!" Robin's fist swung toward Peter's face.

Norworth ducked and planted a vicious uppercut on Robin's chin that sent the taller man sprawling backwards to the ground. Excited shouts brought hostlers from the stables and patrons from the inn to form a frenzied circle around the sparring pair.

Panting, Peter returned to his discourse as he stood over Robin and waited for him to rise. "Second, Your Grace, any man who does not realize how lucky he is to have a loving wife and a sweet babe on the way..." On his feet again, Robin threw a second punch that connected with Norworth's jaw and slammed him to the ground. He struggled to his feet, wiping a trickle of blood from his lip, and doggedly continued his lecture. "Any man, I say, who can contemptuously abandon such a warm, little family is an irresponsible fool."

"You, sir, are the fool! You are wasting your time here. This is none of your business."

Peter bent over, hands on his knees, as he gasped for breath. "You have made it my business by insisting in every way, save a direct command, that I become your lady wife's protector. I do not covet the position, Your Grace, but I will be forced to assume it if you abandon her, so I might as well begin looking after her best interests now!"

"I do not perceive how engaging in fisticuffs with me can further Lucia's interests," Robin panted.

"It will do a great deal to secure her comfort and happiness if I can knock some sense into that thick skull of yours!"

Robin's eyes gleamed with fury anew and he smashed his fist once more into Norworth's jaw. Peter staggered back into the arms of the jeering, cheering crowd and Tracy stopped his fall. "What the devil are you doing, Peter? Why are you even here?"

"Don't worry, Tracy. I know what I'm about...I think!"

Peter stumbled back into the ring and Robin closed with him. They grappled, dragging each other to the ground. Robin landed on top of Peter, his fingers curling around the viscount's throat. Forcing Robin's hand up and away from his neck, Norworth groaned. "Finally, Your Grace," he gasped, "any man who has waited as long and fought as hard to clear his name as you have..." With a shout from deep within him, Peter threw Robin off, then leaped on top of him "...is an incomprehensible imbécile to walk away from honor only just regained. You are forsaking love, family, and honor, Your Grace! I've never seen a greater fool!"

Robin slammed his knee into Peter's belly and groin. Norworth rolled off him with a scream of pain and Robin was astride his adversary in a split second, his long, white fingers once more squeezing Peter's throat. "Now, my lord, you shall hear a few truths from me. Any man who plots a husband's murder so that he may claim his wife has no right to judge another's code of honor. You are a hypocrite, my lord, and a damned philanderer!" Robin loosened his grip so that Peter might answer the charge.

"Plot your murder? Do you actually believe I'm planning to kill you?!" Norworth rasped.

"I overheard you and Lucia discussing my demise yesterday. She has every reason to want me dead, but you, Norworth! I took you for a saner man! très bien! I've left the field open for you so you won't be obliged to kill anyone. I only ask that the pair of you are discreet during your liaison. Go to her! She'll be happy with you!" Robin released his hold and rolled off Peter.

The two men sat panting in the dirt while the crowd dispersed, sensing that the excitement was over. Tracy and Sir William started toward them, but Peter warned his friends away with a shake of his head.

"You are the most obtuse man I've ever met, Your Grace. I've told you repeatedly that I love Concordia Lannington. We are betrothed and nothing except friendship has ever existed between Lucia and myself. She merely turned to me for comfort when it seemed you had abandoned her for the demimonde. It is natural, of course, for a breaking heart to seek consolation, but I am a gentleman, sir. I did not take advantage of your lady's grief and confusion to steal her from you."

"I know what I heard, sirrah!" Robin said. Peter raised a brow, waiting. "I overheard the pair of you yesterday afternoon, talking in her room. She told you she could no longer bear my presence and you told her to be patient; that you would dispose of me without leaving a trace. Then she began to rant about how brave and gallant you are. A pretty tale, héin?"

When Peter chortled, Robin stared at him in surprise. His chuckles became guffaws and Amberley shouted, "What the devil are you laughing at? I do not find this situation amusing in the least!"

"Ah, but I do!" Norworth shook with laughter. "The more I think about it, the funnier it becomes." He fell flat on his back on the ground, his arms across his quaking stomach, his peals of mirth ringing through the courtyard.

"I should have throttled you when I had the chance," Robin said.

Peter wiped his moist eyes on his grimy shirtsleeve and sat up, still grinning. "You have just encountered one of the pitfalls of eavesdropping, Your Grace. It was not your demise we were discussing, but that of a spider who had been foolish enough to cross Lucia's path. The little monster had been creeping about her room all day and she took it into her head that he... she insisted the damned creature was male!... was stalking her. She begged me to kill him...er...it and I did."

"A...spider?" Robin stared at him. "That entire gruesome conversation was about...a spider?" Laughter rumbled deep in Robin's throat and both men began to howl, their guffaws ringing through the innyard. "Lucia does have an inordinate fear of vermin," Robin gasped, trying to regain his composure.

"So I told her!" Peter said. "Damned near dashed my brains out on the furniture chasing the wretched

creature about!" Then Norworth forced himself into a more serious frame of mind. "Lucia does love you, Your Grace, and this separation is tearing her apart inside."

Sobered by his words, Robin stared at the ground. "I've hurt her so many times. How can she forgive..."

"One thing she won't forgive is the sacrifice of her happiness to your guilt! Put aside the past and concentrate on the future!"

"But I can't..."

"Look you, 'tis all quite simple, really. She loves you and you love her. Don't try to deny it! It's been written all over both your faces for weeks. Your next course of action is obvious. You come with me to the Stag's Heart where I left the ladies. When we get there, you have a long, intimate, and extremely honest tete-a-tete with Lucia and the pair of you live happily ever after. Let's ride!" Peter rose and started toward his horse, but Robin remained where he was, a lonely, frightened figure sitting in the middle of the yard.

Peter trudged back to him. "For such a ferocious man, you're cursed cowardly in some respects; do you know that?" Robin jumped up, glaring at him. Ignoring the challenge, he said, "You've not a damned thing to fear and everything to gain. Winning your lady's love will do wonders for you. Change your whole outlook. You'll be a new man! Believe me, I know! To horse, Your Grace, and let's be off!"

As Peter swung into the saddle, Robin stood frozen, all the agonies of past loves amassing to form a hard lump of terror in his heart. "Clench your courage in your fists, old man, and let's go!" Peter called, "Lucia's waiting for you!"

Shrugging, Robin strode over to Diablo and mounted. Waving to Tracy, who watched them from a doorway, Peter led Robin onto the road.

Lucia could not be still. She drank her tea, ate the pastries the awed innkeeper's wife had provided, and wandered about the room, touching all its appointments. Finally bored with exploring her surroundings, she pressed her nose against the windowpane in the hope of glimpsing Peter or...a much dimmer hope!... Robin.

"Do stop fidgeting, Lucia," Corinna said. "They will be here soon enough."

"But what if he doesn't come, Aunt? What if he doesn't...? Oh, why did I ever consent to Peter's madness? Robin doesn't want me! He's made that plain enough."

"Sometimes a man doesn't know what he wants or what's good for him. He has to be pushed in the right

direction," Corinna said.

Silence filled the parlor while the countess read a book of prayers and Lucia stared anxiously out the window. At last she leaped up in frustration. "I can't just sit here and let Peter fight my battles for me. I'm going to the Crown and Thistle to find Robin."

She strode from the room as her aunt lowered her book in astonishment. "Lucia, wait! You don't even know if he's still there!" Corinna ran after her, muttering direfully, "That child will be the death of me!"

Lucia sped through the taproom and out into the yard, calling for her carriage. The countess reached her side a moment later. "My dear," she said, "you can't force him to love you. If he doesn't willingly come to you, I don't think..."

Lucia had been listening politely to Lady Easterbury while they waited for the carriage. Suddenly she clutched Corinna's arm, her face radiant, and the countess looked up to see two heads, one dark, one copper, bobbing on the horizon. "Look, Aunt! Peter has brought him!"

"Well, that's a beginning, at least," Corinna said.

When Robin saw Lucia standing in the innyard, the lump of fear in his chest seemed to swell and he felt a wild urge to run. But Peter had spent the entire journey extolling the joys and benefits of love with particular stress upon the rosy future he envisioned for himself with Concordia. He did seem happy, Robin thought. Damned ecstatic, en effet! Craving that happiness for Lucia and himself, Robin ignored the terror and doubt in his heart and matched his pace to Norworth's.

When the gentlemen entered the yard, Lucia flung decorum to the winds and raced out to meet them. "Robin! Oh, Robin, I'm so glad you have come!" she cried, then recalling their last conversation, she lowered her eyes, her smile dimming. What if he had been brutally honest when he had told her of his Paris plans and was just here to bury, finally and forever, any hope of reconciliation?

"Lucia..." Robin called, eagerly dismounting, then, at her sudden reserve, his own resolve ebbed away.

"Might I suggest a private parlor for this reunion, Your Grace?" Peter said. "I'll find a groom to see to the horses."

Norworth watched with a sense of accomplishment as the couple disappeared into the inn. They neither looked at nor spoke to each other, but he hoped... No, he was certain!... that they would soon find something to say to the point. As a groom led the horses away, Corinna inspected his bruised, bloody face and scruffy clothes with laughter in her eyes. "I had no idea that Cupid had a rakehelly reputation and apparently indulged in brawls!"

"I am planning to retire the rakehelly reputation very soon, ma'am, and the brawling with it, if I can stay in Amberley's good graces."

Corinna gazed anxiously at the inn's door. "Do you think this meeting will work?"

"It has to," Peter said. "She'll be so miserable without him that she might take it into her head that life isn't worth living and, without her, he'll drink himself into the grave or, more likely, allow some dolt with half his skill to skewer him in a duel."

"Let us pray that they find happiness together then," Corinna said.

"Amen!"

Lucia felt tongue-tied and inadequate. She glimpsed her image in a mirror over the fireplace and wished her ebony locks were the spun gold he prized. Averting her eyes from her unsatisfactory reflection, she looked at the floor.

Robin felt awkward and a bit ashamed of yesterday's misunderstandings. Nevertheless, he let his gaze wander with delight over her sweet face and figure, lingering tenderly on the firm roundness that was their precious child. His eyes swung back to her face, to the midnight softness of her hair. How he yearned to caress those dusky, silken tresses...

Desperate to break the uncomfortable silence, they both spoke at once.

"I apologize if I have inconvenienced you, Robin..."

"Norworth said you particularly wanted to see me..."

Sudden silence. Robin waited for her to speak, terrified uncertainty stilling his tongue.

Lucia's words of love tumbled around inside her mind like dice in a cup and when she glimpsed that bloated, black crow of a governess in the mirror again, her courage fled completely. "I just wanted to say that...that I shall not need the London house. I shall stay at the Castle. Lynkellyn House will be at your disposal whenever you wish to stop there."

Robin swallowed hard. This announcement hardly rang with affection! Norworth must have misjudged the whole situation. Robin chided himself for not trusting his own instincts above all else. This beautiful, distant ice queen, though she was not plotting his death, certainly did not love him. "I shall not be

needing it any time in the future. I've decided to travel a bit. Perhaps I'll visit Russia again or maybe Greece. I've never been there." 'Come with me to Greece, Lucia. Let us explore it together!' he wanted to beg, to shout, but the words were trapped within him. Why would she cross the street with him, much less sail the world? "Perhaps after the babe is born, you may change your mind about the London house so I will leave it free for you." He cleared his throat self-consciously. "In spite of what I said yesterday, I would like to know how the infant progresses, ma chérie. I will leave my direction with Gleason and he will forward your correspondence."

"Very well," she said miserably, dragging her eyes to his face. She tried to etch his dark, handsome countenance upon her memory, knowing how much she would miss the warmth of his arms and the sweet fire of his kisses during the long, cold, lonely years ahead.

"Farewell, then, ma chérie. I doubt I'll see you again before I sail for France." Robin bowed, aware and ashamed that his courage had failed him at this crucial point, but, as wretchedly unhappy as he was, he dared not chance the utter devastation of his heart again. Resolutely turning his back on Lucia, he walked toward the door.

Lucia panicked. She was losing him! She had been granted one last chance to explain herself to him, to win his heart, and she was wasting it. Her entire life had been one gamble after another and she had played the game for far too long to lose without even casting her dice. Screwing up her courage against the searing rejection she anticipated, she said, " Please don't go, Robin! I don't want to have my baby alone!"

He turned at that, brows raised. "You won't be alone, ma chérie. You'll have the servants and Lady Easterbury and I daresay Norworth will stay with you..."

"Peter will want to be with Concordia. Besides, I don't want him. I want you! I...I love you, Robin!" There! She'd said it! She cringed a little inside, waiting for his scorn.

He stared at her, incredulous, yet wanting to believe. Crossing the room, he clasped her hands, searching her eyes. "I have been a monster to you, Lucia! I should think you'd be glad to see the last of me."

"Some aspects of our life together have been...unpleasant, Robin, but I've also felt wonderfully happy and safe with you. The simple truth is that I...I love you!"

Robin's piercing gaze stared straight through her eyes into her heart and she hid nothing. For better or worse, her soul stood naked before him that he might see the true depths of her devotion. "Ma chérie, how can this be possible after...after all that I've done to you?" he said.

Searching his eyes, she put her arms around his neck. "My heart holds no grudges, Robin. I love you. Dare I hope...?"

"You stole my heart long ago, Lucia Lightfingers," he smiled, tentatively embracing her and marveling at how tenderly she welcomed him. "Mon Dieu, but I love you so much. I had no idea how I was going to live without you."

She pulled a little away to look into his eyes. "Then why were you so eager to leave?"

"Because I...I did not want to hear you tell me just how much you despised me, ma chérie! Or even worse, how much you loved Peter."

She opened her mouth to protest and he laid a hushing finger against her lips. "I know! I know I have been unpardonably mutton-headed! Norworth nearly dashed my brains out clarifying my error. But I did think you wanted him, Lucia, and, considering our past, I could not believe that you could possibly want me. I still cannot! My conduct toward you has been abominable. I've brought you so much pain and terror and grief, ma chérie, and I am so very sorry for all of it! How can you ever forgive me, much less feel anything akin to love for me?" He shook his head in amazement.

Her eyes caressed his lips, craving his kisses. "'Tis true, you will never be...well..." she paused.

"A paragon of all the virtues? A knight in shining armor?" Robin's arms tightened around her, his lips brushing against her ear. "I'm hardly that, am I?"

"The role of the Black Knight suits you much better, my love," Lucia said against his shoulder.

"Surely your mama warned you against the Black Knight, ma chérie. Now that you have so foolishly confessed that you love me, blackguard that I am, I shall take full advantage of it. Forget your knight in shining armor, my girl. You are in the clutches of a wicked duke and there's no escape for you."

"I daresay I must fancy the villain, then," Lucia said, smiling up at him.

"You are very wise, ma chérie!" He lost himself in the shifting amethyst shadows of her eyes, letting his weary spirit bathe in their cool, healing depths. His lips caressed hers with an exquisite tenderness that lasted eternities, but ended too soon. "Let us start again, ma chérie!" he whispered huskily, savoring the feel of her body against his. "Let us be wed properly in a church this time with all the attendant folderol! I want everyone on earth to know that we are one!" Kneeling, he took her hand and pressed his lips to her wrist. "I love you madly, passionately, Lucia Cothcourt! Will you have me as husband?"

Epilogue: March 1736

The morning sun dappled the green lawns and bright gardens around Lynkellyn Castle as the Marquis de Valière sauntered toward a small knot of people seated beneath a shady tree. Greeting the Earl of Malkent and his countess, Georges was introduced to Lady Easterbury, Lord Bellefield, Sir William and

Lady Blayne, and the Viscount and Viscountess Norworth.

Georges settled into a chair, smiling. "I arrived late last night, mes amis. The duke and duchess had already retired for the night and the servants would tell me nothing. What mysterious entertainment have our friends concocted for us?"

"There are the babies' christenings on Saturday," Tracy said.

"Mais oui! The redoubtable twins! A boy and a girl, héin? And the boy to be named..." he paused as if searching his memory, then said smugly, "Georges! Oui, c'est là!"

"And Peter," Norworth reminded them. "Good manners may force us to reciprocate and name our child 'Robert' if it's a boy, my dear." He beamed at Concordia, heavy with child.

"The Lynkellyn heir is also to be named 'Tracy'," Malkent said.

"And William! And William!" Amaryllis chimed in.

"And don't forget Lord Bellefield!" Lady Val adjured them. "The babe is to bear Anthony's name as well." Blushing, Tony grinned and bowed.

"I see that the honor is not as singular as I thought!" De Valière sniffed.

Valeria laughed. "Has no one given any thought to the little girl's name?"

"We shall leave that decision to her parents. They must have some influence on their children's lives, no?" Georges said amidst general laughter.

"I'm beginning to wonder if the Rogue and his bride can tear themselves away from each other long enough to raise their offspring," Tracy grinned. "I've never seen two more besotted people! Newlyweds!"

"Yes, they have been smelling disgustingly of April and May ever since that dreadful business with Mountheathe," Peter said.

"And we have been so very level-headed in comparison, have we not, my lord?" Concordia giggled as Peter dropped several light kisses on the palms of her hands, then one on her lips.

"I have been extremely level-headed, my love, considering that I'm mad for you!"

"That's enough of that!" Tracy snapped. "Between the Amberleys and you two, I feel a hundred years old!"

"Well, I'm glad to see Robin so happy after all he's been through," said Amaryllis. "He deserves it!"

"You must tell me about this...this 'business with Mountheathe', as you call it," Georges said, accepting lemonade from a footman. "Robin explained it all in a letter, but the contents were most bewildering. His tales of chasing after Mountheathe were constantly interrupted with paeans to Lucia's beauty and involved descriptions of hearts overflowing with passion. Robin claims he is English, but no prosaic Englishman could have written such a valentine, not even in the first blush of love!"

The other guests leaned forward, interrupting and contradicting each other in their eagerness to relate their adventure to the marquis. Their narrative soon drifted into jokes and laughter.

Strolling into this giddy commotion, the Amberleys greeted the giggling group with large smiles on their faces and small bundles in their arms. Two nursery-maids trailed behind them.

While the other guests clustered around Lucia to coo at her infant, Robin balanced his baby in the crook of his arm and reached out to clasp the marquis's hand. "Georges! Well met, mon ami! I was afraid you weren't coming."

"You don't think I'd pass up a chance to see you in all your domestic glory, héin? I would not miss this fête of yours for the world. Allow me to give you my felicitations on having cleared your name."

"Merci, mon ami." Robin shifted his infant to a sitting position in his arms and grinned, "May I present Lord Georges Peter..."

"...Tracy William Anthony Amberley, sixth Marquis of Norelton. His reputation precedes him." Georges laughed as he let the wriggling baby clasp his fingers. "Un bon fils!"

"And I've a fine daughter as well! Lady Elise Concordia Corinna Valeria Amaryllis Amberley."

"Robin! Do you truly expect les enfants pauvres to remember such lengthy sobriquets?"

"Well, we have been calling them Georgie and Ellie and ignoring the rest. I was hoping you would stand as godfather, mon vieux. You're the closest thing I have to male kin since Mountheathe..."

"What did happen to your cousin?"

"He couldn't face the scandal and the duns. As soon as he was able to travel, he fled England for the Continent. I paid his more pressing debts and he returned home to Heathe Manor a few weeks ago. No one's heard anything from him since." Robin shook his head sadly. "It all could have ended so differently if only... But I fear Giles and I shall be forever at daggers drawn."

Having left her daughter to gurgle in Corinna's arms, Lucia came up to the gentlemen. "My lord Georges, it is wonderful to see you again."

The marquis bowed over her hand. "Ma chère cousine, you look radiant. Marriage appears to agree with you."

Her eyes met Amberley's and she smiled. "Robin and I have decided that we shall suit after all."

"Which is to say you're 'mad for each other', to borrow Lord Norworth's phrase. I knew it would happen!"

"That is why we've gathered everyone here, mon cher Georges!" Robin said. "We have an announcement to make."

The nursery maids took the children into the house as Lynkellyn called his guests into a circle. "Tomorrow is our first anniversary," he said, slipping an arm most improperly around Lucia's waist, "and since our wedding was not the romantic affair it should have been, Lucia and I are resolved to try again. We have invited everyone here to witness the renewal of our vows in a grand wedding ceremony with all the attendant pomp. Georges, as a member of Lucia's family, will you give the bride away?"

Caressing his jaw thoughtfully, the marquis bent a penetrating gaze upon Robin. "Je ne sais pas, monsieur. I believe ma petite could do a great deal better than you if she would only look around her a little!" After much jesting and cajoling, he finally agreed to escort his cousin down the aisle.

Georges brought one dark cloud to the festivities when he confessed to Lucia that the Duc de Mondecharles would not relent toward her. "He is a stubborn old man, ma chère, and he would rather die than ever admit he was wrong. Besides, you have married an Englishman like your mother before you and that, to him, is unpardonable."

"The Cothcourts still do not acknowledge me either. When Robin and I visited London last month, people welcomed us and fêted us everywhere we went. It was very gratifying after...after all the bad things that have happened. Always, though, at every party, the Cothcourts and the Laddons glowered at me, pointedly turning their backs. It was odd, funny...almost, but it hurt, too. Family is all the true wealth anyone has, really."

Georges squeezed her hand. "You and Robin are building a fine, new family and someday when I am Duc de Mondecharles, you shall meet all your French cousins." They strolled on for a few minutes, the cool March wind ruffling their hair and tugging at their clothes. De Valière studied his subdued companion. "This marriage! You are happy, ma petite cousine? This is what you want?"

"Oh, yes!" Lucia nodded. "I know that our union was not the fairy tale sort and during those first months we nearly killed any possibility of a future together, but Robin and I have come a long way in a year. I

have discovered the sweetest, most honorable, most noble man is hiding beneath my black knight's armor. He is my delight!"

"Apparently he has worked some sort of magic on you, ma belle. I hope the spell never wears off," Georges said, hugging her.

Late that night, as she lay in bed beside Robin, Lucia gazed at her wedding gown, gleaming palely in the shadows and smiled, thinking of all her blessings.

Robin dreamed beside her, his strong, warm arm curled around her waist. Stretching contentedly, she caressed his hand as it encompassed her midriff and he awoke. He whispered her name and, with a murmur of pleasure, she turned to accept his kisses; to share with him the sweet, tender fire of love.

The End

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